William Newmiller

The War I Didn't Worry About

Two wars raged in 1966. At age 18, I worried more about the one that could pull me and other 18 to 26 year-olds into a conflict I didn't understand in a faraway jungle. The other war was nearby, 15 miles up the road in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Benton Harbor was the biggest town in largely rural Berrien County in southwestern Michigan. Along with neighboring St. Joseph, Benton Harbor lies east of Chicago, on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Once home to the nation's largest open-air produce market, an industrial, cultural, and retail center for the surrounding population, Benton Harbor began bleeding figuratively and literally during the wave of racial unrest that swept the nation in the sixties. Wounds there have yet to heal, and they remain painful. The war I wasn't so worried about continues, even as we begin to bring some closure to the other war in Vietnam.

Alex Kotlowitz's 1998 book about Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, *The Other Side of the River*, recalled for me long dormant memories that fuse the then and now, the we and they, and that tell the division and violence of our time. The book chronicles the enduring racial division that defines the relationship between black Benton Harbor and white St. Joseph, located just across the St. Joseph River. It's a racial division marked by opposing perceptions that were sharpened by the discovery on May 22, 1991 of the corpse of Eric McGinnis, a black youth found floating in the river separating the two towns. The intervening years haven't revealed the cause of death, but everybody in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph seems to *know* the cause. Those on the north bank of the river in Benton Harbor remain convinced that Eric was killed, probably by a white in St. Joseph. On the south bank of the river, in St. Joseph,

residents see Eric's death as accidental.

If you've visited Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, the difference in perceptions by the townspeople won't be surprising. Although collectively called the "Twin Cities," few cities contrast so sharply. Picturesque St. Joseph, with its cobblestone streets, antique stores, art galleries and boutiques, and commanding view of Lake Michigan, describes itself on its official web site as being "nestled on the southern tip . . . of the Riviera of the Midwest." Benton Harbor has no web page. In 1989, *Money* magazine ranked Benton Harbor as the worst place to live in America. I drove through Benton Harbor in 1998, on a nostalgic journey to visit the haunts of my youth. Little was left of the city I remembered from before the war. The movie theaters, the stores, the restaurants, the offices—all are abandoned now, their broken windows covered with rotting plywood, their foundations crumbling.

Connecting these contrasting cities is the Bicentennial Bridge. As you cross it from Benton Harbor to St. Joseph, Benton Harbor's low-lying land, some of which was dredged from the canal built to serve an early port, is at your back. In front, your eyes follow the upward slope of the land to the bluff sitting above the southern bank of the river. On it, rising like a fortress, sits the county courthouse and jail. St. Joseph actually began as a fort. The French explorer, Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, followed Father Jacques Marquette to the mouth of the river Marquette called the Miami, after the nearby Miami Indians. Here La Salle built Fort Miami. Later, Jesuits built a mission upstream, naming it St. Joseph in honor of Canada's patron saint. Eventually, the river, too, took on the name of St. Joseph, as did the town downstream that grew about the site of Fort Miami. Roman Martyrology describes St. Joseph as the "protector of Our Lady's good name" and as the "confidant of Heaven's secret." Benton Harbor's namesake is a bit more down to earth. Thomas Hart Benton, staunch supporter of Andrew Jackson and a Senator from Missouri between 1821 and 1851, championed Michigan's statehood. He lost his senate seat in the election of 1850, when his newfound opposition to slavery placed him at odds with his constituents. He would stay in Washington, D.C. writing on a variety of issues. His last book, *Examination of the Dred Scott Case*, was sharply critical of the Supreme Court's decision declaring that congress could not ban slavery in the territories. The coincidence of name—one city, on the hill, named for the sainted foster father of Jesus—the other, built on land dredged from the river bottom, and named for a

Jacksonian politician—seems to have destined these towns to clash as competing symbols.

One of my best friends in college, an idealistic and less than streetwise law enforcement intern in the sixties, witnessed the hardening of symbol into reality when discontent boiled over into the streets of Benton Harbor. His naïve faith in uniformed authority shattered; he told me about police officers—in squad cars cruising through Benton Harbor, rifles pointed out the car windows—muttering, "go ahead, nigger. Do something." One officer, despite the long overtime hours, would hurry back out after his shift to patrol the streets in his own car, savoring the excitement.

It was and remains war, and it takes the language of war to describe it. Kotlowitz writes of race in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph: "Sabers rattle. Accusations are hurled back and forth across the river like cannon fire. And the cease-fires, when they occur, are just that, cease-fires, temporary and fragile." In Benton Harbor, Eric's black friends reacted to his death with anger. "For these boys," reports Kotlowitz, "the neighbors across the way were the enemy." "A few," according to Kotlowitz, "brandished wooden canes [. . .] waving them around like the long swords of ancient warriors." Kotlowitz characterizes the conditions existing when Eric's body was discovered: "the lines had been drawn, the sandbags piled high."

This war went long unnoticed. In the late 1940s, the serene countryside and unspoiled lakefront beauty of rural southwestern Michigan was for many Chicagoans like my parents an irresistibly attractive respite from the crowded, noisy, and increasingly dangerous big city. Then, it was a four-hour drive from Chicago to southwestern Michigan. Now, it's less than two hours. Then, you could gaze across Lake Michigan from the Michigan beach and see nothing but the vast, seemingly endless expanse of azure, an immense inland sea. But such untouched seclusion in the Midwest has long been illusory. By the late fifties, on days when the wind blew from the southwest, the stench of Gary Indiana's steel mills would sour the morning. And now, on a clear day, the Sears Tower and the John Hancock building rise above the azure horizon, a reminder that the great lake is but a lake.

Maybe the changes to the area were too gradual and too subtle for a teenaged boy to notice. I overlooked the irony that my parents, like many others, had escaped the city, but not its problems. Half a world away more intense conflict had my focus. Others were returning from

Vietnam with collections of human ears. Soon, I feared, it would be my turn. In 1969, college—and the II-S student deferment—was behind me. I'd already passed the draft physical. In rapid succession, I'd "won" the draft lottery (the only time I'd made the top ten in anything) and learned of the massacre in My Lai. Two months after the Kent State shootings, I'd report for training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, planning to serve my time in the Air Force: an unavoidable intrusion in my life, born of military necessity and a national policy of capricious conscription.

Texas would be as close as I'd get to Vietnam. At Sheppard AFB, Texas, I'd teach South Vietnamese students to become military pilots. I remember Hoa, a likeable person, but an unlikely pilot. Pulled from medical school to become a pilot, he never seemed comfortable in an airplane. Usually lost, and often engrossed in academic details, he blithely crossed runways without clearance, cut other planes out of the traffic pattern, and once banged the nose gear so hard on the runway that he broke the strut. Family history, however, may have fated Hoa for combat. When he was a child, the Viet Minh killed his father, a North Vietnamese, in Hanoi; Hoa's mother escaped with her children to Saigon. Years later, I'd read W.D. Ehrhart's short story, "I Drink My Coffee Black," and remember Hoa: how he would bring me coffee when we had to report to the flight line at 0500, and how curious he was about my disdain for cream and sugar. In Vietnam, he told me, one would drink unsweetened black coffee only as a reflection of bitterness that had entered one's life. I'd attend graduation for a class of pilots on the day Hue fell to the North Vietnamese. Most of my students would never go home. Hoa would say he didn't want to return to Vietnam because everyone he knew was dead.

About this time, I realized, like Hoa, I no longer wanted to return to my rural home. A larger world beckoned, and Benton Harbor's downward spiral continued, fueled by the exclusivity of the surrounding area, which increasingly sharpened racial divisions, even as distinctions between friend and foe in Vietnam further blurred. St. Joseph had long maintained its racial exclusivity. In 1965 the local paper reported, "not one black family had been sold a St. Joseph home since World War II." And even when the color line was broken in 1965, the same paper editorialized, "a few of those agile colored youngsters might do a lot for the [St. Joseph High School] Bears' basketball fortunes."

Some would cite St. Joseph's exclusivity for the demolition in 1972 of

Silver Beach, the area's largest amusement park. Silver Beach, located in St. Joseph at the mouth of the St. Joseph River, drew the young and active from both sides of the river. Next to the midway was a sandy beach where children would romp in the cold Lake Michigan surf. Pretense faded away at both the beach and the midway. The roller coaster was a social leveler. Terror—even when artificial—breaks down boundaries. As beach-goers peeled off their jeans and tee shirts, they removed a layer of armor and bared their human vulnerability. The demise of Silver Beach further limited the opportunity for social contact between blacks and whites.

What contact remains has been marked by suspicion and, too often, by violence. The case of Eric McGinnis is but one instance that gives rise to suspicions and perceptions that break along racial boundaries. In 1998, the *South Bend Tribune* published an account of Eric McGinnis's classmates in the Benton Harbor class of 1993. Within five years of high school graduation, reported staff writer Julie A. Swidwa, five of the 142 students surveyed had died violently: three from gunshot wounds, one from stab wounds, and another from a beating. Not a single 1993 Benton Harbor High School graduate lives in St. Joseph. Sadly, the separation symbolized by the St. Joseph River runs through much of America's social landscape. Like the responses to the O.J. Simpson verdict and to the beating of Rodney King, the responses to Eric McGinnis's death from each side of the river point to worldviews appallingly out of synch.

The daily contact I had with my Vietnamese student pilots disappeared years ago. There were a few letters. Hoa did go home, and managed somehow to survive a few combat missions before the South was completely overrun. In the early eighties, Hoa wrote from the Galang Refugee Camp. I helped him obtain sponsorship, and he immigrated to America, at last escaping that war. Despite his previous experience in America, he struggled for years to find his place, first in odd jobs and then in a failed attempt to become a commercial pilot. Finally, he drew upon his medical training to become a physical therapist. He lives in Philadelphia, where he provides physical rehabilitation to victims of inner city violence, mostly black men in their late teens and early twenties. He has applied for U.S. citizenship.

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