



Don Collier

My Education (Excerpt from *A Gravedigger's Journal*)

I loved school; impatient for school breaks to end; first day of school was another Christmas, new textbooks, new teachers, new clothes, and shoes, finally, a new lunch pail. My love of learning grew as I aged into a firm belief that learning was lifelong; if you stop learning you are dead. I loved school, but school did not love me.

*7th grade, Round Pond School for Negro Children (3-room country school)
Clarksville, Tennessee, 1962*

Classes begin with a morning ritual, a solemn Lord's Prayer; all heads bowed with Mrs. Barnes, the principal and teacher, leading the prayer. I wondered if she was really into the prayer or if she was eyeballing the room for sinners not praying. I dare not to raise my head to confirm my suspicion, risking that her gaze might fall on me. The next ritual was the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag followed by punishment.

Punishment was done in front of the entire class. The condemned would come to stand in front of the class and at the side of Mrs. Barnes' desk, standing with one hand outward, palms up; Mrs. Barnes would administer one swat with a rubber strap, the condemn could not flinch; flinching angered Mrs. Barnes; the condemned were not allowed to cry; children crying angered Mrs.

Barnes. One demonstration of this punishment kept a whole class silent and obedient forever. It served the same purpose as the whipping post. Going back generations of Jim Crow education; the child was lovingly raised by semi-illiterate guardians.

I witnessed one such punishment: an older girl in the school was observed over the weekend keeping company with a soldier from an army base just across the state line. Standing bravely with one palm up she took the swat without flinching; she returned to her desk and laid her face down into the folds of her arms resting on the desk. She hid her tears and muffled her crying. Yes, it is true what the old folks say, a misbehaving child was punished at home and at school for the same offense.

Mrs. Barnes was an old-fashioned country teacher that everyone feared and hated. Except my father. One day he picked me up from school and he did not get out of his truck. Mrs. Barnes was angry; all parents came into her classroom to genuflect before her (the talented tenth); she knew them all by their first names; all called her Mrs. Barnes. She said to me, "You tell Oscar I am mad at him for not coming in to pay his respects." I told my father; to my pleasant surprise he said, "I don't like Mrs. Barnes. When I come to pick you up, you don't have to say nothing to her; just come on out and get in the truck." He hated her and was not afraid to say so, unlike so many other adults. I was proud of him that day. For many at this time, teachers and preachers stood above reproach. A child who dared to do otherwise would be scolded to stay out of "grown folks' business."

I had one very close call with Mrs. Barnes' rubber strap. I was the student with top grades. She called me to her desk; addressing all the class she said, "you work hard and gets good grades; take this ax, holding up for all to see; go into the woods to find a Christmas tree for the school."

I went with much trepidation; I didn't know much about the woods behind the school. However, I spotted a perfect tree right next door, across from the meadow playground. My thinking was I could cut down this tree, go off and hide a bit, then triumphantly return, dragging the tree behind. I got in two not-so-good whacks with the ax; then a woman came excitedly out of the house, "Boy...boy what are you doing?" I replied, "Mrs. Barnes sent me out to cut down a Christmas tree for the school." She replied, "I am sure she didn't want you to chop down my tree! I am going to tell Mrs. Barnes about you. Now git." I waited and waited for Mrs. Barnes to call me to the front of the class, and say, "Our neighbor said you tried to chop down her tree. Stand still with your palm out. You better not flinch or cry." But the neighbor, to my great relief, did not report me. Mrs. Barnes lived inside my head for a long time, so did my father's comforting words.

It was soon after this close call with the rubber strap that a white school board official came to our school for an inspection. Mrs. Barnes showed him around the three classrooms and the kitchen with dining area. She did not introduce him to anybody, not even the other two teachers;

he was not introduced to the children or the kitchen lady. Mrs. Barnes was giving him an incredible Uncle Tom performance; big smile, slightly bowed head, and lots of “Yes, sa, No, sa.” I was disgusted. She lorded over black peasants and factory workers and their children as a superior, educated Negro. None of these peasants and factory workers would do such a public display of Uncle Tom behavior; their dignity would not allow them to do such a thing in front their own children. I cannot remember anything I learned in Mrs. Barnes’ class, but I did not lose my love of school.

There is, however, one recurring memory of Mrs. Barnes that comes back to me at strange times. Mrs. Barnes walked into the classroom with the shocking announcement, “Children, President Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas. You’ll have to walk straight home, don’t wait on the bus to come. When you get home stay inside until the grown-ups get home.” My younger sister and I walked down the gravel road leading home. She said to me, “What are we going to do if we see a white person.” I replied we will hide in the woods; follow the creek back home.

*8th grade, Dana Junior High School
San Pedro, California, 1966*

I presented my report card to my mother. My grades were always good. But I told her I was disappointed because I did not make it to the honor roll again; this was at a time when the honor roll meant more than a bumper sticker; honor roll meant your name on a display for all in the school to see. I explained to her how hard I worked to get all A’s; then one teacher gave me a B+. She said to me, “Dem white folks don’t want a black boy on their honor roll.” I just sat dejected; then she said, “Son, it is not enough to be just as good as the white folks, you got to be better than them.” For years, I carried a resentment towards these teachers who denied me what I had earned.

My love of school remained with me. Apparently, I am not alone with this regard. I was talking to a friend I enjoyed talking to. He was an ambitious Black student around this time. He said, “My mother told me the same thing. She said you got to be twice as smart as the whites. And don’t expect any acknowledgment of this. White folks will not admit to this.” Ambitious, capable black youth were ignored.

*10th grade, San Pedro High School
San Pedro, California, 1968*

On the first day of school, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. the class was called to stand and pledge allegiance to the flag; half the class, both black and white students,

remained seated and silent. The teacher looked around the classroom, but didn't insist that any student join him if they clearly did not want to. He proceeded to lead those who stood with hand over heart in a lackluster recital. This spontaneous protest went on for a week or so. I was sent to the principal's office because I would not stop my protest. The principal asked me if I would give up and recite the pledge of allegiance. I told him that I would never stand for or recite the pledge again. I was suspended from school. But I stayed fast to my words. I would not stand for any patriotic gesture, I remained seated or left the room.

At this time, getting sent home from school was a big deal with the youth, dreading how to explain to an upset parent why you were sent home. But my mother said, "Good! You let dem white folks know where you stand." I felt a moment of euphoria, then she went on "... it's in God's hands now. God will punish them for what they have done." I didn't want any help from God. What I wanted was what other black youth wanted; I wanted a gun. King's pacifism was a control mechanism over angry black youth; Malcolm X's disciples in the Black Panther Party called for armed self-defense and gained an audience with Black youth. Thirty-eight Panthers were shot down, murdered, by the bloody FBI COINTELPRO without firing a shot in return, in most cases. This was the fulfillment of a promise made by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that if Negro youth wanted to become revolutionaries, they should understand they will be dead revolutionaries.

I loved school, but school didn't love me. I never went back to school after my humiliating suspension. My formal education ended in the 10th grade; I'm largely self-taught.

Don Collier calls himself "an ordinary Black American man on a mission, not of his choosing."