

“So he slaps him.”

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“Never Forget”

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The television tribute to Sidney Poitier recalled how Poitier himself described what happened when he tried to enroll in an African-American acting school. The teacher pushed him out the door and said he'd never make it. Poitier couldn't read. He was tone deaf. His Bahamian accent was too thick. All three reasons were sound reasons. All three were true. Poitier's gift was acknowledging but refusing to accept these limitations. Did the teacher regret failing to take time to help him? My professor, after failing me in expository writing, did take me aside to show me how to work at writing. Poitier's real teacher arrived in the form of an elderly Jewish man at the restaurant where Poitier worked, them reading the newspaper together after the restaurant closed.

Failure: sometimes our own fault, often our own fault. Sometimes it's the fault of forces beyond our control. Failure, in my experience (and I'm well experienced in this area), usually is a rough white water confluence of choices. And you're there without a life jacket.

Come now, have you never gotten a D- in life? Are you haunted by where you have failed others or yourself? I hope so, provided the haunting is done with clarity and hope, without bringing out hankies or tiny violins.

We are our wounds, our mistakes, our hurts, our failures, our faults, our hypocrisies. We are our history. Correct that. We are what we do with our hypocrisies, our faults, our failures, our hurts, our mistakes, our wounds. This explains why I keep saying how the phrase “forgive and forget,” is both trite and wrong. Preferable is: “never forget, then forgive.” We can play the denial game, at least until the Tupperware of our denials spills from the pantry. We can try to forget, ignore, even rationalize our missteps and misdeeds. For how long? Have you tried to paint over pencil markings?

God bless the gift of disquietude, discontentment, disillusionment, this holy restlessness and discomfiture, these stirrings when we want something better. When we realize what we thought were answers weren't. When we dare question the conventional, questioning ourselves, even disliking bits of ourselves, if we are observant. Yes, we find freedom in loving ourselves but that doesn't mean we always have to like ourselves. To erase our bad memories erases who we have become today. That's the clue. The fortunate among us admit them, learn from them, making ourselves more human than inhuman, remembering to name them instead of letting them name you.

Avoid reading this as an invitation to beat yourself up. If that's all we do, all we do is end up too bloodied and bruised to go forward. What “Never Forget” requires is the wisdom and trust to be honest, to decide how to make amends, to work on becoming truer. Nations too, as when Gandhi popularized a sermon from Westminster Abbey that preached the ‘Seven Deadly Social Evils,’ warning us with these D- signs of a failing society: “Wealth Without Work, Commerce Without Morality, Science Without Humanity, Religion Without Sacrifice, Politics Without Principle.” How we doing?

Alligator cannot change alligator nature. Mountain lion cannot change lion nature. Mosquito cannot change insect nature. Humans can.

Watching again Poitier's film, "Lilies of the Field," one of the subtexts missed in previous viewings became clear. It isn't as if the movie changed. It was the viewer who has been changed, shaped by current times. Same with the Bible. Scripture doesn't change. What you bring to it does. Here's Homer Smith on his own, wandering, homeless, a black Baptist from Alabama. Then there are the five Roman Catholic nuns who risked escaping Eastern Bloc fascist tyranny to come and minister in the Arizona desert, adopting their new home. All the characters are outsiders looking to build something worthwhile. Notice also how it is the Latinos who end up building the chapel. The only two white persons include the prejudiced boss, Ashton, who repents his prejudice, and the jaded priest, Father Murphy, who recovers his faith from them. The outsiders redeem those who assumed they were the insiders.

Another interview with Poitier pointed out how for the 1967 movie "In the Heat of the Night," he insisted that the producers officially contract that whenever and wherever the movie is played, it must include the full scene where the white Mississippi aristocrat cannot stand Poitier's character refusal to be deferential. So he slaps him. Poitier slaps him back. Did this movie get shown in Jackson, Tupelo, Meridian, Clarksdale?