

Foreword

Preface

It's My World

Essay 1 - My Friends Mean Everything To Me

Essay 2 - The Remnants of Divorce

Essay 3 - Redeemed!

Essay 4 - Working Out

Essay 5 - Drinking

Essay 6 - Coffee Makes You Sweeter

Essay 7 - Can't We Just Be Friends?

Essay 8 - Black Men Speaking

Relationships

Essay 9 - Professional Sisters

Essay 10 - Why Men Beat Women

Essay 11 - Giving Up Our Parent's Values

On Spiritual Matters

Essay 12 - Burning Churches

Essay 13 - A Sunday Sermon

Essay 14 - Leaving Las Vegas

Essay 15 - The Boys' Club

Essay 16 - My Calling

Baggy Pants, Slang & Know-How

Critical Feedback

Essay 17 - It's a Shoe Thing

Essay 18 - Clothes

Essay 19 - Basketball Goals In The Hood

Essay 20 - Is Rodney King A Fool?

Essay 21 - Baggy Pants, Slang and Know-How

Essay 22 - Big Hair

Essay 23 - Can I Get A Barber, Please?

Essay 24 - The Oscars, This Time

Essay 25 - Fanatical, Not Fantasy Football

About the Author

Foreword

Dear Reader,

I wrote this compilation of essays in 1996. Since then, they have been sitting dormant in a large binder awaiting publication. You might say they were conceived in a whole other epoch of my life. That was a post-divorce and pre-seminary period. It was a creative time and ideas and observations were flowing through me like water over Niagara Falls. Reflections just poured out.

If you knew me now, you would immediately realize that I was a different person back then with a different perspective. I've broadened my views over the last 24 years, have experienced another divorce and remarriage, earned two graduate degrees (M.Div. and Ph.D.), joined the U.S. Air Force as a chaplain, transitioned from being a United Methodist Church minister to a Unitarian Universalist clergyperson, lived in four states, visited numerous countries, learned Spanish and have grounded myself in a beautiful marriage.

If the ideas presented in these pages seem outdated, it is because they are. I wish I had time to update each essay, but life does not permit that. Besides, it is more interesting to see from whence I came.

To capture my current state of mind, please visit my other websites: wmasteringyourownfaith.com, myquibbler.com (a website for filing complaints and getting results), getaholdofyourself.org (which showcases my book on faith development), and runawaycatfish.com (my children's book website). From these sites, you will notice that things have changed for me.

In the meantime, enjoy *It's Your World* and send me your feedback. I would love to hear from you.

Cheers,

Xolani Kacela

Preface

I grew up the son of a military man and an entrepreneurial woman. It was a precarious position for me because I had strict disciplined, bootstrapping on one side and tempered, loving nurturing on the other side. My father could be counted on for a swift kick in the butt if I got too far out of line. It's no wonder that my mother had such an appeal to me during my youth. I knew I could count on her for understanding and compassion. Over the years, their styles of loving have blended, and I attribute my balanced mental health largely to their distinctly different styles of parenting. But it was their healthy outlook on life that encouraged me to look out at the world around me and take note of my surroundings and strive to make a positive difference.

Born on an Army post in Oklahoma, where the city met the plains, the military life offered a sheltered, pluralistic view of society. The schools were a mixture of many races with varied socioeconomic backgrounds often hidden by camouflaged fatigues and army greens. For a society that tries to emphasize homogeneity, the military neighborhoods offered a dozen ways to say, "you all." Some people said, "ya'll" while others said, "you'ins." But as a kid it really didn't matter. Despite the dialect of the hillbilly soldiers, we all played together as if one big family.

Every other year, the family reunion ended as my family returned to Columbus, Georgia while my dad did a stint at Ft. Benning. The return was an opportunity for me to reunite with the homeboys who never left and a reality check for me and my sister, Tina. Not only were we reminded that our year away from the nest caused us to speak "proper" as opposed to Southern, we were also reminded the world was not as multi-colored beyond the gates of the military fort. When we returned to Columbus, there was primarily only one color--colored. You see, in our neighborhood, there was no cultural diversity, there were no military police roaming the community continually keeping the peace, there were no soldiers to spray the trees and shrubs every spring to wipe out mosquitoes, and there were no home-cooked meals awaiting us every day after school (because my mother returned to work at the family-owned funeral home). Life acquired an urban edge that was soulful and often unclean.

But going home fortified us with the spice of life we missed as Army brats. We witnessed the urban plight in all its beauty and ugliness. Though the neighborhood was homogenous, there was another kind of diversity than we were accustomed to on the post.

Our house sat in the middle of a black oasis. To the left of us were the Joneses, a couple of

educators who stood as role models for all the kids. Mr. Jones was tall and dark, with a deep voice that yielded a touch of tenderness and compassion. His manner was strong, yet gentle. Mrs. Jones had a similar disposition. She was friendly and always approachable. The Joneses were the first family to own a car with lights that shutoff by themselves after the driver left the car. Though I never have been able to determine the value of that feature, Mr. Jones seemed to bask in it.

Right in front of the Joneses lived Ms. Jesse, whom none of the kids liked. We didn't like her because her whole front yard was a garden that was closed off by a tall wooden fence. Whenever we played kickball in the street, we had to be extra careful not to kick the ball in her yard. Unlike other neighbors who didn't mind if we went into their yards, Ms. Jesse would fuss every time the ball landed in her garden. Then we'd have to knock on the fence and beg like little slaves to get the ball back. Every now and then, she wouldn't come to the door and that would end our game because no one had the guts to venture into her yard without her permission.

Behind our house was the Blue Haven Cafe, the neighborhood juke joint that rocked every Friday and Saturday night. I can recall many a summer night listening to loudmouth, card-playing, fun-loving "drunks" (as we called them) playing cards into the wee hours speaking in a language where every other word had four letters. Something about that late-night card playing has stuck with me over the years. Maybe it was the smell of those chicken legs and thighs placed between two pieces of white bread covered with mayonnaise, lettuce and tomato. It could have been the sounds of Marvin Gaye singing "Let's Get It On" on the juke box for a meager ten cents. Maybe it was the potpourri of other food scents that wafted into my bedroom window on those hot summer nights. Most likely, it was the combination of elements that lingers on and tugs at my heart. To this day, I prefer a juke joint to the high-tech lights that illumine modern dance halls and the earthquake sound systems you can hear before stepping through the doors.

The juke joint was patronized by the blue-collar, sometimes no-collar, part of the neighborhood that started a few doors away from ours. Most of my best friends lived behind those doors and I spent as much time behind those doors and as I did behind my own. Being there, living there, gave me a deep understanding of how most lives, no matter what the income level, are born of the same desires and longing for well-being, strong family values, and cross-generational prosperity. Very few people in our oasis were content with complacency and knew the value of education and strong work ethic. Whether or not they were able to exercise that knowledge was a different question. The influences on knowledge that exists today prevailed in the 60's, too. Some things haven't

changed no matter what today's political, social and intellectual pundits say. The influences we have today have always been in place. It's the rate of which information is communicated that has accelerated in exponential proportions that has changed our lives so drastically. Our inclination for nostalgia is the cause of American amnesia.

Around the corner from us was another type of living. Like us, people were black and working class. Like us, they were largely homeowners struggling to make ends meet. But unlike us, they didn't get along with the people who frequented and lived closer to the juke joint. They acted like they despised the juke joint and all its patrons. Around the corner, people were above patronizing the juke joint. I don't know where they got their juke on, but it wasn't behind my house.

I saw these two worlds collide when I attended elementary school after returning from a year-long stint in Oklahoma. Vividly, I recall a recess one morning when my boy, Greg, who lived directly in front of me, was caught wearing some gold sneakers with holes in them. He was identified by my other partner, David, who lived around the corner. Greg's family truly was doing the best they could and he defended himself with harsh anger. But David pressed on in jest trying to belittle Greg in fine fashion. David clearly didn't understand the cause of the problem and he had no interest in learning. While his jokes were hysterical, I felt shame for Greg, but was too coward to step in say something. Yet, deep inside, I knew they were both good people. Their ignorance of each other is the same ignorance that separates people today. It lessens people's life chances and creates a false sense of superiority and security and leaves behind a collective mass of hopelessness and pain.

Today, Greg still lives in the neighborhood, two blocks from where my mother still lives. He still lives with his father when he's not locked up in the pen. Every now and then I call home and inquire about my boy. Sometimes he's out working to keep his head above water, and other times, he's behind bars for some petty theft that lets me know he's a victim of his own mentality, not his environment as some would have us believe. His lack of vision is endemic to much of today's black culture. Necessary support mechanisms were available to him, but he chose to ignore them and go his own way. David, on the other hand, is a college-educated, Baptist minister, with a wife and kids. His was a path that went beyond two kids playing the Jones as a way of trying to impress the rest of the gang. Somewhere in that school yard, he developed a vision for the future and turned his vision into a reality.

Many of my visions also have turned to realities. During the conversion, some of the visions I

held fast to had to be given up and revised in ways I never imagined. But as I relinquished these beliefs, I found myself growing in ways I never imagined were possible. The growth process, I've learned, never is complete; it shouldn't die until you do. Many of us limit our human potential when we take on the attitude that we don't have time to read or when we refuse to accept the feedback and criticism given by family, friends and co-workers who often criticize when it's absolutely necessary. Little do we realize that rejecting this criticism causes us to turn into strangers in our own homes. Sooner or later, after doing things only our way, we adopt personality traits that make us seem totally alien to the people closest to us. It's no wonder that married couples come to the realization they don't know their spouse after a few years. Sometimes, we realize our perceptions of ourselves are not the reality others have of us. Then there are the times when our perceptions of the world around us lead us down dark paths and dead-end streets. It is on these occasions when we must adjust our internal road map, cut our losses, or turnaround and seek out a new direction. When we reach this conclusion, we must change or face inevitable internal perishing.

Too frequently I talk to friends who steadfastly hold on to ideas and fantasies of how things should be even though these ideas have constantly failed them. Failures may turn up in relationships, on the job, and sometimes in church, but these individuals hold on as if they have no other choices except the ones they learned as kids from their parents and some misinterpreted nursery rhyme. A friend recently told me she felt true love never dies, even after marriage ends in divorce. It was clear that philosophy served as handcuffs to a past that was long gone. Such a philosophy troubles me primarily because it is not soundly based on experience. I know it was formulated during childhood, possibly after reading a novel, yet it manifests as a bedrock in life decisions after it proves itself faulty. The fact of matter is that love does die even if it is real and true. People remain together under miserable circumstances knowing they don't love each other anymore but continue to bear the pain because they endorsed a faulty idea of love years ago and are afraid of admitting an error. Not only does staying loyal to faulty tenets cause us to make faulty decisions, worse than that, it causes our personal growth to fall short of its potential and limits the good we can do for others.

For years, I felt I'd always be treated fairly if I did an excellent job for my employer. I held on to this concept of thinking because I had been raised to believe hard work was always rewarded. During my childhood, I worked for the family business and for the PX system and I was genuinely

rewarded for my efforts. After college, I treated all my failures and successes as evidence of the effort I expended. If I was fairly compensated for my work, I chalked it up as a job well-done and when I wasn't patted on the back, I accepted that I needed to try harder the next time. This system always worked for me despite hearing from many friends and colleagues that it didn't hold true for them. In the back of my mind, I knew they weren't trying hard enough. Maybe they weren't as polished in some areas as they should have been. Maybe they imagined some mystical force working against them and that held them back. They must have been doing something wrong because I knew the world was fair.

Eventually, the forces of racism hit home, and I was forced to confess. People will not always treat you fairly when you do well. They are often not even concerned with fair treatment and feel absolutely no remorse after treating you badly. Before accepting this, I tried to attribute bad treatment to personality problems. Even that didn't hold water. I had to give up that old premise I learned from my family about work ethic. Life demanded that I adopt a new philosophy if I were to compete and survive in Corporate America. Otherwise, I was going down with the other non-believers. Though I had fundamental truths that were the center of my reality, I realized I had to be nimble or my realities would end up as fatalities.

My world view was greatly expanded after moving to Munich, Germany. Not only did I learn that there were more ways to do things than the American way, I also learned there were better ways of doing things. European sensibilities are quite fascinating, many of which I'd love to bring home to the U.S. It was in Turkey that I experienced what Malcolm X probably experienced when he made his pilgrimage to Mecca. I will be forever thankful for that experience.

As I look back to those drives to Army posts, flights to Columbus, Dallas and various outposts in Europe and Asia, I see that they were all layovers to my ultimate reality. Though I live hundreds of miles away from those places now, they make up the foundation of my being, and the basis of my visions. Seeing many sides of the world as a kid was an experience that I continue to seek now. I didn't have to search for to gain a unique perspective as an adolescent; the view was clear just beyond my doorsteps. As an adult, the neighborhood is much larger, the people are more sophisticated, and my view is more mature. I'm able to see more and understand more and as a result, I want to share more. I still live surrounded by many classes of people. Each has its own set of circumstances and reasons for living where they do. I'm not as close to many of my childhood brothers and sisters as I'd like to be, but I haven't forgotten from where I came. Not from the top

and not from the bottom. I tend to think that I came from the center, so now I give you my view from the middle.

It's My World

Essay 1 - My Friends Mean Everything To Me

I wouldn't be where I am without my friends. I don't mean my associates or acquaintances, those I don't claim to have. I mean my soulmates, my true blues, my tight boys & girls, and those people who pass through my life and impart with me a meaningfulness that leaves my life embellished, even if only in the most minor of ways. I'm talking about people who are ordinary in most ways, just like I am, yet profound in ways they probably wouldn't imagine.

My life has been blessed. I always reflect on how I observed my mother and uncle dealing with people that visited our funeral home in Columbus, Georgia during my youth. People would come in from all walks of life, some needing - some giving. It didn't matter if they were young or old, if they were shy or bold, they were always welcomed and greeted with a smile, a handshake and often a big, tight hug. There was no pretentiousness or superficiality about the way my uncle treated people, he was genuine. I liked that. The people liked that. As a result, the family all grew and reaped the benefits that kindness bestows upon a person.

Those greetings were a big education for me. I learned that people appreciate friends and they appreciated the way he made them feel – respected, needed and warm. People always had good things to say about my uncle and mother. “Fine man, your uncle John!”, I would hear when making business rounds. “Your mother is the sweetest person”, another person would tell me when they found out whose son I was. So not only did I learn from them how to treat people, but it was constantly reinforced by persons I respected and looked up to.

I've tried to treat people kindly and sincerely ever since my childhood. As I grow older, the payoff gets bigger and bigger. The older I get, the more I appreciate people I meet. My friends are a true source of love and inspiration for me. I get excited thinking about some of them because we have a fellowship and tightness that is quite extraordinary. The fellowship and tightness have evolved from being open and intimate with one another and trusting each other enough to share both positive and hurting experiences. With each communion comes a spiritual reckoning that grows the friendship and helps insure its longevity. Sometimes being with a few guys for a couple of hours is almost like going to church. Rather than listening to one sermon, I can get two sermons simultaneously. When we depart company, my spirit is filled with joy, renewed and whole. Some people don't leave church feeling this way; I get it from my friends.

Recently, two buddies and I went to church together. We've all known each other for a while and frequently get together for something. As soon as I got into the car to join Bill and Arthur, Bill started talking about a conflict that incurred prior to departing from his house. He was frustrated and truly needed to voice a few things. We listened intently for several minutes as he described the situation that weighed heavily on his heart. It was stirring to watch and listen to his outpouring of feelings because I knew he was being honest with us, not trying to get us to buy into his side of the story, just seeking a friend; being a friend. Our part was simple. We listened and offered our varied perspectives, trying to be supportive in every way we could. I believe he knew he could count on us. We knew we could count on him.