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## LIVING IN TWO WORLDS

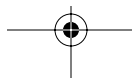
*When you travel, remember that a foreign country is not designed to make you comfortable. It is designed to make its own people comfortable.*

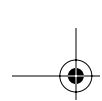
Clifton Fadiman

**O**ne Sunday morning in 1977, a school bus from a white Baptist church rolled into my black neighborhood. I don't know how they got my name or when the negotiations with my parents took place, but the folks in the Memorial Baptist Sunday school department targeted me during one of their annual church-growth campaigns, and the next thing I knew, I was sitting in a partitioned room watching flannelgraph Bible stories, mentally salivating over the promise of doughnuts after class.

My parents, who were not regular churchgoers at the time, saw Sunday school as a useful way to get me some additional moral instruction. My mother especially was diligent about keeping me on a positive course. The boys who had nothing to do but hang out on the streets were usually up to no good, she'd often say. She was right.

The bus was the first thing I liked about the white Baptists. Their Bible songs, large gymnasium, and sweet pastries were fine. But it was the bus that initially won my eight-year-old affection. It was different from the one I boarded each weekday morning for my cross-town trek to grade school. This school bus wasn't caution-sign yellow but brown and white, like a petting zoo pony. It had rounded edges, not the boxy angles of the yellow bus. Colorful pictures of smiling children were taped to its interior walls, and the seat cushions didn't numb your cheeks. And get





this: The bus actually pulled up in front of my house and a nice white man came to my front door and knocked each Sunday morning. In contrast, the stop for the yellow bus was a half-mile hike down the road.

Buses played a pivotal role in my life back then. Far more than transportation, they became a strange symbol for who I was, where I could go, and what I could and couldn't do.

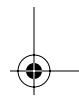
Shortly before I entered kindergarten, the Rockford, Illinois, school district began requiring a number of students of my racial and social complexion to ride buses across the Rock River to the other side of the city, passing numerous other grade schools, so we could attend Bloom Elementary. The seven-mile ride took about an hour, once you factored in the half-dozen additional pick-ups along the way.

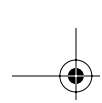
There were days, sitting precariously on the edge of an aisle seat, that I wondered to myself why the students on my overcrowded bus couldn't go to McIntosh or Ellis or William Dennis. Were those schools not good enough for us? And if they weren't, why were most kids from our neighborhoods forced to go to them? Why had a random slice of us been chosen to get up earlier, travel farther and get home later?

I didn't understand anything then about school desegregation or *Brown vs. the Board of Education* or the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I didn't perceive myself as being a piece of a larger social experiment, a supporting player in a nation's court-ordered mission to undo two hundred years of systemic injustice. For me, it was just an inconvenient bus ride.

Of course, there were also times when I felt special about my privileged status as a "bus kid." After all, I got to leave the "poor" side of town each day to spend time in the "rich" section. The neighborhoods were cleaner, the white girls seemed friendlier, and I was usually better at kickball than any of the little white boys. (There were some perks to being one of the only black kids at your school.)

Still, for me and dozens of other kids from my side of town, our sense of worth was tied to those yellow buses. Each day the bus took us to a brighter, more hopeful life, only to bring us back home seven hours later.





In mundane ways, the school bus defined who we were. The rich kids walked home or were picked up by their parents; the bus kids had to load up at 3:15 p.m. or risk being left behind. The rich kids could stay after school for sports or Cub Scout meetings; the bus kids didn't have the luxury of extracurricular activities, nor did we get home in time to watch reruns of *The Brady Bunch* or *Batman*. (Shameful confession: some days I would feign illness so I could stay home to watch Adam West in gray tights.) Each school day offered real-life lessons in what it meant to be, in the truest sense of the phrase, from the other side of the tracks.

Most American cities have an unspoken dividing line that splits black communities from white, poor from middle class, urban from suburban. It might be a highway, a park or a literal railroad track. Whatever its form, it provides a physical landmark for the social separation that, by fate or choice, we all practice.

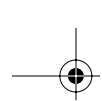
In Rockford, the dividing line is the Rock River, a gorgeous body of water that cuts through the tree-draped town of 150,000 like chalk across the center of a soccer field. To live on the east side of the Rock means nicer houses, bigger yards and easier access to shopping and other services. To live on the far west side (where I am from) means public housing, weed-infested concrete and empty storefronts.

Even as a child, I recognized the difference. I understood that there were essentially two Rockfords.

I don't mean to sound ungrateful. Growing up on the west side wasn't bad, relatively speaking. My childhood was full of lovely memories. I lived in a two-parent home, unlike a lot of my friends who resided a few blocks away in the government-subsidized Concord Commons apartments (a.k.a. "the projects"). I had a yard to play in and a hyperactive mutt named Sherwood. As a young kid, I was content with my life—that is, until I got on the school bus and was confronted with how the other Rockford lived.

The west side was my reality. But the school bus was my entrée to the





larger world. It was no small thing, then, that my introduction to white Christianity should come via a bus.

### JESUS IN WHITE SKIN

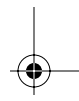
Like Oreo crumbs in a glass of milk, there was just a sprinkling of black kids in the Memorial Baptist Sunday school program, and I was the only black child in my class. I knew I was different, but at that time I didn't know how much race mattered in America—and especially in American churches.

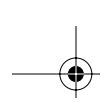
The first thing I learned in Sunday school was that black is the color of our hearts without Jesus, red is the color of Jesus' redeeming blood, and white is the color of our cleansed hearts after we accept Jesus as our "Lord and Savior." There were even visual aids, construction-paper cut-outs that demonstrated the red blood washing away the black sin to reveal a brand-new white heart.

Racial subtext notwithstanding (I was a few years away from making those kinds of hypersensitive inferences), this was riveting stuff for an eight-year-old. Though he didn't wear a cape, this Jesus was a heroic character.

Actually, I was somewhat familiar with Jesus already. My parents periodically took me to a black church around the corner from our house, and he was regularly invoked there: "Praise your name, Jesus!" "Give Jesus the glory!" "Help us, Lord Jesus." But most of the time, I could never figure out what the sweat-drenched preacher was saying beneath his gravelly wails and singsong declarations. In years to come, I would grow to love the unique power and expression of the traditional African American church. But as a young lad, sadly, I didn't get it.

Jesus also hung prominently on our living room wall, where he gazed out ethereally from a bronze-plated wire frame. That the man in the painting looked more like the lead guitarist of a British rock band than a Jewish Messiah didn't bother me much back then. This was the bearded white Savior who was mightier than Santa Claus, Superman





and Muhammad Ali all rolled into one.

There were prayers to God in my house. My parents made sure of that. They were usually over dinner or during bedtime. The prayers were short, reliable utterances like “The Lord is my shepherd” and “Jesus wept” and “Now I lay me down to sleep.” Though simple, they kept me cognizant of an invisible God who, for whatever reason, had a special interest in our lives.

The God-Jesus thing was a bit more nebulous. My parents taught me that Jesus was good and that somehow he was God. But I didn’t really get the full story until I sat in that Sunday school class at Memorial Baptist Church.

“Jesus is God’s Son, and he wants to come into your heart,” the Sunday school teachers told us each week. “We all are sinners, and we need Jesus to save us.”

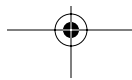
We learned that it wasn’t something you could earn or work for. Jesus’ salvation was a free gift. And so I accepted Jesus into my heart about every other week. To recast an old Chicago saying, I was saved early and often. Salvation was free, so I wanted to get as much of it as I could.

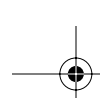
We sang bouncy songs like “Jesus Loves the Little Children” and “Roll Away,” which had us gesturing wildly like NFL refs as we sang, “Roll away, roll away, roll away. Every burden of my heart, roll away.”

There also were those flannelgraph Bible stories and obligatory lessons on obeying our parents and telling the truth. But the main attraction, week after week, was always the “personal relationship with Jesus” message.

Though I went through a variety of teachers during my three-year tenure at Memorial Baptist, the one I remember best is Mr. Kaiser. A tall, heavy-set man with a tight buzz cut and dark-rimmed glasses, Mr. Kaiser would have probably looked more fashionable in the *Leave It to Beaver* era than the disco and *Star Wars* vibe of the late seventies. But he fit the fundamentalist mold to a T.

I remember Mr. Kaiser because he gave me my first Bible. It was a





shiny black, hardcover King James Version with color relief maps of the Holy Land printed across its inside covers. I loved the smell of its crisp new pages. It was my unexpected prize for winning the “invite a friend” contest during one of the church’s many attendance campaigns. With the tantalizing report of doughnuts and fruit juice after class, I was able to lure the next-door neighbor kids and my buddies from Concord Commons to Sunday school. Four Sundays in a row, I out-invited all the other kids in my class to take the contest crown. Mr. Kaiser signed the front leaf of my new Bible, thanking me for my efforts.

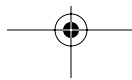
I still have that prize Bible on my bookshelf, though it’s no longer shiny and the pages now smell like musty newspapers. What I value more now is the memory of Mr. Kaiser. He was an average, working-class man who answered a call to teach young people about God. Looking back, the image of this thick, redneckish white man teaching a little nappy-haired black kid about Jesus couldn’t seem any weirder.

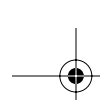
What my head tells me today is that, for many people, the stereotype of a white man who looks like Mr. Kaiser is one of a warm-blooded bigot, the kind you see in black-and-white video clips badmouthing Dr. King or aiming fire hoses at helpless marchers. But what my personal history tells me is different.

#### **LIFE AFTER INTEGRATION**

As a post–civil rights baby, the majority of my life has been spent integrating institutions—public schools, white churches, Christian colleges, evangelical ministries. Like many African American professionals from my generation, most of my days take place in settings where I am the only person of color in the room.

I am not lamenting the situation, nor am I blind to how I got here. My faith, family and career have been indelibly shaped by my experience as a child of integration. It has meant the chance for education in better schools. It has meant opportunities to knock on professional doors that, given a different set of circumstances, would have been off limits to





someone from my neighborhood. It has meant becoming a part of a Christian tradition that, when true to form, brings God's love and truth to bear on every aspect of life.

But it also has meant living within a religious movement that takes for granted its cultural superiority. It has meant disregarding the occasional stray epithet or ignoring shortsighted comments that beg for a retort. You've heard them, perhaps said them: "I don't even think of you as black," or "Why do black people need to have their own beauty pageants and magazines and colleges? If whites did that, we'd be called racists."

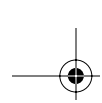
I've never thought of myself as "the token black," but I have enjoyed the privileges of being the only African American in the house. For a long time, I lived in blissful denial of the inadequacy of this arrangement. While certainly conscious of race, I didn't consider it something that would affect people's perceptions of me, nor did I allow it to influence my view of others. I wore color-blinders.

I was the approachable black guy, the white community's friendly interpreter of all things African American. And hey, it was great! I admit it. At moments, I prided myself on being the only black person some white people would ever know personally. When another black person would come into the picture from time to time, I'd feel threatened—like they were trying to intrude on my territory. "These are *my* white people!" I'd think.

The problem, of course, is that no single person can legitimately represent an entire race. Though I lived with that delusion throughout much of my young adulthood, I got a rude awakening once I began to ascend the professional ranks at white evangelical institutions. After a period of racial hibernation, I awoke to the reality of my otherness. I realized once and for all that, as an African American evangelical, I am a black Christian in a white Christian's world.

This fact smacked me upside the head in a variety of ways—the acceptable worship songs at church, the photos used to illustrate magazine articles and ministry ads, the feeling of always having to reeducate my





white friends and colleagues. Sometimes it was as blatant as an offhand comment from a white superior at work: “If we publish too many articles on the black church, our audience (i.e., white men) might feel alienated.”

Other times, it was in the form of an innocent oversight that had embarrassing consequences: In 2005, several members of our staff at Christianity Today International headed up the planning committee for the annual Evangelical Press Association convention, which was held in Chicago that year. When the brochure for the event came out, I noticed that the entire lineup of plenary speakers and entertainers were white. Odd, I thought, for a convention that purported to echo the vibe of its host city. When I mentioned this to the chairman of the committee, he was apologetic. He assured me it wasn’t an intentional dis. The omission might have been avoided, I suggested, had a person of color been included on the planning committee. He agreed.

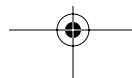
I hate it when stuff like that happens. I hate having to play the race cop, persistently notifying whites of their lapses in cultural sensitivity. I don’t like making my white brothers and sisters feel guilty or ashamed. On the other hand, if I didn’t say anything . . .

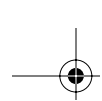
Many days the weight of it all leaves me exasperated. Sometimes in the silent thumping of my heart, I am haunted by the thought that I will always carry the mantle alone—terrified by the realization that, on a daily basis, if I do not speak up to voice a nonwhite perspective, it will go unheard, like a tree falling in a deserted forest.

I am often confronted, once again, with the same dilemma that beset me when the school bus transported me to the other side of town. I am in the white world but not of it. I have been granted limited access to a place that will never fully be mine. I am a tourist with an expiring visa.

#### CALL OF THE WILD

By now you might be thinking, *If it’s such torture, why does he stay? Why doesn’t he just pack his bags and get his black behind out of those white set-*





*tings? Find a black church. Find a job at a black organization or in a secular context, where diversity is less of a struggle. Drop the racial angst and just live life.*

I know people who have done that—left their white evangelical churches, colleges or jobs to find a place where diversity (or the lack of it) wasn't as much of a daily drain. And many of them became happier souls.

For some of us, though, it's not that simple.

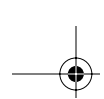
My friend Clarence Shuler, a diversity consultant based in Colorado, was the first African American to play basketball for Moody Bible Institute in the early 1970s and the team's first African American captain. He graduated from Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Texas in the early eighties and was the first African American to work at the Southern Baptist State Convention in Illinois. In 1995, he was offered a job at a major evangelical ministry in Colorado. The group wanted to expand its outreach to African American pastors, and they wanted Clarence to spearhead the effort.

"I took my whole family out there to visit, and they offered me the position on the spot, which is never a good thing," Clarence recalls. At first, he was reluctant to accept. Having been one of the first blacks in evangelical ministries before, he knew how challenging it would be. But then he prayed. (Ah, that dangerous thing called prayer!)

Clarence couldn't sleep for the next two nights. But finally he sensed God speaking to him. "He told me to trust him," Clarence says. "So I took the job."

Chanel Graham, who's in her early twenties, grew up in a mostly white suburb in Orange County, California. It was an established, upper-middle-class community that was filled with million-dollar homes long before everything else in California cost a million dollars. Chanel and her family lived in an apartment complex—"but it was right across the street from the million-dollar homes," she laughs. She became accustomed to being one of the only African Americans in her social circles.





“In school, I was one of the first black people that my friends knew who could ‘speak their language,’” Chanel says. “I grew up around whites. I know how they think, and I didn’t see much of a racial distinction between people. When they met me, it was like, ‘Wow, she’s really nice. She’s not angry about race or anything.’”

In high school, Chanel attended Saddleback Community Church, pastored by *Purpose-Driven Life* author Rick Warren. Though she grew up going to black churches, Saddleback is where she eventually settled. A graduate of Biola University, an evangelical college near Los Angeles, she now works for a real estate company and is a member of a cutting-edge, but mostly white, evangelical church in Hollywood.

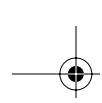
“The worship is mainly David Crowder Band and Matt Redman,” she says, lamenting that there isn’t a more culturally diverse approach. “I’d love to sing some Fred Hammond songs sometime.” Still, Chanel attends this church because it’s the place where she feels naturally drawn.

“I am quite comfortable being the only African American in my church,” she says. “However, I do have moments when I feel slightly isolated from the rest of the congregation because of my pastor’s illustrations or anecdotes. Also, I sometimes miss worshipping with people who may have similar families or cultural practices.” Despite these occasional feelings of incongruity, Chanel believes she’s where God wants her.

Most Christians are acquainted with the biblical notion of having “a call.” We’ve read the classic passages of Scripture where God calls Moses, David, Isaiah. We’ve seen Jesus calling out his disciples one by one. We’ve witnessed Christ’s Spirit, in a blinding flash of light, knocking Saul on his butt and spinning his reality a hundred and eighty degrees.

What’s more, we’ve heard this call ourselves. Sure, many of our days are spent listening to heaven’s silence, wondering if God is even there. But then, without warning, the Spirit moves. Our senses are sharpened, our thinking transformed. And we know deep in our gut that God is calling.





*Sell your car and go to Africa.*

*Ask her to marry you.*

*Move to the city and teach at-risk kids.*

For some of us, the call is less explosive and more of a slow boil. We've always known we would be preachers or writers or zookeepers. Throughout our spiritual highs and lows, we've never lost that awareness.

That's how it is being a black evangelical, I think. It's God's call. A slow-boiling conviction that, despite our loneliness, frustration or flat-out rage, this is where we're supposed to be. This is where we belong.

