The Right Kind of Father

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Most of the tributes to former Oakland Tribune editor and publisher Robert C. Maynard, who died Tuesday of cancer at 56, dwell on the lasting difference he made in opening up U.S. newsrooms to minority journalists.

That would justly make Maynard proud. He himself had blazed the way to the eminence where, as the first black owner of a major general-circulation daily he could command a hearing for this cause.

A bare dozen years after quitting high school to write for a black weekly, he earned a prized journalism fellowship to Harvard. His brilliant newsroom career brought him credibility when he told editors and publishers they were both doing wrong and wasting talent in failing to hunt out promising minority reporters. Most got the message.

News & Observer readers, however, knew Maynard best as a syndicated columnist. Here too he will be hard to replace, for he had a gift unique among current pundits for shrinking massive problems to family size.

Of the scores of Maynard columns this newspaper carried, probably half began with some homely anecdote—a child’s dinner-table question, a saying from his Barbados-immigrant mother. He taught his three children and his many readers that today’s issues are neither too new nor too complex to yield to old, tested, honorable tools and measures.

Through his writing on matters as widely various as Japanese trade, teen pregnancy and urban riots ran a single strong, enduring theme: the need for individuals, families and communities to take responsibility.

His own family has suffered a great loss in the death of Bob Maynard, who seemed to represent the best meaning of the word “fatherly”—exemplar, teacher, guide and friend. In our degree so have we all.
November 23, 1980—These are days of universal remembrance. Where were you on that day in 1963 when you heard that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas? Everyone who remembers at all remembers that day.

For me, it is a dual memory. The first president for whom I voted was killed. But something else happened that day, an event that marks for me the point between two Americas. There had been the old Jim Crow America with the “white” and “colored” signs in the washrooms and other subtler signals of segregation.

As I entered adulthood and the newspaper business, those barriers were falling, but the pace then was slow. One of the problems posed by that slow transition is that some things were open to blacks (we all said Negro then) and some things were not. Often, you only found out by challenging the barrier. That could pose the risk of physical pain sometimes, emotional pain every time. Being turned away from a restaurant on a hungry night always took a little slice out of your soul.

But I am getting ahead of my story.

Coping with the shock of that day had been difficult for us in the little town of York, Pennsylvania, where I was trained as a journalist. The story coming over the wire would not have been believable if it were not for the television to make it seem somehow more real. Finally, a little after midnight, the newspaper came out. It was confirmed in black and white. We stood around staring at the newspaper. Nobody wanted to go home.

My boss of that time was an adventurer, an editor who played a mean game of tennis every day and who guided his institution on the general theory that the editor edits best who edits least. But he cared passionately about every line in the newspaper and he vented his Irish wrath on more than one hapless soul who forgot the main Higgins rule: “People first. Everything else comes after people.”

Higgins simply could not go home that night. (John F. Kennedy had been his Harvard classmate.)

“Listen,” he said, “I know this place in Baltimore. It’s got great
Greek food and fantastic belly dancers. It's just the thing to pull us out of this mood.

We were on the sidewalk outside the offices of the York Gazette and Daily. It was a few minutes past midnight. The chill of the night was nothing compared to the chill that came from thinking of a president shot dead. We walked in silence to the parking lot across the street. "I will do us both good to get our minds off this," said Higgins.

"Jim, do you realize you are inviting me to a nightclub that does not serve Negroes? You're putting me on."

The law on public accommodations was in a peculiar state at that time. In theory, the days when restaurant owners could publicly announce "white only" service was over. The law was shifting toward the position that public accommodation meant just that. But not all establishments obeyed that law in 1963 and many usedsubterfuges, as Jim Higgins and I would learn on the night of Nov 22-23, 1963.

The first sign of trouble came when the headwaiter seated 10 people who came in after us and left us standing by the entryway, craning our necks to see the dancers. The dancers were having a good time not remembering, as I remember. Warm and sensuous aromas came from the kitchen. Higgins and I remained by the door.

Perhaps 10 minutes passed. The headwaiter asked us what we wanted. Higgins said we wanted a table. The headwaiter said he had none. We pointed in unison to an empty one not 10 feet away.

"That one is reserved," said the headwaiter.

"For whom?" asked Higgins.

"For a member of the club," said the headwaiter.

"What club?" asked Higgins.

"Oh, didn't you know? This is a private club. Members only," said the headwaiter.

All this was taking place in hoarse whispers by the door. Just then, Higgins spied a man he knew from York. He bolted from our tight little circle and walked up to the table. "Hey, man," said Higgins, "you a member of this club?" The man looked blank. "Club?"

The headwaiter maintained it was a club now, even though it wasn’t when Higgins had been there the week before, and even though that man sitting over there did not remember that he joined that night.

"Just tonight? He joined tonight?"
"Yes," said the headwaiter, "just tonight."
"Terrific. We want to join tonight."
"Oh, sorry," said the headwaiter. "You can't. Not tonight."
"Why not tonight? You just said the guy over there joined tonight."
"But it is too late to join tonight."
"But he just joined tonight."
"Yes but you see, the president is gone."
"The president is gone?"
"Yes. Only our president can make you a member and he has gone home for the evening. Sorry."

Higgins exploded: "If you still have a president, you are lucky. We lost ours tonight. So fine, we will wait for your president. We won't leave. Call your president." And before another word was said, we were sitting at that empty table "reserved for a member."

The Baltimore City Police Department arrived in five minutes. As I saw the swarm of blue uniforms coming through the door, I asked Higgins if he wanted to take another minute and review our position as journalists about to make news. He said he didn't give a damn. I said, fine. I was just a reporter.

The owner emptied the joint. The last patron out called over his shoulder in a foreign language that he couldn't wait to compensate us for the inconvenience. One of the belly dancers said she was sorry, that it wasn't fair. Then she left. Soon, it was the two of us, the headwaiter and the policemen. Then all but one of the policemen left. The one who remained said he could do nothing for us or against us. He left. The owner appeared, a short and dapper man who said we had ruined his establishment and we would be called to account shortly. Then he left. The headwaiter said he might as well go and get his topcoat.

We had the joint to ourselves with nothing to eat or drink and no music or dancers.

"I guess we should go," I said to Higgins.
"There's a mob of men out there," he said.

We decided we might as well go and face it. We came to the front door and a roar went up from across the street. There stood perhaps 25 angry patrons. As we moved toward the corner, the mob moved behind us and the curses sounded closer and more sincere.

When we reached the corner, we encountered the last officer to leave the establishment. "I'm sorry you gentlemen didn't have a

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	nicer evening in Baltimore," he said, "but I hope you'll come back some time and give us another chance." With that, he made an odd gesture. He tipped his cap to us.

At the tip of the officer's cap, 50 sets of headlights came on at once. Uniformed police officers appeared from the rooftops and out of cellar windows, or so it seemed at the time. They surrounded us and marched us to my car. They escorted us until we were miles away.

Anyway, said Higgins, it was a nice drive.
Reconciliation Struggle

July 9, 1992—The children and I were talking at dinner. The subject was the days of my youth. They always want to know about the world when Dad was their age. What did people wear, eat, think and do in those ancient times? They cannot, of course, imagine a time before hip-hop music, high-top fads, hairstyles and color television.

There were deeper differences than those I tell them of: the days of rigid racial segregation, drinking fountains, rest rooms and restaurants for white people only. “That’s unreal,” the littlest one says. They read of such things in their history books, but it is something else to know someone who can speak of such times from his personal experience.

Outrageous as they find those times, they think about racial issues differently from the way my generation thought of them. My children’s generation does not necessarily find that integration is the answer my generation thought it was. For us, the remedy for segregation was to make a world where white people and black people shared everything. We wanted all the schools open to all people. The prevailing doctrine of that time was that if white people and black people were made equal before the law, the problems that came from racial division could eventually be healed.

My children’s generation has a different idea. They do not feel that same imperative. They believe they have a right of equal access to those things available to every other American. No question about that. But do they believe the solution to the problem of racism lies in people of all colors living, working and playing together? Well, yes and no. They think that if people can get along and respect each other, that’s fine. But if a white person cannot respect them, they do not feel the need to be around that person or, more important, to have that person around them.

As we approach a presidential election, the issue of race will arise again, as it inevitably does in our quadrennial debate about our destiny. In the past, it has been common to discuss the views of the African-American community as if it were a monolith, speaking with a single voice. As I listen to those of my children’s generation, I am keenly aware that is not necessarily true. There are growing
generational differences in the attitudes of peoples of color toward the matter of race.

Where my generation placed a high premium on the importance of integration, my children's generation cares more about cultural identity and the right to express one's feelings openly and honestly, "whether other people like it or not," as one young man put it to me not so long ago.

In such a circumstance, our political leaders should be very careful this time around. They should be sure about whom they are speaking when they address the important issues of the concerns of the black community. I have become convinced there are deep generational fissures running through this nation today. No place are those divisions more evident than between generations in the black communities.

I think the basic issues of dignity and equal opportunity are still of abiding concern, as they have been for the past half-century. How those issues are expressed, however, is changing with the changing character of a different generation whose experiences are as different as be-bop and hip-hop.

Bridging those differences will be as much of a challenge in some instances as bridging the differences of race that still plague this nation. The danger lies in assuming that race alone determines attitude. Age has a great deal to do with the challenges we face in healing a society that has been riddled with deep divisions over the last few years. In our house, we find ourselves constantly fascinated by the great amount we can learn from each other. We find ourselves constantly referring back to that important bit of wisdom from author Stephen R. Covey "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."