



Point of Inflection: Childhood

Though my life has spanned nearly six decades, it didn't start in the best of places. My mom frequently told me as a child that I had been an "accident." She didn't always offer any mitigation to her obvious displeasure, but even if she had it was clear via her actions that her unwavering view was that I had ruined her life. I had been an unplanned birth owing to Catholic opposition to using birth control, and my father's apparent lack of "rhythm"; one of the last poor slob born into the generation known as the "Baby Boomer Generation." I was born about half an hour outside of Los Angeles, in a part of the San Gabriel Valley where gang-related murders in the 1960s rivaled the number of homicides in cities like New York, Detroit, and Los Angeles itself.

I grew up in a community that was immersed in spoken and unspoken "Catholic values." I knew how to feel both "worthless" and "guilty" about everything I did by the time I "made First Communion." My mom also frequently sent me to church with our well-meaning Baptist neighbors where the head of the household was a Baptist minister. So, in addition to all the other insane "baggage" I inherited from Catholicism, I also was indoctrinated to the "fear of everything" that was an integral part of the Baptist religion's "Rapture-loving" culture. I was "left behind" by any sanity early on in my life.

Most of the residents of La Puente California, the city where I grew up, were either first or second-generation immigrants from Mexico and Central America. At that point in the 1960s there were still many Anglos living in the area as well. They weren't in the majority, but Fox News hadn't yet evolved into the "Fair and Balanced" beast it is now, so relations between Anglos and Latinos hadn't completely soured yet. Most of the Latinos fell into the "lower middle class" strata, living in the smaller and less well-maintained homes, with most of the Anglos living in slightly nicer homes on the edge of the Latino communities.

My home life was horrible. My oldest brother had been drafted into the Vietnam war mid-decade, and my sister was married and gone before I was ten. I was an outcast in school, and I had unpopular and unorthodox ideas even as a child. I petitioned my teacher in order to stop being required to pledge my allegiance to the American flag every morning; and I was ultimately granted leave to abstain from that task





after explaining my reasoning in an essay for the school's principal. I also arranged an elementary school "protest" against the licensing of nuclear power plants in California. Ironically, I rarely completed any homework which was assigned to me on a regular basis. I was only interested in learning about the things that weren't being taught in school and that would assure that I would one day die alone, bleeding to death in a dark alley. That didn't help my standing among my fellow students, teachers, my few friends, nor my family.

My family were transplants from Southern Louisiana to Southern California. The Southern-Louisiana-Southern-California "diaspora" was a real phenomenon among people of who were of Cajun/Creole ancestry, as am I, who relocated to Southern California over the years. My mom even referred to Louisiana as "the old country" when she was waxing sentimental about her life before I appeared. I was the only one of my siblings born in California.

My father was a construction carpenter whose darker skin prevented him from purchasing a home in one of the nicer "White Flight" areas of Southern California (like the city where my wife was raised, La Crescenta, California), so he ultimately purchased a home in the city of La Puente. Shortly thereafter, he suffered a number of heart attacks, which took him out of ranks of the consistently employed and placed him in the gray area of the "marginally employable." The financial and social consequences to our lives were profound. While not homeless, our options for living were severely "limited." When my father died in 1970, things got even worse, and we were forced to live on Social Security "Survivor's Benefits," which were and remain, notoriously sparse.

Worse, the beloved Southern legacy of racial bigotry followed my family from the South to the West, and my mom's demeanor towards me was also impacted. I didn't have "good hair," nor was my skin light enough in tone to easily "pass for white." I was a racial "ambiguity" that was a source of internal conflict for my mom. It was a conflict which I lost. I was a de facto racial outcast in my own home, and as it turned out, in the broader community that we lived in. There was, and remains, racial animus between members of the Latino community and members of the black community—one tragically oppressed group chose to express discontent with another tragically oppressed group—one of the deepest seated "freedoms" of the "American Promise": the freedom to "hate at will."



Childhood P.2





In the 1970s, a huge law enforcement "sweep" took place in Southern California. Many street gang leaders were arrested and ultimately imprisoned. The change was superficially transformative in my community. The gangs weren't actually gone, they had just been deprived of the most experienced elements among their members, and the young men that replaced them were far more unpredictable and violent. The new leaders were quickly grabbed up and "re-socialized" by members of larger organized crime organizations—a sort of "upcycling of criminal skills." They were no longer just fighting over dominance in their "barrios" anymore. Now, they were moving drugs, weapons, and increasingly involved in human trafficking—the envy of any true "scalable" business enterprise. The move to eradicate them had backfired, and life where I lived got even more stressful and confusing.

In the 1980s, it was publicly revealed that the San Gabriel Valley had also been a region of much legal and illegal dumping of various toxic chemicals, including waste from plastics production and rocket fuel from the "Cold War" defense efforts. The valley had a suspiciously large number of landfills, though the concept of "Environmental Racism" had not actually been explored much yet. Rumors even floated around, surfacing in a few state-sponsored reports that later disappeared from public records, that small amounts of Plutonium had been disposed of in the area. Though there is currently no official confirmation of any Plutonium contamination, there are now a number of EPA "Superfund" cleanup sites across the valley. The water quality there is beyond abysmal because contaminated groundwater is "processed" then reintroduced into the drinking water supply. Why waste "perfectly good water" just because it's "deadly"?

There was, and remains, a de facto hierarchy of racial identities. Having no readily apparent racial identity places one in the lowest strata possible, because all other cohesive groups tend to reject those who they see as "outsiders." Not being a member of any group tends to define one as an "outsider" to all groups. Racism may not be pretty, nor at all logical, but it was and is ubiquitous, much like bad sit-coms on cable television.

I was also identified early in elementary school as being "gifted." The term is a misnomer, however. Intelligence is not any "social gift." Because of the manner in which the educational programs for "gifted children" were developed, being identified as "bright" only increased the sense of isolation that most already experienced. For me, that was true

Childhood P.3





in the extreme. I was a person of color without a definitive race to attach myself to, awkwardly “gifted,” as well as invisibly and quietly “poor.” In the “American Landscape,” that combination is a guarantee of hardship; an irony of the reality of life in the “land of opportunity and inclusion.”

The totality of my early childhood experiences had inspired something less than an “optimistic outlook on life.” I had been given the message all throughout my life that I didn’t matter in the larger scheme of things. By the time I entered high school, I really wasn’t truly aware of all the damage my experiences had caused in my life. I knew that I wasn’t welcome anywhere, often not even among most of the people I called “friends.” Needless to say, I wasn’t expecting to be named as a “senior superlative” in my upcoming high school yearbook, unless there was a category for “Most Widely Outcast.”

Throughout elementary school, junior high school, and high school, the realities of racial isolation, intellectual isolation, and cultural isolation, dominated my life. Not being Anglo or Latino, and not even consistently being recognized as “black,” placed me in an unusual position in my personal interactions. Though few might like to admit this, the “culture of poverty” is rife with some of the worst manifestations of racism, and some of the most severe examples of racism were being seen among and between members of marginalized communities of color.

Lacking the ambition to do anything “productive” with my life, other than indulging in dreaming meaningless “Pipe Dreams” and trying to avoid being killed on the way home from school, I didn’t do well in high school. Being a natural “smart ass,” and painfully unable to defend my own interests, I was not popular with other students either. I spent three and a half years in high school developing a deeper realization that life had little to offer me. I rarely did homework, did not care much for high school socializing, and wasn’t impressed with being forced into “honors” classes because of being recognized as “gifted.” I squandered away any intellectual advantage I might have had and became involved in the noble task of trying to stay drunk, high, and idle as much as possible. I graduated early from high school solely because of the largesse of instructors who believed that I could be “saved” from my own treasured apathy through “social advancement.” Oddly enough, they weren’t entirely wrong. It just took me decades to find any reason to let go of that hard-earned apathy. As it turned out, that journey was a long and painful one.



Childhood P.4

