

## COMMENTARY / CULTURE

# On Divine Delays!



Terry Howard

Here we are 21 years later and the images of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on our nation again surface in our memories. Although our lives since then have been splintered into different directions – tragedies, triumphs, wars, you name it - we remain united by that day as a “where I was then” moment in time.

Although thousands of lives were lost at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and in the field at Shanklin, Pennsylvania, the largely untold stories are those who survived the horrors of that day.

Which takes me to a recent church service.

To make a point during his sermon, the pastor rattled off reasons why some escaped with their lives during the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center that snuffed out the lives of 2750. “Divine delays” is how he rationalized what saved them that awful morning.

Now there’s a good chance that as you read down his list of “delays,” your reactions will be no different than others in the congregation that morning. Here’s his list, perhaps the most startling nine lines you’ll read in this entire narrative:

- A person....
- missed his taxi
- went into labor and delivered a baby
- got caught in a traffic jam
- whose alarm clock was set at the wrong time
- missed his bus

- returned back home to make a phone call
- spilled food on her clothes and returned home for a change
- was late because he attended his son’s first day at kindergarten
- walked to work in new shoes, developed a blister on his foot and stopped at a pharmacy to buy Band-Aids

A short time later the towers collapsed into a nightmarish heap of concrete, steel, glass, broken bodies, and acrid smoke that permeated the air.

When the impact of his list sank in, I had a recollection of an American Airlines flight attendant I knew in Boston who missed that ill-fated Flight 93 that plowed into one of the towers because she took a sick day. I thought about an attorney relative who was traveling on business that day when one of the towers fell next to and badly damaged the building that housed her law office.

But let’s turn to a more recent personal history, specifically a frightening “near miss” moment in my life. The year was 2017.

You may recall that five years ago on August 12, 2017, hundreds of far-right extremists descended on Charlottesville, Virginia to protest the planned removal of the Robert E. Lee statue from the city’s center and clashed with police and counter protesters. The “Unite the Right” protest, as it was called, was the largest and most violent public assembly in decades, leapfrogged recently by the insurrection on January 6, 2021. Among the scores of those injured, Heather Heyer, a young paralegal, was run over and killed by an extremist.

So I arrived at the Charlottesville airport that afternoon, headed south on highway 29 and exited onto interstate 64 on my way to my hometown 33 miles west. Now had I turned to downtown Charlottesville for a bite at Mel’s Place, my favorite soul food restaurant, which I often did on previous trips, I would have run smack into the violence erupting just a few miles away. Fortunately, I had a full course breakfast before leaving Georgia.



I thought about my Charlottesville near miss after absorbing the pastor’s list of “divine delays.” Contextualizing his list, had I veered off to downtown Charlottesville, the consequences could have been, well, to say the least, dire and you may not be reading this piece.

I thought about that morning on May 3, 2021, when Scott Hudson, a long-time restaurant owner in Georgia died when a tree fell on his vehicle during a thunderstorm on a street that I’d driven down only an hour earlier. There’s not a day that I don’t think about Scott when I drive down that street enroute to the post office.

So, if you are still reeling from the pastor’s list shared at the outset and my near misses, let me add a few consequences of possible near misses in your life:

- You passed on a date with someone you would have later regretted.
- You passed on an investment “opportunity” that you learned that you would have lost lots of money on.
- Because of a schedule conflict, you missed a large gathering that turned out to be the source of a large COVID spreader.
- You were within the speed limit and, unlike others, did not get stopped and

ticketed for speeding.

- You found out that a restaurant you’d dined at a while ago received recent complaints from customers who had been food poisoned.
- You had a colonoscopy you had been putting off, one that found and removed polyps that could have developed into cancer had you waited much longer.
- The house you wanted to buy but didn’t had a problem with flooding.
- The company you applied to but did not get hired went out of business and laid everyone off.

In the end I leave you this; be grateful for those positive life-changing delays in your life and, above all, what could have but didn’t happen!

© 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

### How the Pullman Car Porters Help Shape the Black Middle Class



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LEARN TO READ READ TO LEARN

Just a few years after the Civil War, the Chicago businessman George M. Pullman began hiring thousands of African-American men—including many former slaves—to serve white passengers traveling across the country on his company’s luxury railroad sleeping cars.

While they were underpaid and overworked and endured constant racism on the job, the Pullman porters would eventually help to fuel the Great Migration, shape a new black middle class and launch the civil rights movement.

Rise of the Pullman Palace Car Company

In 1859, as the railroads were expanding their reach across America, Pullman convinced the Chicago, Alton and St. Louis Railroad to let him convert two old passenger cars into new and improved sleepers. These more comfortable, luxurious sleeping cars were an instant hit, affording wealthier passengers the amenities they were accustomed to at home and allowing middle-class travelers to enjoy a taste of the good life.

The first Pullman porter began working aboard the sleeper cars around 1867, and quickly became a fixture of the company’s sought-after traveling experience. Just as all of his specially trained conductors were white, Pullman recruited only black men, many of them from the former slave states in the South, to work as porters. Their job was to lug baggage, shine shoes, set up and clean the sleeping berths and serve passengers.

The Perfect Servants

George Pullman was open about his reasons for hiring Negro porters: He reasoned that former slaves would know best how to cater to his customers’ every whim, and they would work long hours for cheap wages. He also thought that black porters (especially those with darker skin) would be more invisible to his white upper- and middle-class passengers, making it easier for them to feel comfortable during their journey.

“He was looking for people who had been trained to be the perfect servant,” the historian Larry Tye, author of *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class*, told NPR in 2009. “He knew they would come cheap, and he paid them next to nothing. And he knew there was never a question off the train that you would be embarrassed by running into one of these Pullman porters.”

But despite the undeniable racism behind Pullman’s employment practices, he ended up giving advantages to people who desperately needed them. In the early 1900s, a time when many other businesses wouldn’t hire African Americans, the Pullman Company became the larg-

est single employer of black men in the country.

The Life of a Pullman Porter

Working as a Pullman porter became a coveted job, even a career, and many brothers, sons and grandsons of porters followed in their footsteps. Porters were paid more than what many other black workers made at the time, and the work was not backbreaking, when compared to field labor. More importantly, they got to travel the country, at a time when this was unthinkable for the vast majority of black Americans.

As Pullman porters became famous for their superior service, many former porters moved on to jobs at fine hotels and restaurants, and some even moved up to the White House. Porter J.W. Mays first served President William McKinley in his sleeping car; he would later spend more than four decades in the White House, serving McKinley and the eight presidents who followed him.

But, along with the opportunities they enjoyed, Pullman porters undoubtedly had to put up with a good deal of prejudice and disrespect. Many passengers called porters “boy” or “George,” after George Pullman, regardless of their real names. This was an uncomfortable throwback to slavery, when slaves were named after their owners.

Pullman porters often worked 400 hours a month, with little time off. While their salaries were envied in the black community, they were among the worst-paid of all train employees. Tipping was built into the pay structure, which saved the company money but encouraged porters to solicit tips, fueling their later reputation as grinning “Uncle Toms” who exaggerated their servitude to increase their tips.

Porters Form First All-Black Union

By the mid-1890s, the American Railway Union had organized most Pullman employees, but refused to include black workers, including porters. Formed in 1925, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) was organized by A. Philip Randolph, the social activist and publisher of the political and literary magazine *The Messenger*.

Due to strong opposition by the Pullman Company, Randolph and the BSCP had to fight for more than a decade before securing their first collective bargaining agreement—and the first-ever agreement between a union of black workers and a major U.S. company—in 1937. In addition to a big wage hike for porters, the agreement set a limit of 240 working hours a month.

Randolph and other BSCP figures would go on to play key roles in the civil rights movement, helping to influence



Porters Winslow (no other name available), Jean Napoleon Maurice, Sam Morgan and James Thomson (seated) get their assignments from sleeping car agent W.A. Gough.

public policy in Washington D.C. that ultimately led to passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Edgar D. Nixon, a Pullman porter and leader of the local BSCP chapter in Montgomery, Alabama, was instrumental in starting the bus boycott in that city following Rosa Parks’ arrest in December 1955. Because he was often out of town working as a porter, Nixon enlisted a young minister, Martin Luther King Jr., to organize the boycott in his absence.

Pullman Porters Legacy

While the mid-1920s marked the high point of business for the Pullman Company, the emergence of the automobile and the airplane as alternative modes of transport cut significantly into railroad business over the decades that followed. By the 1950s, passenger train service was on the decline, and in 1969 the Pullman Company ended its sleeping car service.

By then, however, the impact of Pullman porters had stretched far beyond the railroad, with lasting economic, social and cultural effects. From the beginning, porters had served as change agents for their communities, carrying new musical forms (jazz and the blues, for example) and new radical ideas from urban centers to rural areas, and from North to South. Their influence undoubtedly helped fuel the Great Migration, during which some 6 million African Americans relocated



from the South to urban regions of the North and West.

By viewing the lives of wealthier white Americans up close, Pullman porters were able to see clearly the differences between these lives and their own. Armed with this knowledge, many porters saved up money to send their children and grandchildren through college and graduate school, giving them the education and opportunities they hadn’t had themselves.

In turn, these children and grandchildren would form the nation’s growing black professional class, many of them going on to become outstanding figures in a vast array of different fields, from law (Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall), politics (San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley) and journalism (Ethel L. Payne of the *Chicago Defender*) to music (jazz pianist Oscar Peterson) and sports (Olympic track star Wilma Rudolph).