

Jack  
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your  
copy

I sent  
copy  
to  
Dorinda

Jackie Robinson  
Cascade Road  
Stamford, Connecticut

March 25, 1971

Master Jeff Auxier  
Palisades Elementary School  
1500 S. W. Greentree Road  
Lake Oswego, Oregon 97034

Dear Jeff:

It has taken me a long time to answer your letter and it may be that my answer will be too late to serve the immediate purpose for which you wrote me. If so, I am genuinely sorry. The fact that I have recently had a health problem is only part of the reason I have not responded to your letter more promptly.

You see, Jeff, just as those who love me were concerned very much about my sickness, I too am deeply concerned and feeling much disturbed about our country today. For, I love our country and I feel it is terribly ill.

I was very hesitant about writing a letter to you to make that statement. You are young and enthusiastic and full of belief in and patriotism for our country and that is only natural. Even though I have my doubts and fears about the way things are going in our land, it gives me anything but pleasure to tell a nice, unspoiled youngster - as you seem to be - that we are living in a sick country.

It is hard to say that to you - as hard as it is for some parents to tell their youngster who has been believing in Santa Claus that this old gentleman is a myth, that he doesn't exist. It is hard because, in your youthful enthusiasm and innocence about some of the unpleasant facts of life, you obviously believe in a kind of Santa-like perfection of America and American democracy.

So, how do you say to a great little kid who has honored you with a letter such as the one you sent me - No. No, I do not want you to fly yaafflaggin my name. How do you say that without hurting his feelings, without paying him back with rejection when he has offered you something pretty close to love? It's hard to say no under such circumstances. However, as long as I can remember, I have believed that the worst thing a human being can do is to say, think or do anything which he himself does not believe, simply to please somebody else.

I have been attacked, criticised, denied honors and awards because I cannot be a hypocrite. But I can honestly say that I have been pretty consistent in my determination to be able to look at myself in the mirror of my own conscience and not be ashamed.

I am not ashamed TO BE ASHAMED of some of the terrible things which are happening in our country. The tragic truth is that many of those who are the biggest flag-wavers, the loudest to cry out their love for America - are the very people who are helping to divide blacks and whites and to create more barriers which separate the rich and the poor, the educated and the unlettered, the young and the adult. Some of these "super-patriots" deliberately promote hatred and use the flag to cover up their evil. Others, meaning well, but blindly following the marching bands and the popular trends, contribute, without meaning to, to dividing our nation into segments of class and race and religion and age.

Your letter made me feel honored. It also saddened me because I knew what my answer must be. It also inspired me, however, because it made me think even more deeply about a book I am writing about my life and the life of the black man in America over the past fifty years. Your letter strengthened my resolve to be very clear and explicit and brutally honest in this book in telling why I will not wear a phoney band of super-patriotism on my sleeve, why I will not fly a flag whose significance has been perverted and polluted by those who say they are patriots but who act like treasons to the principles on which this land of ours was supposed to have been founded.

It is impossible, in a letter, to spell out for you the many reasons why I feel the way I do. I am going to do that in the book and Al Duckett, my collaborator and I want you to receive one of the first copies. In a sense this book will be dedicated to you and other kids like you, white and black, who are the only hope this country has of one day living up to its vows. Reading your letter, I said to myself: "I hope this young man hurries up and grows up." You see, we need young people who can have your earnestness and enthusiasm and who can grow up, strong and stubborn and demanding that slogans have substance and that flags mean fidelity and that democracy in America truly becomes real for all of America's people.

The final thing I have to say to you, Jeff, is to cite one incident which might help you to understand the problem of other youngsters who were born with black skin. Imagine being born into a family in humble circumstances. You grow up, helping to support yourself and get a college education. You work as a bellhop and in other minor jobs. You do very well in your school work. You remain clean in your personal life. You marry a lovely girl and begin to build a family. You struggle hard until you are on your way to becoming important in your profession. You become a distinguished educator, lecturer and

social worker. You are called upon to head a very influential organization which is dedicated to seeking meaningful employment and respect for black people - The National Urban League. You initiate creative and bold programs which result in many thousands of jobs for your people. You have a winning way with industrial princes and lords of industry. You know how to get into board rooms and under their skins. You know how to tell them disagreeable facts about the life of blacks and about white discrimination without alienating them. You do not wear dashikis or scream angry slogans or give fancy handshakes or suggest that your people participate in the hari kari of race violence. You do a marvellous job of helping people and a brave job of weathering criticism from whites who call you too militant and blacks who call you "Tom." Popes and presidents respect you. But so do black thousands upon whose tables you have placed a little better loaf of bread. One day in Nigeria, there seeking to help bring about progress for people of the world, you get caught up in rushing waters and you die. A world stands still for a moment of shock. Then come the statements, the telegrams, the messages. Your death, before you reached fifty, is internationally headlined. The bosses of corporations and the outstanding legislators and just plain people file past your remains in one African and two United States cities. The President of the United States comes personally to your funeral and, himself, delivers the eulogy. A bugler blows taps to the sky. An American flag is at half-mast many places in the world. And you, Whitney Young, Jr., who lived up to every principle which our society says is noble, you, the highest apostle of equality in the land - are buried in your home town in A JIMCROW GRAVE.

It is as though, after all you had accomplished, your country had said to you: "You were indeed a marvellous man. But remember - even you are just another nigger."

Am I saying that my good and decent friend, Whitney Young, died in vain? No, I am saying that his death and all for which he lived and all the small deaths he had to die in being misunderstood - I am saying these are warnings to us all that it is wrong to have our young men fighting in Asia for the kind of democracy we will not give them at home. It is wrong that when they come back seeking a job, a home or a grave that isn't marked "nigger" we cannot give it to them. I am saying that the moment of truth is here when we must ask the marching bands to hush for a minute and the murmur of pledges of allegiance to be still long enough and the emotion of the salute to flags be slowed down long enough so that we can hear the truth the black man is saying today, the truth that many black men are thinking and do not say aloud. They are thinking - along with our late and lyric poet Langston Hughes - "America never was America for me - and yet I swear, America will be."

God bless you son.