

## “The “N-word” still stings!”

*By Terry Howard*

If you're one of my regular readers then you know that I equate my weekly treks to Starbucks to the “journey” of diversity. Those walks also allow me to manage stress, unleash my imagination, inhale fresh and not so fresh air, people watch and get in some serious, uh, “*blackberrying*” – if there is such a word.

And if you were to ask me to take a wild guess, I'd say that roughly 40% of my article ideas emerge during those walks; others from forays into Barnes and Nobles, poring through three daily newspapers and the rest through personal and electronic connections with people globally.



Adding to all that I'm ensconced inside a darn good company, have a pretty cool gig and am surrounded by some extremely talented people - all of which allows me to test the elasticity of more than a few comfort zones. Not bad, huh? As I always say, if you love what you do you'll never work a day for the rest of your life.

But the truth is that every now and then during our journeys through life we encounter a “fender bender,” a jarring reminder of some cruel realities. The nasty underbelly of diversity has a way of sneaking up on us sometimes and kicking us in the gut. Let me share something that happened to me recently during one of my walks. But first, I need to tell you a bit about “The Little Rock Nine.” Context is important before I go on.

For those of you who remember - or who lived someplace outside the U.S. (or outside of reality) at that time - an important landmark in the struggle for civil rights happened in Little Rock, Arkansas. Fifty years ago this September nine Black youngsters made their way through a spitting, invective-spewing mob and throngs of federal troops up the steps of Little Rock's Central High School. Their court-ordered mission? School integration.

Way too young to fully comprehend the magnitude of the indelible mark they were about to stamp on history, The Little Rock Nine climbed those steps in an incredible display of courageous resolve. The image of one girl in particular - head held high, eyes straight ahead - is forever etched in my mind as a chilly reminder of malignancy of our racial history. Her courage, their courage, continues to this day to totally amaze and make this grown man weep.

Pause for a second and imagine yourself as one of the nine. Next, imagine yourself as a parent of one of them. You're at home in front of your television watching helplessly as *adults* screamed

and spat at your offspring. Are you shaken by these thoughts, squirming in your chair, fighting back the tears? Good. It's important that I ready you emotionally to move on.

Back now to that recent walk I alluded to above. As it turned out, I was absorbed in thought about a trip I'm planning in October for a group to visit the Little Rock Nine Museum and to take part in other activities commemorating the event's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Then suddenly out of nowhere verbal lightning struck.

### ***"Hey N\_gger!"***

With surgeon-like precision those words cut into my reality, stopping me dead in my tracks. No, no, no I thought; this *didn't* just happen to me. I was rendered speechless, silenced, paralyzed in the moment.

Before I go on, I will say without a doubt that the N-word still raises its ugly head nowadays. Nobody's that naïve. And arguably it remains the worst of all derogatory terms. But it's really different when you're on the receiving end of it. Then it becomes very personal. It stings.

While recovering my senses the SUV sped off amid a puff of exhaust smoke, its occupants rolling in laughter leaving me only to speculate about the factors and conditions which gave rise to such cowardly behavior. Although I'd grown accustomed to swatting away mosquitoes on my walks, this bite penetrated my armor. The psychological swelling, the anger, commenced immediately.

Now to be clear, no group can lay exclusive claim to the N-word. Many will tell you that their version of the word (homo, slant eye, redneck, spic, raghead, crip, etc.) has the same power to debilitate. This may explain, in part, why so many groups have "taken back" their version of the word so as to neutralize it, extract its venom, blunt its edge, distill it for inner group consumption, connection and, to the bewilderment by outsiders and the tight-lipped chagrin of many on the inside ("Don't ask, don't tell?"), only to be used within. That's their way of seizing ownership of the word...*removing the sting*.

Now my purpose here is not to evoke sympathy or guilt, or the tears that often accompany those emotions, nor is it to give too much ink to a few aberrant nit wits. And as much as I wanted to, I suppressed the urge to shout back, especially when I noticed that the source of the barb wore a football jersey with the number 79 on it. That number, you see, is usually reserved for linemen - behemoth Texas-bred and fed linemen at that - who tend to be much bigger and a lot faster than yours truly. A broken pride is one thing, a broken nose - mine in particular - is another. I was probably wise in choosing the former. Doused in reality, common sense has a way of prevailing.

Now to finish out this story, I'm happy to report that my pangs of anger were soothed further down the sidewalk when I returned to my thinking about The Little Rock Nine. It helped put my pain into perspective when it dawned on me that while my N-word was one, and came from one idiot, The Little Rock Nine's were many and flowed from the lips of many "intelligent" adults. Put differently, my experience paled by comparison. That was another way for me to remove the sting.

Is there a silver lining in all this? I think so. On one side this incident serves as a reminder of the ugliness that's still out there. On the other it presents me with a phenomenal opportunity to spotlight the incredible courage of The Little Rock Nine.

It also gives me a chance to point to Philip Herbst's book, "The Color of Words; a dictionary of ethnic bias in the United States," Intercultural Press, 1997. There you'll discover the origins of the N-word and other biased words, including those I cite above, aimed at other groups because of their differences. Education is a powerful detoxifier; another way to remove the sting.

In the end, and so as not to leave you in an emotional heap at the finish line of this story - and at a complete loss as what to do personally - I invite you to join me in Little Rock for a massive "sting removal campaign." If you can't make it, I completely understand. But here's what you can do; peer into your workplace, home, place of worship, school, deep into the inner sanctums of your conscious and ask yourself the hard question....*what can I do to rip out the stings, choke the life out of them, slam them to the ground and stomp them permanently into oblivion?*

Now go ahead and resume your journey. But please be careful...*and watch out for the stings!*

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