



ON THE GROUND

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AUTHOR'S INSTRUCTIONS: "READ THIS OUT LOUD!"

From the time I took my first *Introduction to Sociology* course—spring semester 2010, at Community College of Philadelphia—I have reflected on how my identities were created and influenced by, or were in reaction to, social forces. I came into this world on the first wedding anniversary of my parents, Leonard Clark and Erma Lee Williams Clark. My father was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and my mother, in Toledo, Ohio. In the early 1950s, they were a young, Negro, working-class couple, attempting to make a life in the big city of Chicago, Illinois. But they were not alone. I don't know the chronology of when their extended family members arrived, but I did have grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins in the city. My sister and three brothers arrived on the scene within a twelve-year period. I was too young to fully appreciate what was going on in the world when President John F. Kennedy was shot on November 22, 1963. I had my hands full with sibling rivalries; with rats, roaches and Raid, in south-side and west-side ghetto apartments; with overworked, underpaid parents; with prejudiced parochial and public school teachers; with questions about the legitimacy of Roman Catholicism and the Church; and with my pre-adolescent maturation.

My purview expanded with news of the Civil Rights Movement, and the arrival of the Beatles. Assassinations of beloved leaders, civil uprisings, police shootings in Chicago and around the nation, and the neo-Nazi Party in the western suburbs. We were all "fit-to-be-tied," as the saying goes. My parents didn't want to let their children—especially the boys—out of their sight. Fear was the daily bread. Anxiety was the milk. There was so much for me to learn about how to survive, and I was very inquisitive, which sometimes annoyed my mother to no end.

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was invited to add his voice and presence to the 1966 campaign for fair housing in Chicago, I wanted so much to be there, among the throng. But my parents wouldn't hear it! So I had to satisfy myself with television, radio, and newspaper reportage. After King left Chicago, I took public transportation west to Marquette Park, the "conflict zone," to see the Brown Shirts for myself, as they handed out literature and petitioned the residents to keep outsiders out of their neighborhoods. I stayed on the bus and watched them through the window. When I rode back to my community, I could barely walk home. Housing segregation was then what gentrification is today: a diabolical tool of social control for power and profit.

I came of age during the great social and political agitations of the 1960s and 1970s. Black power, feminism, gay liberation, resistance to war, global indigenous sovereignty, anti-imperialism, environmental justice, and ecology forged in me complex and multifaceted identities. Today I walk with awareness of the great tribulations and sacrifices endured by my parents, my ancestors, and by contemporaneous peoples determined to recover and reclaim their/our wholeness/oneness. I also walk with how sensitive and outraged I have become to indifference, justified brutality, and rapacious sociopathy.

While I embrace what appears to be the relative privilege of seeking more education—a kind of vision quest—I struggle with this question: How can I turn what I learn into something of value? What can I contribute to the body politic? Through personal scholarship, occasionally provocative discourse, and exhilarating student collaborations in *Making Effective Change: Social Movement Organizing and Activism*, I am reminded that the Authentic Self matters. We need each other's respect, compassion, empathy, and candor to foster real, substantive change.

To the Evergreen classroom and community, I bring all I am and all I hope to be. I bring the fears and realities of economic, housing, and food insecurity. I bring the anxieties about being unseen, unheard, and dismissed. The canary that is my spirit is battered and bruised; and although my soul is bone-weary, I am not yet dead. Over the years, many family, friends, and acquaintances have been stricken down by cancer, suicide, AIDS, or random—and particular—acts of violence, but I have survived. And in continuing, it is my job—indeed, my responsibility—to share, encourage, and provide passionate, visceral testimony to life.

ABOUT THIS WRITING

A version of “On the Ground” was one of the winners of The Evergreen State College 2013 Academic Statement Essay Contest. Learn more about the Academic Statement initiative at Evergreen at <http://www.evergreen.edu/academicstatement>.