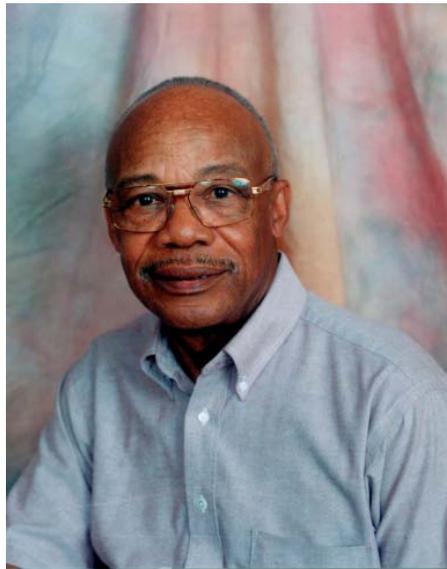


My Life Story

By

Sterling Macer



Story Keeper



Starr Kohler

Acknowledgments

The Ethnic Life Stories Project became a reality because it caught the imagination of many individuals throughout our community who worked to bring it to completion. We wish to thank the following for their many talents, their countless hours, their words of encouragement, their open office doors, and their generosity of time and money in support of this unique opportunity to embrace the diversity of Springfield.

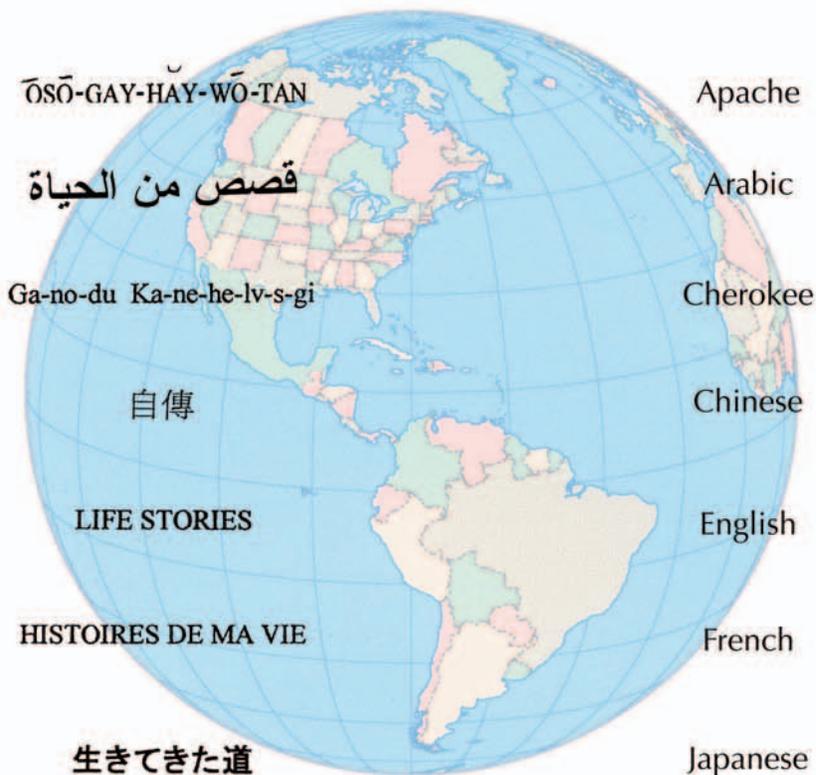
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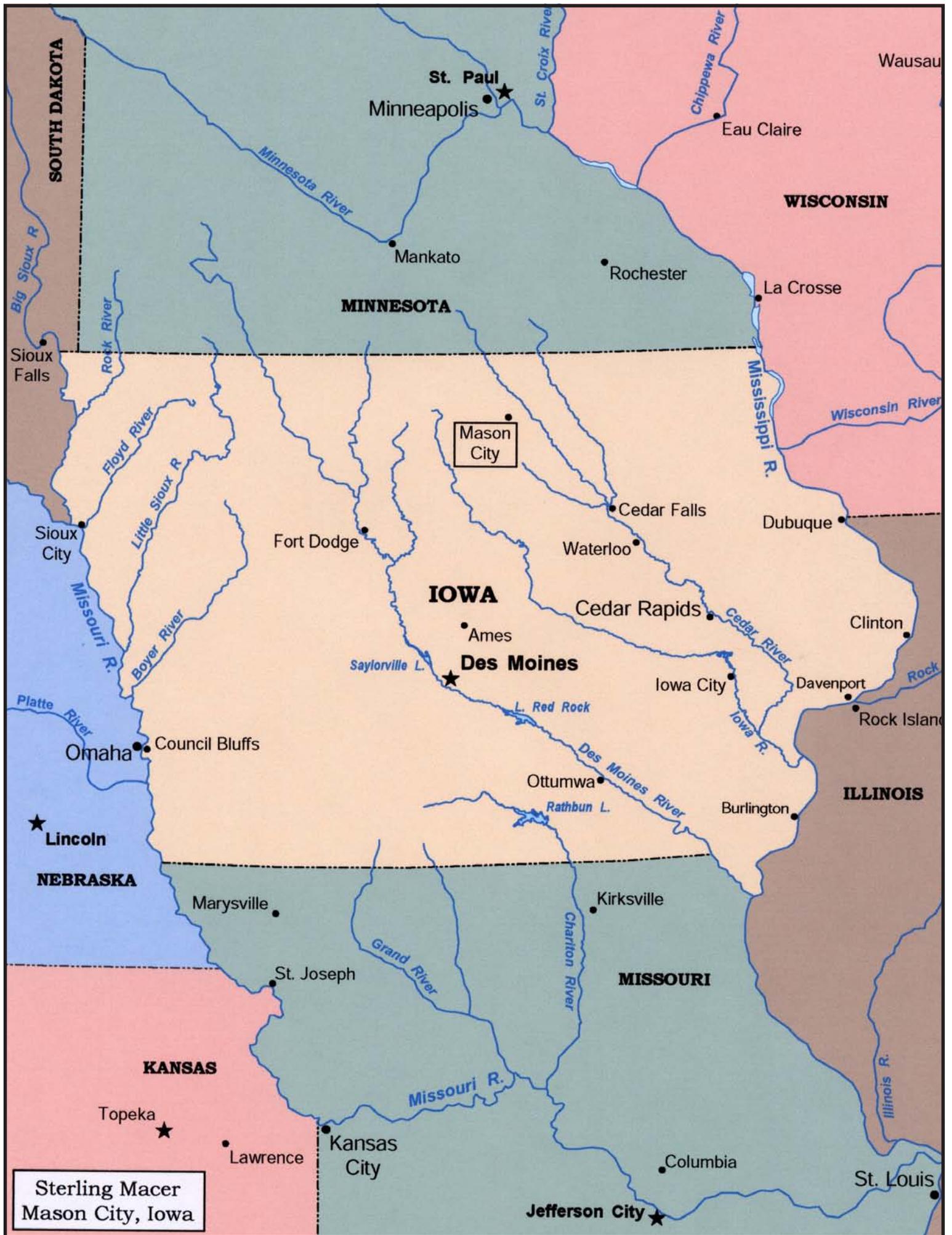
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Special acknowledgment to Charlotte, without whom there would be no Ethnic
Life Stories Project

Jim Mauldin, Coordinator
July, 2001

The Ethnic Life Stories Project . . . giving the Springfield community a window to its diversity through the life stories of ethnic elders.





Dedication

To my mother and father, Ruby and Aaron Macer,
my siblings, Morris, Richard, and Allen Macer,
as well as Ben Grayson and his family.

To my many relatives who helped me grow,
and to my Uncle Overton Burrell who,
among many other things, took me fishing, as a child,
for the first time in my life.

To Jack Bengough,
who led me to my career with General Electric.

Most importantly, to Delores,
my understanding wife,
and to my children,
Deanne, Sterling Jr., and Dawn.

Many thanks to Starr Kohler, my story keeper, who made me feel
comfortable enough to share happy, sad, forgotten, and important
repressed moments of my life.

Without Starr's probing and attention to detail, my story could
not have been written. I feel I have also found a friend. Thank
you, Starr. I am grateful to you.

Lastly, thank you Jim Mauldin for being the leader in this Ethnic
Life Stories Project in Springfield, Missouri. It is people like you
and Starr who enable me to have so much faith in the future of
Springfield and our nation.

Preface

Southwest Missouri Office on Aging (SWMOA) is honored to be a sponsoring participant of The Ethnic Life Stories Project. One of the great joys in our work is meeting and visiting with Seniors who have contributed richly to their communities—either through high-profile, active leadership, or through a quiet courage that steadily acquires and shares wisdom. The Ethnic Life Stories Project opens our minds to an exploration of the particular gifts Seniors of ethnic backgrounds have brought to our local community.

We are pleased to be able to offer, specifically, the life story of Sterling Macer. Sterling speaks with the voice of a gentleman, a voice pleasing in resonance, unhurried and free of arrogance. His eye contact is unclouded and calm, a warm invitation to join him in quiet conversation and exchange. It isn't long before you discover that, amid the comfort of his understated manner, there also runs a sparkle of the unexpected: Sterling is unafraid to think his own thoughts; he is unafraid to parallel the experienced error of others with his own humanity and error.

As you read this life story, you are in the company of a man at ease with himself, a man who has learned to dine with challenge, not wrestle it, a man who has deliberately grown and learned throughout his lifetime--and fully expects to spend the days ahead in the same pursuit.

We invite you to learn from such a person.

Thank you, Sterling, for granting me the honor of being your story keeper. From the first time we met, as strangers, in a restaurant where you were the only black, I knew we were starting a remarkable journey, and a remarkable friendship.

Starr Kohler
Resource Center Coordinator, SWMOA
(Sterling's story keeper)



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All readers of my life story should understand that the positive roads which I walked and ran were pointed out by a large number of positive people. I am grateful to and love all of them.

Amy
Ardine
Austin
Allen
Al
Alice
Angel
Bernard
Barbara
Bonnie
Bob
Bobbie
Bucky
Bill
Charles
Carolyn
Cody
Cecil
Doris
Don
Donna
David
Ed
Elizabeth
Eugene

Fred
George
Glen
Joe
Joel
Judd
Jack
Jerry
Jeanne
June
Janet
John
Joanne
Jim
Judy
Jimmy
Kenneth
Karen
Larry
Lillian
Lola
Linda
Lessie
Louis
Lois

Meredith
Mable
Marty
Monica
Marion
Mary
Marilyn
Oscar
Pat
Patti
Rae
Roger
Ross
Roy
Ruth
Ruby
Rick
Starr
Sue
Steve
Tom
Toney
Wilma
Willie
Zetta

Someone asked me one time, "Mace, would you have rather been white?"

I told him, "No, not at all. I think life is pretty exciting as it is for me and I don't know why I would want to be white. After being black, it would be too easy to be white."

When it's all said and done, I've enjoyed the struggle. I've accepted the challenge and feel pretty complete. Being black makes everything a little bit more exciting, once you accomplish something.

No, I wouldn't rather be white.

Chapter 1: Beginning with "Home"

My full name is Sterling Robert Macer. As a boy, I thought it was a dumb name until I learned it came from a favorite uncle on my father's side, Sterling Boldin. Then I grew into it. I've only known one other Sterling and I met him when I was going to college in Des Moines. When I asked him how he got his name, he said he was named after an uncle. It turned out to be the same uncle. My life has been rich with small discoveries and twists.

Even though my name is Sterling, that's not always what I've been called. My oldest brother and his friends called me "Skeets" after a little comic strip fellow called Skeeter. But the nickname that stuck with me the most was "Lurley", because when my brothers were little, "Sterling" came out "Lurley." That's the name I hear at reunions and when I'm with cousins and old friends.

I was born on April 15, 1933, in our home at 655 South Jackson, Mason City, Iowa. I don't remember my mother talking about my birth any. Perhaps she would have told that to a daughter, but she didn't have any daughters.

At the time I was born, Mason City had about 30,000 people, and Mason City is still a city of 30,000 today. Although there were a significant number of black people in Mason City by comparison to other Iowa cities, we weren't actually very many in number. Even within our minority neighborhood, 99 percent of the people were whites from the "old country", as they called it. There were probably three or four black families on each block, with European immigrants and Mexicans between.

I loved the "united nations" neighborhood I grew up in. I didn't realize just how much I loved it until I got older and moved away. On our street, you would be living next to a Mexican, across the street from a Bulgarian or Hungarian, with a Czech and a Greek up the street. Out of that mix, a lot of successful people were made. I think that's because, for the most part, we were good, hardworking people.

The street where we lived used to be called "Powder Street", some say because of its history of gunpowder and violence. But my mother told me it was named Powder Street because it was the last dirt street, unpaved, dusty, and when they finally paved it, they renamed it Jackson Street. That sounds more logical to me than the gunpowder story because our neighborhood didn't give the police a lot of trouble. The crime we had was centered mostly around the gambling hall, and the police pretty much left that alone. We had bootleggers, too, and everyone knew it, but as long as you bootlegged only in the neighborhood, there didn't seem to be a problem.

Most of the men in the neighborhood worked hard. The Mexicans and blacks worked at the nearby brickyard, Mason City Brick and Tile, or at the packinghouse across town, Jacob E. Decker and Sons. These were the only two places you could really expect to get a job. There were other places to work, like the cement plant, but the cement plant paid a lot of money and those were premiere jobs. They didn't give those jobs to "us."

The “us” were known as “colored folk” back then. I don’t think it was meant to be particularly derogatory, and I didn’t take it as an insult. After that we graduated to being “Negroes.” When some folks first started saying they wanted to be called “black”, there were people my father’s age who rejected that change.

“I don’t want to be called a black. I’m a Negro,” they would say. They rejected “black” because it was too close to “blackie”.

“Hey, blackie, come here,” they’d heard too much.

Beyond the immediate minority neighborhood where we lived and went to church, you could encounter some discrimination—and nearly every day we ventured out of our five-block safe-haven into that bigger world. If you went to the YMCA, went downtown to the store, or had jobs to go to, you left the minority neighborhood. Your social life was in the neighborhood, but your work life and everything else was outside it.

Even within our diverse neighborhood there was some ethnic bitterness, but it was mostly between different religious European groups. On one level there was a lot of intermingling, but these people could also be very angry at one another. The same Eastern Europeans who didn’t like each other across the ocean immigrated here and ended up in minority neighborhoods, living beside each other again. But as the kids grew up together, I think we helped bridge that bitter struggle. The Evanoff kids, and Petkoffs, Papajohns, and Hassapopolifs—all of us went to school together. And became friends.

The simpler ethnic differences to understand were that Greek kids would go to Greek school. They went to regular school, too, but on certain days, they also went to Greek school. When I played with them, I learned to speak some Greek. When I played with Mexican kids I also learned some of their words. I can still hear their mothers calling “Andele a la casa” in my mind. “Hurry on home.”

Home for me was a three-room house with one big climbing tree in the front yard and a little willow in the back. (That gigantic front tree is still there now, though the house is gone.) Since the house only had two bedrooms, and one of those was for my mother and father, all four of us boys shared the second bedroom. Of course it was easiest for my oldest brother. He was king of the walk, so he got a bed by himself. The other three of us kind of slept in the same bed.

We had a coal-burning potbelly stove that heated our three rooms well, but we had to put on a lot of cover during Iowa winter nights. Although our house had running water, we had no inside bathroom. On those Iowa winter nights, when it was too cold for trips out back to the “ranch house” (as my big brother called it), we had to make other arrangements in the house. I can remember one of the problems with being really young and sharing a bed. If you wet the bed, you had to get out of that habit in a hurry—else you got kicked out of the bed.

The kitchen and living room in our house were really one room together, but we always ate on the kitchen side, the side with the icebox. “The Iceman” would carry in twenty-pound blocks of ice with tongs, and put them in the icebox. We also stored food in a dugout cellar underneath the house, especially the apples my cousins gave us from their small orchard. We would wrap them in newspaper, being careful not to drop them or cause a bruise, and set them gently in a barrel in the dugout. Then we’d have good apples all winter long.

Our home was in Mason City, Iowa, because of my great-grandfather, Henry Banks, who was freed from slavery when he was 17. He moved his family from Virginia to Iowa when his daughter, Mary (my grandmother), was, herself, 17. Shortly after the move, Mary wed Walter Edgar, a young man who had also immigrated to Iowa from Virginia.

One of Walter and Mary’s children was my mother. In 1909, when my mother was nearly nine, Grandpa Edgar

decided to move the family to South Dakota where the government was giving land to homesteaders. But South Dakota didn't turn out to be a pleasant experience for my mother. She hated not being able to go to school. She had only completed third grade in Iowa, and in South Dakota there were no schools close enough to attend. So, she became a field hand.

Often the backbreaking work of trying to bring in a decent crop was all for nothing. If the prairie fires didn't destroy the crops, the droughts would. Because the crops often failed, one of the main food staples was milk, and my mother was allergic to milk. It was a thoroughly miserable life for her, so when she turned sixteen she left South Dakota. (Much later, after 25 years in South Dakota—and after expanding their original 120-acre grant into 1,600 acres—my Grandpa and Grandma Edgar ended up moving back to Iowa, too.)

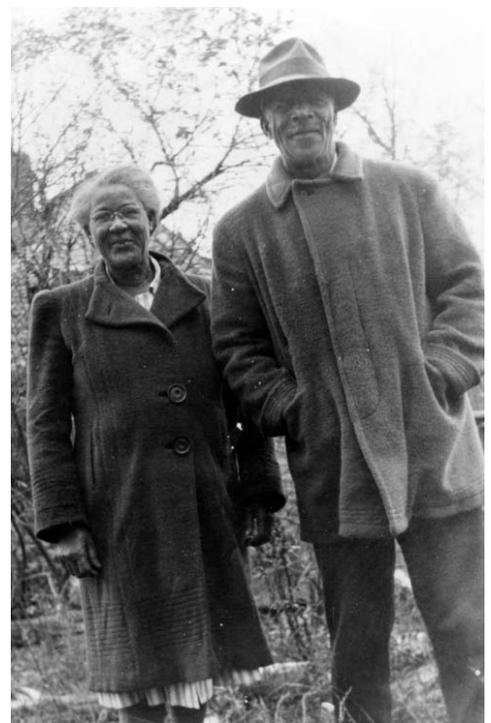
When my mother was sixteen, on her way back to Iowa, she went through Omaha where she happened to meet my father. Shortly thereafter, they married and moved together to Mason City where my father started to work in the meatpacking house. Mason City was a good place to live because of the ready work at that time, and because my mother had a lot of relatives there. If you gathered all of them around, I'm sure we had the most aunts and uncles and cousins of any family around.

My great-grandfather, Grandpa Banks, the one freed from slavery, was among the close-by relatives, too. I was old enough to remember him. He couldn't read, so it fascinated him to hear me read. I'd read *Dick and Jane* to him and when I was finished he'd say, "We'll have to read that book again."

So I would read it over. "Run, Dick, run. See Jane run."

"One more time," he'd repeat. It seemed very satisfying to him and I was very proud to do it.

Great-grandpa Banks' funeral was the first one held in St. John's Baptist, the new church my father and other black men built. I remember having church services in the basement while the upstairs was being finished. One of the best things about the new church was its bell. In later years, I'd go to church early so I could help pull the rope. That bell still hangs in the church today, with the same rope on it that I used to pull.



Grandmother Mary and Grandfather, Walter Edgar

I realize now that my father knew for some time he was dying of leukemia. I think that's why we got exceptionally close in the short time we had. He went occasionally to the University of Iowa Hospital for treatment, although I don't know what they did for him back then. I really don't know.

Chapter 2: My Father

Less than five years after my grandfather's funeral, there was another family funeral. It was my father's. He died before I turned nine. But in the span of those few years, he gave me the assurance that he loved his sons.



My father, Aaron Macer, with four sons, Morris, Richard, Sterling and Allen

Every payday my father would come home with little chocolate mint patties hidden someplace among his clothes. It was our job to find them. (To this day I still like mint patties.) And on special winter evenings, we'd gather in the kitchen and eat popcorn. I should say, at least *some of us* ate popcorn—until we learned to share. After my mother popped the corn, all of us boys would fill our bowls as full as we could, leaving mostly the “old maids”—the hard kernels that didn't pop—for my father.

One time I remember my father saying, “Man, I'm glad you left me these old maids! And they're so good for your teeth. They're the best part of all.” We didn't get the point and just looked in amazement at him munching on those old maids.

The next time we had popcorn, remembering what he'd said, we made sure nothing but old maids were left. I remember him saying, “Look at what you guys did! Why did you just leave me the old maids?”

“But you like them so well, Dad!” we reminded him. My mother laughed and laughed at how my father's lesson had backfired.

Another evening entertainment was listening to the Philco radio. I especially remember my father and his friends waiting around the radio for the Joe Lewis, Mac Snelling fight to begin. And I remember how they hollered when Joe Lewis won. I didn't know the significance of that event until later years. Hitler had been crowing about the superiority of the white race. Now a *black* Joe Lewis was the champion.

Because he didn't own a car, my father got around on a bicycle. Sometimes he would take the three youngest of us on the bike with him, one on the handlebars, one on the crossbar, and one behind. I remember the Saturdays we would go by and get cinnamon rolls and pop to go with our lunchmeat and ride out to the park for a picnic.

Most places we went were close enough to walk to, like church. On Sunday my father always put on his one suit, his shiny shoes, and his spats. (Spat were a cloth deal that went over top of shoes to help dress them up.) And he always wore a hat to church. He looked sharp sitting up on the front pew with the rest of



Father Aaron with Brother Richard, gardening

the deacons.

But one week the three of us youngest boys got in his closet—with a pair of scissors just begging to be used. First we trimmed off the bottom of one of his suit legs. Then, to make it even, we trimmed the other leg. But it still wasn't quite right, so we went back and forth, trying to even out the legs. My oldest brother came along and saw what we were doing and he got out of there.

When the next Sunday came along, nobody knew what was going to happen. We strained to hear every move my father made. The closet door opened, and there his trousers were. He told my mother, he says, "Ruby, come n' get 'em! Come get 'em! If I catch 'em, I'll kill 'em!"

As bad as that was, I don't even think we got a spanking. To this day, just looking back at pictures of him and how he used to dress so properly on Sunday makes me laugh. I wonder what he wore that Sunday. I can't remember.

I had a love and a fear of my father, but not a mistrust at all. I don't ever remember him punishing me unfairly. I do remember getting this lecture from him one time about something I had done.

"Did you do this?" my father asked.

"Yes, Dad I did it."

"You go out and get me a switch."

So I went and pulled a dead limb from the little willow tree in the back yard. The stick was so brittle it would shatter at the slightest tap—and I took it in to him.

He looked at it and said, "You go out and get me a real switch, or I'll get my own!"

So the next time I brought back in this sawed-off broom handle we used to play with. I handed it to him and looked up at his face and he just started laughing. I knew he wasn't going to hit me with that broom handle. As it turned out, I didn't get a spanking at all.

As adults, my two older brothers and I love remembering and laughing at all these things. But my younger brother was sad. He'd been too young to remember much. "At least you can remember Dad," he said. "I don't have those memories." I hadn't thought too much until then about what a gift memory is. I'm thankful for having these memories.

Not all the memories were about happy events, though. One day a train hit a school bus in my hometown and everyone in the neighborhood went running to the wreck site, which wasn't very far. Word had quickly spread about how bad the wreck was, so lots of men in the neighborhood went to try to help. I wanted to go up with my father since he'd always let us tag along with him, but I remember my father saying, "No." Several kids were killed in that tragedy.

When I was about five, I was crossing the street to do some errand for my mother, when one of the neighborhood drunks, "Old Drunk Costo", came down the street and hit me. I remember the car hitting me in the forehead and knocking me down. They took me to the hospital and I had five stitches, the same number as my age.



*Sterling, Richard, and Allen...
just cruising.*

We had a dog that was hit by a car, too. One day I brought home a rat terrier puppy that a Greek family a couple of blocks away gave me. I called him Dopey because I had just seen *Snow White* at the theater. Though I hadn't asked permission before bringing Dopey home, everyone loved him right off. He was a small dog, but he would bark down anyone who pestered us. When he was hit by a car and killed, it was my father who buried him.

Looking back now, I think my father probably had a hard life, but I never heard him say it was hard. He never complained about his work. I don't think many men did. But later, when I was in high school and I wanted a summer job, I went to work at the same meat packing plant where he had worked, in the same department, and with a few of the same men he had worked alongside. I learned first hand what it was like to do the work my father had done.

When you started to work at an entry-level position for the packinghouse, the first place you worked was in by-products—the dirtiest job in the place. You spent the day cleaning up entrails, guts, blood, doing a lot of hand shoveling in all the muck, and doing various other disagreeable things. Working in a packinghouse wasn't easy work. But my father worked up until nearly the end.

I can remember very vividly the day that my father died. August 14, 1941. He was 44. I was eight.

When he came back from the Iowa City Hospital that last time, evidently they were sending him home with very little hope. I remember his breathing—this “hhhhhh”, very deep, almost gasping-for-air noise—all through the last night. In the morning he was taken back to the hospital.

When my mother left that morning, she said, “I have to go see about your father. They've taken him to the hospital. I want you boys to stay home.” But I didn't stay home. I rode off on my scooter, past the school, which was closed for summer, and was three or four blocks from home when another guy in the neighborhood, just a few years older than me, came looking for me.

“They told me you were supposed to stay home”, he said sternly. All the way home he was so tight and serious.

“What's wrong?” I asked him over and over.

All he would say was, “You just better come home.” By the time we got there I knew something was really wrong. When we got back, Mr. and Mrs. West, next door, took my brothers and me to their house and told us that my father had died. I don't remember paying any attention to my brothers. I don't remember going to them for any solace or anything. I just remember going outside where I cried and cried until I vomited.

Then there was the funeral. I was crying and everybody else was crying. The same preacher that had done my baptism, Rev. J.M.E. Eves, did the service. Now, with greater understanding, I realize why that funeral was so particularly sad. Back then no one had anything. Obviously, a packing plant wage left nothing for savings. Now here was just a woman, alone, with four boys, ages 6, 8, 9, and 17.

I give my mother enormous credit for the influence she had in my life. Some of that credit is just because she was there, promising to hold us together as a family, refusing to let us be divided into various homes. And some of it is because she worked so hard to make that promise possible.

Chapter 3: Finding a Way

After my father died, I remember the fear in our situation. It was scary. Some of our relatives were talking about splitting us up. Someone would take one boy to raise, somebody else would take another one, and we could make it that way, they said. My mother relieved our terrible fear when she said, “NO” loud and clear, to anyone who even talked about such a thing.

“I’m going to raise all four of our boys,” she said. And she did.

My mother saw to it that my father still had a part in our lives, even after he died. She enjoyed telling us how smart he was. “Your father, you know, was a high school graduate. Your father was very intelligent.” And she let us know what would or wouldn’t have pleased him. “Now, I know your father wouldn’t like that,” or “Your dad would have wanted you to do such and such.” She used that as a major motivator for all of us boys. And I think she did well considering she saw all of us into college.

Through the years, schoolteachers and principals were authority figures in our lives, but there was no one like Mother. There was no doubt in our minds that she was in charge, and we never lost sight of that. It seemed sometimes she was almost harsh. Looking back at it now, I see that she had to be in order to raise four boys alone. My brothers and I used to say, “I wish she would just stop! I heard her already! I wish she would just be quiet!” But she would stay at it. She was a strict person and a good housekeeper, even though we didn’t have much, but she also had a sense of humor.



My mother, Ruby Macer, in her 30's and in her 70's.

Maybe one of her best helps, as a single parent, was the “big brother” spirit of our neighborhood. The whole neighborhood I lived in, not just the black neighborhood, watched out after the children. You couldn’t go anywhere in that neighborhood and do anything without people, especially the women, letting your mother know about it. News of what was going on would even beat *me* home. And the information was always correct. White, black, brown neighbors, it didn’t make any difference. In that neighborhood you did the right thing.



The church was a big part of our lives, too, and we were there for every service. Though we lived two different places while I was growing up, we were never over a block away from St. John’s, where we attended. There were two black churches in our neighborhood, St. John’s Baptist and one Church of God in Christ. On the other side of town, there was also a black Methodist church. These three churches were different in name, but they were the same in one regard: all the faces in the congregation were black. Black people and white people went to church

separately.

There were good men in our church, friends of my father, and we had uncles, but my mom never needed a man around to actually help with us boys. I do remember one time, though, when I was in my early teens, Mom asked, “What would you do if I got married? How would you feel about that?”

I put in some stupid statement like, “I’ve got a dad! I don’t need another one!” And that was the last I heard of it.

Really, it was not wise of my mother to seek our advice. Even though we would probably have rebelled at the time, she should have just remarried without asking our permission. After all the boys left home she was all alone for quite some time. Finally, in her sixties, she married a fine gentleman named Reed Allen, who had also been a widower for a long time. Since Mom lived to be 95, she, at least, had some years of companionship later in life.

From the time my dad died, Mom supported us by working long hours at what was called day work (going outside the neighborhood to clean people’s houses), and she got sixteen to eighteen dollars a month for each of us boys from the brand new Social Security fund. But the biggest support we had came from my hero of a brother, Morris, who had gone in the Navy.

Even with the help, it took all of us to make a go of it. For food, we raised things in the garden and Mom canned for us. My brothers and I would sell the surplus to restaurants. I saw one of the owners recently—a Greek restaurant owner who is very old now—and he says he still remembers me from back then. “I had to teach you a lesson. You brought me dirty vegetables! You didn’t even wash them the first time, so I had to explain to you.” We simply pulled up the beets and carrots and onions and took them, dirt and all, to sell. At least you could tell they were fresh.

We had other chores besides the garden. My brother Richard was our fix-it guy since he was very mechanical-minded and still is. Mom taught me how to cook and wash clothes, and I still do that today. I liked helping her in the kitchen, and she liked the company, too. Maybe part of my motivation was just trying to get out of other work, but Mom would cover for me and let me watch her and help. I would ask, “How come you do this? . . . How come you do that? . . . Why do you do that to tomatoes? . . . How do you season food?” She answered all my questions and to this day I enjoy doing special holiday cooking.

Besides the garden and chores, we all worked, too. We did any kind of work we could to help out, and nobody had to say, “Bring home your money.” We just did. During winter, my brothers and I couldn’t work much because of school, so in those months we had to charge the coal and groceries. By the end of the school year we’d have tremendous bills, so we’d work hard all summer to pay off the bills for this, and the bills for that. Then we would go back to school and start all over again.

Sometimes we went door to door looking for work. We would go out to the neighborhood where people with money lived, and we would change out their storm windows, or rake their yards, whatever needed to be done. Over time we built up regular customers. Recently I went back to look at some of those same houses. I remember how envious I used to be of them. It’s strange, because now they don’t look like anything special.

One of my favorite jobs was the junking business. My cousins Jim and Donald and my brother Richard and I were in the business together. We’d go out and pick up odd junk, copper and metal bits, and sell it to the junkyards for the war effort. We called ourselves “The Super Junkers”. We piled everything we found in my cousins’ yard, because it was larger than ours, with ten apple trees. When we got enough, we would take it six blocks to one of the junkyards. It might not sound like much of a job, but we made quite a bit of money at it.

After I was married, my mother came to me and put two silver dollars in my hand. I said, “What is this?”

She said, “These are the first two silver dollars you gave me when you went to work. You were going on nine years old.” She liked to brag about how she never had to buy me a pair of shoes after I was nine years old. I always bought them from my own work money.

For some reason shoes were important to me. I only have one pleasant memory of being barefooted—when we’d go over to the Malachateris’ and help them with their grapes. They’d put the grapes in a big vat and have us boys take off our shoes, wash our feet, and climb in to stomp the grapes with our bare feet. Other than that, I didn’t like being barefooted. Still don’t. I know a lot of kids don’t mind. My grandkids love to go barefooted, but when I see them I tell them to get their shoes on their feet. I think it’s because having shoes for your bare feet wasn’t so easy back then.

Far more important than my mother saving those two silver dollars, was her success in teaching *me* to save. When I’d bring home money, she’d ask, “Now, how much did you make?” I’d tell her and then she’d ask, “How much you gonna save?”

I might answer, “Well, nothing. I only made \$5.00 this week.”

She’d say, “What if you only made \$4.50? Would that be enough?”

“It would have to be enough,” I’d say.

“Then take fifty cents of that and save it,” she’d say. As a result, with few exceptions, I’ve saved every year since I’ve been working.

Some people think they are too important to say, "I'm sorry," especially if they're in authority. But the people worth remembering with love are the ones who can apologize.

Chapter 4: Apologies

Even though Mother never had a chance at more education than the third grade, she loved to read and educated herself. And she took a lot of interest in our education, which started at Grant grade school, about four blocks from home—three blocks if you counted our short cut across the railroad tracks. We really weren't supposed to go across the railroad tracks, but after a while the neighborhood parents gave up.

I remember one grade school teacher, Mrs. Miller, very clearly. One time she had her back to the class, and we were all lined up, when, all of a sudden, she turned around and slapped me, POW! Bob Eagers, teacher's pet, had been making some kind of noise and I was just standing there. When she hit me I said, "That wasn't me."

"You keep your mouth shut," Mrs. Miller said.

A couple of girls went up to her afterwards and said, "That wasn't Sterling, it was Bobby Edgers." Mrs. Miller picked me to do something later, but she never said she was sorry.

I only remember one time ever getting any kind of punishment except verbal from my mom. When I was 16 or 17, she slapped me for mouthing off about something. But afterwards she apologized, even though I had it coming. She said, "You're too old for me to have done that." She went on to tell me where I was wrong, but the thing I remember more than anything was the apology.

Later in life, when I was a parent myself, I remembered those incidents—the one with the teacher and the one with my mother. If I made a mistake and knew I made one (and we all make mistakes as parents, though a lot of times we try to cover them up) I remembered that an apology goes a long way. My mom didn't say, "Now, that's a lesson to remember," but it was one for me.

Other apologies stand out in my memories, too. One time, Stan Koul, a favorite coach, had me run against Bob, a kid I really liked, who was nick-named "Shorty". I wasn't as tall as a lot of other guys, but there was a lot of difference between Bob, a truly small person, and me. Anyway, when the coach paired me with him I didn't say anything, but I was surprised. It was embarrassing for both of us. In that 100-yard sprint, I beat Bob by about 30 yards, and I was still embarrassed when I walked off the track.

After a while the coach came up and said, "I'm sorry, Sterling. I won't do that again." I can still remember his sincerity.

One apology from grade school still puzzles me. Kenny, Jerry, and I were the only three black students in chorus. When the teacher picked us to be featured as a trio in a school program, we felt pretty special. She had us come to the front to practice and gave us this music for "Old Man River." We looked at it, and the beginning of the song --as it was originally written back then—started off "Nigger . . . nigger . . . nigger . . . nigger . . . Old man river." (Of course, they don't print it like that now.) Anyway, we said, "We can't sing this song!"

When I look back at it now, I still wonder about it. Our teacher must have known how the song started, but she never seemed insensitive before. In fact, she was pretty nice to us. I wonder if she just didn't think it was a big deal? Anyway, when we said we couldn't sing it, she said she was sorry, and she edited out that first line. We

went ahead and sang it after that. It's a curious memory.

One other person in my grade school memories is Mr. Pendergraff, our grade school principle. When you did something wrong, like get in a fight, Mr. Pendergraff would come in and talk to you, and say you had a paddling coming. We all got smart to the fact that he only paddled you until you cried, so most kids would cry quickly. But I was stupid the first time and said, "I'm not going to cry!"

The next time I didn't have so much pride. I cried almost before he started. It got to be a challenge with us kids to see if you could get out with only one bop. But, you know, everyone loved Mr. Pendergraff. That's because, even though he gave us paddlings, we all thought he was fair. (But we never told about our paddlings at home, because that would just get us another one.)

I don't see blackness. I don't see whiteness, and I don't see colors. I see human beings, personalities.

Chapter 5: Gifts from the Neighborhood

In spite of the difficult times, food seemed to be plentiful enough when we were growing up. Maybe we just didn't expect much back then. I remember well the grocery store where we charged our groceries. Every once in a while, my brothers and I would try to sneak a dozen doughnuts on the grocery list Mom sent with us. The owner would look over the list and ask, "Now, did your mother tell you to get these doughnuts? You go get a note from your mother to get the doughnuts." He'd go on down the list. "Box of cornflakes? That's fine." He was smart about boys like us. Even the neighborhood storeowners helped keep us in line.



1946—My first experience with diversity—Neighborhood Scout Troop #1 had members who were African-American, Mexican, Greek, Serbian, German, and Irish.

During the war it wasn't just money or a list you had to have to get food. You also had to have the right rationing coupons or meat stamps. One day I went into Tony's grocery store on the corner of Sixth Street and South Jackson with my mother. We turned in our meat ration stamps, and Tony was packaging our order when this white guy came in—obviously from a richer neighborhood. He asked to buy some meat, too, but Tony wouldn't sell him any. The man wouldn't take no for an answer and got pushy.

"I've got stamps, and you've got more meat over there," he demanded.

Tony said, "That meat is for my customers, my regular customers." The white man raised all kinds of cain before he finally stomped out. I remember how important I felt that day. And I never forgot the loyalty Tony showed us. It was a satisfying experience, even for that short moment, to be more important than an arrogant, rich white man.

That's the way it was in our neighborhood, though. We knew about discrimination but we also knew there were genuinely good people in the world, and a lot of them lived in our neighborhood. No matter what race you were, these people would stick up for you. I went to school with some white guys who were also great—played football with them. We were all part of one group: friends.

When I was a kid at home, we didn't talk much about what you couldn't do because you were black. Nobody said, "Don't go and do this, Mace, because you just can't." But one Saturday when I was ten, I was told I couldn't do something. After that, no one had to say there were some things I couldn't do. I just knew it.

The Armory building, outside our neighborhood, had a skating rink in it. Ray, Garcia, Benjamin Bombela, and some other white friends, asked me to go with them one Saturday. I was the only black in the group, though Ray and Ben were "brown" Mexicans. When we got up to the ticket booth at the Armory to pay, the guy took everybody's money, including "the brown money", but he stopped me from going in and wouldn't take my money. He said, "I can't let *you* in." I remember the loneliness and shame of being cut out of the group by him. I just stood there with everybody looking at me and didn't know what to say or do.

The guys who were with me looked back at the ticket guy and said, “Why? . . . How come he can’t go in?!” They even asked me. “How come he won’t let you in?”

I just said, “I don’t know.” I did know, but it was embarrassing to talk about.

They kept on asking, “Why can’t he go in there!” until the guy got tired of it, looked around to see if anybody was watching, and then said, “Go on in.” I went in that time, but I never went back. My friends and I never talked about it afterwards. But I’ve never forgotten that they wouldn’t even think of skating without me.

Sometimes we would have “gang fights” in our neighborhood, but we didn’t use clubs and sticks like you see now days. We had “fair fights”, as we called them. “You can’t kick someone when they are down, and you fight one at a time”, and like that. No one took tire irons and billy clubs—just one-on-one fighting. If a Mexican or Hungarian or black from our side of town was at the fight, he was with us. And if a Mexican from the other side of the town was there, he was on the other side. We weren’t divided by race, but by loyalty. Everyone saw that as fair.

Some of the reasons I’m pleased to have come from my neighborhood are because loyalties weren’t determined by color, and because my brothers and friends came out of it and did great things. I think one of the big reasons for our success is because we never had segregation. The entire state of Iowa never had an “overtly” segregated school.

One of the barriers you have to success is the way you talk and hold your head. If you can’t look someone in the eye, or if you hang your head when you’re trying to interview for a job, it’s going to hold you back. And that was often a problem with kids who came from segregated backgrounds. Some of them had grown up in places where a black man wasn’t welcome to look a white guy in the eye. Or, maybe just being around whites made them so uncomfortable they wouldn’t make eye contact. For whatever reason, the segregation had hurt them.

As an adult I had a friend named Rick who asked me, “Lots of times when we go places, you’re the only black person there. How does that make you feel?” He’d started thinking about it after I took him to a place where he was the only white person. “Does it frighten you to be the only black?”

I told him the truth. “No, it doesn’t, because that’s the way I grew up.” Again, I think that’s where desegregation worked in my best interest. Kids from segregated schools in the Deep South or Chicago had a difficult time being “the only black” in a crowd. I think segregation explains a lot of the fear white people have for blacks, too. Many whites have lived in places where they never see many blacks, so they are afraid of them.

In my neighborhood, on the other hand, I was surrounded by rich diversity. It was truly alive with every kind of background and ethnic color you could imagine. I’m grateful to the neighborhood for the gifts it gave me—grateful that I saw, enjoyed, and learned from its very satisfying ethnic wealth.

When I think of the progression of my life, with all its changes, I thank God all the time. My brothers and I have talked about how we share these same feelings. At Christmas time, we don't even know what to get each other anymore. It used to be easy, but now we've all got everything we want or need.

This year my brother Richard wrote me a note at Christmas and said he was just sitting in wonder, looking at his kids and grandkids. And I was, too. Sometimes it's hard to believe we've been blessed with such wonderful kids. And we're a far cry from the days when a spectacular Christmas meant getting one bicycle to share between the three of us. In spite of that, we were pretty happy kids, though.

Chapter 6: Holidays

I remember childhood Easters mostly because we lived by some Greeks who had a laundry. They would color eggs in just one color, deep red. "Why do you have all your eggs the same color?" I'd ask. They also had a good tasting Easter cake—a hard kind of a cookie cake.

Speaking of cakes reminds me of the birthday cakes my mother used to make us. We always had a birthday cake even though there were no gifts, and Mom made the best cakes. She had taken a course in decorating cakes and made wedding cakes and special occasion cakes for people to help make money. For our birthdays we got to request any kind of cake we wanted. Taste changes through the years, so you'd want a chocolate cake at one point in your life, then you'd want something else.

I did have one birthday party when I was 12. It wasn't elaborate, like parties today. Kids didn't bring presents. Everybody just played games, ate cake, and sang *Happy Birthday* to me. The best part of it was that a couple of girls came.

The biggest celebrations were at Christmas. We always bought our tree because they were very cheap. Then we would decorate it with icicles, construction paper chains, and little school art projects. There was always a star on top. We made Christmas presents for Mom like all kids do—you know, you press your hand into this and say "That's for mom." All of us boys would also go down to *Kreskey's 5 and 10* store and chip in to get something for her. I remember one time getting her a jewelry heart. I think I could still find that heart around someplace. Mostly the gifts for us kids were apples, oranges, and pears in our stocking, with one little toy of some kind.

One "boy scout" Christmas I'll never forget. This guy had gotten a boxcar shipment of Christmas trees and wreaths, and he said he'd pay me to unload them. He asked me to go get some friends to help and he would pay them, too. As I unloaded the trees with four of my best friends, we talked about all the money we were going to make. They thought I was pretty great for choosing them to help. But at the end of all the hard work, the guy only gave us one dollar.

"We should get more than this," I said. "I told these guys you would pay us."

"If you don't want the dollar, just give it back and get outta here," he said gruffly. We felt tricked and robbed.

The more we thought about it the more upset we got. I felt especially bad because my friends were now blaming me. "We wouldn't have come over here if we knew we weren't going to get paid decent!" they said angrily. Back and forth we went, working up each other's anger until we decided he wasn't going to get away with it.

That night we went back to where the trees were stored. He had a small fence around them, but that didn't make much difference. We climbed over it and took gobs of Christmas trees and wreaths and hauled them to our clay-pit hideout. Then we went around the neighborhood selling them, saying we were Boy Scouts raising money for our troop.

There was such a good market for cheap trees that we went back again and again to take more trees, until finally the guy really started noticing trees were disappearing. During the day, we passed by his stand going to school, and we saw he had put a guard there, looking out. So we thought we better not go back any more. Since we had set out just to sell enough trees to get back what he should have paid us, I was satisfied, anyway.

One of our guys got greedy, though, and went back one more time. Of course, he got caught and then he told on everyone else. So one Saturday the police came down to our neighborhood to round us up. They were actually pretty sympathetic, though. They took us with them when they asked the guy what he paid us. We could tell the police didn't think much of our employer after he told them what he'd paid. Maybe that's why they didn't make us pay for the trees we took. Instead, they made us go around and recollect the trees we'd "sold". I had brought one of the trees to our house and told my mom, "We got that for working to help unload some trees, Mom." So I had to take our tree out, too.

I lied as much as possible to the police about how many trees I'd sold. Of course, I also lied and told my mom that I really didn't do it. I remember my Mom saying back, "As long as you're a thief, you'll always be a liar." I wish I could have learned that lesson well right then, but I had another major lesson yet ahead. In the end, though, I realized how true her statement was.

I came to see that being a thief is the worst thing in the world. A thief will do just about anything and a thief is always a liar. But if you don't steal anything, you don't have to lie. Someone challenged me on that one time and said, "If you murder someone you have to lie about that." True, but you did steal something in that case. You stole somebody's life.

I'm not proud of what we did that Christmas, but I discovered from it the importance of learning as much about a job as you can before you take it--like how much you're going to get paid, and when you're going to get paid. That lesson really stuck with me even after I became a Human Resource Manager for General Electric.

When we hired someone, I'd ask if they had any questions. They'd often say, "No," just because they were glad to get a job. But I would say, "You should have at least one more question: When is payday? How much you will be paid and when you will be paid are questions worth asking anybody." From that Christmas on, I learned to be pretty straightforward about matters such as this.

We never felt poor. A white family lived catty-cornered to us, and I would sometimes see the Salvation Army make deliveries to them.

“Do they bring it to them because they are poor?” I asked my mother.

“What do you think you are?” my mother would ask.

If you're poor and you think you're poor, you are poor. If you don't think so, you're all right. Because having fun doesn't have anything to do with having money.

Chapter 7: Having Fun

Some of the richest memories I have are of playing out at the clay pits. I had a cousin, Donald, a little younger than my oldest brother, who always let us younger boys tag along with him when he went to the clay pits. He was our chosen leader.

The clay pits area was a kind of playground for our neighborhood. When they dug out clay for the brickyard, it left these hallowed pits that would fill up with perfectly blue, clear water, and make great ponds. They were perfect for fishing and swimming. In fact, I learned how to swim there. If you couldn't swim, they'd just throw you in (with someone always standing by), and you'd start swimming. It's ironic that the clay pit land wasn't considered valuable back then. Later, they divided it up for lots, and you had to pay \$40,000-50,000 for a little lot next to those nice ponds. Still today I go back and fish at the clay pits once in a while.

Donald was always a very clean cut guy, very intent on doing the right thing. He still is. He made a great leader for our “Cousin's Camp”. That's what we called our clay-pit country place. We had built a lean-to where we could cook our fish and hang out, and sometimes we camped there overnight. In the winter we built ramps and would slide down the hills onto the ramps, up airborne, then down another hill—like ski jumping.

One winter day we were walking out to camp, crossing a little inlet where two pits joined together. I fell through the ice and Donald came in and pulled me out. Rather than go home with all the scolding that would cause, we went on to the lean-to, built a fire in the opening, and undressed to dry our clothes. We were perfectly warm there, in the middle of winter. After our clothes dried, we went home and never did tell what had happened.

Donald was always great with gadgets, too. One time, when he was about 16, he built an electric chair and we all thought that was the funniest thing. He pounded nails into a chair, attached wires to the bottom of the nails, and ran them over to a generator. When somebody sat down in the chair, he would turn that generator, and all of a sudden they'd jump up. It's not surprising Donald went into the Navy after high school, and they sent him to the University of Kansas to get his degree in electrical engineering. After thirty years, he came out a commander.

Besides the clay pits, the YMCA was a favorite hangout. You could get a free membership if you couldn't afford it. I still remember John Calhoun, the guy who managed it. He was great, and made it possible for us to earn our way to Y camp every summer, about ten miles away.

When I got older, on Friday or Saturday nights I would go to a place called *The High 12*, only it was down in a basement so we always called it *The Low 6*.. It was an all-black gathering place that was only open one night a week. A couple times a month there would be a dance, but I never was a very good dancer. I had no rhythm and, ethnically, that's hard for me to admit. I'd go and act serious so it looked like I didn't want to dance. I'd

rather be serious than make a fool of myself, or listen to them say, “Hey you look like a white guy dancing out there.” People still ask me today if I dance and I say, “*No*, I don’t dance.” Anyway, at *The High 12* I got to have fun with guys and girls, even if I couldn’t dance.

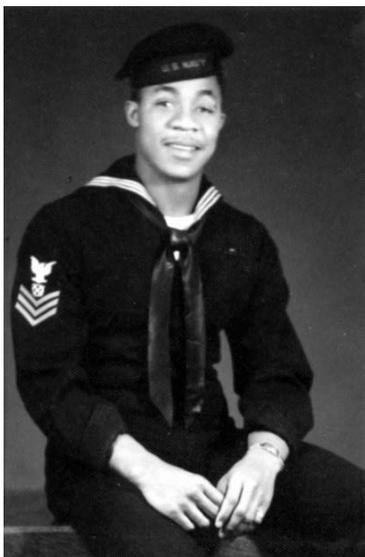
So much of my history at home was about my brothers. As brothers, we fought sometimes, but we loved each other and no one else could fight us. If someone jumped one of us three younger ones, the other two piled in. And if that wasn't enough, we got our older brother. No one bothered the Macer brothers. And when we got into fights with each other, from the beginning Mom could settle anything between us boys.

Chapter 8: Brotherhood

Morrison Edward is my oldest brother. He was born in 1924, April 24.

In so many ways, Morris was a big force in my life. He was a superstar in high school, a very good athlete, all state football player, president of his junior and senior class in high school, and he was a good student—a hard act to follow. I would go to school and the teachers would say, “Oh, you’re Morris’s brother . . . Well, he never acted like that.” You can’t compete with that. I think for my younger brother it was even worse. He had three brothers to follow. If I could advise teachers in one thing it would be: *Never pit one sibling against another.*

Morris graduated in 1943, and then went straight into the Navy, overseas in the war. Remembering his family, every month he sent us home his allotment. My brother is a hero to me because of the way he shouldered responsibility and looked after us.



Brother Morris in the Navy.

I still try to imagine what it was like for him. The guys who were in WWII gave up a lot more for this country than most people really acknowledge. The young ones gave up the chance to get education, athletes gave up the chance to go to school in the prime of their life, and many sent nearly all their money home to poor families. My brother Richard and I have tried to tell Morris, in every way we know how, that he’s a true hero. We couldn’t have made it without him.

Every letter Morris sent home was a real event. My mother would read them aloud to us and we would go back and read and reread them over and over. In one, he told us about how marijuana was really being abused over there. “There’s a drug problem with kids these days,” he wrote Mom. “Keep an eye on all the kids,” and it kind of hurt me, because he said “especially Sterling.” I remember thinking, “Why me? Why especially me?” Maybe because I was adventurous. I would try a lot of things that didn’t make sense. But, anyway, I always met a challenge like that, and you know, I never, ever used marijuana.

I knew what marijuana was, though. In Mason City it grew wild right out along the railroad tracks. During the war there was a hemp plant in Mason City, for making rope, and, of course, marijuana comes from hemp. When Mexicans came to Mason City to work the fields, they would plant it, too. Walking down to the clay pits you could see it all over, or you’d see people drying it on screens. Later, when I was in college it was common everywhere. But it never tempted me. Morris’s letter must have made a real impression..

Johnny Quinonas, a Mexican, Johnny Evanoff, a Bulgarian, Johnny Chimbitis, and others from our neighborhood, were all in the war, too, like my brother. They were the neighborhood’s oldest sons. When I

think back, it seems like everything just stood still, waiting for these guys to come back. When some of them didn't come back, it was horrible.

Johnny Quinonas shot a big gun in the artillery. We were told his unit took a direct hit when he was shooting and he was killed. The Chimbitis' son was killed, too. Mrs. Chimbitis went into a deep depression and she stayed there for a long time. As I recall, her hair just kind of turned white over night. Johnny Evenoff came back, but right afterwards he crashed in a piper cub and was killed. We couldn't believe it had happened. During these tough times, you could see the whole neighborhood pull together, just like a family does—even people who didn't particularly like each other. And you could see that all the previous differences were no more than just “family fussing”.

When Morris came home after the war, things were still tough. Black servicemen had fought alongside whites in a hard war and had helped beat Hitler, and Tojo and Mussolini, so they all had big expectations when they returned home. But after a short “hero-for-a-day” kind of recognition, they found out nothing had really changed. Their white buddies found decent jobs, but they couldn't, for the most part. They were told, “No, you have to go back to the pits, to the brickyards, to the packinghouses, working hard and dirty.”

Since my brother had been a Boatsman's Mate First Class, Master of Arms in the Navy, stationed in Hawaii, he wanted to be a policeman after coming home. He'd been good enough to fight Hitler, but not good enough for the Mason City police force. Only blue-eyed, blond-haired Aryans were allowed on the force, as we saw it. Ninety-nine percent of Mason City's minority population believed the police chief to be very bigoted. So, instead, Morris went to college in Detroit two years, then to business school.

My next brother, Richard, was born January 9, 1931 and he is 15 months older than me. Since we're so close in age, we share a lot of interests and memories.

Richard's goal was to become an engineer. He was the family fix-it man. But back then they didn't want black people in engineering school. He still gets upset when I bring it up now. So he ended up studying to become a teacher. During college, when it came time for him to do his student teaching, he had to do it at a school for *the blind*—the only place that would accept him. My wife's brother, Leroy, also became a teacher. He went to Iowa State Teacher's College and when it came time to do his student teaching, he had to go to the boy's reform school.

I never had a black teacher until I got to college. Even in states that had never been segregated, there was a real reluctance to have black teachers in the classroom. About the only jobs they could get were in big northern cities with mixed classrooms, or in depressed ghetto areas.

Richard ended up teaching in predominantly black schools. Leroy taught safety education. But, you know, in both cases, in spite of the unfairness, these men made it pay off for themselves. Leroy went on to Washington D.C. and wrote road safety manuals and got some awards. One of the big things he promoted was the seat belt. My brother Richard went on to Wayne State in Detroit to get his Masters, and became a Director of Vocational Education for the State of Ohio. I've always been proud of his accomplishments.

My youngest brother, Allen was born nearly 2 years after me, 1935, March 9th. He died when he was 44, same as my father. And he died of leukemia, same as my father. I don't know if it was the Hodgkins form of leukemia that my dad had.

I think his condition might have been treatable, but once he heard “leukemia”, he wouldn't go to a doctor. He



Brother, Richard

held it all inside, all the fear. He and his wife had divorced when their only daughter was very young. Then he moved out to Detroit where Morris was and tried to get his life back together again.

Allen's one daughter, Crystal, came up from North Carolina to his funeral in Detroit. She was 14. Seeing her father in a casket was her first conscious memory of him. My mother had written Crystal letters through the years, but we met her for the first time at the funeral. We're grateful for the opportunities we've had to visit with her since, and the family has maintained a relationship with her and her mother.

Burrell on new chapter of his Navy success story

Donald Overton Burrell, son of Mr. and Mrs. Overton H. Burrell, 825 Harrison SW, is beginning another chapter in his Navy success story.

A newly-appointed lieutenant junior grade, Burrell is assigned to the Naval Nuclear Power School at Mare Island, Calif., where he instructs potential crewmen for the Navy's nuclear submarine and surface fleet.

In a personal letter to W. Earl Hall, editorial consultant of the Globe-Gazette, from Vice-Admiral W. R. Smedberg III, Chief of Naval Personnel, Burrell is cited as an example of "how to succeed in the Armed Forces by hard work, dedication and superior performance."

Admiral Smedberg comments that Burrell's achievements present an enviable goal for all young men who choose the Navy for a career and said that Burrell is a credit to the Navy.

Burrell's success story began July 3, 1946, when he enlisted



LT. DONALD O. BURRELL

as a seaman recruit. In the short space of 12 years, he attained the highest enlisted grade of master chief electronics technician. He became a fully qualified SCURA diver and spent six years on fleet submarines.

The new lieutenant's star began to rise when he was selected for participation in the Navy Enlisted Scientific Education Program (NESEP) in 1959.

His performance as an NESEP student was outstanding. He entered Kansas University in the electrical engineering school and in four years never missed the dean's list for academic achievement. He was graduated with a 2.8 grade of a possible 3.0.

Consistently a front runner, Burrell was ordered to the Naval Officer Candidate School at Newport, R. I., where he was graduated 14th in a class of 955. For his leadership qualities displayed while a student at Newport, he was the recipient of the Kiwanis Club award of an officer's cap to go with his newly-won commission.

Burrell wears the World War II Victory Medal, the China Service Medal, the Korean Service Medal, the National Defense Medal and the Good Conduct Medal.

*Cousin, Donald Burrell
made us all proud.*

I wish I hadn't screwed up so much during my teenage years. I really do. It's okay to say, "I learned something from those mistakes," but it's so dangerous to make the kind of mistakes I did. You're on a borderline, playing with your whole life at that time. I wouldn't encourage any young person to trust that they could live the same way I did—and come out all right. It could have easily gone the other way.

It's kind of a two-sided thing. My teenage years bring me the most pain and shame, but also the most pride for having overcome the troubles in the end. The sad thing is, I haven't even been able to share that achievement with very many people. I haven't wanted to expose myself like that. I knew not everyone would understand. Even now they won't.

Chapter 9: Pulling Up the Shades

My teen years were the most troubling time of my life.

Going into the teen years, things weren't as simple as in childhood. The list of things I "couldn't do" grew rapidly. Jobs weren't as available to me, as "a colored boy", as they were to my white friends, and I felt like I had some kind of brand stamped in the middle of my forehead. When my friends were getting good jobs for the summer, the best I could do was still rake yards, or clean and change storm windows. It got harder and harder to find work, and I was never paid as much as my white friends.

I remember a junior high teacher asking me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I said I wanted to be a dentist. She said right off, "Oh, colored boys can't become dentists." I remember the particular flat feeling her words gave me. I don't actually think she was trying to be mean—maybe just reflecting the times. But what I remember is that she had no encouragement for me, no vision at all.

Junior high is a critical point in life, I think. You make a lot of decisions about what you want to do in life, about what you *can* do. That's when you most need people who encourage you. We needed it especially, as black kids, because it was so hard to get a job. I remember I had a cousin that moved to Detroit and became a bus driver. We thought that was a really big deal—because it was at that time. Black people could only get janitor jobs and dirty labor jobs. Being a bus driver was like being an "executive" for a black man. There's nothing wrong with being a bus driver, but it shouldn't have to be the top limit of what you can aspire for.

Athletics played both an encouraging and discouraging role in my teen years, too. I thought I was a pretty good athlete. I played football and ran track and played some basketball. I wasn't the tallest person in the world and there were other guys who could play basketball better than I could, so I was on the B team. B team players suited for home games, but only some of us went to out-of-town games. When my name was included in the traveling squad to play a big game thirty miles away, I was pretty excited.



My high school track team.

I had a friend named George Seward at that time who had a new pair of shoes, so I asked him if I could borrow them for this game. He said I

could, and told me his gym basket was unlocked. “Just go ahead and get them,” he said. I remember going down to the locker room looking for his basket, and thinking I found it, but it was locked. There was an open one next to it, with new shoes in it, so I figured I was mixed up about where his basket was. I took the shoes and wore them to the game.

When I got back, the principle called me into his office and asked me if I took some shoes. I said, “Yes. I got permission from George Seward to use them.” The principal told me the shoes I took weren’t George’s. I explained that I had thought they were. As it turned out, in spite of all my pleading and explaining and saying I was sorry for the mistake, and in spite of the fact that George Seward told them “Yes, I told him he could use my shoes and I forgot my basket was locked,” they kicked me off the basketball team—because this other person said his shoes were stolen by Sterling Macer.

I really felt bad. Everyone knew I wasn’t on the basketball team any more. At least it was near the end of the season, so there weren’t a lot of games left. All this about a pair of shoes might seem silly to some, but I really became angry and bitter because of it. It seemed to me that nobody had listened or cared. The system hadn’t worked for me. And, as I look back at the incident, I can see that it was the beginning of the most troubled months of my teenage years.

During that time a couple of guys named Kenny and Jimmy were out doing a lot of things we knew weren’t legal. And they had asked me to come in with them several times, but I had always resisted. After getting kicked off the basketball team, I told them, “Yeah, I’ll do it.” It was like I didn’t care anymore. I was angry about not being able to get a decent job, and about being accused of stealing. I had a real sense of the unfairness of it all and became bitter.

So, for the next few months, I did some things I’m not proud of at all. If they were going to call me a thief when I wasn’t, I might as well be one. Even with a mother and a church I respected, even with all the good things I had been taught, I deliberately made some bad choices.

There were several of us involved in the robberies, but only two or three of us would work together at a time, so there was less chance of getting caught. But in the end, we were all caught and taken to court. I’ll never forget the date we appeared in court—April 1st—because I remember Mom saying, “Who’s the April Fool’s on now?”

When we stood before the judge, two of the other guys’ parents said, “We don’t have money for a lawyer. We need a court lawyer.” I thought that was a good line. Then the judge asked my mother about our situation.

“Well, I don’t think you people are really here to hurt Sterling,” she said. “I think you want to help him.” The judge nodded at her, but I didn’t think that was such a great thing for her to say. I wanted her to insist on a lawyer, too. As it turned out, the judge sent one of the other boys off to reform school, another to jail. But I got the best of it. I’ll always believe that was partly due to the way my mother handled things. I told her many times since that she would make the best lawyer in town.

The irony is that at the end of it all, after facing the police and the judge and everything else, you know what I got? I got a job. The judge said I had to pay back what I had stolen, and believing I couldn’t do that without a job, my probation officer got me hired to run an elevator. That’s just what I’d wanted to begin with. I never told the judge or my probation officer that I had all the money I’d stolen in the bank and could have paid it back, because I didn’t want to lose that job.

In spite of getting a job, I thought life was over for me after all that mess. I was ashamed to go back to school. Even though most of the kids, when they found out, didn’t think it was such a big deal, I never quite got over the shame. It’s still very difficult to go over these events because I feel incriminated and ashamed over and over again.

I suppose most people probably have something dark they would just as soon not have to share with anyone else. I draw some comfort from that, and from the fact that, without some of these experiences, I would not have been as effective later, as a counselor working with troubled girls. But that doesn't make it any easier to confess. In fact, this is the first time I've talked about it in detail to any one, except one friend, Bucky. He had wanted to join us, but I had told him, "No, Bucky. We're going to get caught some time." I wouldn't let him do it. He was a couple years younger than me and always kind of looked up to me. To this day he remembers, and to this day we're friends.

When I look at what turned things around for me after those troubled months, one of the people I credit is Stan Koul, a shop teacher/coach I had at the time. He'd have me over to his house on Saturdays and I'd help him put in a garden or rake leaves, and we'd talk. He always had confidence in me. When I go back to my hometown, to this day I still visit Mr. Stan Koul.

I also think of another man, Bill, who was important at that time in my life. Where Stan was gentler, Bill was tougher, but only when you had it coming. Bill was a math teacher, but I never took a math course from him. I didn't particularly like math too much. I knew him as a coach, a good coach. Both of these guys would take a lot of time with you. They told you why you were wrong, and then told you to get in there and do it right this time.

Our church was also a big encouragement to me. Every year a group of young people was designated by the church to go away to the annual Sunday School Convention in June. It was a big deal to get to go. You traveled to another town like Sioux City or Des Moines, stayed at somebody's house for three or four days, and got to meet a lot of different kids. The church nominated kids according to their potential and basic good faith.

I had been voted to go to two conventions prior to the court mess. After recent events, though, I felt really, really bad about facing people at church. I felt like I had let them down badly and figured they were ashamed of me. But when it came time to decide who got to go to the Sunday School convention that year, the church again voted me in.



St. John's Baptist Church

I say, even today, that the church will never know what that kindness meant to me. It was a real pick-up for me. It made me feel like I still counted and that not everybody was against me. They were still willing to invest trust in me. And if you have any character at all, once you've gone through something like that, and someone has helped, you really don't want to let people down again.

Recently, one of the teachers at an alternative school here in Springfield (for kids who have had problems in the mainstream), asked me to come over and speak to the students. I've done that at different places, various other times. And I think a big part of knowing how to encourage those kids comes out of learning from my own mistakes. I don't think many people gain a lot of wisdom by always winning or doing the right thing. You gain most of your wisdom and lessons out of mistakes.

And I think my mistakes have helped me not be an arrogant person. One of the elderly ladies in our church, Mrs. Ashford, used to tell us kids. “You have to have some humility.” She liked Arthur Godfrey because she thought he really projected humility. Mrs. Ashford was right. If you’re arrogant, others don’t mind seeing you fall and fail, but if you have some humility and ask others to help, they will go a long way with helping you. Mistakes can be useful if they help you learn humbleness.

Delores had a roommate in nursing school whose father was Ben Grayson. He became like a father to me, also. In fact, he called me son all the time.

I visited with him regularly until he died, December 5, 1992. He was hard working and well loved by everyone, a gentle, kind person. For years he worked as a janitor, first at a bank, then at the post office.

Finally, after the civil rights came to the forefront, Ben had opportunity to become a rural carrier, and that was a big deal. Prior to that, even for the United States Government, being a janitor was the best a black man could do. It was Ben who introduced me to the stock market and what it could do for me. I'm grateful for him to this day. It was also Ben who helped me, by his example, to understand how to be a gentleman.

Chapter 10: Transitions



Ben Grayson, father of Dolores' roommate, became my mentor when I was a young man.

After I got my life back on track, with help, the rest of high school went pretty well. The only other negative thing I remember was during my senior year when I played left half (what we now call running back) on the football team. Just before the prom, the football players always elected a prom king and the high school elected the queen. That year, the coach got us together and asked for nominations.

Someone said "Sterling Macer" first thing.

And the coach just said again, "We need a nomination."

Somebody called out another name. "O.K, we have one nomination," the coach said. "Who else?"

Pretty soon someone said, "Sterling Macer" again.

"Who else now?" the coach asked, "Who else?"

Someone called out "Darrel Fisher."

"Okay, that makes two," he said.

Three times my name was called, as the first name and then two other times. The coach never acknowledged it.

I think everyone on the team was affected, one way or another, by what happened there. One of the white guys on the team, Ron Wood, always remembered that day in the locker room, and we talked about it several times. Our coach, whether he knew it or not, lost respect that day. He wasn't known to be a fair coach anyway because there were politics in who got to play where. But a lot of the kids in that locker room had said they didn't think blacks were treated differently in our high school. They couldn't say it any more after that day.

I was aware of it before, though. One time when we were going down to Des Moines to play a game, the same coach said, "I'd like to have some colored guys playing in this game because they scare the other team." We had

about five black players on the team at that time. Every one of us just sat there and none of us said anything about that remark. Kids today would rebel, but you accepted it then because there was nothing you could do about it, no matter how much you disliked it.

When I look at his statement today, it looks comedic, but it didn't feel funny then. I've always remembered something, too, from my own experience. Just because a person swallows their pride and doesn't say anything, don't assume they don't have feelings about it. I was quiet that day, but I'll never forget that coach's words, and I'll never forget how he pretended I was invisible during the prom king nominations.

I spent a lot of time on sports when I was in school, but not a lot on studies. If I had it to do over again, I would have taken my studies more seriously. I wasn't a good reader, and I now know that's because I was a bit dyslectic. There really wasn't a lot they did for that problem back then. Words were really hard for me. Once my mother even took me to an eye doctor because I saw several letters backwards.

Dating, like studying, didn't take up a lot of my time in high school. It was late in high school when Delores and I got interested. Her mother and father were separated, and she was living with her grandparents about 10 miles away. When she came to Mason City to visit her mother, she went to our church and I saw her there. Most weekends she was at her grandparents, though, so my weekends were spent mostly with the guys.

At that time, too, I was into Golden Glove boxing, and had never lost a fight. I began to think I was pretty good. One weekend my brother Richard and our friend Roger were setting up an event, and asked me if I would fight a match. They would pay me \$25 dollars for winning, \$15 for losing, and if I was selected as fight of the night, I'd get an extra \$10. I was thinking that would be \$35 for me, \$15 at the worst. So, I said, "Yeah, I'll fight."

The night I got into that ring, I hadn't trained for a long time, but I was cocky. I found out quick enough that cocky people get no mercy. During the first round, I danced around, boom, boom, boom, boom. I knew Gene Gallige, my opponent, because we trained at the same gym. He had spent a lot of time training for the fight, but I still thought I could take him.

I did win the first round. But the second round Gene came out pretty fresh and I was pretty worn out. When you start seeing punches coming and you still can't get out of the way, you know you're in trouble. I wasn't moving right. By the end of the round I was as tired as I could be, and I knew he had at least tied me on that round.

In the third round, it was all I could do to hold up my arms. Gene was hitting me pretty good, too. I told Roger, "Throw in the towel! Give up." He and my brother just said, "Naw, you're winning, you're winning!" Gene kept hitting me and I yelled again, "Throw in the towel!" But my brother insisted, "No, keep it up!"

Even though *they* thought I'd won the second round. I thought I'd lost the second round, and I *knew* I was losing the third round. I wasn't used to getting hit and I was getting hit a lot. Gene wasn't having any pity on me because he knew I wasn't in very good shape. Pretty soon, since my seconds wouldn't listen to me, I just went over, got the towel, and threw it in myself. That's the last boxing-ring fight I was ever in. I had learned a good lesson. If you can't sacrifice enough to get into shape, you don't want to be a boxer. A good general lesson in life is, if you can't do what it takes to make something work, don't bother.

There were 303 in my high school graduating class, seven blacks—all with various dreams. By the time I was graduating from high school I had worked for ten years, but it wasn't until graduation that I felt a kind of passage



*Isn't this a picture of
Determination?*

into adulthood. In high school I was required to be in a certain place each day at a certain time. Now I had to decide for myself what I was going to do with my days.

I was offered a couple of partial college scholarships, one to Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and one to a Sterling College in Missouri somewhere. Sterling College really interested me because it had my same name, but neither scholarship would cover the whole expense. Coe College, in particular, told me they would give me \$700 a year toward the total room and tuition of \$1,200. Then they would give me a job to earn the remaining \$500.

I thought about it long and hard. If I accepted one of the scholarships, all the money I made would have to go toward the rest of the college expense. I wouldn't be able to send any money back home. And the kids I saw going to college had white shirts and blue v-neck sweaters, gray flannel pants and wing-tip shoes. I didn't have those kinds of clothes. How was I going to go to school in my jeans? How was Mom going to get along without what I could make? Finally, I just didn't go.

Instead, I got a job with Bell Telephone, and was going to start working there after graduation. One of the doctors in town had recommended me for the job. It was just a janitor position, but it was with a big company and I was excited about it. But at the last minute I learned there wasn't a job for me after all. Maybe they backed out because of my teenage activities, but I think, more than likely, they decided they didn't want a black kid on the job.

Probably not getting that job was one of the best things that ever happened to me. The same Dr. Morgan who had recommended me for the Bell Telephone job had also diagnosed me with a heart murmur. They thought I might have gotten it from having rheumatic fever as a kid. In spite of the fact that I played athletics all the time, the heart murmur was considered to be a disability and that opened up an opportunity to go to barber school in Des Moines.

Barber school was long months of all-day training, classroom work and apprenticeship. During that time I stayed at the YMCA in Des Moines. My wife-to-be, Delores, was also in Des Moines finishing nursing school at Drake University. Since she lived at the nurses' residence and had a lot of strict rules to follow, we couldn't date a lot. When we did date we mostly went to movies. I would ride a bus from the YMCA to the nurses' residence to get her, and then we would catch a bus together to the movie, and ride it back to her residence. Sometimes, with all the bus fees and movie and meal expense, I didn't have enough money left over to take a bus the five miles back home. So I'd either walk, or catch a ride with somebody.

On June 10, 1956, after Delores had finished nursing school, and I had finished barber school, we got married at St. John's Baptist Church, back in Mason City. I think ours was the largest wedding up to that time. We had a

whole bunch of groomsmen and bridesmaids. For our honeymoon, we drove our 1954 Chevy Bellaire up to Canada, and back down to Niagara Falls. Life was good.



I did have a significant spiritual experience in my life when I was young. But I've learned that talking about spiritual experiences isn't nearly as important as how you live your life. Besides, when you try to describe a spiritual experience to someone, they tend to think you're a little crazy. So I've decided that spiritual experiences themselves are just for the individual. How it affects your life, the way you treat others, is the part you give away. And there's not a spiritual command any more important than "Do unto others as you want them to do unto you."

*I'm not as active as some in church, I suppose. But in some ways, I have a more "active" view of faith than others. I mean, you can pray and pray and pray for something, and sit here for a month praying for something, but until you go out and start working to get it accomplished, nothing is going to happen. God gives you the strength to get it done. Things just don't drop on you. I prayed for strength to go out and **earn** money, not for money. I pray for the ability to help others, not that they will be helped. And that's the way it should be, I think.*

Chapter 11: Two Trips

A couple years after our honeymoon, Delores and I traveled again—this time to Yellow Stone National Park. Driving from Des Moines to Yellow Stone, we stopped along the trail at all the tourist sites. Other travelers were doing the same thing, so we ended up seeing the same people over and over. By the time we got to Yellow Stone, we felt like we had a bit of friendship with some of these folks.

At Yellow Stone, we were told about this popular open-air restaurant. After paying outside, they let you go in to pick out your steak, and then they grilled it for you. It came with a baked potato and salad—all you could eat. Since we had camped all the way to Yellow Stone, we decided to treat ourselves to this. Besides, we hadn't eaten any breakfast that morning, and we were hungry. So we found the restaurant, already very busy, and lined up to pay.

In line we saw some of the same people we'd met along the way. Some of them were in front of us, some behind us. We had a good time in line, visiting with them, working our way up to the front. Finally, it was our turn, and I had our money out, when they said, "Sorry, folks. We can't serve you." That was the first time I had ever been refused food because I was black. I had heard about it happening, but this was the first time for me. And it was very embarrassing and hurtful for both of us.

I was angry with the people in front of us and the people in back of us who were witnesses to the embarrassment. I was angry that they saw it and just kept on going in. I was angry because none of them said, "Hey, that's not right!" They just shuffled on in. They didn't care.

Upset and hungry, we went across the street to a tavern-looking place, to at least get a hamburger. When I walked in, you would have thought I was John Dillinger, or something. Obviously, they hadn't seen very many black people out there. Everyone turned to stare and the place was dead quiet.

"Can you tell me where we can get something to eat?" I asked.

"There's a place 70-80 miles down the road," they answered. So we obviously weren't welcome at this place, either.

By that time, Delores and I were tired and hungry, so we just went to a store, bought lunchmeat and fruit, and ate by the lake—by ourselves. I'll be honest. That incident left me angry, and I lost some of my faith in humankind. But the ending to the story didn't come until a few years later when we took another trip.

This time we were going to Arizona and we had one daughter by then. In the few years since Yellow Stone, laws against discrimination had been passed, and integration had improved a great deal. We felt pretty comfortable we wouldn't run into any more restaurant problems. Since we weren't camping as much, though, I had learned to make hotel reservations in advance. Occasionally we would be turned down at motels because they said they were full, and we wondered if they really were.

One night we came into an Arizona town, and I hadn't made a room reservation in advance. I checked at the Holiday Inn, but they said they didn't have any rooms.

"But, sir, there's a place downtown that I know has a room," the manager said. "It's an older place, but it's clean. I just called for another guy, and they had a room for him. They might have more rooms if you hurry."

So, I got in the car and we drove down there in a hurry. But as I walked into the lobby, this guy at the desk was saying to someone else, "I don't have any rooms! I told you I don't have any rooms! I'm sick and tired of you bothering me about this! Get out of here!" Finally the guy left and the manager looked over at me.

"I came to get a room," I said, "but I already heard what you said to that other guy."

"Oh, I have a room for you," he said grandly. "But them damn Indians! I don't want them in here!"

You know, I took the room he offered and I didn't say anything because I wanted a room for *my* family. How often I've thought back to that time when I was angry with those other people in Yellow Stone because they ate when I couldn't. I'd had nerve enough to get angry with someone else for not speaking up, but when it came my turn, I didn't say anything, either.

In Arizona, we were tired. In Yellow Stone, they were hungry. At the moment, it was easiest for each of us to think of our own best interest. From that experience I learned not to condemn people so easily about what they do or don't do—because I've discovered I'm capable of the same behavior. Those people may have gone home that night with the same regrets I did when I didn't speak up. They may have said, "I didn't know they did that sort of thing at this restaurant." But they still ate. Maybe afterwards they felt bad they didn't say anything, either.

It's easy to feel so angry when someone wrongs us, not so easy to face the truth when we do the same thing to others. I forgave those people in that Yellow Stone line after my experience in Arizona. They probably weren't trying to deliberately mistreat us, however wrong they were. Maybe they would have done it differently at a different time. We're all guilty of doing less than noble things, of being caught off guard. It's possible for some of the nicest people you could ever meet to seem insensitive at some times. You can't sum people up on the basis of one or two observations.

I also learned to turn the bad experiences into useful ones. You can't make *other* people do anything, really, but you can use your own experiences to make *yourself* better—or more full of hate. For years I'd let that Yellow Stone incident rot inside me. And when you start doing that, start hating people, you'll destroy yourself in the end. First you hate one person, and then you hate more people. You end up being mean to everybody. I've seen people like that; people who are so unpleasant nobody can stand to be around them. You can't be like that in this life. You surely don't want to live like that.

I learned to be more prepared to speak up when I should, but I also learned that the failure to do so isn't the total

measure of who you are forever. Everybody deserves a second chance. One thing, though, if you have any character, you learn from moments of bad judgment and weakness. After that restaurant experience in Yellow Stone, the people around us couldn't claim they'd never seen discrimination, or that they didn't know about the Jim Crow rules. When the civil rights movement got going, they had to say, "I've seen that happen."

It was the late 50's and that's when things started happening for blacks. You could see them doing things and positioning for better jobs. There now seemed to be a reason to get an education. Academics hadn't seemed very important before, because you were going to get a janitor's job anyway.

Chapter 12: College Days

Shortly after Yellowstone, I started thinking about going to college. I was working at a barbershop near Drake University and had gotten to know some of the students there. Their suggestions that I attend college, along with my wife's encouragement, got me to thinking.

So I started taking some night classes at Drake in 1957. I had been out of high school for four years.

During the day I barbered, and during the evenings I went to school. I hadn't been any great student in high school, but I hadn't been focused on grades then, either. Now I needed to see if I could make grades before jumping in full time. Delores and I also started saving as much of our pay as possible so that, if it worked, I could go to school full time for a year and not have to barber so many hours.

As it turned out, I did all right, academically, at Drake. I was able to take one three-hour class each semester and just study for one class at a time. Over the course of my night college, I accumulated 15 hours with a GPA of about 2.6 or something. So, Delores and I decided I'd go to Iowa University full time for two semesters and see how that worked. With Delores's nursing pay, and me doing janitor work a couple hours a day at the University, along with barbering on weekends, we got along fine. We lived in married student housing which wasn't too expensive, and the weekend barbering was pretty lucrative. I'd cut hair in one fraternity one weekend, and in another one the next weekend.

The first semester at Iowa University, I didn't get any F's, but I got 2 C's and 3 D's—a 1.4 GPA for the semester. I was put on probation and was very discouraged with the whole thing. This was different from the night classes at Drake where I studied for one class at a time. And I didn't understand the grading system at all. If I guessed at a question and missed it, I got two points off, and stuff like that. It was tricky. At that point, I went to Delores and said, "You know, maybe we're just wasting time and money here."

When my literature teacher, Miss Hovey, learned I was struggling with whether or not to continue, she said, "You're doing fine, Sterling. Education just for education's sake is more important than pursuing education for grades." I chewed on that for a while. And my wife really encouraged me. "We saved this money for you to go to school a whole year. Just try it one more semester." So I dug in and the next semester I got a 3.0 GPA. From then on, things went well, and I finished in four years.

After that first Iowa University year, I barbered more to help out with expenses. I worked in the same shop I had earlier, with two black guys who were really sharp. One of them was the owner of the shop and working with him was a whole business education in itself. It was a very nice shop, out in suburban area, with all white customers. Because it was close to Drake University, we got a lot of college students coming in. Ironically, I invited some of the black students at Drake to come, and the owner wasn't happy. "You shouldn't have had them in here," he said.

It sounds strange to think of blacks discriminating against other blacks to protect their own business, but this was one more example of compromise to protect self-interest. The shop owner actually had deep feelings about

discrimination and wasn't setting out to be mean. He was just trying to assure that his business would survive. People struggle with things they know are wrong. In a sense, those kinds of actions, that kind of racism, doesn't bother me—because it's not mean-spirited, really. It's the racists who deliberately set out to hurt you, to be mean—that you need to worry about. And I had some experiences with those kinds of people, too.



My graduation from Iowa University was a family celebration. Clockwise from top left: Delores, Deanne, brother, Richard. and with my mother and mother-in-law.



Once someone told me, “Sterling, you have a confidence and grace that doesn’t belie the struggles you’ve had. You seem tranquil, at ease with anyone.” I take that as a high compliment. I don’t seem beat up, then.

Chapter 13: Badges of Honor

I always knew as a black person, that if you were stopped by police the best things to say were, “Yes, sir. No, sir. Not me, sir. Yes, sir. No, sir. Oh, please sir. I certainly will, sir.” You didn’t talk back to policemen or act like you knew anything, because if you did you were going to jail. I’d always known that, but not as well as I did after I was arrested in Des Moines, Iowa one night.

It was 1957, during the time I was working as a barber in Des Moines, and going to Drake University in the evening. My wife, Delores, and I lived in a very small apartment in a predominantly black, but mixed, neighborhood, and she was a third-shift scrub nurse at the Veterans Hospital. Since we only had one car, a green 1954 Chevy Bel Air, Delores drove it to work at night and I walked.

On Good Thursday, just before Good Friday, I had just finished some finals, and set out to walk the few blocks home. In order to get home, I had to walk through a white neighborhood. As I’m walking, a police car pulls alongside.

“Come here, boy,” the officer calls out to me.

I had just seen a movie called *Shane* and was cocky enough to ask, “Are you speaking to *me*?”

The policeman pulls out his pistol and points it at me. “I said come here, *boy*.” So I do. “Spread ‘em,” he orders.

I put my hands up on the car and spread my legs. “Yes, sir.” He takes his billy club and knocks my legs further apart.

About this time more police come and I ask what the problem is. They don’t answer me. “What are you doing out here?” they ask, beating me in the sides with their billy clubs. Then the first one puts his gun at the back of my head. I’m very frightened. I really think they’re going to kill me. But they just beat me up, and then they shove me in the police car. All the way to the police station they call me every name, saying “nigger this” and “nigger that”. I had heard all these stories about how the police in Des Moines beat up blacks behind the station’s closed elevator doors. I’m already beat up when we get to the elevator.

By the time they put me in a jail cell I know what’s going on. A white girl has been raped.

I spend a beat-up, sleepless night in a cell, waiting. The next day they put me in a line-up. I can hear the people who were looking at me talking.

“No, that’s not him,” this girl says. “He’s my barber,” another voice said.

After the line-up, they put me back in the cell and in a while the captain comes in and says, “They didn’t hurt you last night did they?”

“They did,” I say back. “They beat me up so bad I have blood in my urine.”

He mumbles something about “You’re going to be all right,” or “We’ll see about that.” And then he leaves. Pretty soon he comes back in. “The boys didn’t hurt you last night, did they?”

I say, “Yeah, they did.” He leaves again. Now I’m beginning to understand what I have to do. And it makes me sick. Pretty soon, he comes in again.

“The boys didn’t hurt you last night did they?”

“Naw, they didn’t hurt me,” I say. He locks me back up, and fifteen or twenty minutes later he comes again, this time with someone else.

“The boy’s didn’t hurt you last night, right?”

“Naw,” I repeat. So now two of them have heard it. The fifth time he comes back with yet another person.

“You told us the boys didn’t hurt you last night, right?”

“No, sir. They didn’t hurt me.” Now they have three different policemen who have heard me say it. They put me back in jail and I wait.

After a while they get me and let me go. I say, “How can I get home? I don’t have a car.”

“Walk,” they say.

I call the guy at the barbershop where I work, and he comes to get me. Safe in his car, I finally break down. Up until that time, I have been trying to be strong. Now all the hurt and hate explodes. I had been beaten up badly, and then forced to say repeatedly (to five grinning policemen) that nothing at all had happened.

At that moment, I hated every policeman. “I ought to go get a shotgun and lay in the weeds and just wait for that policeman and shoot him,” I thought. But I was also angry with myself. I felt like less than a man. I hadn’t stood up to them. I felt a rage at how helpless I’d been.

If I hadn’t been in school, with other goals on my mind, I might have tried to get vengeance. If my personal balance had been just a bit more off, it could have been a mess. Sometimes you see hate crimes against society, and maybe in some of those cases it’s because of such a rage. If for some reason people think the law is mocking them they can get very dangerous.

Some policemen still go around today saying, “Why should blacks distrust us so much?” I know why. Because of the stories I could tell them myself. But you know what? I never told my kids that story until now, when they’re adults, because I was their dad and I didn’t want anger to distort their growing. If kids love you and they see you angry about a hurt or wrong, they become angry, too, and it can damage their whole lives. Besides that, I knew, growing up, they would find enough trouble of their own to deal with.

So Delores and I worked hard not to plant any negative anger in their memories. One time we were taking them back to Iowa for a Christmas visit with family when I was pulled over for no apparent reason. The officer’s first comment was, “Going a little fast, weren’t you, *boy*?”

“No, sir. I don’t think I was,” I replied casually. “I got this new cruise on the car and thought it was right on the

line.” He stood there, shining lights in the car, over my three kids and the Christmas presents in the back seat. His partner was standing at the back of the car with his gun out. But it was obvious we were no threat, and they didn’t have anything on us, so they let us go.

As we pulled out, my son asked, “Why did that policeman call you boy, Dad? You’re not a boy.”

I don’t think that officer cared, or even realized, what he had done. I could have let him make me really angry, and if I had been as careless as him, I would have let it show in front of my son. But I didn’t want my young son to grow up with hate I had taught him. We don’t teach our kids hate intentionally, but the fact is we do it by the way we react when we’re hurt. The experience had been embarrassing, and I think most men can understand that, but I didn’t want my son to have to worry about that.

Years later, Delores and I and the kids were coming back from Iowa in a brand new ‘85 Volvo. My son, Sterling, was driving, and Delores and Dawn were in the back seat. It’s funny the details you remember. My son had a bandana tied around his head, like a street kid. My daughter had a towel cranked in the window to keep the sun from coming in.

Anyway, we were north of Jefferson City, doing the speed limit, when we saw this police car coming towards us, chasing another car. The highway was flat for a long ways, so we saw him pull the car off as we were approaching, and walk up to the window to start talking to the people inside. But just as we passed, the officer looked over at us, hopped back into his car, u-turned across the median, and started after us.

I asked my son if he was going the speed limit, and he said he was, but the patrolman continued to follow us several miles. “He’s still back there,” I said. “He’s going to stop us for something.” Finally he did pull us over and I asked, “What’s the problem?”

“Whose car is this?” he asked.

My son said, “This is my father’s car.”

“Well, who should I give the ticket to?” he asked.

“For what?” I said.

“Your license is expired. It’s been expired for a month.”

“Oh, no!” I said. “I’ve been running back and forth to Iowa every weekend because my father-in-law is dying of cancer in the veteran’s hospital. I guess I’ve had my mind on that and forgot all about the license. You’re perfectly right. I’m sorry.”

“Well?” he responded, coldly. “Who’s going to get the ticket?”

“You’re going to give us a ticket for that?” I asked unbelievably. “Aren’t you going to give us a warning or something first.”

“No,” he said flatly.

By that time I couldn’t resist. “Why did you turn around and chase us when you had another car stopped over there? It looked like they were speeding but you waved them away and chased us.”

“I saw your license was expired,” he said.

“You looked all the way over the median at a car going 55 miles the other way, and you could see that our license was expired?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“You know what I think?” I started in. I remembered the kids. “Well—I better not say what I think. I’ll take the ticket. Just give me the ticket.”

So then the officer took me back to his car to give me the ticket, and as he was filling it out, he asked me, “What do you think about this?” I just sat there for a moment.

“Do you really want to know what I think?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t forget you asked me what I think.” I sat there quietly until he gave me the ticket. Then I said, “I think you’re the kind of person they call a racist pig. You’re the kind of cop, I’m thinking, that makes people, especially minorities (including me at this time) hate cops.” He just sat there, then he handed me the ticket, and I got out of car.

He followed us for another five miles down the road after that. My wife asked if I had said anything to him, and all I said was “Yes.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have done that,” she said. “Because he’s still following us.” Finally, I guess he thought he’d made his point, and he turned back.

We probably could have made a successful career out of getting stopped by police, because in 1992 it happened again to Sterling. He was home from California for a visit and had borrowed my new 929 Mazda to go see some friends. His weekly show *Homefront* had gotten a lot of local publicity. Anyway, while he was home, he borrowed my car one evening to go see some of his friends. About one in the morning I got a call from the police. They had stopped Sterling on Campbell, by the old Consumers, and had taken him down to the station.

Because of my own experience of being taken down to a police station, I was immediately concerned, so I got in the truck and got there as quickly as I could. When I passed Consumers on the way to the station, I saw my car there on the street, with a policeman standing alongside it. I stopped and identified myself and the officer said, “Mr. Macer, I want you to know I had no part in this stop.” That made me even more concerned. He told me my son had been taken into the police station to deal with a prior traffic ticket. I went from there to the police station.

“What’s going on?” I asked, once inside the police station.

“Well, your son was stopped and discovered he had an outstanding traffic ticket from St. Louis. So we brought him in to process that ticket,” they said.

“Are there no charges for today?” I asked.

“No.”

“Well can I get him out?” It turned out he had already been released and had gone to an ATM to get some

money for the ticket.

“Everything’s taken care of. It’s just fine,” they said. But it all still sounded strange to me.

When my son came back I took him out to the car and asked, “Were you speeding?”

“Not at all,” he said.

“Well, what happened?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I was just going south on Campbell and I saw this police car sitting at the corner. He had his blinkers on to go the other way. I went on past him, and I could see him look at me. Then he changed his mind and turned to follow me. I know I wasn’t speeding.”

“Why did they stop you?” I asked.

“I don’t know, unless it was for being ‘black while driving’.”

When we looked in the car, you could tell it had been thoroughly searched. The mats were all pulled loose and things were ruffled. I think my son was right—he was pulled over for being a young black guy driving a brand new car going the wrong direction, south and not north. I figured that’s why at least one officer wanted me to know he had no part in the stop.

Although it was a rather sour experience, that one policeman’s sensitivity stands out most in my mind. I also realize it could have been a lot worse. Times had changed since I was arrested long ago. And, once they found out who Sterling was, an actor, he became a celebrity, not just “the usual black guy.” Some of the officers even told me they had gotten his autograph. Things would have been different a few years earlier with an “ordinary” young black man.

I do have one experience when the police were more on my side than against me—but in a comical way. During my senior year in college, 1961-62, they were building interstate 80 right through Iowa City. The construction crew was mostly made up of white men from Alabama and Mississippi. One night, after school, a black friend of mine and I were sitting in a restaurant, next to a round table with six construction guys. Pretty soon one of the loudmouth guys started in about how “there are too many niggers around here.” On and on he went about how “niggers do this and niggers do that, and too many niggers come into restaurants”.

We ignored them a while, knowing they were deliberately trying to antagonize us. But, finally my friend Tony went over and said, “Look, that’s very offensive and we don’t want to hear it.”

When he came back I looked at him and said, “What did you do that for! It’s only going to get worse now.” Out of the six, only a couple were really spouting like that, but they just kept on until I’d had enough, too.

This time I went over and said, “We’ve had enough of that.”

They said, “What are you going to do about it?” We were young and stupid at the time, and didn’t have enough sense to walk away. Since I had been a Golden Glove boxer in high school, I was pretty good with my hands, so the loudmouth guy and I went outside. Because I got out the door first, I had the immediate advantage. Tony had blocked the door to keep others from getting out. By the time they got the door open, this guy was down, and no one else was eager to get into the fight right then.

Tony and I left, and started walking toward the married student housing where we both lived. We walked

through a park along the way, talking about how stupid we had been, about how we were seniors now and had nearly jeopardized our education over something we could have walked away from. But we also talked about how we were tired of walking away from guys like that. As we left the park, we saw a bunch of people under the streetlight ahead and as we got closer, we could see they were holding tire irons and chains and jack handles.

“Oh, Tony,” I said, “It’s those guys again.” Only now there were about 12 or 13 of them. I don’t know how they found us, but they clearly were waiting for us.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

Tony said, no, he wanted to try to talk to them and make peace. I said, “Well, *you* can stay and talk with them.” (Tony was very light complexioned.)

As Tony walked closer they shouted to him, “We’re going to hurt you bad, but we’re going to kill that little burly-headed nigger over there.”

As soon as they said that, I took off running. We both did. Everyone started shouting “Get him! Get him!” and there was a lot of noise and confusion, but we had the advantage of knowing the area. I knew there were railroad tracks close by, about 150 yards from where we were. With my Iowa kind of knowledge, I took off towards them. When I got there, I started running one direction, then went down in-between the trains and circled back towards them, so when they tried to cut me off, they were going the wrong way. I was remembering how pheasants used to double back when we went hunting.

There had been so much shouting and commotion by then that people in the neighborhood had called the police. When they got there, they started rounding everybody up. I was far enough away that I could hear the commotion but couldn’t tell what was going on, so I stayed where I was. Tony shouted, “Come on out, Sterling. The police are here. We’re okay now.” I hadn’t had too good of experiences with the police before, but finally I came out and they took us all downtown to the police station.

At the police station they brought us all into the same room and asked, “Who did this? Who hit this one guy?”

“He did it,” they said, pointing at me.

“Yeah, I did it,” I said.

“You told us he was about six foot two inches and weighed about 240 pounds!” the police said.

“Well he looked it out there,” they said.

The guy I had hit wasn’t there. I’m not proud he had to have stitches, but I knew he intended to beat me up awful, so I didn’t give him a chance.

“What’d you hit him with?” the police asked.

“With my hands,” I answered, showing them my swollen hands.

“What started the whole thing,” they asked.

“They were calling us niggers,” we said.

And they said, “Yeah, we called them niggers and all that,” but they weren’t sorry about it at all.

During that time, the early 60's, the whole black movement was gaining momentum, so the police didn't want to get involved in a mess. Iowa University, where we attended, was noted to be a pretty liberal school to begin with. Now here was a bunch of southern white guys talking about killing niggers. The police didn't know what to do, I don't think. (There were a bunch of them standing around observing, and some were asking questions.)

Finally the lead policeman turned to the white guys and spoke his genius line: "Now you shouldn't have called them niggers. You shouldn't have done that. If you were a nigger and they called you a nigger, how would you feel?"

In one quick second he realized what he had said in front of all of his fellow officers—and us—but Tony and I just looked at each other and sat there, still as mice. We knew what he'd done. He hurried on and said, "We won't have this again. Around here, we don't put up with this kind of stuff," and he let us go. We never saw those guys again, and I hope to this day I never do. Sometimes I still think about the guy I beat up. I'd probably still be angry if I was him.

Afterwards, Tony and I laughed about what that policeman had said. It was pretty funny, actually. And we remembered the look on his face. But I also learned a good lesson from that experience. I had let my anger get out of control and take over. As a result, I could have gotten kicked out of school, killed, or even been killed. My whole life could have been ruined. From then on, I tried not to let my emotions get out of control.

I just recently saw a news report on TV. Some guy out in California had deliberately driven his car into some people and killed four or five of them. They caught the wild driver on film getting out of his car afterwards, and some other guys chasing him down the street. One guy caught the driver and was holding him, but then this other guy comes in and starts beating him up. When I saw it on TV, it really bothered me.

I told Delores, "I think that guy should have been held up. I would have liked to be the guy doing the holding, probably. But I hope I would have tried to keep the other guy from hitting him, too."

The driver appeared to be mentally ill. Sick. He had just committed an act that was hideous. But I wouldn't want to be the guy who jumped on him, after he was pinned, and started beating him, especially if he was ill. I hope my immediate impulse would have been to hold and not to hit.

Once when I got a speeding ticket, I decided I'd be my own lawyer. The car I drove at that time had a bad muffler, and as we were passing a policeman, it backfired and roared. Though it sounded like we were going fast, we weren't, because the car wouldn't do over 35 mph.

Intent on justice, I read this little \$2.00 book about how to be your own lawyer, and thought I was some kind of Perry Mason or something. To gather evidence, I went to the police department and got an officer to take my car out and try his best to get it up over 35 mph. He couldn't, because it was impossible. So I "subpoenaed" him to be my witness in court—only I didn't even know how to introduce a witness in court.

I remember the judge saying, "Now, Sterling, you have to approve this and approve this and qualify that. You can't just bring a slip of paper in and have somebody tell me your car wouldn't go that fast." I must have convinced him of something, though, because he only ended up fining me \$10.00. But that was the end of my career as a lawyer.

Chapter 14: A Career

When I first went to college, I wanted to go into physical therapy, but another event changed that. As I was getting ready to take my anatomy final in the classroom one day, I reviewed the text book for the few remaining minutes. There was an empty desk across the aisle on each side of me and one in front and back of me. That's the way we sat on test days to discourage cheating. Anyway, I had laid the textbook, open, on the empty desk to my left, while I was searching for something else. When the instructor said, "Time for the test," I got out my paper and pen and forgot the book was even over there.

When I went up to hand in my paper, I felt good about the test. I had really booked for it. But the teacher took my paper and tore it up. He pointed back at the open book and I realized what I'd done. I swore I hadn't known I left it open. I pleaded with the teacher until he finally told me I could take the test over again.

"But you're going to have to pass it really well in order to avoid an F for this course," he said. "And no matter how well you do, the best I'll give you in this class is a C. It is a disadvantage to the other students, you getting to take it a second time." I managed to pass the test well, so he gave me a C for the semester. That was better than an F, but any chance to get into physical therapy was gone. You weren't allowed into the program with a C in anatomy.

I was really discouraged after that, but, fortunately, it had happened early enough in my college career that I had some room to change directions. I wanted to salvage the courses I'd already taken so I could finish a degree as fast as possible—so I studied my choices. I had taken some psychology classes, but to be a psychologist, you had to get a Masters and then PhD. A degree in recreational therapy looked like the best fit, so I went for that.

It worked out okay, because right after I graduated in 1962, I was able to get a job as a recreational therapist at East Moline State Hospital. EMSH was a huge campus with a lot of buildings since there were about 1,900 long-term patients or residents, some of whom had lobotomies, and all kinds of problems. Written off as lost causes, they had been essentially warehoused in the hospital's various units: the alcoholic unit, geriatric unit, lock down unit.

During my first week at the hospital, a patient turned up missing. Finally someone found him down in the

storage room. He had tied a rope to a pipe and hung himself. It was evident, early on, that tragic problems and people filled the place, and the best I could do with my recreation work was to try to normalize things.

At one point I decided I would try to start a basketball league for the young people there. It took a lot to persuade the director to let me try. When she finally agreed, I really wanted to prove myself and make it work. On the first day, I gathered all the young people into Boyd Hall. Boyd hall was just a big auditorium with a stage. They used it for all kinds of things, like showing movies, but there were also two baskets suspended from opposite balconies.

I divided the young people into about eight teams and tossed down a ball from the stage to each team. After that it was absolute chaos. They were chasing each other with balls, running up onto the stage and off the stage, up in the balcony, out the doors and back in, slamming each other with the balls. They wouldn't pay any attention at all to me or the other workers. After a while, everyone on staff just shook their heads and said it was time to go home.

I felt really bad driving home that night. An idea I had fought for so hard was a total failure. Then, along the way, I passed some kids playing street ball, and suddenly I knew what had been wrong with that afternoon's practice. Can you guess what it was?

Before going home that night, I went to the hardware store and bought some rolls of black and red tape. The next day I went into Boyd Hall and taped down lines on the court. Boundaries. Then I brought the kids back in again and explained the boundary lines. I also had staff with striped shirts and whistles. I explained how they had to stop with the whistle and listen to the referee. "The referee and these lines are here to tell you when you're out of bounds," I said. And, you know what? They listened. We were able to play ball.

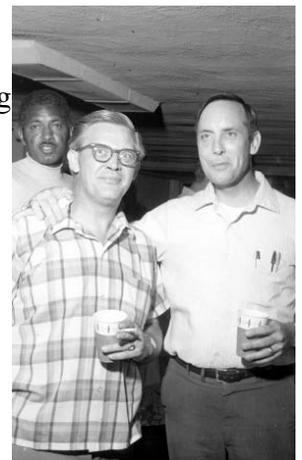
I had discovered everybody needs boundaries. And that's true of just about all of life. Even when you play street ball, you have to have a sense of boundaries for it to work. And that's what changed the success of my program. Without lines and referees, it was just a free-for-all. With boundaries, chaos was changed into purpose. Later, I used the illustration at G.E. in introducing new employees to the work force. "Rules have a purpose, and there are people designated to help you abide by the boundaries. Respect these people and learn to play the game in such a way that others respect you." And good players learn to appreciate boundaries. There's plenty of room for personal creativity within them.

But this basketball success was a rare exception in my hospital work. Mostly I had an overwhelming sense of helplessness. These folks were so bad there was very little chance of getting them well. No one expected them to leave the hospital. Because of working with that kind of defeat day after day, I started getting migraine headaches regularly.

In spite of the fact that I grew to dread my work at the hospital, I did well. In two years, I became director of the recreational therapy program. But two years later I decided I had to leave. People couldn't imagine why. They thought I had a great job. "You're working for the state, respected in the community, and you've been promoted. Why would you quit!?" I wanted to quit because the people weren't getting well at the hospital. I went home every night feeling like I was carrying a burden around from place to place and never getting to set it down.

So when a counseling job came open at a Job Corp in Clinton, Iowa, thirty miles from Moline, I applied, and got it. On December 27, 1966 I started my new job there. Originally I was to start after the first of the year, but Jack Bengough, the Human Resource Manager, told me if I came before New Year's, I would get credit

My mentor, Jack Bengough, is the one in the plaid shirt.



(for retirement purposes) for that whole year of service. At the time, I thought, “for retirement purposes?” That seemed like so far away. But I followed his advice and learned this was the first of many times he would lead me right.

I can't imagine what it would have been like to have stayed at the hospital and missed out on the Job Corp opportunity. I had learned how important it is to leave a job when it isn't working for you. By having the courage to leave the hospital, even though others thought it was foolish, I changed my life for the good. We have the ability to take risks in life—to reach for something positive, or we can choose to stay in losing situations.

Chapter 15: The Job Corp

G.E. and Time/Warner were the companies sponsoring our particular Job Corp Center, under the management of *General Learning* or G.L. (named after these two companies). Job Corps were federally funded programs intended to provide education and job skill training to young people. We could help them get their GED, train them for careers (beauticians, key punch operators, etc.) and we could teach them vocational life skills, like culinary arts, gardening, and driver's education.

The government funded the centers but they contracted with businesses to run them. It was a good arrangement for everyone. The government didn't have to be responsible for the day-to-day running of the centers, and businesses with a lot of organizational experience got good PR from sponsoring a Job Corp. General Motors and Xerox sponsored other Job Corps.

We had about 950 girls living at our center, from all over the U.S. About seventy percent were minorities. Of that seventy percent, probably sixty-five percent were black. The city we were in, Clinton, Iowa was nearly all white, but our girls won community hearts when they helped fight a flood that hit the area. After that, the town really embraced our work. I've remembered that as an example of how adversity can change things for the good.

When I started to work at the Job Corp, I was a group worker/counselor. In time I became Associate Director of Counseling and Guidance. After the migraine headaches and sense of despair at the state hospital, working at the Job Corp was wonderful. I loved my work. I didn't even mind the long commute from Moline. And I never had another migraine headache. I had gone from a terribly depressed situation to one full of hope and future. Even to this day I think it was the most thrilling job I ever had.

Most of my work was one-on-one counseling, encouraging students to stand up and face themselves—to ask, “What could I have done to make the situation turn out differently?” I talked it out with them. “Maybe you couldn't have done anything differently, but there may have been something.” After examining their own actions and choices, we would consider what the other person could have done to make things turn out differently. I taught them to reverse the situation, and see it from another perspective. When you take the time to evaluate things like this, you learn so much more from experiences.

Though most of my work was helping the girls work through their problems, occasionally I had to serve as a mediator between counselors and students, too. One resident adviser had gotten into a big scene with a dorm student. The girl had done a lot of cussing, stomping, and calling names. The adviser, hot under the collar, came into my office and said she wanted the student expelled. “I want her out of here! She's not going to get away with this!”

We talked a bit, and then decided to meet again—after the adviser had some time to cool off. But before our next meeting, she came into my office, furious, with a big apple in her hand. “Look at this! Look at this!” she

said angrily. "That little witch just set this on my desk!"

"Well, it looks like a good apple to me," I said. "Looks pretty delicious, and it's all shined up."

"She's just trying to rub my nose in it," the adviser retorted.

After a while she calmed down a bit and I said, "Look at that apple. What is that apple? To me, it means she's saying, 'I'm sorry.' It's an apology, isn't it?"

"But I want her to say it!" the adviser said. "I want a real apology!"

Finally I got her to see that the apple *was* a real apology. People apologize in a lot of different ways. Your husband or wife can apologize the next day sometimes by just saying, "How you doing, honey?" Then *you* have a choice. You can smile kindly or you can say, "How you doing! What do you mean, 'How you doing!' You owe me more than 'How you doing!'" But is that what you really want? Just accept apologies, however they come, and be grateful for them.

The counselor recognized that in the end, and went back to the student and said, "Thank you. I appreciate the apple." Then they were able to sit down and talk about the situation. The girl admitted that she had been wrong and they went on to develop a good relationship. The girl even became her dorm assistant.

When people asked me what kind of counseling theories I followed with the girls, I always said, "I'm an eclectic counselor. I just do whatever works." I think I got most of my counseling intuition from my mother, and from the fact that I was an in-between kid, age-wise, with my brothers. That put me in a position to learn, both as a younger brother and as an older brother. I had taken some graduate courses in counseling, too, and that was very helpful.

In one abnormal psychology class we learned that the closer to the surface a problem might appear to be, the more careful you have to be in revealing it to that person. I had to find a way for the girls to discover truth themselves. I couldn't just go up and say, "This is what you're doing, and you have to change this, and change this, and change this." That would just cause them to fight me, quit, or become worse.

But that didn't mean I couldn't hold the girls accountable. Discipline doesn't have to be a negative thing at all. It can bring about a lot of good. I came to be known as one of the disciplinary counselors and often had to transfer students to the disciplinary zone with more restricted hours. We had a kind of "third chance and you're out" system.

One of my odd strengths as a counselor was being able to identify pot. A lot of the counselors didn't even know what it smelled like. I could walk down a hall and say, "Someone's smoking pot here," and the counselors would say, "Where? I don't smell anything." Though I'd never used it, I'd been able to recognize its smell since I was eight years old, and thought everyone knew what it smelled like. I found out real quick that wasn't true.

The girls in our center were from all over the country, even Hawaii, Alaska, Haiti. They were Mexican and black, many times coming from gang situations. Quite often the prominent leaders among the girls were negative and rebellious. One time we arranged to have these "leaders", two from every dorm, report for a meeting. Into the room they came, two by two by two, and they started looking around at each other. No one had to tell them who they were. They knew because they recognized the other personalities around them.

Once we had them all in the room, I asked them, "Do you know why you were called to this meeting?"

The response from a few of them was, "To terminate us."

“No,” I replied. “We’ve gotta solve some problems around here and we need some students with strong leadership skills to help. We don’t want to have to send a lot of students home for not following rules, so can you help?” We put a positive spin on their leadership potential, and, you know, most of them took hold of it. They were pleased with the recognition of their leadership potential, and they learned to redirect their power into something positive.

When I look back through my Job Corp yearbooks, I remember so many of the individual faces there—beautiful student faces. I loved those kids. Later in life I ran into some of those students again, and it was always a great pleasure. I have a whole book of letters I had collected through the years from them and their families.

But along with all the great Job Corp memories, there are a few, not so great. One day, without warning, security came into the office I shared with my director, and they told her to stand up and leave her desk as it was. Then they escorted her out of the facility. I didn’t have any idea what was going on. As it turned out, she had been embezzling. G.L. fired her, but didn’t prosecute and not long afterwards, we heard she committed suicide. Tragic consequences.

As it turned out, the situation also created some problems for me. Since I was Assistant Director, everyone expected I would be offered her job, but it didn’t happen. I was put on hold. Because I had access to the same kind of authority my director had, they needed to verify my innocence in the embezzlement. During the investigation, they didn’t take me off the job, but they didn’t promote me, either.

In the meantime, the director’s job had to be filled so the work could go on. Another counselor, Judge Blaine, an Episcopalian priest and graduate of Harvard, was offered the job. Unlike me, he was very intellectual, but we made a perfect team and really enjoyed working together. When they offered him the position as director of the program, he came to me and said, “Mace, they asked me to take this job, but I won’t take it unless you approve it.” I assured him it was fine, and it really was because we were (and still are) good friends. “I think it’s great, Judge.” So, he became Director, and I remained Associate Director.

After the investigation was completed (and they proved I had no connection to the embezzlement), Jack Bengough, Employee Relations Manager, asked me if I would consider becoming Supervisor of Employment. Supervisor of Employment was a mainstream job, and I was pleased. To this day, I think the reason I was offered that job was because G.L. thought they owed me something. They wanted to make up for having to give the earlier promotion to someone else.

If there had been any sense of unfairness before, this made it right. I knew it had been a difficult situation for G.L. From their perspective it was conceivable that I could have been mixed up in the embezzlement. Completing the investigation first was the right judgment. But, what counted with me was that when I was cleared, they made real effort to make it right.

Even when something discourages you in life, you can’t tell how it’s going to turn out in the end. In fact, not getting that first promotion was the best thing that could have happened to me. I didn’t know it then, but the Job Corp was soon to close down, and the best work I could be doing to qualify for transfer was human relations work. I was encouraged by that incident to make the best of situations, even when they don’t seem right at the time.

After Nixon was elected, funding for most Job Corp centers vanished. Students, parents, and staff started a writing campaign to try to save our center, but it didn’t help. September, 1969, our Job Corp center closed and I was transferred to the human resources department at the headquarters for G.E. Motors (one of the Job Corp sponsoring agencies) in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. For the second time, I was blessed with a job I loved.

I want to see a day when African Americans are competing equally because they've had equal education, a day when they are achieving their economic goals without the handicap of unequal education and unequal opportunity.

And maybe when such a day comes, African Americans will also be liberated from the burden of paranoia we bear today. It's true. Black people do live with paranoia, and they have a right to be paranoid, really. In many instances they live thinking that everybody is against them, even if it isn't true. Minority paranoia comes from generations of discrimination and misunderstanding. I spent much of my career developing ways to break both the cycles of discrimination and paranoia.

Chapter 16: Human Resource Management

Getting to move from a job with G.L. to a job with G.E. after the Job Corp closed was great for me. In working with G.E. and Time/Warner at the Job Corp, I had come to respect these companies a great deal, and I was able to keep all my seniority and benefits in the transfer, but those weren't the only reasons I was glad to continue working for them. By staying within the G.E. "pool of employment", I didn't have to fill out another employment application. The application I'd filled out for G.L. only asked, "Have you been convicted of a felony since the age of 18," or something like that, so I didn't have to report my teenage history. (I actually did tell Jack Bengough about the incident, verbally, but it was not written down.)

The earlier state hospital job application had included a broader question like, "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" I left that line blank. After I'd been working at the hospital maybe nine months, they called me up to personnel. I knew by that time they liked me and that I was doing well with my job. But, the personnel manager sat me down, and I saw my application lying there on the table in front of me.

"Did you forget to put something down?" he asked. "I think you forgot to put something down."

I looked at that application, sighed, and said, "Yeah, I did." I could see my whole life going down the tubes again, reliving the shame.

"Well, you better fill it in," he said. "We need a completed application." So I filled in the line and put my pen down.

"Thank you," he said. "You've been doing a good job. Keep it up. But don't leave things out of your application." And that was the end of it. But I never wanted to have to face another job application again—which gave me an even bigger incentive to stay within G.E.

In my years of HR (Human Relations) work, Jack Bengough, who first hired me at the Job Corp, and then further hired me into human relations work, proved to be a great mentor. Originally from Philadelphia, he had come out to help run the Job Corp Center and had been working at G.E. over 15 years by the time I was hired. Jack helped me understand how to be successful as a human relations manager.

One of my early HR assignments was to find a computer technician. I didn't know that much about computers, but my job was to screen people for department managers to interview. I interviewed one fellow, a real nerd as far as I was concerned, but I sent him out to the finance manager for an interview. It turned out that the finance manager liked him so much he not only offered him the job, he offered him a bigger salary than I was making.

I went back to Jack and said, “Gee, I don’t think that much of this guy.”

His response was, “Look, Sterling, let me tell you something. Think of the hiring managers as your customers. Your job is to satisfy them. You were able to do that in this instance, so now that hiring manager thinks you’re great. You brought him a person he liked. It doesn’t make any difference if *you* like him or not. The manager does, and that’s what counts.”

Jack knew what he was talking about. I learned the best way to help myself, in terms of career growth, was to sit and visit with managers so I could determine their likes and dislikes. Then when I was recruiting for that manager, I could do a much better job bringing in someone they could relate to. I appreciated Jack Bengough because he was so open, honest, and helpful in getting me into the mainstream. He was one of those folks who doesn’t fear sharing what he knows to help someone else.

In 1977, when I was 43, I got the Human Resource Manager job here at the Springfield GE plant. It was a good promotion, challenging—a dream job for me. I knew, of course, that there were some people who weren’t real happy to have me take the job, but one of my employees helped me a great deal with that. When people told her, “I don’t think Springfield’s ready for a black on a job like this,” she would say, “Well, G.E. is!” She saved me from going into situations blind by alerting me to those who didn’t share the pleasure of my promotion. That really kept me out of some traps because I knew where the land mines were. But very quickly I felt comfortable and well received by most people in my new position.

When I came to the Springfield G.E. plant, about forty to fifty of the one thousand employees were minorities. In my years here, I got that number up to ten percent. But the most important thing was that we got some blacks into professional positions, too. I believe I was G.E.’s first African American Human Resource Manager in a non-union facility in the South. In fact, I don’t know if there had ever been a black Human Resource Manager in any southern facility.

G.E.’s goal was to treat folks in their non-union facilities as well—or better than—employees in a union facility. They had taken a big gamble sending a black guy down to a non-union Ozarkian plant, one of their star facilities. I felt a big responsibility because of that. If I screwed up, I felt G.E. wouldn’t have a big incentive to try other blacks in prominent positions.

You have to give G.E. credit for a lot of initiative in working hard at minority recruitment early on. Even at the Ft. Wayne plant I had been working on job integration action plans. Affirmative action, during the 1969-72 era, helped get things going with the establishment of some laws. Someone may argue with my opinion, but I think G.E. led the whole Springfield community in terms of integrating the work force.

A couple years after coming to Springfield, G.E. sent me away to a training course for several weeks, and my roommate was an Australian. I knew about Australia’s history with apartheid, so the two of us sort of stiff-armed each other for a while. (Actually, the reason for apartheid in Australia wasn’t because of blacks, but because of Asians. They wanted people to come in and settle the land, but in the process they were afraid nearby Asians would overrun the country.) After a while, though, my roommate and I began to talk some. When we talked about apartheid, he said I was condemning him for something he obviously hadn’t had any part in. “Look at what you people have done to the Indian over here,” he said.

We did agree on the truth that reality was far different from television coverage. After watching American news, my roommate expected to find blacks and whites killing each other in the streets over here. He’d never dreamed he’d have a black man as a roommate. On television, you never see the good things people are doing, just the riots. Because you happen to see one magazine photo, or a thirty-second TV news clip, you better not generalize and say, “That’s the way people live over there.” I learned this over and over as I traveled and worked in later

years and experienced actually being in other countries.

Through the years, G.E. sent me to various other trainings, and I grew in skill until I was responsible for designing trainings. One of the things they asked me to do was create a minority awareness presentation. The main purpose of the seminar was to educate managers in how to “treat minorities as you would want to be treated.” These were sometimes tough seminars to present to managers who outranked me. But the company Vice President required them to attend and instructed me to say whatever was necessary to make improvements in attitudes.

In one seminar I used some unusual methods to effectively communicate the heart of minority work force issues. After everyone was in the room, and we were getting ready to start, I would ask for a volunteer from the room. “I need someone to help me,” I’d say. “I have all this audio visual stuff to do and refreshments need to be brought in. Rather than disturbing everyone, will someone offer to help me?”

Someone would always say, “Sure. I’ll be glad to help.”

Then I’d say, “There’s one thing more. It’s part of the rules. From now on, every time I want something from you, your name is Boy. I’ll say, ‘Boy, I want you to do this or that’. And if anybody else in the room needs water, paper, or anything, I want all of you to call, ‘Boy, come get this for me.’”

I turned back to the helper. “That’s your name from now on. You understand that, boy?” Mostly they would look at me and smile. Then I would immediately say, “Boy, go turn off those lights.” Later on it would be, “Boy, go get me a drink of water,” then other things.

The first time I did this, it worked better than I could have imagined. The guy actually stopped me at break time. “I’m tired of this -----!” he said angrily. “You can take this job and shove it!” He was towering over me and I thought he was actually going to hit me.

The class had just been dismissed for break, but I called out, “Just a minute. Just a minute. Don’t anyone go on break right now. This boy has just come and told me he doesn’t want this job. In fact, he’s threatening me. What should we do with him? What? Should I fire him?” Some thought I should.

Then we talked about what had happened and explored it together. “All of us were calling him ‘boy’, and that made him mad. He’d felt important for being chosen to help—until he heard how he was going to be addressed. Then he lost his temper with me, and threatened me. That’s grounds for firing him. I hear a lot of complaints about black people not doing this or not doing that. But sometimes it’s not them that’s the problem.” It can sometimes be the manager and co-workers provoking the irritation, changing eager workers into discouraged or angry ones.

Occasionally when I did the program, the person I selected would ham it up—act like Uncle Tom, stepping around, hustling. But we would still evaluate what had happened. “Would you hire this person,” I’d ask.

“Probably not,” they would answer. “Maybe for some jobs, but not for others because he was a clown. He wasn’t serious about the job.” Or they would say, “No, because he was a sappy Uncle Tom.”

Regardless of how the “boy” acted, I would point out, “You made him what he was. You made him angry, or you made him act the buffoon. That’s what *you* made him through your disregard for his dignity. Even if you call him “boy” politely, it’s still disregard. You’ll find that some employees aren’t going to take it. Some are going to argue with you. Some are going to fight you. Some are going to act silly to cover their embarrassment or anger. Some are just going to feel like they are nothing. They’ll let you break them.”

The question then became, “What should we have done differently? What should we have called him?” I stressed with them the importance of not calling any of their workers little pet names.

“Why don’t you call him by his name. If his name is John, call him John. If Peter, call him Peter. It’s pretty simple.” It’s amazing what difference just simple measures like this make.

“When you say, ‘Boy, do this, and, boy, do that’, it’s demoralizing to a person. And that’s what blacks have had to put up with for all these years. When you’re directing somebody, always use proper names for them.”

The seminar was usually very well received when I presented it. It had such a powerful effect on people that they wouldn’t tell the next incoming group what had happened. “Just wait and see,” they would say. Even for me it sometimes had a startling effect because I couldn’t predict what would happen.

Once, when I was making the presentation in Jonesboro, Arkansas, this guy spoke up. “But I have two John’s in my area. If I don’t call the one ‘Nigger John’, how am I going to tell him from the other John?” This guy didn’t appear to be ridiculing me. He actually seemed sincere. He apparently didn’t see ‘nigger’ as being insulting at all.

“What’s his last name,” I asked.

“Fisher.”

“Then call him John Fisher,” was my response. How can something so simple be so challenging to some folks?

Besides doing the seminar for G.E., I did similar awareness presentations for community groups. They would ask if I could do it free, and I was happy to. But at one fair I noticed other presenters being paid.

“Gee whiz. What’s going on here?” I asked. “You asked me to do this free, but you’re paying him a stipend or something? I’m here talking about equality. Aren’t you hearing it at all? What is it that a black man wants? If I do a job for you, I want to get paid just as much for it as the others. If they’re doing it free, ask me to do it free. But don’t ask me to do it free if you’re paying others. Don’t just tell me, ‘I give you high marks’, and walk away. Give me the marks, and give me the same money you are giving the others.” I believe it’s important to insist on such fairness or people are never going to get it.

Taking care of my family has been very satisfying. My kids never had to worry about whether they could afford college. They worked—but not because they had to. And we enjoy each other. So many families end up torn apart, fathers and mothers not even wanting their kids to come in the house, brothers and sisters not speaking to each other. I'm grateful our family is still strong and committed.

Chapter 17: Parenting

Along with my education and career development through the years, we were also growing a family. My oldest child, Deanne Marie was born the year after I started Iowa University, in 1958. My son, Sterling Robert Macer, Jr. was born in 1963 while I was at Iowa State University. Dawn Delores, my youngest daughter was born in 1967 during my Job Corp years. Our grand plan was to have children four years apart so we could help get them all through college. One would graduate, and another go in, another out, and another in, or so we thought. As it turned out, all of them wanted some extra education, so at one time we had all three in college.

School was easy for Deanne Marie, unlike me. Even if she didn't pay any attention in high school, she could still get a good grade. When she went to Indiana University, it was the same, so she partied a lot. After she graduated she worked in communications at KY3 for a while, then went to Tulane University law school and graduated cum laude. Today she's working in Houston, Texas, and she and my son-in-law have given us three grandchildren: Drake Alexander Sterling Hodge, Devon Marie, and Dominic Delores.

My son, Sterling, got his Bachelors of Fine Arts at SMSU, then went out to the University of San Diego on a fellowship to get his Master's degree. After SMS, he had originally wanted to go right into acting, but then he was offered a fellowship. When he came to me and asked if I would support him for a year while he made a go of acting, I said, "No". "But if you take this fellowship and get your Masters, then, I'll help you get started." I knew a Master's would qualify him to teach if the acting didn't work out.

Sterling decided to take the fellowship and before he had even completed his last course, he was cast as Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* at a Dallas theater. I had never fully understood what the fighting was all about between the Capulet and the Montague families until watching a black guy as Romeo and a Mexican girl as Juliet. It was very well done. Sterling still lives in California and has gone on to be successful in acting and directing.

Our youngest daughter, Dawn, was not as interested in school as the first two. I blame myself for not being as alert to her studies as I had been with Deanne and Sterling. By the time Dawn was in high school, I was working long hours, determined not to fail on my new job for lack of effort. So, while I had monitored my first two kids more closely in school and talked with them, there was less time for Dawn—and much of that I spent just telling her she wasn't getting the grades she should be getting.

After high school years, Dawn wanted to go on to college. She thought she would make up for all the lost years and everything would fall into place. But it proved to be a lot harder than that for her, without the right preparation. After a while, she decided she'd rather go to cosmetology school, but that didn't prove to be satisfying, either. When she decided to do something else, I told her, "We won't spend any more money until you really make up your mind. It's just a waste."

Oddly enough that kind of changed our relationship for the good. She came to me one day and said, "Dad,

you're right," and I told her how wrong I had been for not paying more attention to her needs earlier. I do regret that mistake, but now we have a close relationship and I enjoy Dawn enormously. Several years ago she started working in a doctor's office and liked it so well she finished a doctor's assistant training course. Recently she decided to go further with her nursing education. I think she has found what she truly wants to be—and I'm proud of her for working it all out.

You know, I have prayed one prayer for all my life: that I would live long enough to see my kids out of school and to see them set professionally. I was beginning to think the schooling was over with, but now my daughter calls and says, "I'm going to nursing school." I'm happy about that. I say, "Thank you, God" for that.

Being a parent is a tough job, and you're going to make mistakes—but you do other things right. I remember Sterling telling me one time, "Dad, do you know why I never got into any big trouble growing up? Every time something came up, I would think about coming home to face you."

When we first moved to Ft. Wayne, and Sterling was in the second or third grade, he took a package of gum from a drugstore we were in. When we got home I saw he had his hand in his pocket, and I found this gum. So I called up the storeowner and said, "I'm bringing my son in because he took a package of gum from your store." All the way back to the store, I told Sterling about what can happen to you when you steal, and on and on. Then the store owner was so rough on him that, after a while, even I thought, "Gee, it was just a package of gum!" But it helped. It makes a difference when you take action instead of just saying, "Don't do that again."

Apparently that lesson was successful because when he got older, Sterling went to a K-Mart store with some neighborhood kids. Even though the other two kids were stealing candy, Sterling wouldn't do it. When they were caught, the store called all the parents, including me. But when I went down, they told me, "No, he wasn't stealing anything. It was these other two who were. He was just with them."

There's nothing quite as big in this life, I think, as parenting or helping young people. I honestly enjoy kids, and that's why I enjoyed the Job Corp so much, too. I have never seen myself having a mission in life other than to do the right thing for my children and other young people who come into my life. I love burning a few good memories into young minds, minds that might already have a lot of bad memories. Today I mentor a ten-year-old boy and I want to help make a difference in his life. I've been lucky to have a good relationship with a lot of young people I've come into contact with, mostly through church and work.

It bothers me to see some people prejudice their kids from the very beginning. I know parents are afraid of their kids getting too friendly because of kooks, but sometimes a little white kid will wave at me, and I'll wave back, and then a parent will grab their kid back and look the other way. Whether any words are used or not, that kid is being taught something. You see black mothers do the same thing. But then sometimes you see a white kid in a car staring at you, and you wave to them, and they wave back and smile, so you figure their parents are pretty friendly, too. I don't think kids are born with prejudice. They are taught it. In the same way we pass along our religion and our lifestyles, we pass along our prejudices.

You know, they didn't use to make black dolls. You couldn't buy a black doll years ago anyplace. We had to buy our black girls white dolls. Now you go into toy stores and see white kids picking up black dolls, black kids picking up white dolls. That gives me a pretty heartwarming feeling. It maybe doesn't seem like much to some people, but it feels significant to me. There's been some real progress made. I'm pretty optimistic about what this world can be one day.

When someone asks, “How much time do you spend thinking about how far you’ve come in life?”—I say “about the snap of a finger.” If you start worrying about patting yourself on the back, “Look how far I’ve come. Look how great I am,” you really don’t have time to get any place else. And the people you’re talking to won’t think you’re very great, either.

If you’re a halfback and you’re running down the field and you’ve got an opening between the guard and the tackle, you better start worrying about getting through that opening and not about what’s in back of you—not about what you’ve already passed. Because if you look back, you’re gonna to get run over. You can also feel sorry for yourself a lot if you keep looking back.

Chapter 17: Reflections

Sometimes people want you to look back to try to identify the lowest point in your life. That can be difficult—partly because low points are relative to where you are in life. Low point: when I was a kid and my father died. Low point: when I was a teenager standing before a juvenile judge. Low point: finding out my wife’s MS will prevent her from being able to do the traveling we looked forward to. (She has dealt with that so well, though.)

But when I look back at all the low points, I have to see some sort of purpose, as well, in all of them. My father’s dying had a part in making me who I am today. It’s a tricky thing to say you’d like to relive some part of your life—make some mistakes right. Because everything you’ve done has gone into making you who you are. If you like things about your life now, about your kids, your marriage, you better be glad for everything that has happened, because it all contributed to where you are.

I’ve known some people who have regretted their marriages, but if you love your kids, you better be glad you married the person you did. Otherwise you wouldn’t have the same kids. You have to learn to live with all that has happened. The only way you can learn to like yourself truly is to embrace your low points as part of who you are. My mother taught me that you have to work at liking yourself, even with all the low points. So, I don’t have any low points that still bring me despair.

Just like it’s difficult to choose one lowest point in life, it’s just as difficult to choose one highest point. Again, it’s all relative to the time of life you happen to be living at that moment. If I could identify “*The Highest Point*” of my life, I wouldn’t have incentive to search further. If I thought I had already experienced my highest point, what excitement is left? I don’t think you can identify just one high spot and be a healthy person. Even if you become President, you have to compartmentalize that and go on to the next phase of your life, looking for new opportunities. You have to keep looking to create new “high points”. I think Jimmy Carter would agree with me.

I now know why most of the militant black people of the early sixties (who left the United States) came back. It's apparent that Africa has its problems, too. We have problems in our country, for sure, but we do have laws intended to solve them. Even if those laws aren't sufficient, or we don't like some of the laws very well, they give us some kind of recourse.

With enough pushing at the law (and we can push at the law without being openly killed in our country,) we can get things accomplished. Maybe not as fast as we want, or all that we want, but compared to other countries, we're making progress. That's what makes our country great.

Chapter 19: Travels

Getting to travel has been a major high point since I retired from G.E. in August, 1995. I hadn't really planned to retire then, but in February of that year my mother died at the age of 95. It didn't actually depress me, but a close death like that gives you a different perspective on life. I thought about all the other things there were to do. I was able to retire when I wanted to, and one of my life long dreams was to travel. So, I made the decision.

First I went out to California, then I went to Africa again. I had been there the first time in 1992. Africa is so fascinating, so large, you can't see much of it in one trip. The first time I had gone as part of a tour, and though I stayed about a month I only got to see three countries on the west coast, Nigeria, Togo, and the Ivory Coast. I was naive enough on that first trip to think I might go out and find a few of my relatives. When I got there and found 200 million black people, that pretty much cured the notion.

Once our tour got to Africa, optional side trips were available. I took one side trip with another man on the tour—Willie (from Chicago). It was a good idea to buddy together for security. Traveling alone isn't too good an idea in a foreign country. We went, together, to Togo and the Ivory Coast for a week or so, touring cities, Abijan and others.

But one time Willie almost got us into trouble. He had a camcorder with him and would take pictures without getting permission. The people there didn't like that. Someone would be carrying something on his or her head, and tourists would start filming them. Someone would be carrying a baby differently than they do over here, and tourists would crowd in for pictures. If you think about it, you wouldn't do that in this country. It's rude.

Anyway, we were to fly back to Legos to rejoin our original group at the Sheraton the evening before our New York departure date. But when we landed in Legos, the airport police, strutting around with guns at their sides, asked to see our visa and passport. Unfortunately, our tour guide hadn't gotten us a visa for that one night's reentry into Nigeria. We explained we were leaving for the United States at midnight the following evening and would only be in Legos overnight. But that didn't make any difference.

“You have no visa,” they repeated over and over, thick with accent. “You cannot go back to your hotel. We have to keep you in the guest hotel.”

I thought, “Well, that's not so bad. It's probably cheaper than the Sheraton we were going back to.

“We'll show you the guest hotel,” they said, and they took us to this big room, bars around it, with filthy floor mats, about two inches thick, jammed against each other. Each mat had a grapefruit can standing at its head for a

toilet. It stank worse in there than any outhouse. The people inside were listless and it was obvious everything had been taken away from them.

“We don’t want to stay here,” we said to the guards.

“But that’s the only place we can put you,” they insisted.

“We can sit up in the airport tonight,” we offered eagerly.

“No, you can’t do that. You have no visa.”

“Well, what can we do?”

“Do you have three-hundred dollars?” they asked.

“Oh, yes!” we said, and we counted out some nira, their money. Their nira was only worth about twelve cents compared to our dollar. It was ridiculous how many nira it took to buy anything.

“No, no, no, no, no! Dollars!” they exclaimed. They wanted \$300.00 American dollars for each of us. They didn’t want anything to do with their own money. It was going down in value even as we spoke.

Well, three hundred dollars apiece was a lot of money and we didn’t want to pay that much. Besides, we didn’t want to have to take out our American money in front of them, where they could see how much we had. So we told them we didn’t have any American dollars on us.

“We left our American money back at the hotel,” we said. “If you let us go back to the hotel, we’ll get the money and bring it back to you.” We didn’t really intend to do that, but we wanted to get out of there. So this went on and on for hours and hours, into the night.

By about midnight, we were really tired, and the sweat was just rolling off of us. It was the sweating that gave me an idea. I started slumping down, and pretty soon I bowed my head, and pretended that I was really ill.

“Sweet, sweet,” I mumbled over and over. Willie caught on to what I was doing.

“My friend’s a diabetic and he’s real sick. He needs some sugar! Something sweet.”

Before long, they got really concerned and thought they better help me. They put their hands out for money. I thrust a big wad of nira at them, and they ran down and got a roll of mints, something like LifeSavers™. When they brought it back, they tried to give me back my change, but I paid no attention. I was panting as they tried to unwrap the mints for me. Finally, I just grabbed them away, broke the roll open, and started eating, paper and all.

Somewhere I had read about an international law that if you get sick in a foreign country and you’re an American citizen, the government has to report it to the American embassy. They didn’t want to get the embassy involved with this, I was sure. So, we were finally able to convince them to let us go back to the hotel, with the promise that we would bring them money the next day. They asked us to leave our passports for security, but we knew better than that. Handing passports over is an invitation for them to be stolen and falsified for other people.

We told them, “No. Our passports belong to the United States and we’ll get in big trouble if we leave them.”

It was 1:30 in the morning before they finally put us in a cab. The cab driver charged us about triple for that ride, but we paid. Willie wanted to argue about it, but I didn’t. Though it was 3:30 a.m. when we pulled into the

Sheraton, by 9:30 the next morning, we were standing in the American Embassy explaining our situation. They treated us nice and gave us a place to wait through the day. Then at 6:00 that evening three of them took us back to the airport. Our flight at midnight had been cancelled, just as the embassy people had said it would be. By canceling the flight, the airport police knew we would have to report to the office to reschedule. We wouldn't be able to slip past them.

It was evident that the embassy staff had a lot of experience with situations like ours. They talked very politely to the police and explained that we should have, indeed, had visas, but we hadn't known any better. After a lot of ingratiating talk about "the ignorant tourists", they finally got us on the plane without paying the six hundred dollars. It was quite an experience, but if I had it to do over again now, I would have just paid them the three hundred dollars. I also learned that just because I was black didn't make me a "brother" over there. In fact, I felt a lot more kinship with white Willie than those African "brothers". Just goes to show you that color isn't what dictates friendship and trust.

When I went back to Africa on my second trip I went to the other side of the continent, east Kenya. It was much more tourist friendly and astonishingly beautiful. But I was struck by the violent ethnic fights between villages, even though they're all black. Just looking at the people, I couldn't tell the difference between tribes, but they could just glance at each other and say, "That person is from such and such a tribe."

Some tribes were very rich, and others very poor. One particularly wealthy tribe in the Crescent Valley owned vast tracks of fertile land where they raised coffee, tea, and cattle. You could stand on the top ridges and look down over their valley and see how beautiful and well kept it was. I asked one cab driver, "How do you solve this problem of so much wealth for some and such poverty for others? How do you propose to solve the problems between tribes?"

"What we need to do is kill some of them," the cab driver answered, very seriously. "They out vote us in every election, so we need to kill them." And that's a prevalent philosophy among some.

At first I personalized the fact that it was black people who were killing each other over greed. But then I remembered it's not just the blacks doing such things. It's happening all over the world among selfish people, like in the Baltics. The Chinese, the Serbs, and the Irish all kill each other over selfish issues, too. And, no matter where it is, it's bad.

My third trip was to South Africa, the most developed African country. There are still some supremacist-type whites to be seen, but the majority of the Caucasians I saw were working very hard to get rid of leftover apartheid. I couldn't believe how much had been achieved in such a short time. Like my Australian friend, I had expected gunfights in the street.

From media reports I had an image of Suetto as some little ghetto village. It actually has several million people living in it and there are some very nice homes. But right next door to some of those beautiful places, there are tin roof huts with goats in the dirt yard. The people have to live certain places, according to their skin color. You can't buy your way out. You can't have a social life that gets you out of the ghetto. (Interestingly enough, though, the Japanese have been declared white over there because of all their money.)

Going with a college friend to the 2000 Summer Olympics in Australia was an entirely different kind of trip—probably the most enjoyable. Because the Olympic forums were all pretty close to each other, we got to see a wide variety of events—track and field, boxing, basketball, wrestling, and tennis. Though I hadn't been much interested in tennis before, there are just certain athletes you see, and you know they're doing something exceptional. That's the way it was with the Williams sisters.

The next Olympics are in Greece, and I'd like to go, but the ones I really want to go to are the ones after that, in

China . . . because that'll mean I get to live a lot longer!

I had been asked by a lot of my black friends in Ft. Wayne if I was sure I wanted to come to Springfield. “Are you sure you want to go there?” Springfield wasn’t the average place an African American would elect to live. My father in law said, “You don’t want to move to Springfield! Those people are bigoted. They just got finished hanging some black men down there.

It wasn’t until after I arrived here that I learned the lynching had been at the turn of the century. Those kinds of memories go through the black community. Springfield changed forever because of that event, and no matter what else Springfield ever does, that story will live. It’s part of history, and part of the shame.

Chapter 20: Springfield

My oldest daughter, Deanne, never actually lived here in Springfield since she was leaving for college during that transition. But we were concerned about the quality of education our other two children would get in Springfield. Sterling was in the eighth grade, and started at Cherokee. He wasn’t the only black student, but he was one of very few. Having always been in an integrated school, he managed okay.

Soon after we moved, Sterling came home one day and said, “There’s a teacher who may want to talk to you, Dad.”

I said, “Well, sure. Just tell him to let me know when. What’s this all about?”

“He wants to talk to you about me making too much noise in the hallway, talking too much, I guess.” Some weeks later, I got a call at work from this teacher.

“Mr. Macer, I’d like to talk to you. When can you come over?”

“I can come right now,” I said. I told my secretary I would return soon..

He was a big, tall man and the first thing he did was ask me to sit down, so I sat down. But he continued to stand—right over top of me. “What’s the problem?” I asked

“Well, your son didn’t get all his projects done. He makes noise in the hallway and doesn’t stop talking when he comes into class.”

“Now, this is shop class, right?” I asked. “Can I see his grades?”

He brought the grade book out. “This project wasn’t done, and this project wasn’t done,” he pointed out. But I could see there were a lot of other kids who hadn’t completed the same projects. “He just got a B here, a C here. He’s not getting enough out of class, and this talking has to stop.” He continued on. “And I told your son I was going to talk to you and I’ve been waiting for a call.”

“He didn’t tell me I was to call you,” I responded. “I was under the impression that you were going to set up a meeting and send a note home. But I’ve got some things I’d like to talk to you about, too. First of all, sit down

so we can talk together.” I think my not being intimidated surprised him, and he sat down.

“I have to tell you, the talking will stop. I’ll be speaking to my son about that. But I wanted to talk to you about the first day he came to school here. He told me you gave him a book to read in front of the shop class, and he had to read several pages out loud. He thought you were trying to test him to see if he was one of those ghetto kids who couldn’t read. As it turns out, reading is one of Sterling’s best subjects—but I thought your action was tragic. What if you had brought some new kid in and stood him up in front of the class and he couldn’t read? You could have destroyed him then and there.”

I wasn’t finished. “You also told my son he had to set an example because he was the only black kid in the class. He doesn’t have to set any example because he’s black. He has to set an example, if he wants to, just because he’s a student.” I finished with a question: “And, by the way, have you called other parents to come in, because I see a lot of students haven’t finished those same projects?” He said he hadn’t seen any other parents yet.

“Have you called any of them to set up appointments?” No, he hadn’t even called anyone besides me.

“Then how did you come to select me to be the first?” I asked. By that point he was getting uncomfortable. Not surprisingly, I never heard from him again.

My youngest daughter was in the fourth grade when we moved here, and things weren’t quite as easy for her as they were for Sterling. Generally, it seems to be more difficult in school for minority girls than guys. For one thing, the dating thing is more awkward for girls. Guys have sports to fall back on. A black athlete might become very popular and make lots of friends in a white school. But it’s not going to happen that a black girl becomes the most popular girl in high school when it’s almost all white.

Even with the difficulties, I wouldn’t have changed where my kids went to school. Some people might think I should have found a more “black” area to bring my kids to. But I don’t think it’s necessarily a disadvantage to be in minority situations. You learn early to develop good communication skills and to interact with all sorts of people—the same kinds of people you’re going to have to do business with later. If you haven’t grown up doing that, it’s much tougher adapting and growing later in life.

Because my kids went to the schools they went to, they grew up learning not to be intimidated; they never had a fear of dealing with anybody. (In fact, my daughters were pretty good *being* intimidators sometimes.) I think it’s the whites that only go to school with whites, and the blacks that only go to school with blacks, who come up with fear.

One of the opportunities I had when we moved here was serving on various education panels. Those in leadership were trying to upgrade minority awareness and get more on board with what was happening in the rest of the United States. Thanks in part to this deliberate attentiveness, notable, positive changes have been made in our schools.

Springfield has worked hard to be progressive. When I first came to work here, the community very nearly overworked me. Every committee in town, it seemed, wanted a black professional. The main difficulty was trying to meet all the opportunities, and still have enough time at home. I believed the committee work was worthy, and it was important to me to be involved in helping encourage positive change through whatever insights I could offer.

Various churches wanted me to be involved in their programs, too. I was asked by several white church friends to become a member of their church. One of my neighbors at the time was a minister, and invited me to his church. I told him I appreciated it, “but if I have any talent, anything to offer personally, I think I need to be offering it, at this time, to the young people in black churches.” So, I joined Washington Avenue Baptist Church.

Since our church's recent relocation, several more white families have begun to attend, and I think that's great.

In one odd way, integration can sometimes hurt some blacks, though. I think if I were a black minister, it would be easy to feel jeopardized if integration went too far in churches. Not too many interracial churches, still predominantly white, would seek out a black pastor over a white one. The same thing happened to black teachers when desegregation started. The only places black teachers could get jobs was in all black schools, so when there no longer were all black schools, they had a hard time competing for jobs in the integrated schools.

If you owned a theater in a minority area, you could easily fill your theater when yours was the only place blacks could go. But when the Jim Crow rules were annulled and blacks could go lots of places—some of the black theaters went out of business. It's just one of those awkward things that happens during the integration process. It takes a long time to finally work through to a point of even exchange, a point when black professionals and business owners regain strength and are on the same footing with whites.

When I came here to Springfield, I looked for a professional black peer. On occasions I wanted feedback from someone dealing with similar situations. But I actually couldn't find any peers with jobs equal to or comparable to the one I had. I was pretty stunned by that because I knew a lot of people more technically capable than I was—who should have risen higher than me in business.

These days, black professionals are easier to find in Springfield. Having an African American Deputy Director of the school system is real indication of change. What a wonderful message to send kids. "Look what you can be!" That's the way kids grow strong and well—looking at people who've accomplished things, finding people they can identify with. "If somebody else can do so much, so can I."

Fifteen years ago, if you'd asked me where I'd be after retirement, I would have told you it would be someplace other than Springfield. I planned to leave here. Now I see Springfield as a great place to live, and I don't plan to leave. It's gotten that much better in the last fifteen years. There's still work to be done, but there's not the old resistance to good things. Springfield is looking for new ideas, new ways to do things. *The Ethnic Life Stories Project* is one fine example of that outreach.

It's not easy to convince some black people that there are friendly white faces—because of the history of treatment they've received. I could easily have decided all policemen were bigoted and cruel after my arrest in Des Moines. But those officers weren't the whole sum of the nation's police force. So I've had to take lessons myself in fighting paranoia.

You have to work hard at trying to see things accurately and fairly, one event at a time. If you don't, you will become narrow and closed to hope and light when it is there waiting. You'll never be able to help turn ethnic strife into ethnic celebration. You'll be too busy hiding and hating.

Chapter 21: Choices

Some of the problems between whites and minorities are just deadlocked cycles that go on and on. A black will reach out to a white, and get hurt—maybe get their hand slapped in a bad experience. Then, in another place and time, a white will reach out to them. Maybe this white has heard about some injustice or discrimination and they want to help make it right. But the black person slaps him away, because he remembers his first bad experience. Then the white person decides every black person is hostile. So the next time a black person approaches him, he turns his back, and walks away. On and on it goes.

As our country learns to embrace diversity instead of fear it, we'll have more and more freedom to share the good things we can offer each other. Some folks fear that too much integration will end up robbing black people of their cultural identity. If there are some real cultural differences people don't want to lose, there's nothing wrong with holding on to those. But when whites talk about "preserving cultural differences", I tend to think it's just a ploy to keep black people in check.

If a Greek named Hassapopolas wants to shorten his name to Hass to Americanize it, there's nothing wrong with that. Some Germans don't talk about their German heritage, and that seems to be okay. But somehow whites like to point out how important it is for blacks to keep their "blackness." The main thing is, people should be free to make their own choices. Every person should be able to make their own decision about how "ethnic" they do or don't want to be. The decision and limitations should not be *imposed* on them. Some are very strong on ethnic pride; others would rather be part of a mainstream. Maybe some things are lost when races blend, but other things are gained.

One of the problems in Mason City was that there were a lot more black guys than girls in my circle. After we got a phone, one white girl used to call me all the time. (Before that we had to run down to the grocery store on the corner, like lots of folks, to use the phone.) After this girl kept calling me for a while, my mother asked, "How serious is this, with that girl calling all the time?" Marriage wasn't on my mind at all at that time, but she talked to me very seriously. "Marriage is very difficult. You're going to get married one of these days, and you should think about that very carefully. It's difficult enough when you have two people of one color."

My mother was right about marriage being difficult even in the best of circumstances. I don't care how happy your marriage is, there are still some difficulties that come up, and I think it probably *would* be harder if it's interracial. But there's a difference in my mother giving me advice and white people trying to figure out if it's "right" or "wrong" for blacks to marry whites. It wasn't black men who started interracial relationships, you know.

How do you think all these little light-complexioned black kids came along during slavery time? What happened was the master said, "Come on down here." You don't think the slave went up there to ask, do you? So the

subject can be very emotional. I chose to marry a black person and so did all my kids—but not because we thought it would be *wrong* to make other choices. I would have accepted a white son-in-law or daughter-in-law, and my children know it. Every person should make his own choice.

People ask me, “So how do you think we should treat each other?” There’s worry about how to “act natural” around blacks, or whites, whichever. The answer isn’t complicated. To welcome someone, no matter what color, just treat them the same as you do everybody else. If you’re used to bringing cookies to everybody who moves into your neighborhood, saying, “Hi. I’m Sterling Macer and my wife baked these cookies for you,” then do it for them. If there are certain neighborhood rules, tell them about the rules just like everybody else. Don’t be afraid to say, “We all like to keep our porch lights on at such and such a time.” If that’s the neighborhood practice, ask them to do it to. They may say no, but a white might say no, too. It takes attentiveness if you want to learn to treat people the same, just as we sometimes have to be conscious, as parents, of treating our children the same. But it becomes natural the more you do it.

And it’s really in these simple ways that we make a difference in overcoming fears and barriers. When it snowed here, I got out and was trying to shovel my drive off. The young couple across the street saw me and came over to shovel it for me. I thought that was great. They treated me just like any other old man. They could have fretted about whether or not they should do it since I’m black. “Maybe he’ll think we’re being patronizing because he’s black,” they might have thought, letting that prevent them from helping. Or maybe they might have been afraid because they never talked with a black man before. They could have dreamed up all kinds of reasons, based on my blackness, for not coming over. But in the end, they just did the common courtesy thing they’d do for anybody else. I would have done it for them if the situation were reversed.

On the other hand, if you don’t fraternize with your neighbors, then don’t do it just because a black person moves in, either. If you’re mean, just be your old mean self to everybody, all your neighbors—including the black, Hispanic, or whatever. (Preferably, though, you can be your old nice self to everybody.) Just don’t do anything *because of* color, either good or bad.

If I die tomorrow, someone would have to say, “He accomplished what he set out to do.” There are more corners I want to see, hope to see. There are more high points to find. More to learn and love. But nothing of the past is left undone.

I wanted to overcome my mistakes. I wanted to hear my mother say, “Your father would have been proud of you,” and believe it. I wanted a wonderful wife and wonderful friends. I wanted to be able to make a difference through my own career. I wanted my kids to have a chance for an education, an opportunity to start good careers. I wanted to live in a comfortable, nice home. I wanted to travel. I wanted to see our country make good changes for the African American—for everyone.

I’ve seen all these things come true.

Chapter 22: These Things I’m Learning

I think one of the great secrets to aging well is staying involved in things young people are interested in, without competing against them. I’ve learned not to be intimidated by the energy, intelligence, and spontaneity of young people. If I don’t understand something about computers, I ask them. Instead of ridiculing me for that, I’ve discovered that they get a kick out of teaching me how to catch on.

Why belabor the fact that you don’t like the music of other generations, that you can’t understand rap words, that they dress differently than you? Focusing, instead, on the joys and commonalities of all generations (and ethnic groups) opens a door that brings color and energy to your own life.

As my life has unfolded, I’ve discovered a bit more about which pursuits are worth the effort, and which ones aren’t. One worthy pursuit is “learning to learn”—from every situation, every person, every job. Learning, like everything else worthy in life, requires effort, continual and genuine. It is a discipline that requires your active participation—you can choose not to learn from experiences and people, or you can choose to find truth and positive growth in any circumstance.

Another secret ingredient in aging well is good humor. The same people who now think I’m old and peculiar, will, in twenty years or so, be my age, too. And then they will have a new appreciation for how adaptive senior adults really are—handling waves of change with a rather astonishing amount of grace. I’ve also learned not to be intimidated by people who are more skillful, more youthful, and more intelligent than I. God has given everyone gifts of his or her own. The only fruitful way to spend life is finding and enjoying the gifts we have within us, rather than envying what others have.

I’ve learned that my way isn’t always the only way to do things. There’s more than one way to do the same job. In the same vein, I’ve learned to explore other ways of doing things, make room in my life for other approaches to ideas and tasks. I even like to try foods that are prepared differently than my usual meals. I may not like them all, but trying them increases my experience.

I’m learning to enjoy whatever I’m doing, wherever I am. When I was just a kid peddling papers on the street, I thought that was the greatest fun. I try to surround myself with positive people who are enjoying life. I’ve come to see that I’m going to get wherever I want to go faster when I surround myself with positive people, people who also have goals. If I were alone on Earth, my life wouldn’t be happy. So, I try to enjoy the gift of people.

Learning to enjoy whatever resources I have access to at any time has taught me contentment. People are one of

those resources, as well as nature, the ability to learn, and the ability to have a relationship with God. The only way to make sense of this life is to believe in a power bigger than you. In my life, I have come to know that Supreme Being as Jesus Christ. His sacrifice and provision has under-girded all of my life. He provides something other than myself to rest upon, to trust.

I've also learned that having expectation of good things to come is part of aging well. Five years from now I hope I will have just come back from the Olympics in Greece. I will be looking forward to every moment with my children and grandchildren. (I may have opportunity to meet and love even more grandchildren.) I want to still be involved in limited consultation work in the Human Resource field. I want to be looking for new adventures.

And five years from now, I want to be continuing to gain the strength to be steady, honest, and unintimidated in my response to all of life's situations, with every person I meet.

When I was in my mid-forties I went back to Mason City for a reunion. We were gathered at my cousins' house (where, as kids, we had stashed our junking treasures among the apple trees). One of the guys I had gotten into trouble with so many years before had lived next door to my cousins. I asked about him and was told he still lived there, so I went over to see him.

"Well, Sterling, how you doing?" he asked.

He was still a "wise guy", bragging about getting by cheaply, living in his parent's garage, and he asked me about how I'd gotten to be so successful. He took me over to his garage, where, inside, he lifted up his mattress, drew out a bag and unzipped it. I watched as he went through the ritual of shaking out some white powder on a glass plate, chopping it rhythmically with a razor blade, then dividing it in half, and half again. He snuffed two of the little piles up his nose, then shoved the rest of it over to me.

"No, man," I said. "I don't do that anymore. I quit." In that moment, I allowed the nature of the guy I was with, and the uncomfortable situation, to dictate my response—rather than simple truth. I didn't want to embarrass the guy I was with; I didn't want to embarrass myself. So I let embarrassment—awkwardness, intimidation—drain my courage to be honest: I'd never used cocaine and had no desire to begin. Fortunately, I wasn't intimidated enough to do *what I didn't want to*, but I was intimidated enough not to do *what I wanted to*: tell him "You're nuts man. I thought you'd grown out of this kind of stuff." I wimped out.

I've thought about that incident through the years, and the way I wilted—even though I was a well-established, independent adult who had weathered many difficult situations, failures, and achievements. How tough must it be, then, for young, impressionable kids to resist the overwhelming power of intimidation? How difficult is it for teenagers to decline the strong urge to be accepted by anyone and everyone?

At age forty-five I still had a lot of growing to do. If I were in that little garage next week, with my old acquaintance, I hope I could now say, without the hot prickles of insecurity, with a steady, honest gaze, "No, I've never used cocaine and I never want to." But, even if I've come far enough to do that, I still have a lot more yet to learn. I always will. Maybe a secret to aging well is in knowing there is still work to be done—still growth and maturing to be achieved.

Maybe the greatest secret of all is in having a yearning and hunger for that possibility.



Macer brothers and sons



Father, Aaron Macer



Family holiday

Mother and church elders.



Sterling Macer, world traveler.



Brother Morris, back row, center, with the chorus of brothers and cousins he organized after his years in the Navy.



Springfield, MO
2001