The Promise of Justice

Stewart, Mac A.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Stewart, Mac A.
The Promise of Justice: Essays on Brown v. Board of Education.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
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The year 2004 marked the fiftieth anniversary of a landmark case about diversity in education. The 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas case and subsequent Supreme Court ruling had major national significance in the field of public education, especially for the southern states where the doctrine of “separate but equal” was mandated by law. This essay is a reflection on the period before and after the Brown decision and how it affected my personal life and my educational experience in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Prior to the Brown decision, all levels of public education in the South operated under the “separate but equal” doctrine, which was based on the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in the case Plessy v. Ferguson. That ruling was overturned in the Brown case, bringing about a new era of educational opportunity for African Americans in all regions of the nation; it brought hope that access to quality education and its accompanying benefits were now within their reach. Yet for people in the South who were still living with the legacy of slavery, there would be no rapid transformation of social and political systems based on segregation of the races.

Attending public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, in the 1950s–60s, I experienced firsthand the meaning of “separate but equal.” Black schools
routinely were given the hand-me-downs from the white schools—books, sports equipment, musical instruments, even auditorium seats. Black families often complained about having their students take public transportation far distances across town to attend the one black high school in the city, while white students not only had the convenience of a high school in their part of town, but if they lived too far, school buses were made available to them.

Outside of school, segregation affected all aspects of employment and access to social and government services. Segregation was the law of the land, severely limiting black people’s opportunities for gainful employment. Blacks performed menial jobs as maids, janitors, and day laborers. Although there were a few black lawyers, doctors, and small business owners, the two main professions available to educated blacks were in education and the ministry. Little Rock’s one black officer walked a beat only in the small black commercial district. He did not have the authority to issue tickets or arrest a white person. Public recreation facilities were closed to black youth. The downtown Boys Club, YMCA, YWCA and the facilities of most civic organizations operated on a “whites only” policy. Blacks were forced to sit in the back of the bus and use rest-rooms and water fountains separate from whites. Upscale restaurants, soda fountains, cafeterias, even McDonalds did not serve black patrons. Blacks could not use the downtown public library. Feelings of neglect and despair were rampant in black communities. However, people believed in the American dream that through education, equal opportunity, freedom, and justice were attainable.

Attending black schools in Little Rock offered some benefits not available to students in rural schools. After all, we did attend accredited schools and had serviceable school buildings and opportunities to attend college. At the time only four colleges—Arkansas AM&M College, Philander Smith College, Arkansas Baptist College, and Shorter College—were open to black enrollment among the twenty-plus colleges in the state. We had outstanding teachers. Many received bachelor’s degrees from Fisk University, Morehouse College, Tuskegee Institute, Philander Smith College, Arkansas AM&M College, and other prestigious black colleges. A few had completed master’s and doctoral degrees from major universities outside of Arkansas. Although black teachers were forced to teach under less than desirable conditions, with inadequate educational resources, they were dedicated and nurturing people who were committed to sound educational principles.

The children of sharecroppers who lived in rural, agricultural areas of the state had less chance to receive a quality education. They experienced
what was called a “split session.” Under this policy adopted by rural school districts, black schools were closed during the cotton harvest in the fall because the students were needed to pick and process the cotton crop. Moreover, it was commonplace for teachers in the rural schools to hold only a high school diploma. Students attending these schools had little in the way of books and other learning materials, and the school buildings, often just one-room shacks, were deplorable. My grandfather moved his family from the rural delta region of southeastern Arkansas where these conditions existed, to Little Rock to provide my mother and her siblings a chance to attend the only accredited black high school in the state.

The Court’s ruling in the Brown case, however, did not result in the immediate integration of public schools in the south. Pockets of resistance to the order began to emerge, which slowed progress in certain regions. Granted, numerous school districts followed the Court’s ruling without incident and made the necessary changes to integrate; Arkansas was one of two southern states to announce within a week of the Brown decision its plans to desegregate its schools. The Board of Education in Little Rock was among the first to move in that direction. Little Rock had established a reputation for being a progressive southern city with good race relations. Many observers believed the schools could break down the barriers of segregation with a carefully developed program. Yet there were others in the city and state who called for resistance to the Court’s ruling and set out to sustain a campaign of resistance often accompanied by violence.

The first major nationwide challenge to the Brown decision occurred in Little Rock in 1957. The action was the result of a suit filed in federal district court against the local school board by Daisy Bates, president of the local branch of the NAACP and author of the award-winning book, The Long Shadow of Little Rock. Ms. Bates and other black leaders believed that the desegregation process proposed by the Little Rock school board was progressing too slowly. The Court’s action sped the process along and by the summer of 1957, nine black students were scheduled to enroll at Central High School in the fall.

By the beginning of the 1957 school year, media reports and school board bulletins had provided the public with ample coverage of the desegregation plan. During the first week of classes, Governor Orval E. Faubus called out the state’s National Guard to surround Little Rock Central High School and prevent any black students from entering. He claimed that such action was necessary to prevent rioting and to ward off caravans of protesters headed to Little Rock to commit violence against
citizens and property. He later espoused the view that his actions were based on the southern doctrine of “states’ rights.” Meetings and telegrams between President Eisenhower and Governor Faubus, along with court injunctions, kept the nine students away from school for nearly three weeks.

When the students returned to school in late September, Little Rock policemen surrounded Central High. Hundreds of curiosity seekers and protesters congregated in front of the school. Little Rock’s mayor ordered the local police to quietly accompany the nine black students into the school through a side door after classes had begun. When it was announced that the students were in the school, a mob of violent segregationists broke through the police barricades and rushed toward the entrance. Many white parents entered the school to remove their sons and daughters. Fearful that the police did not have the capacity to restrain the mob, the school administration moved the black students out a side door. The local police could not control the riot being perpetrated by mobs of protesters. Black students, national news reporters, sympathetic bystanders, and anyone else who showed a tolerance for law and order was attacked and a melee ensued.

The national media had a field day reporting on the violence being perpetrated by ardent segregationists. Amid the chaos, Relman Morin of Associated Press wrote,

Crowds clustered at both ends of the school set up a storm of fierce howling and surged towards the lines of police and state troopers. The explosive climax came, after the school had been under siege since 8:45 A.M., when the Negroes walked quietly through the doors. Police, armed with riot guns and tear gas, had kept the crowd under control. Inside, meanwhile, students reported seeing Negroes with blood on their clothes. The crowd beat three newspapermen. All three were employed by Life magazine. James L. Hicks, a reporter for the New York Amsterdam News, wrote about the beatings received by four black newsmen: ‘At Park Street we came face to face with a mob of about 100 whites standing on the corner. When they saw us, they rushed toward us yelling ‘Here come the niggers.’ A man threw a punch at Wilson [editor of the Tri-State Journal], another kicked Newson [reporter, Afro-American Newspaper], and a one-armed man slugged me beside my right ear. We turned to run and found ourselves trapped by the crowds whom we had passed as we walked up the street to the school. As we met, a group of five men, the mob
yelled ‘stop them,’ ‘kill them . . . ’ Many of these beatings occurred as local police and state troopers stood watching.”

In 1957, I was a spry ten-year-old fourth grader. The segregation that existed during that time mattered little to me because it was simply the life I knew. My parents were aware of the emerging calamity and made efforts to shelter us from the harsh aspects of these events. At the time, such things were not discussed with children my age. When the crisis at Central High School erupted, it was a surprise, it was a frightening end to my assumption about what I had deemed a safe and secure school and home life.

My sense of well-being all changed on a September day during recess when two hundred children at Stephens Elementary School ceased playing and stared at a rumble emanating from the sky. The sound of large transport airplanes overhead was frightening, especially since we had been conditioned during this Cold War period to believe that an attack by the Russian army was imminent. We stood bewildered and learned later that the planes carried troops from the U.S. Army 101st Airborne Division headed to Little Rock Air Force Base with orders to dispatch immediately to Central High School to force compliance with the federal court school desegregation order.

President Eisenhower sent the federal troops to Little Rock in response to calls from Mayor Woodrow Mann and Congressman Brooks Hayes to bring about law and order and force compliance with the federal court order to desegregate Central High School. In a message to the nation, Eisenhower stated: “Under the leadership of demagogic extremists, disorderly mobs have deliberately prevented the carrying out of proper orders from a federal court. Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of our courts.”

The terrorism that accompanied these events is not easily forgotten. The anti-integration forces (mainly the White Citizens Council and the KKK) began to conduct a campaign of terror on the black community and on anyone who had even moderate leanings toward school integration. The superintendent of schools and the city mayor received daily death threats and had their homes and cars riveted with bullets. Bombings occurred at the homes of NAACP President Daisy Bates and Carlotta Walls, one of the nine black students attending Central High School. In further acts of violence, the offices of the Little Rock Public Schools were bombed. In many instances, some of the parents of the Little Rock Nine lost their jobs at white-owned businesses. Night
riders, gangs of white thugs, drove through black neighborhoods breaking windows and attacking people on the street. At my elementary school, we experienced weekly bomb threats, creating an environment of fear and disillusionment.

Hatred and bigotry came from some of the most unlikely people. Wesley Pruden, a white minister and ardent segregationist, ran newspaper advertisements opposing integration. He asked such questions as: At social functions would black males and white females dance together? Would black students join clubs and travel with whites? Would black and white students use the same restrooms? Would black males and white females enact “tender love scenes” in school dramas?

The national and international media extensively publicized the hate and anger directed toward the nine black students attending Central High School. Books written about Daisy Bates and several of the nine students themselves also tell the story. Let me ask: How many of us had federal troops provide transportation to and from school and accompany us to each of our classes? How many of us could have stood up to these acts of violence? These were high school students whose ages ranged from fifteen to seventeen. Because their families wanted them to receive the best education available, people wanted to kill them. It is a sad commentary on our “civilized” society and it is an episode in American history that we should not forget.

Ironically, had the process of integration been left to the students, black and white, today, we might be looking back on a very different scenario. The acts of violence against the nine students were committed by outside agitators and a small gang of student thugs. Several white students befriended the nine black students, deploiring what they were being subjected to both in and outside the halls of Central High School. The student newspaper ran editorials condemning the violence going on outside the school during the height of the crisis. A white student was quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle saying, “If parents would just go home and let us alone, we’ll be all right. . . . We just want them to leave us be. We can do it.”

In 1962, Ernest Green, the first black student to graduate from Central High School, spoke about his experience with the white students:

In looking through my clippings, I think of all the things that have happened at Central, the most significant thing was the friendly attitude that students showed toward me the day of the rioting. The type of thing that was going on outside, people beaten, cursed, the mob
hysteries and all of this going on outside . . . we inside the school didn’t realize the problems that were occurring and continually stu-
dents were befriending us. I remember one case in particular in my physics class. I was three weeks behind in my assignments, and a
couple of fellows offered to give me notes and to help me catch up on the work that I had missed. I was amazed at this kind of attitude being shown toward the Negroes.

The Little Rock Nine—Ernest Green, Carlotta Walls, Elizabeth Ekhord, Jefferson Thomas, Terrance Roberts, Minnijean Brown, Gloria Ray, Thelma Mothershead, Melba Pattilo—are nine of the bravest people I have ever known. They and their families are the true heroes of the Central High School crisis. Their courage and resilience galvanized black and white resistance to racial oppression in Arkansas and the nation.

Today, Little Rock Central High School stands as a proud reminder of when in 1957 it served as a symbol of southern resistance to school desegregation. A magnificent edifice, Central High School was lauded for its architectural beauty and the quality of education it offered in a state that was near the bottom nationally in public education rankings. When the school opened its doors to students in 1927, the New York Times noted that at a cost of $1,500,000 it was the most expensive ever constructed in the United States. Now fifty years beyond the 1957 crisis, Central High School is a much different place. Today, the once all white neighborhood surrounding the school is predominately black and the majority of students at Central High are African American.

Several ceremonies have occurred over the years to commemorate the tumultuous events of the previous era. In 1997, President Clinton, former school administrators, city officials, and students gathered on the steps of the school for the fortieth anniversary of the historic events sur-
rounding the 1957 crisis. Each of the nine students returned to the high school to which they were once denied enrollment to accept commendations from the President of the United States.

For me, it was overwhelming to watch and read the national media coverage of the celebratory atmosphere of these events and the “former-
ofes-now-friends” ambiance of the occasion; it was quite a contrast to one of the most violent periods in civil rights history. As part of the fortieth anniversary, the Mobil Oil station across the street from Central High School that was so prominently seen in the media coverage, had after years of neglect been restored to its original appearance and turned into the Central High School Visitors Center and Museum. Directly
across the street from the Museum, a well-manicured park has been created with engraved plaques and monuments erected as a lasting remembrance for the struggle for school integration. (To provide longevity, the Museum and monument garden are funded and maintained by the State Parks Department.) The contrast between the present-day environment and the events of September 1957 is testimony to the enormous sacrifices made by people of both races and all levels of authority to remedy the inequities and injustices resulting from state-mandated segregation and Jim Crow laws of the South.

The integration of Little Rock Central High School was one of many episodes in the struggle for equality in our society. It occurred at the time that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. began to emerge as the quintessential leader of the civil rights movement after being arrested during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. Education was important to King and those involved in the civil rights movement because they understood that it was the stepping stone to political and economic prosperity for African Americans. In his book, *Strive toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958), Dr. King wrote: “It is one thing to agree that the goal of integration is morally and legally right; it is another thing to commit oneself positively and actively to the ideal of integration—the former is intellectual assent, the latter is actual belief. These are days that demand practices to match profession. This is no day to pay lip service to integration; we must pay life service to it.”

The Supreme Court decision of 1954 and the crisis at Central High School served as catalysts for efforts that changed a nation. Dr. King firmly believed providing quality education to all would lead the nation toward the ideal of equality and justice. It is a belief we are still trying to make a reality.