

They Said Things To Him They Never Said To Me

A few days ago, I received a phone call from a man I had not spoken to in almost sixty years.

We were classmates once. Then life happened.

Families.

Careers.

Children.

Grandchildren.

Funerals.

Weddings.

The ordinary passage of time that somehow feels impossible until you wake up one morning and realize you are eighty years old.

He called because he had attended a wedding in Florida.

Nothing unusual about that.

What was unusual was what happened at his table.

He found himself seated with several veteran journalists from Washington — people who had covered the White House, network news, and national politics. At some point my name came up in conversation.

For the next half hour, according to him, they talked about me.

Not to me.

About me.

That distinction matters.

Because the truth is that many of us spend our lives hearing criticism directly and praise secondhand.

The criticism always arrives on time.

The praise often travels a much longer route.

As he described the conversation, I found myself thinking about something that had happened throughout my career.

I would walk into a room and people already knew who I was.

Not because I was famous.

Because I was often the only Black network cameraman in places where Black network cameramen simply did not exist.

People knew my name before I arrived.

People had opinions before I arrived.

People had stories before I arrived.

Sometimes that worked against me.

Sometimes it worked for me.

But it was always there.

At one point in our conversation I said something that surprised even me.

I told him:

“They said things to you that they would never have said to me out loud.”

The moment those words left my mouth, I knew they were true.

Not because people were dishonest.

Because that is often how life works.

The people around you know what your work meant long before you do.

You are too busy doing the work to measure its impact. You are too busy meeting deadlines, solving problems, carrying equipment, making payroll, raising children, paying mortgages, and surviving whatever battle is in front of you.

You rarely get to stand back and see the full picture.

Other people do.

That conversation drifted where conversations between old friends often drift.

We talked about Baltimore.

Not the Baltimore of television.

The real Baltimore.

The one we actually knew.

The city that produced lawyers, judges, teachers, doctors, journalists, ministers, entrepreneurs, and public servants.

The city that raised generations of Black men and women who believed education mattered.

The city of Morgan, Coppin, City, Poly, Douglass, Carver, and Booker T.

The city of church basements, Sunday school classes, neighborhood mentors, and adults who quietly watched over children who were not their own.

The city before everyone became a statistic.

The city before every story became a crime story.

At one point we talked about The Wire.

His mother hated it.

Not because it was false.

Because it was incomplete.

The stories were real. The people existed. The suffering existed. The corruption existed. The violence existed.

But so did everything else.

The teachers existed. The lawyers existed. The judges existed. The doctors existed. The families existed. The neighborhoods existed. The Black excellence existed.

The problem is not that one story was told.

The problem is that only one story was told.

A city is never only its wounds.

It is also its builders.

As we talked, story after story surfaced from a world that seems almost impossible now.

A family doctor who remembered your mother. A lawyer who knew your grandfather. A congressman who once got chased out of a basement for smoking. A tailor who quietly helped a neighborhood kid.

People connected to each other in ways nobody bothered to explain when we were young because nobody thought the connections were unusual.

Only later did we realize how extraordinary those networks really were.

The older I get, the more I understand that we often grow up without knowing who we are.

Not because we lack identity.

Because we lack perspective.

My grandfather taught Sunday school at Ames Church. I did not know what that meant until after he died.

My mother married thousands of couples at City Hall. I did not understand why strangers smiled when they saw her on the street until years later. They were not responding to her. They were responding to one of the happiest memories of their lives.

That realization changes how you see the world.

It changes how you measure success.

Success is not always money.

Success is not always titles.

Success is not always awards.

Sometimes success is simply this:

Sixty years pass.

A man sits at a table hundreds of miles away.

Your name comes up.

People smile.

And the story they tell is a good one.

If that happens, then maybe you did something right.

Maybe the work mattered.

Maybe the example mattered.

Maybe the effort mattered.

And maybe, just maybe, the things people say about us after we leave the room are the truest measure of the lives we lived.

— **Robert Tutman**

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