

Introduction: A Reasonable Assumption

All four of my grandparents were slaves. I am the grandson and the great-grandson of slaves on both sides—my mama's and my daddy's parents and all of my great-grandparents labored first as slaves and later as sharecroppers on Alabama cotton plantations. That is why I believe I am descended from the best and the brightest. This seems to me a perfectly reasonable assumption.

After all, think about what you do when you go shopping. You look for the best product you can buy at the lowest price. What do you think the slave traders did? They kidnapped and sold the best physical specimens they could find, the strongest and the most beautiful, as well as the most skilled craftsmen, the finest musicians—the best they could find. They found well-built girls and women too, who looked like they were tough enough both to survive toil in the fields and to maximize the slave owners' investment by bearing children—generations of slaves from one initial purchase.

I always make this point when I speak to young people at schools, and as an educator, I do a lot of that. Society has taught our black children to look down upon themselves, to lack pride in their heritage. I want them to know that even when we were slaves, we were selected for our power, our skill, our strength, and our intelligence. Even when we were debased, they picked us because we were the best of the best.

During the seventeenth century, after the slave trade arose in Europe and took force in the New World, the African black slaves were treated as simple heathens who needed to be Christianized. However, the internal resources, intellectual power, and physical endurance of the slaves permitted them not merely to survive, but to develop a new culture upon the foundation of their old African cultures. That new culture has spread across the globe right up until today. The slaves retained part of

their own culture and injected it into the Christianity that was imposed upon them. This new, hybrid culture is best illustrated by their Christian music—the spirituals and ultimately, gospel music—out of which emerged, eventually, blues and jazz and even today’s hip-hop, influencing musicians both black and white. You don’t think of it as rooted in slave culture, but when I listen, I hear the echoes. I hear the voices, the calls and responses of our ancestors’ rhythmic labor chopping the cotton and pulling the plow and cutting the cane. The rhythms are universal and still with us.

Some of my life story in this book is about my family, and some is about my community and my people, but mostly I hope it is a human story, about how human beings treat each other and how people struggle to reach higher ground.

My world outlook was shaped by my parents’ long view of history. My parents lived in Alabama, and they knew many elders who had been slaves—not only their own parents and grandparents, but the parents of their contemporaries. Perhaps this gave my parents some perspective. They could see how we had progressed from slavery; they wanted us children to understand that you don’t quit simply because things aren’t where you want them to be right now. They moved to Chicago and kept on pushing. It was their hopes and dreams that kept them and kept us—and still keep us—alive. That’s not racial. Any and every oppressed group has done this—pushing, persisting, and preserving their cultures. Take the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto: they documented their fight to survive through buried milk cans full of photographs, clandestine film, letters smuggled out, and really any means at hand, and they took up arms in the resistance. There are many ways to struggle. But you don’t ever give up. From what I’ve seen in this world, I find that resistance to oppression is a universal. It is the ultimate human trait.

A family story has it that when I was just eight months old, I looked around at the oppression in Birmingham, Alabama, where I was born, and said, “Shit, I’m leaving here.” My mama said to my daddy, “Dixie, that boy can’t even change his diapers—we’d better go with him.” The story is humorous but has a serious point. My family knew we were not safe in Birmingham, especially since my daddy—everyone called him “Dixie”—did not put up with any nonsense. So, when I was less than one year old, my parents came to Chicago from Alabama. My sister, Charlotte, was ten years old, and my brother, Walter, was four years old.

I was the baby. My parents arrived in Chicago with quite a handful—their worldly possessions plus the three of us. We came by train, like tens of thousands of Alabama blacks who came north in the first Great Migration. This was in the summer of 1919, the summer of the Chicago race riot.

We arrived in August 1919, mere weeks after the riot. Some two dozen black Chicagoans had died at the hands of white mobs, who raced through the few black neighborhoods of the city setting fires, beating, and murdering. The mayhem was sparked by the murder of a black teenager, Eugene Williams, who was stoned to death after he unwittingly crossed the line separating the black from the white swimming areas at the beach on Lake Michigan by Twenty-Ninth Street. But it was the culmination of worsening competition for jobs in the stockyards, the packing plants, and the mills when the white soldiers returned after World War I. Ethnic European immigrants sought to defend their perceived interests against us, the newcomers. But even knowing about the fresh Chicago violence, my parents were among the tens of thousands who came north anyway. Perhaps they viewed the race riot as an aberration, whereas the white terror that constantly threatened in Alabama was a permanent feature. I am not sure. But after that week of violence, black Chicago knew it would have to build its own community, without help from white Chicago.

The first Great Migration was encouraged by the *Chicago Defender*, the flagship black newspaper disseminated throughout the South by the black railway employees. It was said that every copy of the *Defender* changed hands at least five times. Its editor and publisher, Robert Sengstacke Abbott, exhorted southern blacks to come north for opportunity, particularly to jobs in the Chicago stockyards, on the railroad, and in the mills. He was unabashed in his appeal to blacks to take jobs as “replacement workers” when labor struggles resulted in mass firings of strikers. In the fast-growing industrial economy, Abbott promised, you might start on the bottom, but with a little effort you would rise. His newspaper was peppered with success stories about black entrepreneurs who had arrived with little in the way of capital, but who in Chicago had built churches, hotels, insurance companies, funeral homes, and cosmetics companies and other specialty businesses catering to black consumers. In a burgeoning, segregated market, one had only to hang out a shingle and a black dentist or beautician had a guaranteed clientele at the door.

A tiny neighborhood grocery store didn't require much money to get started, but it could feed an extended family for generations, and I still know South Side families who started with a fruit stand the day they got off the train.

I have told this story hundreds of times, how we were welcomed to the big city. We got off the train at the Twelfth Street Station and were met by relatives and friends who coached my parents about how you live in a city: *Don't spit on the sidewalk. Don't walk on the grass. Don't talk too loud. If you're reading the Defender, put it inside the Tribune.* Although my parents were urbanized folk from Birmingham, life was so different in the North. We members of the first Great Migration from the South—my parents' and my generation—received this training from the black friends and relatives who were already in the North. Jewish immigrants were instructed by their relatives not to behave like “greenhorns”—naive new arrivals. Black immigrants were instructed how not to behave “country”—ignorant of city ways. I imagine that every generation of immigrants from anywhere receives similar instruction on how to assimilate, how to blend in, how to become successful.

The training was profound, as well as intrusive and judgmental. It carried within it the weight of hard-learned lessons. *Don't have too many babies. You're not down south anymore.* In the urban South as in the North, babies cost money. But in the rural South, babies were an asset. You needed more hands to work the farm, to feed the family. Isn't it still the case today? In modern China, the government for several decades imposed an across-the-board limit of one child per family, and it was the farm people who most sharply opposed this rule, now cast aside. This is a social habit that transcends race. In Chicago, when we would see a woman with several small children and perhaps another on the way, my mother would cluck with disapproval, raise her eyebrows, and ask aloud, “How they gon' pay for 'em?” In strictly segregated Chicago, where housing for blacks was at a premium, this was a question with real practical impact. We were densely packed into such a small area, and we observed each other closely and critically.

Sometimes things get so singularly racial that people can't see that it's just human behavior. This is not just an American phenomenon. Minorities are excluded from the mainstream. They can be and are used as an instrument of capitalism. You can see it in Africa. In South Africa, there is still tremendous poverty, but we also have seen the recent rise

of a class of African leaders who form a new elite, while the poor people are not much better off economically than they were before the defeat of the apartheid system. Indeed, behaviorally speaking, the new elites are very much like those who were at the top layers of the apartheid system. It's true here, and it's true over there. It's part of that human story, about how human beings treat each other.

My own story is part of that human story, too, and it is in many ways a fairly ordinary immigration story. How we were educated and how we lived through war and upheaval and the Great Depression and the movement for justice. Throughout this book I will whenever possible name the street and the block where we lived, the locations of our schools and theaters, our churches, the parks, and the other sites where the story unfolds. For I do view it as Sacred Ground, and to me, it has a precise and eternal locale. For me, to this day, that particular neighborhood of Chicago is my Sacred Ground. It has been called the "Black Belt," the "Black Metropolis," and, because of James Gentry, an editor for the old *Chicago Bee*—another one of the black newspapers on the South Side—"Bronzeville," meant as an expression of pride. It lies from Twenty-Sixth Street on the north to Sixty-Third on the south, and from Cottage Grove on the east to State Street on the west. I can walk from where I live now, at Forty-Ninth and Drexel Boulevard, to every house where I ever lived. When I walk those streets I can stop and look at the buildings where we lived. I can remember faces, voices, melodies from my loved ones on these streets.

I am lucky to still have a few friends around the neighborhood who go all the way back to our childhoods together. One of my classmates from Edmund Burke Elementary School is Velda Hines, a former social worker who is now ninety-seven years of age. Her folks had a small business in the black ghetto, a grocery store. Another friend I've had since the age of seven or eight is Norman Burrell, who also attended Burke Elementary. Norm recently lost both his legs, but he is alert, aware, and politically active. Whenever we talk, we still recall not just the battles we've been through, but all the fun we had on this Sacred Ground. And we remember all the friends who are no longer with us, people like William "Billy Boy" Green, who went on to become the first black agent for the Internal Revenue Service, and Carl Cotton, who became a taxidermist at the Field Museum, possibly the first black to hold such a position. There was Cleophas "Tally Ho" Smith, Carl "Carlos the Cool" Caldwell,

Lonnie Young, Bob Carroll, and so many others. Their stories are part of my story and all of us are part of the story of this Sacred Ground.

For me, this expression—Sacred Ground—is not a cliché, but a real, hallowed space, from which major figures in the freedom movement emerged, and where historic commitments were forged. Some of the names of those freedom fighters are well known. Others were the unnamed rank-and-file of the freedom movement and of the labor movement born in Chicago.

Understand that our family moved not simply to Chicago, but specifically and intentionally to the *South Side* of Chicago. This was the main area where black folks could live and could find housing. Our first residence was on the 4900 block of St. Lawrence Avenue. When we got there in 1919, the neighborhood was predominantly white, but those whites soon ran off. And from then on, it became an expanding black community.

Now I am ninety-nine years of age. I have lived here in the same neighborhood continuously, except for a few brief interludes in other cities and during World War II. I have walked the streets of this neighborhood since 1919. So I want to talk about *this* Sacred Ground. It's a real place. It's still here. We have overcome a lot, and there's still plenty of overcoming to be done.

In our own ways, each of us, the early migrants and their children, are sustained by a spiritual sensibility, captured so well by the great Duke Ellington in his lyric "Come Sunday," from his first Sacred Concert. I've been reciting this lyric to myself for many, many years whenever I need a lift.

Lord, dear Lord above, God almighty,
God of love, please look down and see my people through.
I believe that God put sun and moon up in the sky.
I don't mind the gray skies
'cause they're just clouds passing by.

Duke Ellington was above all a humanist, a spiritual composer. People don't think of Duke Ellington as political, but he distilled with that lyric the notion that *we can overcome*. As a young man, I took inspiration and encouragement perhaps more from song lyrics like Duke's than from Bible study. We have always taken sustenance from the words that remind us we are meant for something better.

My full name is Timuel Dixon Black Jr. My mama selected Timuel, also my daddy's first name, because she thought it sounded biblical. She told me it meant I am a child of God. My father's first name was Timuel, but his middle name was also Dixon, and again, he was known as Dixie. Norm still calls me "TD." He thinks he's the only one who still knows my nickname. By the 1960s, some characters referred to me as "TDB." *Too Damn Black*. TDB. They didn't necessarily mean it as a compliment. But I chose to take it as one.

When I thought about writing this book, I thought there must be something of wider value in my stories. I worried that this book might seem vain or egotistical. The fact is, I don't give a damn about Tim Black as some sort of shining light. I consider my story to be fairly *typical* of men and women of my generation. I believe my life is fairly representative of the lives of many of the children of migrants from the Deep South. My story's *typical*-ness is precisely where its value lies. What might be learned from our stories? Considering where we started, how did we get over—or not get over—coming up the way we did? Sometimes it amazes me, even now.

As I will explain, we grew up in the midst of the Great Depression. At my daddy's income level, we should have been on welfare. But my daddy's point of view was, "We'll starve to death before we go on relief." He wasn't joking. He would go door to door in Hyde Park offering to wash windows or cut grass, but he wouldn't go on welfare. Velda's and Norm's families had income. Norm's father worked in one of the downtown hotels, and most of the children of the black hotel employees went on to college. But for all of us, including my mama and daddy, education was a top priority, and I'll be saying a lot about that in the pages that follow. Education is a big part of this story, and of my story.

After all, teaching has defined much of my adult life. I taught in high schools, colleges, and universities. Among my students there were some remarkable individuals. In this book, I'll tell you about a few of them.

I think often of my student Bill Daniels. Bill graduated from my own alma mater, DuSable High School, in 1956. Bill was a ward of the state and a foster child. Nowadays they would classify him as "at risk."

"William," said his guidance counselor, "you didn't do very well on the test. I think you ought to keep that job you have at Sears Roebuck." In other words, you are meant to be a stock boy. Not "college material." I visited all of my homeroom students at their homes. Bill told me

what his guidance counselor had said. I told him, “William, she can’t tell you what you can do. Only *you* can tell you what you can do.” The administrators and other teachers didn’t recognize Bill’s other qualities: he was an outstanding swimmer, he was on the chess team, he was good-looking, he was diplomatic, and he was a good student. He just didn’t do well on tests. He had outlined where he wanted to be. I got in touch with the Pullman Foundation, and we got him a scholarship to go to college. Off he went to Upper Iowa University, where he was the second black student ever. I took him over from Chicago and kept in touch with him throughout his college years. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa. Bill’s story, like many of the others related in this book, figures in my volumes of oral history, *Bridges of Memory*.

Similarly, there was the brilliant young Ron Gault. He too attended DuSable and went off to college. Ron became an international development banker. He is married to the journalist and civil rights leader Charlayne Hunter-Gault. Ron still calls me from South Africa. They are the children of my contemporaries. They grew up poor but determined. They formed the next generation after the first Great Migration.

Now in telling such stories, I am trying to give a picture of social change. Among my contemporaries, I am, I admit, a little bit of an exception, having married three times. In my younger days, divorce was looked down upon. Most of my peers settled down and stayed married. The children in my generation, whose grandparents had been slaves, grew up in fairly stable, two-parent households. This is well documented now. From 1910 to about 1950, 80 to 85 percent of black kids were in two-parent households. Now it’s less than 35 percent. We see the same trends today in the white communities but not to quite as dramatic a degree. So society has changed, movements have changed. The way we live today is far different. I look back and am struck by the way black life has been altered, by the way we are now perceived in America. Our families of old were torn apart by the slave system, which sold babies away from mothers, and ripped husbands and wives from one another. What are the forces that tear children from parents and take loved ones from one another now?

I am so proud of and moved by the work and activism of young scholars who have documented the causes of these changes. But my intent here is not to write an academic book, only a collection of my memories. However, I certainly commend to you those who have written about

such phenomena as mass incarceration, the decimation of public education, and the perpetuation of poverty among black Americans. I am moved by the work of those who have benefited from the advances of the civil rights movement, who are now teaching in our universities and on many other fronts. I am proud of them, but I'm not naming names here for fear of omitting some of these powerful intellects, many of them the children and grandchildren of the civil rights movement.

My intent in writing this book is simply to tell my story with as much humor, readability, and identification as possible, as well as some scholarship for those who want to check it out. I hope you'll enjoy it, and, typical as it may be, perhaps even be a little inspired by it to help make this world a better place. I hope, too, that you'll come to understand why I feel so much love for my Sacred Ground.