

Friday Memory - Nantucket African Meeting House vandalized

This past weekend the Nantucket African Meeting House, which is now owned by the Museum of African American History in Boston, was vandalized. Spray painted on the front of the modest building, which appears to be about the same size as our upcoming Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum, were the words **Nigger Leave**. Adding another layer to this ugliness was the drawing of a phallic symbol.

Maybe this was the work of teens or maybe not, who knows. Perhaps an investigation will reveal the culprit, or culprits, so Charity-Grace Mofsen, the Manager of the African Meeting House, will have the opportunity to “teach them something because I feel that whoever has done this, they are missing something.” Whatever hate they have, whatever it’s based in, there is no place for it here.”

I asked Elaine if she could recall the first time she was called a nigger and without missing a beat answered, 1967. She said she was in her first week of Junior High School going into the 7th grade and remembered it all like it was yesterday. She further told me she knew she had to immediately deal with the person and did just that! While listening to Elaine, I tried to remember my first time because like every Black person I know; I too have gone through this rite of passage.

I then decided to make a random call to another person of color and spoke to my cousin, Bonnie, who is six years younger than me and posed the same question. Again, without hesitation, she told me she was five years old and proceeded to tell me her story as if it just happened hours ago.

While playing with a friend outside her apartment complex, Bonnie said her playmate invited her to have lunch before they were to walk together to afternoon Kindergarten. After they entered the apartment, her playmate disappeared into a bedroom to tell her mother a friend was over for lunch. A few minutes later, her friend tearfully reappeared to tell Bonnie she had to leave because her mother told her that “no niggers were allowed in the house.”

So why are we telling you these stories? Because after reading about the assault on the Nantucket African Meeting House, Elaine and I knew we had to talk about this in our Friday Memory. One thing we knew for sure, however, is that if we did write about these incidents and chose to eliminate the word nigger, our discussion would automatically become less authentic.

As hard as this may be, we believe that in order to have a meaningful discussion about race and bigotry the whole story must be told despite its ugliness and without sanitization. Yes, we could have chosen to allude to the word with a series of dashes but truthfully which audience does it cause to be more uncomfortable?

Folks, this is a prime example of why our work remains urgent-- even in 2018. The work of the Nantucket African Meeting House, as will be the upcoming Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum, not only provide the service as memory keepers but also as facilitators ready to open up difficult conversations of how our past affects the present. We ask you to think about how we continue to move forward by working through uncomfortable conversations and why certain words may evoke feelings of anger, disappointment and exasperation in some and guilt, shame and remorse in others. This is precisely why we have formed the Sankofa Project which is a partnership with the William Trent House, The Grounds For Sculpture and 1804 Consultants to offer symposiums that arm our participants with tools to discuss the most difficult topics in African American history and present day experiences.

We commend the board of the Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum for sending a letter of solidarity along with a donation to the Nantucket African Meeting House. We were particularly encouraged with SSAAM's decision to post a link to the article on the website accompanied with a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King where he stated, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

So Elaine and I urge you to not be afraid to talk about the "hard stuff" and to remember that we will continue to meet you where you are.