



Robert C. Maynard

THE MCGILL LECTURE

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It never occurred to me in the days of my wondering youth, when Ralph McGill was a towering symbol of light in a troubled land, that I would have an opportunity to pay tribute in this manner to such a rare figure of our time.

The reason such a thought never occurred to me is that Mr. McGill and I lived in such different Americas. His was the Southland with its strangled conscience then, a land beset by a segregation he called "estrangement . . . a withdrawal from humanity that is close at hand, that passes in the streets, that lives just over the other way."

I read of that land as it was described by Lillian Smith, Carson McCullers, W. J. Cash, and, of course, Ralph McGill. I tried to understand it in my youth, but it was a strange place then that existed between the pages of a book or occasionally on the front pages of our New York newspapers when some event occurred that seemed to typify a time of tortured souls.

My America then was a place that moved in massive rhythms between day and night, a place that conjured up pictures immediately when, in the argot of the place, the "joint was jumpin'" or it was a "rompin', stompin' kind of night."

We thought we were free and that you "down here" would be slaves forever to Jim Crow. Whether white or black, you were shackled to a set of rules only a few understood, but by which all must play.

That is why I have chosen to speak to you today on the subject of "Ralph McGill's America and Mine." In the days of my youth, the days when Ralph McGill's name was a legend because he stood against the forces of evil in a land in terror of the night rider, the flaming cross, and the white robe, we were so innocent "up North" because we thought we were free and that you were not.

Later, years later, Dr. Martin Luther King would predict that the South would be free of Jim Crow long before the North was free of its racism. We scoffed and said we were free. Then one day, years after that, I found myself facing a man in a gray-flannel, three-piece suit wearing Gucci shoes and holding an imported leather attache case, and I learned that his name was James C. Crow, III, Esq.

By then I knew none of us was free.

But I am getting ahead of the story of Ralph McGill's America and Mine.

Two different forms of fantasy shaped our worlds. It seems to me the South became transfixed after Reconstruction by a delusion that it could recapture the old relationship of master and slave if it held on rigidly to the remnants of the caste system that existed before the Civil War. It was necessary, then, for a whole region to engage in massive self-deceit, to foster through every means possible the notion of inherent superiority of whites and the total inferiority of blacks. All this was psychological reinforcement of the fantasy that nothing had changed.

But, as Ralph McGill wrote so often, it was all a mask of self-deceit. And Walter Scott's little rhyme applied no place as it did to that situation:

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive."

No tangle of deceit is quite as elaborate as that created to deceive oneself.

The role of Ralph McGill, Hodding Carter, and myriad other courageous literary leaders of the region in that time was to try to awaken a people from their fantasy to face the reality that the past was never to return and that the world was moving on, leaving a region to rot in remembrance.

Soon after, the civil rights lawyers, Martin Luther King, the marchers, and the television cameras would combine to jolt the region from its reverie. I date the day of great awakening to that Sunday afternoon on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma when American citizens marching for the right to vote were beaten, trampled, and tear-gassed, and the whole wide world was watching on NBC's evening news.

Only a short time later, President Lyndon Johnson went before a joint session of Congress to speak of the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy. . . ."

Little by little, McGill's South became "the New South," and soon after that, the "Sunbelt," and it has a long way to go before it fulfills its full "destiny of democracy"; but it is a long way from the South of Eugene Talmadge, who so delighted in spitting the worst epithets at Ralph McGill.

The delusion has diminished, even if it has not disappeared. Only time will tell if the delusion can be wholly cured. I came south as a young reporter in the late 1960s to record the crumbling of the wall of delusion.

It was yet fully to occur to me that the world in which I was raised "up North" was fostered on fantasy, too. If the South reveled for so long in a delusion of the past, the North reveled with equal abandon

and for just about as long in the illusion of freedom and equality for all.

I take you back to the 1940s, to the same time during which Ralph McGill wrote his column every day on Page One of the *Atlanta Constitution*.

Those were the days of my growing up in New York City. Those were the days of our illusions. We who had never been to the South regarded it as another country. I can remember many nights in my childhood when my brothers and I whispered under the covers and told each other frightful stories.

Often those stories concerned hideous happenings in the South that we had read in a newspaper or a magazine. Or had conjured in our minds.

We would tell these things sometimes to my mother and father at breakfast, and they would look sad as they talked of the people "down there" living in a hell unheard of in our quiet and secure world of brownstones and urban culture.

We could not see or understand then that we, too, lived in a world of illusion governed by the web of caste and class. By virtue of my father's property and my mother's managerial skills, we and most of the middle class families around us assumed the world was generally all right. That is to say that we would go to the right school, marry into the right family, enter the right profession, and live in the right neighborhood.

That is not to say for a moment that we did not each of us encounter our share of racism in some form or another, usually at school, but sometimes on the street or in a restaurant. But we were told we were free, so we brushed off those encounters as aberrations, rarely connecting them to any larger system of thought or activity resembling what we understood to govern the South's mores.

One of the clear manifestations of racism around us was police brutality. We were aware of the fact of police killings and police beatings, but we were sure those things only happened to certain kinds of bad people and that some individuals on the police force were prejudiced, the most common word we used in those times for racism.

But I must say only a few people within our hearing in those days stood up and said to the people in our stable little community or the many like it in New York City that great masses of poor blacks in New York were ill-fed, ill-housed, and denied equal justice under the law as a matter of course.

Our school teachers rarely mentioned such a thing and neither did our church leaders. It was not that the problem did not exist. We were all soon to hear the thunder from Watts and Hough and Harlem. The

problem was there, all right. It simply was not discussed by those who were living the illusion of being free.

And those who were living the harsh reality of those mean streets had no voice of their own, certainly no voice the rest of society had deigned to heed. Out of sight, out of mind.

By the late 1950s and into the early 60s, the voice of the oppressed of the South was beginning to be heard. The sound of the feet of the walking Montgomery bus boycotters was telling a story to the world, a story whose tones would grow louder and louder across the land, to lunch counters in Greensboro, to the streets of Birmingham and Albany, and on to Selma.

But no such great nonviolent movement had captured the energy and the frustration of the urban masses in New York, Detroit, Cleveland, or Chicago. Indeed, many in those cities continued to live in the illusion of freedom in the midst of deprivation.

By the time Bull Connor's police dogs tore into the marchers in Birmingham, there were small protests in New York for jobs, one or two against housing discrimination and educational inequality. But they were generally ignored, treated with disdain on the inside pages of our great New York newspapers if they were reported at all.

And then, to use the phrase of John O. Killen's novel about racial warfare in the armed services after World War II, "and then we heard the thunder." By that time it was August of 1965 and the sounds of breaking glass and the sight of burning buildings came to us first from Watts, a place known to few outside Los Angeles. Soon its name would be a symbol for urban unrest across the land and around the world.

Once again the whole wide world was watching, and what it saw was the end of the illusion that only the blacks of the South were oppressed. The illusion that Jim Crow was a regional phenomenon unique to the South was a cruel illusion we nurtured up North to our great peril.

One by one, our great cities, the citadels of civilization, were ravaged by the fire of the pent-up rage of those who had been the invisible victims of our Northern illusions. Rivers of blood and years of darkness were the price the Northern city would have to pay, and is still paying, for having nurtured our illusion that the North was free and equal while the South was not.

Well here the delusion and the illusion coincide. Goethe once said that all it takes for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing. Those of us in the press, the great calling of Mr. McGill and myself, live in the belief that if we do not ferret out wrongdoing, evil will engulf our society. Each time anyone moves to abridge our rights under the First

Amendment, that is what we cry out from the rooftops and from our pulpits on the editorial pages.

But we came late and lame to the story of one of the greatest evils of our society, the evil of racial oppression and its great cost to our advancement as a society. Ralph McGill once said of the South's press:

"A shocking number of its newspapers had failed in the responsibility of leadership—to reveal a region to itself. Painfully few had ever dissected the so-called Southern way of life or stripped the myths from the Southerner's belief that he was somehow different from other Americans and entitled to special rights, including the right to be 'let alone' in the ugliest practices of discrimination."

The marvel of this coincidence of delusion and illusion is that much the same thing could have been said at the very same time about the press of the North, but I know of no editor of a stature comparable to that of McGill who said the same about the unstripped myths of life in New York or Chicago or Los Angeles.

Indeed, it was left for a presidential commission to examine the urban uprisings and declare that the press of the North bore no small amount of the blame for what transpired. It found that the press had ignored a major story—make that phenomenon—in its own back yard.

More than that, the commission and many serious students of the urban riot could only conclude that the press played a major role as a causative factor, that our failure to report on the conditions of the inner city left those inside its walls with no way to make the rest of us out there in illusion land understand how deep was their anguish.

In other words, so far gone were we in our illusion, so ignorant were we of that before our very noses, that our neighbors had to set a fire to gain our attention.

I wish this were a purely historical exercise. I wish I could say we were cured of illusion in the North and of delusion in the South. Oh, how I wish.

In a little less than three years, we will celebrate—if that is the correct terminology—the 20th anniversary of Watts. I wonder what lessons we can claim to have learned as a society from what we saw and heard there and elsewhere in those terrifying days and nights.

It has been 14 years since the death of Dr. King. The night he died, I watched the flames of urban anger reach within 10 blocks of the White House. I would have thought such an experience would have etched permanent wisdom on our society about the dangers of such illusions as so possessed us before the riots.

But I am persuaded today that we learned almost nothing. The conditions have changed little in most places. In some instances they may

have become worse because we are on the cusp of the new age of information and technology and we still have penned up in our cities people who have yet to get right with the Gutenberg revolution. We have wasted human potential ticking away like a time bomb we pretend does not exist. And despite having seen it explode once, we seem immobilized and incapable of defusing it.

Meanwhile, a South that now calls itself a Sunbelt has become more urban. In so becoming, the problems we have seen in the Northern city have become more familiar in the South. The Klan, once familiar only in the South, is now vividly visible in the North. Thus are the distinctions being erased between the North and the South.

We see now more clearly than ever that the problem was not so much one of region as it was one of entrenched racism that simply found different forms of expression at another time.

The heart of the matter in Mr. McGill's America and Mine is that both have been seized for centuries by the curious ability of racism to poison the quality of our national life.

Even though we see the many awful manifestations of its evil works, we cannot seem to come to grips with racism as a society and purge it from our public life and from our private hearts.

I mentioned to you the piece in which McGill chastised his Southern brethren of the press for their failure to "reveal a region to itself." When he published that piece, I know of many liberal New Yorkers who savored the subtle power of its phrasing and treasured its poetic rebuke.

Unfortunately, it did not occur to them to ask how well we in the Northern press were doing at revealing our region to itself or, for that matter, our society to itself.

It must be obvious by now that this problem of racism is our great national shame, a shame from which we still seek to hide instead of face. I suspect part of the difficulty of it is that racism is a peculiar phenomenon. It is the only personality disorder with which I am familiar that managed to transform itself into pervasive public policy.

James Crow, III, Esq., and his better known forebear, Jim Crow, suffer from something the psychologists call by several fancy terms. The simplest one I know of is impaired self-esteem. They are, to make short work of the matter, deeply damaged human beings.

In their modern manifestation, these are people whose egos were damaged early in their lives. They were told by someone they hoped would love them that they were unworthy of love. And not just that they were unworthy of love, but that they were unworthy altogether.

In general terms, the pain of such rejection was too excruciating to bear; so instead of living with a sense of self-loathing, they project

that hatred onto some other fixed object or group. Whatever ugly self-image they seek to expiate, they project onto the object of their hatred.

It is this mixture of self-hatred and guilt that has always given classic racism some of its more baroque contours. A man who goes out and preaches racism all day will come home to a black servant he will tell everyone is the person he loves most in life.

Or the psychiatric literature will report on the case of the woman who so fought to keep her children from going to a school with a handful of blacks that she committed vile acts of violence. When finally she received the proper care, she was found to have a morbid sexual fixation on black men that she feared she could not control if she came in proximity to any black people, even small children.

It has long been a concern of mine that our public institutions have permitted themselves to fall victim to the foibles of racism instead of developing some way to help people grow out of them. The reason I regard that as a pity is that it is obvious to me that healthy humans do not need racism to enhance their self-esteem.

There was a time in the 1960s when it was popular to decree that all white Americans were racists.

Nonsense. I will grant that racism pervades the land, and I will grant that any of us can at some time or another bolster our egos by finding some object on which to plant the flag of inferiority.

But that is a long way from saying that all whites are racist. First of all, the issue of ego and the problem of self-phobia can affect any person of any race. More important, I will not concede to any disease the power to be so persistently pandemic.

Not everyone is a racist because not everyone needs to be a racist. Racism is a personal circumstance reinforced by one's social environment. People who may have the same ego problems that we call racism but who are raised in an atmosphere that discourages racism will often find some other means of dealing with their problems. Racism is little more than an elaborate justification for a deep sense of inadequacy.

What I have always wondered is why we do not treat this phenomenon in its proper context as a mental health problem instead of a public policy problem.

Above all, I trust none of us any longer labors under the illusion that it is a regional problem. In one way or another, it is a problem that affects most of the globe. We may take some small comfort in that fact, but it should be very small.

I say so because I believe Dr. King was correct when he said we would either learn to live like brothers or we would one day die like fools. We must come to grips with this as a global problem, but we

dare not point our finger elsewhere until we have addressed the problem seriously at home, in our universities and medical schools, in churches and synagogues, and, above all, in the news media.

In that regard, Ralph McGill is a model of integrity and mental health who should inspire us to continue to be courageous as he was courageous. He knew the rich potential of this region and this nation, and he knew the mental disorder that affects our body politic would forever hold us back.

We have seen in the transformation of the economy of this region only a small example of the profundity of his wisdom. And thus what I learn as I ponder Ralph McGill's America and Mine is how, after all, they are one America. He saw an America fulfilling its promise by ridding itself of prejudice. We have not heeded his advice very much, only enough to realize he was right.

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