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Simple, Not Easy: Reflections on Community, Social Responsibility and Tolerance
Parkhurst Brothers
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It's perhaps too easy, in this day and age of omnipresent brain candy, to pass by a title like this one; it looks like work. The cover reminds that its author, Terrence Roberts, is one of the Little Rock Nine, nine courageous African-American students who volunteered to be the first to integrate Little Rock's Central High School in 1957 under the limited (in the sense that Army personnel did not enter the gym or the classroom) protection of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division, and who endured a year of daily hostility and abuse. Roberts went on to become a psychologist, educator, and speaker.

The title, like Roberts' essays, states things directly. Its seriousness notwithstanding, Roberts' writing is the kind of writing that goes down easy; which introduces a curious, confident, and compassionate intelligence; and which enlivens the mind and spirit with the possibility of courage and clear sight.

In this collection of twenty-nine short essays and speeches, Roberts covers a variety of topics: racism and other divisions; the importance of building community and relationships; cross-cultural issues; public figures, including letters to Senator and President-elect Barack Obama; the history of his experience at Central High School; and above all, the value of education and keeping one's mind open to learning and possibility. The topics themselves are interconnected, but they are further tied together here by Roberts' voice and world view.

Roberts sets a conversational tone—indeed, he chafes a bit in the preface at the limitations that a book's format imposes on his true goal: building a thinking relationship with the reader—and his voice is clear, composed, and in his words, "dripping sweet reason" into the various social wounds and misapprehensions from which we suffer. He is not afraid to bust open a myth or two—the social constructs of race and race prejudice and our national mythological narrative of meritocracy chief among them—and he does so in a way that invites reading and reflection.

Inviting reading and reflection on beliefs which are strongly held, or for which one has

suffered, is one of the most difficult tasks for a writer or an advocate; it is all too easy to slip into stridency or a faintly superior tone. But Roberts seems to have developed a near miraculous talent for truth-telling in an accessible voice. This is not, however, a writer who hesitates to say what he thinks, either in print or in person. In one passage, he describes speaking with a group of bored eighth-graders who would rather be somewhere else. When they admit this to Roberts, whose appetite for and commitment to learning is paramount, he tells them, to their astonishment, "You are all cowards."

This kind of confrontation is made tolerable by the fact that it is rooted in a wish to strengthen community, and the knowledge that Roberts himself has risked much, and continues to risk, in order to learn. His early experience of testing the nation's commitment to Brown vs. the Board of Education is part of a lifelong pattern of testing limits and commitment, and his survival of the experience left him both with some sobering lessons ("people do what they wish to do when they have the power to do so") and a real belief in the underlying power of love in our lives, even in harrowing situations. The Little Rock Nine were urged, by Dr. Martin Luther King, to adopt a non-violent approach to their experience at Central High School. In his formative years, on a daily basis, Roberts was challenging history, not only in the form of its segregationist policies, but also in the age-old human default mode of a violent response to violence.

The very fact of his adoption of nonviolence at the age of sixteen in the face of institutionalized violence gives pause. How many of us could do the same? But Roberts does not rest on his past; rather, he uses it to illustrate his views on education, love, responsibility, and possibility, and to invite continued dialogue on how we shall use our gifts. Here is the song of, as D.H. Lawrence might say, a man who has come through, and his experience lends authenticity to his voice.

He is one of us, but is also alert to "craziness"; he recounts the sometimes apologetic mid-life approaches of his former tormentors with clarity and compassion; he leaves room for people to be who they are, but he has no patience for cowards. Always, he is passionate about learning, about taking advantage of the numerous opportunities life offers for expanding and refining the mind. His speeches are often directed to young people, but his message serves older adults as well: "Life at its best is about learning how to be the best you can be," or "Even under the most adverse circumstances, we can choose to learn…You will, no doubt, be forced out of your comfort zone. But count that as a valuable happenstance. If you continue to reside in the center of the cocoon you have spun for yourself, very little growth can occur."

Self-described as "alternately dismayed and delighted" with the state of things, he communicates both feelings clearly. There is no doubt that the US continues to avoid looking the dynamics of oppression in the eye: "The elite among us seem to enjoy playing giant games

of let's you and him fight; and many at the lower ends of the socioeconomic ladder lack the sophistication to even know they are pawns in the game." At the same time, over and over he sends a message of hope and possibility—and determination. Keep learning. Commit yourself to helping others learn, to creating a world in which unnatural and unfair obstacles to learning and developing are removed.

These essays will leave readers wondering: was it a divine accident that brought the events in Little Rock and this remarkable mind together, or were the events in Central High School the catalyst that created this spirit? Is Roberts a rare person; or is he an example of what any of us might do, if we responded positively to an opportunity to risk and stretch? No doubt Roberts would challenge us to try and find out.

This is America's best thinking, focusing on what is possible, embracing difference ("Difference simply is. There is nothing one need do to make difference palatable," he says), urging the nation to live up to its ideals, and encountering life and education as an exciting adventure, from a mind forged in the fire of one of its most insidious maladies—racism—and tempered with intelligence, a sure sense of identity, and a confidence that he belongs.

Roberts' commitment, as an educator, is to "dispel myth and uphold the truth as [he] know[s] it." His talent is to make the truth seem nourishing and perfectly reasonable. And so it is.

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