

COMMENTARY / CULTURE

Birthday “Confession” of an Imperfect Man!

Terry Howard

Ever have one of those moments when something comes to you leaving you grappling with, “what do I do with this?” When that happens you’re often left with a gut feeling that there’s something here that may benefit someone if you pass it along. Well, here’s one I got from “Troy” who just celebrated his birthday:

“I’ve officially been walking on this rock for 55 years, met my weight loss goal and developed arthritis in my neck and lower back.

I’ve broken hearts more than I’ve had my heart broken. I’ve had great friends who turned out to be enemies, and enemies who are now great friends. I may have lied a little, drank a bit too much, smoked, dabbled in a little “chemistry,” been in fights, been arrested, shot at, gone to jail, wrecked a few cars, been kicked out of some bad places and welcomed into a few good ones (but I had a praying mother who I owe more than I could ever pay back).

I’ve been betrayed, lied to, reported, fired, disappointed, angered and sad-

dened by family and so-called friends. I have stolen and had things stolen from me. I’ve been beaten over the head with religion, saved too many times to count by His grace, sinned more than I could ever admit here, repented, backslid, shook my fist in anger at God, been on my knees begging for forgiveness and His help, disillusioned by religion (the actions of man) but have remained steadfast in the belief of a designed plan (my spirituality is yet undefined).

I find comfort in darkness but continue to seek light. I do grown man stuff, but deep inside I’m still the comic book nerd with a whimsical imagination. I’ve lusted and been lusted after, been famous and infamous. I’ve hated and been hated, and never truly understood love until a woman stayed by my side as I faced Stage 4 cancer and staring death in the eye, even after I’d pissed her off for the umpteenth time.

I’m the biological father of three amazing, very distinctly different kids, the father-figure to a countless number of kids I’ve coached or mentored over the years. I’ve also been the reason a few (maybe more) young women had to make a difficult life or death decision (for that, I am truly sorry), but also a dad to someone I believed was my biological child, only to find out that he wasn’t.

I’m the guy who stayed on the phone with a suicidal person for seven hours convincing them that they had a reason to live. I’ve had some who have wanted to take my life (including me) that tried and failed (yeah, me and death have gone a few rounds, but I’m still here).

I have a heaping pile of “survivor’s guilt” that occasionally weighs heavy on my heart. So much so that when I hear of someone’s passing, especially from cancer, I sometimes look to the heavens and ask, “Why me? Why did I get saved?”

I’m an introvert hiding in an extrovert’s psyche. There are only two people that truly know and have known me the most. I trust them enough to allow them to figure me out, even though there may not be enough lifetime to actually do it. I’m married to one, and unfortunately, COVID took the other. But I know his



spirit visits me, challenges me to listen to my better angels and ignore my worst demons. God help him if he’s actually been assigned as my guardian angel.

I’m a loner but belong to several affiliations. I may seem to conform, but in my own way I’m a maverick, work best when I’m flying by the seat of my pants or find myself in chaos. Yet I tend to like things uncluttered and am a perfectionist about particular things but not all things. My desk is organized chaos.

I love all kinds of music. Even some country. Now that I’m older, bluegrass makes me feel nostalgic (I am a Kentucky-Tennessee hybrid after all). You may just as soon hear me bumping Public Enemy, Prince, AC/DC, or Charlie Daniels.

I have “mommy issues” and “daddy issues,” but I love both my parents, just not the same. I care about my family who I would be there for in a heartbeat if they needed me. Same for my close friends (some of whom don’t know I consider them that). I will become evil

incarnate to anyone who hurts my wife or kids. Yet, I’m a harmless little fuzz ball if I and mine are treated well.

If you have managed to get to this point in my birthday flow of consciousness, you have been rewarded with the peeling of a few layers of the onion that is me. Why did I choose to do this? It’s high time for me to stop being so walled in. I need to live and speak my truth more, whatever the consequences. My bride has worked hard for 24 years to make me more

comfortable walking in the light, leaving darkness and my old friend, well, in the dark. Thank you for the well wishes already received, and thanks in advance for those yet to come.”

Okay readers, what aspects of “Troy’s” story resonated with you, or someone you know, at some level? Now if you could somehow “rewind your (or their) clock” back, say 20 years, what would you do differently based on what you know now to shape a better result?

Just asking!

© Terry Howard is an award-winning writer and storyteller. He is a contributing writer with the Chattanooga News Chronicle, The American Diversity Report, The Douglas County Sentinel, Blackmarket.com, co-founder of the “26 Tiny Paint Brushes” writers’ guild, recipient of the 2019 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Leadership Award, and third place winner of the 2022 Georgia Press Award.

This Week in African American History**ALL BLACK TOWNS
A UNIQUE HISTORY IN OKLAHOMA**

Sponsored by Mary Walker Historical and Educational Foundation

LEARN TO READ
READ TO LEARN

The All-Black towns of Oklahoma represent a unique chapter in American history. Nowhere else, neither in the Deep South nor in the Far West, did so many African American men and women come together to create, occupy, and govern their own communities. From 1865 to 1920 African Americans created more than fifty identifiable towns and settlements, some of short duration and some still existing at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

All-Black towns grew in Indian Territory after the Civil War when the former slaves of the Five Tribes settled together for mutual protection and economic security. When the United States government forced American Indians to accept individual land allotments, most Indian “freedmen” chose land next to other African Americans. They created cohesive, prosperous farming communities that could support businesses, schools, and churches, eventually forming towns. Entrepreneurs in these communities started every imaginable kind of business, including newspapers, and advertised throughout the South for settlers. Many African Americans migrated to Oklahoma, considering it a kind of “promised land.”

When the Land Run of 1889 opened yet more “free” land to non-Indian settlement, African Americans from the Old South rushed to newly created Oklahoma. E. P. McCabe, a former state auditor of Kansas, helped found Langston and encouraged African Americans to settle in that All-Black town. To further his cause, McCabe established the Langston City Herald and circulated it, often by means of traveling agents, throughout the South. McCabe hoped that his tactics would create an African American political power block in Oklahoma Territory. Other African American leaders had a vision of an All-Black state. Although this dream was never realized, many All-Black communities sprouted and flourished in the rich topsoil of the new territory and, after 1907, the new state.

In those towns African Americans lived free from the prejudices and brutality found in other racially mixed communities of the Midwest and the South. African Americans in Oklahoma and Indian Territories would create their own communities for many reasons. Escape from discrimination and abuse would be a driving factor. All-Black settlements offered the advantage of being able to depend on neighbors for financial assistance and of having open markets for crops. Arthur Tolson, a pioneering historian of blacks in Oklahoma, asserts that many African Americans turned to “ideologies of economic advancement, self-help, and racial solidarity.”

Marshalltown, North Fork Colored, Canadian Colored, and Arkansas Colored

existed as early as the 1860s in Indian Territory. Other Indian Territory towns that no longer exist include Sanders, Mabelle, Wiley, Homer, Huttonville, Lee, and Rentie. Among the Oklahoma Territory towns no longer in existence are Lincoln, Cimarron City, Bailey, Zion, Emanuel, Udora, and Douglas. Towns that still survive are Boley, Brooksville, Clearview, Grayson, Langston, Lima, Red Bird, Rentiesville, Summit, Taft, Tatum, Tullahassee, and Vernon. The largest and most renowned of these was Boley. Booker T. Washington, nationally prominent African American educator, visited Boley twice and even submitted a positive article on the town to Outlook Magazine in 1908.

The passage of many Jim Crow laws by the Oklahoma Legislature immediately after statehood caused some African Americans to become disillusioned with the infant state. During this time Canada promoted settlement and, although the campaign focused on whites, a large contingent of African Americans relocated to that nation’s western plains, forming colonies at Amber Valley, Alberta, and Maidstone, Saskatchewan. Another exodus from Oklahoma occurred with the “Back to Africa” movements of the early twentieth century. A large group of Oklahomans joined the ill-fated Chief Sam expedition to Africa. A number of other African Americans migrated to colonies in Mexico.

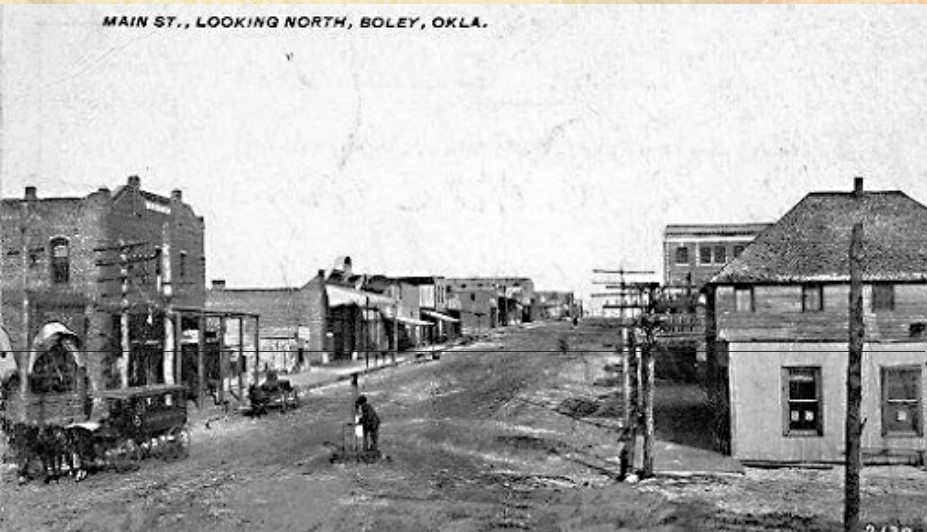
White distrust also limited the growth of these All-Black towns. As early as 1911 whites in Okfuskee County attempted to block further immigration and to force African Americans into mixed but racially segregated community’s incapable of self-support. Several of these white farmers signed oaths pledging to “never rent, lease, or sell land in Okfuskee County to any person of Negro blood, or agent of theirs; unless the land be located more than one mile from a white or Indian resident.” To further stem the black migration to eastern Oklahoma a similar oath was developed to prevent the hiring of “Negro labor.”

Events of the 1920s and 1930s spelled the end for most black communities. The All-Black towns in Oklahoma were, for the most part, small agricultural centers that gave nearby African American farmers a market. Prosperity generally depended on cotton and other crops. The Great Depression devastated these towns, forcing residents to go west and north in search of jobs. These flights from Oklahoma caused a huge population decrease in black towns.

As people left, the tax base withered, putting the towns in financial jeopardy. In the 1930s many railroads failed, isolating small towns in Oklahoma from regional and national markets. As a result, many of



Tullahassee is considered the oldest surviving All-Black town of Indian Territory



The infamous Tulsa Race Riot destroyed one of the most successful black towns in the U.S.

the black towns could not survive. During lean years whites would not extend credit to African Americans, creating an almost impossible situation for black farmers and businessmen to overcome. Even one of the most successful towns, Boley, declared

bankruptcy in 1939. Today, only thirteen historical All-Black towns still survive, but their legacy of economic and political freedom is well remembered. A fourteenth town, IXL, is new, incorporated in 2001