

Williams, G.H. (1995). [Life on the Color Line](#). New York City, NY: Penguin Books.

OVERVIEW

This is a powerful autobiography of a man who has a white mother and a father of mixed heritage. Because the child was so light skinned, he didn't know he was "black" until after his mother abandoned his family and they moved to their father's hometown. He and his brother were raised by their black aunt; consequently, he was not accepted as either white or black. He overcame childhood poverty and abuse, becoming a lawyer and a professor. The book eloquently sums Williams' situation:

Gregory Howard Williams and his younger brother, Mike, grew up believing they were white and that their dark-skinned father was of Italian descent. Then their parent's marriage disintegrated, their mother left, and their father's business ventures sank into a sea of liquor. Pursued by debt and personal demons, Tony Williams took his two boys to his hometown of Muncie, Indiana, where he was known as 'Buster', and where there was no escape from the truth he had hidden for so long.

The truth was as plain as the color of Buster's family. Gregory and Mike Williams were the sons of a brilliant and charming but troubled black man who fled the burden of race until need drove him back to his roots. Suddenly Gregory and Mike discovered they were black as well, strangers in a segregated world about which they knew nothing, forced to learn the strategies of survival amid poverty, prejudice, and agonizing absurdities of a time and place where racism flourished.

INTRODUCTION

The first four chapters of this book describe the childhood of Gregory and Mike in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, a military community. His father owned and operated the Open House Café, where many soldiers enjoyed refreshment and entertainment. Across the east side of the highway, it was all white; west of the highway, they were surrounded on three sides by the all-black community of Gum Springs, home of former slaves and their descendents since the time of George Washington.

Life was tough for the two boys, ages four and five, despite the fact that they were living in a community that believed they were white. Their father drank a great deal and regularly battered their mother in front of them. His drinking soon destroyed the marriage and the business. Their mother escaped with the two youngest children, leaving Greg and Mike with their dad.

LEARNING OF THEIR HERITAGE

At the age of nine, Gregory and his younger brother were uprooted from their only home, to be taken to a strange land and a new life, not knowing if they would ever again see their mother. Their lives changed dramatically as they settled into their new location. They discovered aunts, uncles, and cousins that they never knew they had. While delighted to learn that they had a large family, it was a tremendous adjustment to realize that their family was very poor and very black. Miss Dora, the aunt who then raised the boys, was the only church-going family member. She insisted that the boys join her every Sunday for Sunday School and church. This weekly ritual, alone, may very well have been one of the influences in their lives that saved them. School became a nightmare for each of them as they were not accepted as whites and were frequently harrassed and abused with their black cousins. Their friends in school were black kids; the whites were "off limits". Gregory Williams shares, "Though only ten years old, I faced one of the hardest choices of my life: to dream or to despair. Too young to realize the odds against any one of us ever walking away from those tracks and changing the circumstances of our lives, I chose to dream."

In 1954, Gregory happened to watch a television interview of a Ku Klux Klan leader, following the Supreme Court decision to outlaw segregated schools. According to Williams, "That beefy-faced, white robed Klansman stood in front of a burning cross, railing against black and white children learning together. He claimed that the Supreme Court was encouraging 'race-mixing' and the only result would be the 'bestial mongrel mulatto, the dreg of society.'" This statement struck Gregory like a thunderbolt: the Klansman was talking about him. He was the motive for the violence against integration. He was who they hated and wanted to destroy. That was the biggest puzzle for Gregory, because he had absolutely nothing.

GROWING UP

The only place in Gregory's school life where he and other black students were respected was in the world of sports. On the football field or the basketball court, those who excelled—regardless of race—were heroes. Still, as soon as the game-ending buzzer sounded, it was back to the same abuse—even in the locker room. Dating for Gregory, of course, was restricted to black girls, even though some white girls were interested in him. Even in dating he encountered prejudice. One day while walking down the street with his black date, a car drove by and a teenager leaned out, shouting, "N----- lover!" He realized that they saw him as a white boy dating a negro girl. Gregory wrestled with the fact that his town wouldn't permit him to date white girls, and apparently couldn't tolerate seeing him—because of his light skin—with black girls either. He did, eventually, marry a white girl from his high school; it happened after they were in college, and it was painful for all families involved.

Gregory states that the greatest gift his father ever gave to him was to instill in him the ability to dream and visualize a future of his own making. Gregory was a smart, young man, and a very good student. He excelled in his grades and had an insatiable appetite for books. Reading was the route for escaping his life of degradation. In a political speech, Gregory heard the words, " 'Out of one blood, God made all races to dwell on the face of the earth.' " These and other words of encouragement gave Gregory the strength to succeed.

Before the boys' parents divorced, the boys had a good relationship with their maternal grandparents. They loved their grandmother and thought that she loved them. But after the divorce and the move to Indiana, they heard nothing from either their mother or their maternal grandparents. One day, several years later, their white grandmother came to see them. Gregory and Mike were elated to see her, and they asked her lots of questions about their mother. She was not very responsive, and she eventually became angry. When they asked her to tell their mother something for them, she responded, " 'Don't tell me what to do! I don't carry messages for n-----s!' " This devastated the two boys. They returned to their black aunt, buried their faces in her bosom, and released long and sorrowful wails and sobs that had been submerged since their mother abandoned them. Miss Dora profoundly summed their lives with her

response, " 'Boys, sometimes, life is just plain hard. Most children don't have the trouble you've had, but God has some purpose in all this. You just have to walk on through it.' "

Another significant event in Gregory's life occurred when he was about to graduate from elementary school. He was basically promised by one of his teachers that he would receive the Academic Achievement Award at graduation ceremonies. He was so excited and proud that he worked an extra job just to buy a new (second hand) suit to wear for the event. He also convinced his Dad to come to see him get this award. Gregory had to keep him sober long enough to get him to the ceremony. However, when the announcement came, Gregory and his teacher were surprised and shocked to hear another name called out. What neither of them knew until that moment was that the prize did not go to negro students.

Finally, after ten long years, their father received a call from their mother. She wanted to see her boys. "The pain of rejection, of begging my cousins for small bits of information about her, of having my hopes dashed time after time, had nearly cauterized me." Gregory said, "Now, when she seemed gone forever and when we accepted we would never see her again, she came back." But the emotional reunion ended up being just another disappointment:

We stood less than a foot apart, desperately trying to reach out to each other, yet we were unable to connect. We lived in different worlds. The distance between us was far more than miles and years. I didn't want to start over. I wanted an apology for the years of neglect. I wanted her to say, just once, 'I'm sorry I wasn't there for you boys, and I pryaed every night someone was holding you and protecting you the way I wanted to.' I wanted her to say she thanked God for giving us Miss Dora. But my mother was only concerned with her own distorted reality. She wanted us to reenter her world, but first we had to reject the one in which we had lived the last ten years. Gaining acceptance to her world required that we deny our black heritage and pretend that the people and circumstances of our present life did not exist. We were to forget we were 'colored' boys. She expected us to move back into her life without a past, without roots, without feelings for the people who had sheltered and cared for us when our need was greatest. I knew that was something we could never do.

With great determination and hard work, Gregory went to college and graduate school, becoming a lawyer, and later, a law professor. He ends his book with this statement:

In spite of all the pain and grief of my early years, I am grateful to have been able to view the world from a place few men and women have stood. I realize now that I am bound to live out my life in the middle of our society and hope that I can be a bridge between races, shouldering the heavy burden that almost destroyed my youth.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- How do you think the treatment that these two brothers received in their early childhood affected each of their lives: from their father, from their mother, from Miss Dora, from their teachers, from classmates, and from society as a whole?
- What was the influence of Miss Dora's beliefs and their involvement in the church on these two boys?
- Why does racism end in the sports arena? And why can't the acceptance reach beyond the sports arena?
- How would these two boys' lives be different in today's society rather than in the 1960s?
- What does this story mean for a youth worker today? Is it pertinent? How?

IMPLICATIONS

- **Self esteem.** Self esteem can "make or break" any person, regardless of race. Gregory succeeded in life; yet, his brother, Mike, did not. The father of the two boys continually praised Gregory, telling him that he was "smart enough to be able to do something with his life." Still, their father continually told Mike that he was worthless, just like he himself was. Consequently, Mike succumbed to a life of alcohol and drug abuse, just like his Dad.
- **Education.** Second only to family, the educational experience of a child is a powerful influence. When teachers praise and encourage students, they perform better. A teacher who does not believe that a student is capable of advancing—and shares his or her belief with the child—significantly diminishes the chance for a positive scholastic

outcome. Unfortunately, the two boys involved in this book were mistreated and never encouraged to pursue worthwhile endeavors.

- **Cruelty.** If there is a perfect time for the "Golden Rule" to be understood and practiced, it is amidst racism. The cruelty inflicted on these two boys once they were perceived as black was horrendous. This type of behavior is unconscionable.
- **Legislation.** Although some strides have been made to formulate and enforce laws to reduce blatant racism, much covert racism abounds. The journey to full acceptance is long and arduous.
- **Personhood.** Our society needs to be educated (through the church or other institutions) about personhood. We can have the best educational system in the world, but if we do not learn to love our brothers and sisters, and respect each other's personhood, we fall short.

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