

A Loving Chastisement for America

“Love does not mean what the white man has traditionally thought it meant,” my grandfather wrote.

By Caroline Randall Williams

Ms. Williams is a poet.

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“No Golden Lie Can Live Forever” (2016), by Hank Willis Thomas. Original photography by Spider Martin, 1965. Credit... Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

NASHVILLE — On Nov. 8, 2016, I was teaching at Fisk, a historically Black university. At the end of class, I told my students to brace for the next day. I’d just spent the last six years living in Mississippi and then in West Virginia, and I was 100 percent certain that Hillary Clinton was going to lose.

I bought a bottle of wine on the way home and politely refused all of the jubilant watch parties I was being called to attend. I turned in by 8, and woke up the next morning to the news I’d known would come.

This time was different. A Democratic victory in step with the popular vote. But it was still too close. The polls failed last time, and they failed this time, in part because they can't tell you what so many Black Americans know and live every day: that so much of white America is deeply racist, in ways that are impossible to quantify but that are nevertheless felt, and that bear out in the vote. Every time this fact is underestimated, democracy pays for it. Black lives pay for it. White lives pay for it. There are 235,000 Americans dead in the ground who could back me up if only they had their breath.

My father, too, died breathless in America.

At the time, he was the acting general counsel to the U.S. Army, appointed by George W. Bush. He was a born-again Christian. A conservative Republican. A Black man who had an asthma attack at the Dixie Stampede, a Civil War re-enactment dinner theater with a confederate bias in Gatlinburg, Tenn.

Thanks to my father, whom I loved very much, I am an unabashed, fairly old-fashioned patriot. That surprises people. But why can't I speak out against America's ills and then, with unreserved good faith, contemplate its promise?

In 1968, my grandfather, Avon N. Williams Jr., was the first Black man to be elected to the Tennessee State Senate since Reconstruction. He was Thurgood Marshall's first cousin. He was a civil rights lawyer, a World War II veteran, and a good and loving man.

In 1964 he was interviewed by Robert Penn Warren for a project titled "[Who Speaks for the Negro?](#)" Warren posed a complicated question. Part of the fear of desegregation and equality, he posited, was that it was hard to believe that Black Americans could really love people who just days, months, years, generations before had been willing to engage in a system that stripped them of their rights and their humanity. And it is a tall order, choosing to share space with those who have harmed you, or looked away while you were being harmed, or even who voted for someone who was willing to see you wrong done by.

My grandfather's response is still extraordinary to me. He said, "I think that many of us misconceive what loving those who hate you means. Loving — love does not mean what the white man has traditionally thought it meant. It does not mean being blind to his faults. It does not mean being afraid to tell him when he is wrong, or when he's being stupid. It does not mean being afraid to fight him, in a legitimate way."

"The love that I'm talking about," he continued, "is the type of love which a very intelligent Christian has for a child."

He went on: "Although the white man has accused the Negro of being a child in the American society, I think that if you look at it realistically, you will find that the white American has displayed the more childish tendencies. That it is he who has failed to accept the responsibilities of a mature man. Take, for instance, his violation of the Negro slave woman — a completely unrestrained and childish impulse that ignored the mature

recognition of the facts of life, or any insights into the future. The Negro woman, on the other hand, I think, although she was unable to help herself, I think history teaches that she has come off far better, in terms of demonstrating a maturity, a recognition of the responsibilities of life, to herself and to her children. The fact that we have so many Negro men now who have gone so far in life is the result of some Negro mother washing and ironing and working hard to get that child into school, and to gain an advantage for him. So I say that love involves chastisement. And I think that the white American needs a whole lot of chastisement.”

This holds true today, if only we replace “white American” with Republican. The party has a great deal to answer for, in terms of the integrity of its elected officials and the ideological positions of its base.

Joe Biden has won but it doesn't feel like it's over. Those who voted for the Republican — a staggering 70 million as of Friday evening — will find a more conventional ambassador next time. But we must never lose sight of who they've revealed themselves to be.

The 45th president was an aberration only insofar as his corruption was brazen instead of subtle, his appearance clownish instead of slick. But the people who voted for him are plenteous, and they have been conditioned for this bigotry not just by the last four years but by centuries.

I am on America's side, but as my grandfather said, love involves chastisement. I love the idea of an America that is free and equal. But we are not there yet. For too many Americans, systemic oppression remains a practical reality. For too many Americans, it remains a sacred ideology.

As a soldier in the Pacific, my grandfather was subjected to terrible racism. He remained a reservist and retired as a lieutenant colonel. He stayed in the Army not because he thought it was perfect or just, but because he believed in its capacity for change.

America's original ailments, semi-suppressed but never cured, have come back in new and dangerous ways. Xenophobia, racism, misogyny — in the last four years they mutated, became more virulent. Polite dinner party scowls at friends who said, “Maybe there were good people on both sides,” or social media purges of border-wall-obsessed cousins — these microexchanges simply inoculated those with objectionable views against more effective reproach. We have bred an antibiotic-resistant strain of an old American infection.

What if I invited you to look at time differently? What if I said there is the same amount of time between the bellies of Middle Passage boats and German death camps as there is between German death camps and whatever Cold War-Jim Crow hybrid is percolating here in this country today? Seventy-nine years from when the last slave boat [docked in Alabama](#) to when Hitler declared war on Poland. Seventy nine years from when the United States joined World War II to this moment we're in right now. Objects in history's mirror are closer than they appear.

My great-grandmother Alberta lived until I was 16, and we were very close. Her father was a white man who had raped her mother while she worked in his home. As a result of the trauma of that assault, Alberta was primarily raised by her grandmother, who'd been born a slave. So I was loved and molded by a woman who was loved and molded by a woman born in slavery.

The Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in my grandparents' front yard on my father's 13th birthday. That was September 1972. I'll say it again. Objects in history's mirror are closer than they appear. What is it about this place, this country, that made the civil rights lawyer's son become an advocate for the party most aligned with the hateful group come to frighten and intimidate him and his family? I believe it must have been some kind of grotesque game of *If you can't beat them, join them*.

But joining them beat him. Only a determination to be a part of that party and its world would have led him to the Dixie Stampede.

He was allergic to horses. He was allergic to hay. It still hurts to contemplate what kind of lifelong emotional anaphylaxis that birthday spectacle must've caused. Anyway, he couldn't breathe. He got up to go use his inhaler, and no one who loved him ever saw him alive again.

I've often wondered how we'd navigate conversations together during these fraught times, had he lived. Ultimately, I can't answer for why he was a Republican any more than I can explain this week's mystifying exit polls [suggesting increased support](#) for Mr. Trump across all minority voters.

What I do know is that it was Black people — from Philadelphia, Atlanta, Milwaukee and Detroit — who brought democracy back in line with the will of the people. And all I can offer now is a loving reproach: The Republican Party, whatever else it means to be, is the home of virulent, violent white supremacy. Self-respecting people of all colors must abandon it until such a time as it chooses to excise that hatred.

My father died in service to a system and a party that needed to change. I'm asking America to turn toward a light we've never seen.

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