

**White Sands to Black Lives:
A Reflection on Rage, Privilege and
the Possibility of Redemption**

--Andy Davis

This morning, I want to keep the sermonizing to a minimum; I mostly just want to tell you a new story that's important to me. But I wrote it for performance as a ten minute piece, and in the pulpit I have a little more leeway, so I'm going to try to provide a bit more context.

Let's start with some transgenerational context. My paternal grandfather grew up in "Southie," South Boston, and was the only Protestant kid on his block. So fighting came with that territory, and he became known for his fierceness. My father tells me that when Grampa was grown, and had been living in the suburbs for a while, he was back in Southie visiting, some old antagonist provoked him, and a fistfight broke out. An old friend who didn't know he was in town saw him from down the street, recognized him by his style of fighting, and when the dust had settled greeted him with something like "Al Davis, I'd know that left uppercut anywhere!"

When Grampa was raising Dad, he taught him to never run away from a fight: He told him "If I hear you did that, I'll give it to you worse than you would have gotten it from the other guy!" In telling my brother and I this story when we were young, my father implied the same message to us. And growing up always moving from place to place, always being the new kids, always being among the smallest in our class, we had to learn to fight, and we learned by doing, the best way to learn anything. And we also learned masculine lessons about "pride" and "honor" that could have a positive side, but that could get us in trouble if they weren't expressed in the narrowly circumscribed ways.

By the time I went off to college, I was wound pretty tight. I remember, as a freshman at BU, the feeling of my knuckles being a bit skinned and bruised from punching the cinder block walls of my dorm hallway. I didn't think I was angry at the time, and most of the ways that I acted out seemed "normal," not in conflict with the rules of what feminist theorist bell hooks calls "the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." But when I looked inside myself, I found a rage that took years for me to really bring under control. And, needless to say (in this crowd, at least) most people in our society have *more* cause for rage than I do and *less* latitude and forgiveness for how they express it.

Thus ends the contextualizing: I promised you a story.

Looking back, I'm not sure if the fateful moment was when I called him an *asshole*, or when he stuck his thumbs in my chest and started pushing me backwards down the hill.

Let me back up for a moment. During the years when I probably should have been in college, and sometimes was, my friends and I, along with throngs of other people our age, made an annual migration to the coast to work in beach towns for the summer. My

friends and I chose Ogunquit, Maine, a charming hamlet perched on three unbroken miles of white sand on the edge of the uncaged Atlantic.

Ogunquit was and is a roiling hodgepodge of steamy, sun and sea worshipping humanity. There are families from all over the northeastern US and beyond, our neighbors from across the border, a thriving gay community... And then there were us, the young people playing at freedom, with libidos gone wild, who made the town run, working because that's what we had to do, but then spending the rest of our time drinking too much, experimenting with life, and trying to get laid.

Most of us had restaurant jobs. We'd go to work in the mid-afternoon, sling some version of hash, either in the front of the house or the back of the house, until 10 or 11, socialize into the wee, wee hours, crash briefly, get up, sleep it off at the beach, and do it all over again.

The ringleader of our little circle was Norm. He was charismatic and occasionally abusive...like my country. He was the only one of us who got to have a first name. The rest of us were "Davis," "Walker," "Alvarez"... Oh, the women we hung out with got to have first names, too. The only one you need to know about now is Bobbi. She waitressed at Einstein's, the diner in the center of town, and was going out with Norm, who alternated between treating her like a queen and well, *not* treating her like any kind of royalty at all. The other guys in our circle were all kind of in love with Bobbi. She was wholesome and kind, and tried against all odds to help our little band of sunburned heirs to the patriarchy become our best selves. She was like a den mother for wolves.

We had rented half of a slightly rundown yellow clapboard house just south of the center of town, which acquired a certain notoriety due to high volume conviviality long into the night. ("Oh, you live in *the Yellow House*?") In fact, we developed the kind of reputation that frequently attracted distinguished guests in blue uniforms.

That summer a new club had opened on the south edge of town. It was just over the line in the town of York, which had more liberal laws about how late you could serve alcohol. So it thumbed its nose at its northern neighbor by calling itself "Good Night Ogunquit." The driveway was on the right as you went south from where we lived, and you went up a short, sharp rise as you entered the gravel driveway, before it leveled out into the parking lot. On busy nights, there was always a guy outside the door seated on a stool carding people, and one or two uniformed cops hired to do crowd control. We had something of a cordially conflicted relationship with the Ogunquit police, but these were York cops—we didn't know them at all.

On the August night in question, I was wearing a red and white Oxford button-down shirt, white tennis shoes which always left a trail of beach sand, and running shorts. I looked a like a preppy who'd accepted a dare not to go to the barber for a year. I never shaved my upper lip, and I drew a razor across my chin about once a week. I looked like a preppy gone bad.

We had pre-functioned for a while in the apartment Bobbi shared with Faith and Kathy above Einstein's, just standing in a circle and sharing...this and that.

Anyway, the club was less than a mile away, so we walked. As we walked up the sharply sloping drive from Route One, Norm and Walker began making fun of the first police officer we saw: "'Aah, rent-a-cop, where'd you get that badge, in a cereal box?'" He kind of glowered and growled, but we just walked past him and joined the crowd of other people at the door.

I was last in our line. Norm and Bobbi and then Walker and Alvarez showed their IDs and the door opened twice, and they disappeared into the music and lights. Each time the door opened, the disco ball flashed at me and dance music pulsed more loudly into the parking lot.

"When the working day is done
girls just want to have fun
That's all they really waaaaaant
When the working day is done
Oh girls, they wanna have fun..."

When I got carded, I realized that, though I was 21, I'd forgotten my ID. The kid at the door was apologetic, but told me he couldn't let me in. I told him I understood, and turned to go, and as I did, the big cop Norm and Walker had made fun of came brusquely up and said. "Yeah, if you don't have an ID, get the *Hell* outta here. I brushed past his shoulder and called him that name I mentioned before, that puckered part of nether anatomy. Next thing I knew, a beefy hand was on my shoulder, and he spun me around and started pushing me in the chest backward down the steep driveway. A grenade of rage and indignation exploded in my brain ("How *dare* he touch me?"), and in the next instant my right fist connected with his chin.

As I did, "OhmygodwhathaveIdoneI'mgonnadie" went through my head. I felt a little exposed, and the only way I could think of to cover up was to duck, grab him around the waist and throw him up against a car. That didn't last long; most things in this life are in constant flux, and this situation hadn't reached any kind of stasis. The other cop came up behind me, grabbed me by the hair and the seat of the pants, and bounced and dragged me across the gravel driveway and tossed me in the back of the police cruiser.

Well, Bobbi the patient den mother bailed me out with her boss Steve Einstein's money, and I was ultimately convicted of simple assault and sentenced to thirty days in York County Jail, with all but three suspended, and a year of probation. Possibly the most incredible thing about the story is that when I told the judge that I was planning to be gone traveling in France for a couple months, and that I already had my plane ticket, he allowed me to fly off and serve my time when I came back!

For a few years after this happened, I used to tell this story a fair amount, usually after a couple of beers, to impress other young white men with underdeveloped frontal lobes

with what a badass I was. Then I started to grow up..a little bit...and stopped telling it. I had more important stories to tell, ones that weren't all about me.

But many years later, on another August day, in 2014, I was standing in a circle sharing reflections with a lot of other mostly white people. It was a vigil for Michael Brown, the young unarmed black man who'd been shot down the day before in Ferguson, Missouri, for reacting to a police officer with rage and indignation. And that day I told this story again, but I told it as the story of an incredibly lucky young white kid, a kid who was mind bogglingly clueless about his own privilege. About a kid who, by no virtue of his own, fate and circumstance allowed to survive his own reckless expressions of rage and allowed him to grow up, find love, have a daughter, and watch *her* grow up. Fate and circumstance. Blind fate and random circumstance.

“Emotional neglect lays the groundwork for the emotional numbing that helps boys feel better about being cut off. Eruptions of rage in boys are most often deemed normal, explained by the age-old justification for adolescent patriarchal misbehavior, "Boys will be boys." Patriarchy both creates the rage in boys and then contains it for later use, making it a resource to exploit later on as boys become men. As a national product, this rage can be garnered to further imperialism, hatred and oppression of women and men globally. This rage is needed if boys are to become men willing to travel around the world to fight wars without ever demanding that other ways of solving conflict can be found.”

— **bell hooks**

The Rites of Manhood

It's snowing hard enough that the taxis aren't running.
I'm walking home, my night's work finished,
long after midnight, with the whole city to myself,
when across the street I see a very young American sailor
standing over a girl who's kneeling on the sidewalk
and refuses to get up although he's yelling at her
to tell him where she lives so he can take her there
before they both freeze. The pair of them are drunk
and my guess is he picked her up in a bar
and later they got separated from his buddies
and at first it was great fun to play at being
an old salt at liberty in a port full of women with
hinges on their heels, but by now he wants only to
find a solution to the infinitely complex
problem of what to do about her before he falls into
the hands of the police or the shore patrol
-- and what keeps this from being squalid is
what's happening to him inside:
if there were other sailors here
it would be possible for him
to abandon her where she is and joke about it
later, but he's alone and the guilt can't be
divided into small forgettable pieces;
he's finding out what it means
to be a man and how different it is
from the way that only hours ago he imagined it.

Alden Nowlan

Healing

I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections.
And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly, that I am ill.
I am ill because of wounds to the soul, to the deep emotional self
and the wounds to the soul take a long, long time, only time can help
and patience, and a certain difficult repentance
long, difficult repentance, realization of life's mistake, and the freeing oneself
from the endless repetition of the mistake
which mankind at large has chosen to sanctify.

D.H. Lawrence