

COMMENTARY / CULTURE

On Rustic Church Pews!



If ever there was an eye-catching picture, this one fits the bill.

You see, a fellow I grew up with in a small town in Virginia posted it on Facebook. I'm not sure of its source or time, but think that maybe it was some time in the

40s or earlier. Who knows for sure.

Okay, I admit to having lost count of the number of times I've looked at it, and doing so right now. However, to get other reactions I randomly shared it with several folks for their reactions.

"What I see is a place where slaves prayed on plantations," said one.

"It reminds me of safe houses when abolitionist Harriet Tubman ventured into the South to rescue slaves," said another.

Thought another, "Wow Terry, I wonder where they worshiped during the cold winter months."

Well, as the old saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

Can you imagine when a photo like this has ever been more timely than it is today - pre-COVID, pre-Ukraine, pre-1/6 - when many long for a simpler life and reminders of how it was "back in the day"? Nostalgia is as appropriate a word as any, wouldn't you say?

When you allow old pictures, the black and white ones in particular, into the contemporary narrative they shed light on long ago stories and add perspective on stories today.

Gaze at the picture for a moment. Let it slip into the depths of your imagination. Think about it through the

prisms of our five senses; eyesight (what do you see?), hearing (what sounds do you hear?), taste (what do you taste?), touch (what do you feel?) and smell (what scents are in the air?).

Now can you imagine the folks who sat next to each other on those unvarnished pews? Little doubt that they hugged one another and knew each other's families, all by their first names.

It's no stretch of the imagination to hear the traditional give and take between the preacher and audience, the "ahum," "amen pastor," the "yes sirs," and variations punctuating the air.

The hymnals they sang from, "It's me, it's me O' Lord," have faded black covers and pages yellowed around the edges from years of use and pass downs from decade to decade.

As was the tradition, the congregation moved outside where "church ladies" had spread on picnic tables pans of fried chicken, potato salad, greens, cakes, pies and hot rolls, all made from scratch. Hot dogs and hamburgers simmered on grills. On a side table are jugs of ice-cold lemonade and grape kool aide.

Off to side are the sounds and sights of little boys and girls laughing, playing tag, tasting honeysuckle nectar, climbing trees and bruising elbows and knees. Mercuricome, Vick's Vaseline and pink band aids were never in short supply.

In the distance are the women and men outhouses, further enough away to keep swarming flies and rancid toilet smells at a distance. Within walking distance is the cemetery, the final resting place for members from times gone by.

Behind the trees the gentle sound of a flowing river, one that soaked down beginning young swimmers and submerged scores of baptisms over the years can be heard. And further back,



the choo, choo sound of an approaching train can be overheard.

That was then. Let's turn to the now.

Air conditioning in today's places of worship have made obsolete those old paper fans used to deal with summer heat of decades ago. Today worshipers have the option of watching services online in pajamas at their kitchen table.

Services today have grown into fashion shows (especially during Easter), multiple services and choirs, colorful performances and stop overs for politicians kissing babies while running for office.

Outside, parking lots accommodate the Caddies, SUVs, BMWs, and Mercedes; some lots so large that they run shuttles every 10 minutes to cart folks to the sanctuary.

Security cameras and beefy guards today are positioned to keep a wary eye out for trouble. Unlike back in the day when a rare shotgun was used to eliminate a rabid raccoon or possum, the sad truth is that places of worship nowadays are no longer immune from AR-15 carrying domestic terrorists and mentally

deranged.

Today, well-dressed folks sit next to each other but don't really know "thy neighbor." A polite "have a nice week," or "God Bless You," are about the extent of the usual exchange.

During the week, kids today spend more time on video games and less time hiking, fishing, and climbing trees in nearby woods.

Now if I'm ever fortunate enough to happen across that old church, I'll pull off the road, spray on mosquito repellent, take a seat on one of those rustic old pews, and allow my imagination to run absolutely wild.

Oh, and by the way, I'll leave my cellphone in the car!

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Being Remarkable...But, For What?

By Robin Smith

In today's culture, it's of growing importance to be remarkable. Social media is fueling this, along with the belief that one's identity is what they've done or their current behavior, not who one is created to be along with their potential.

Remarkable is defined as "worthy of attention; striking" by Merriam-Webster dictionary.

So, what do we deem as remarkable in our kids, our community, our own selves in this day? What do we give our attention and praise as striking and worthy of being replicated?

Actions we devote time to and replicate are those that reveal our values. Today, so much effort and time is centered on likes, shares, "friends," follows and comments on social media platforms. Behavior that "goes viral" establishes a notoriety among a fixed group of followers that create a pseudo-community.

Obviously, living in a virtual reality, being talked about and recognized within that same virtual community is worthy of the attention of a mass of people.

Yet is that truly remarkable? Does any of this actually add value to one's

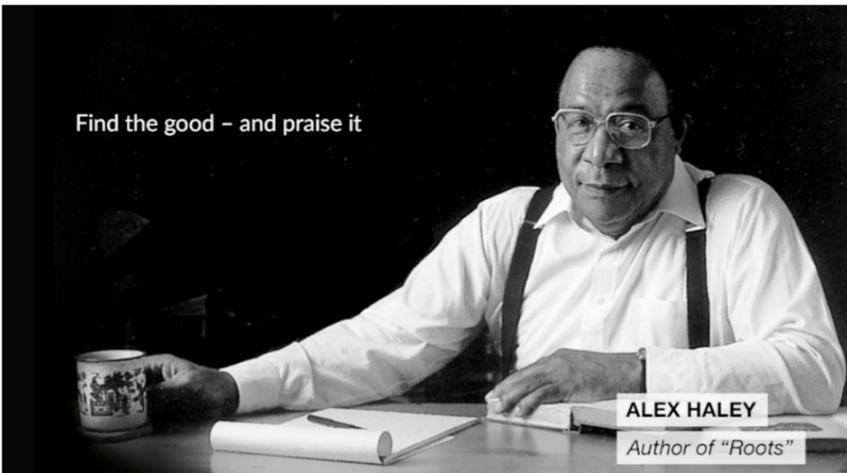
being, fulfill an authentic purpose that yields dividends in life?

Rather than achievement, the social media culture has created the desire to perform and demand praise for that performance. Remarkability is rooted in growing one's skills, intellect and capabilities to critically think for oneself, to build on successes through work and accomplishment.

In contrast, this fake community rabidly seeks public notice and manufactured praise for theatrics, sowing seeds of some imaginary existence that doesn't work in real life and has yielded a bumper crop of confused people.

Confused about their own identity, confused about what actual work is, confused about accomplishment with entitled expectations that are not realistic.

Rather than spend time and space on that which has sown confusion, let's take a moment to do as writer Alex Haley, who authored Roots: The Saga of an American Family, has heralded. Based on Ephesians 4:29 which instructs us to "...not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is



Find the good - and praise it

ALEX HALEY

Author of "Roots"

helpful for building others up..." Haley adapted a slogan: Find the good and praise it.

So, here's to the men and women who get up every single day looking to do their best; to the moms, dads, grandparents and family members who stand strong and courageous (as directed in Joshua 1) in a hostile culture to avoid the culture that has sown confusion and conflict. Here's to those who strive and work to stretch their money further than their month of bills to provide for their

families.

Here's to the parents who are determined to make a way that's better for their own kids than they had because that's what America permits, and God promises (Jeremiah 29:11). Here's praise to students who see that education is one of the critical keys on the keyring of life that opens locked doors, regardless of race, gender, or wealth.

Be remarkable by finding the good and praise that which is good, decent and grows the same.

This Week in African American History

The Clinton Desegregation Crisis (1956)



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The Clinton Desegregation Crisis of 1956 occurred at Clinton High School in Clinton Tennessee. The crisis was the result of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court which called for the desegregation of public schools across the nation. In January 1956, U.S. District Court Judge Robert L. Taylor ordered Clinton High School to desegregate during the 1956-1957 school year. Subsequently twelve African American students, later known as the Clinton Twelve, registered to attend all-white Clinton High School in the fall of that year.

White segregationists across the South vowed to block the school's desegregation and soon some of the most adamant arrived in Clinton to stage protest rallies. One of the segregationists, John Kasper, executive secretary of the Seaboard White Citizens Council, called for a mass protest meeting just before Clinton High School opened.

Nonetheless on August 26, 1956, the Clinton Twelve made history as the first African Americans to integrate a previously all-white school in the state of Tennessee. The first day of desegregation saw no incidents but on the second day the Twelve faced threats of violence from fellow students and a crowd of adults led by Kasper. In response on August 29, 1956, Judge Taylor issued a restraining order on Kasper.

Kasper ignored the order when he addressed a crowd of 1,500 people outside the school the same day. Judge Taylor then ordered U.S. Marshals to arrest him. Kasper spent a year in jail for contempt of court. While Kasper was in jail another White Citi-

zens Council leader from Birmingham, Alabama, Asa Carter, came to Clinton to continue to lead the protests.

On Labor Day weekend, September 1-2, 1956, whites rioted, overturning cars and smashing windows. Segregationists also threatened to blow up the mayor's house, the local newspaper, and the Anderson County Courthouse. Tennessee Governor Frank Clement sent 600 Tennessee National Guardsmen and 100 Highway Patrolmen to the city to restore order.

Although the violence ended, white segregationists continued to use intimidation tactics including burning crosses on the lawns of civic leaders and high school teachers. Gunfire riddled the homes of two of the Clinton Twelve and dynamite was thrown at houses and businesses in the town's African American neighborhood. Clinton High School principal David Brittain also received bomb threats, forcing him to send his family out of town for their safety. Fearing for their safety, the parents of the Clinton Twelve removed their children from the school.

On December 4, 1956, Rev. Paul Turner, a white Baptist minister, and two black men, Sidney Davis and Leo Burnett, escorted the Clinton Twelve back to Clinton High School. Afterwards a white mob attacked and severely beat Turner.

Although Clinton High School was briefly closed until December 10 in response to the attack on Turner, the African American students remained at the school. On May 17, 1957, the third anniversary of the Brown Decision, and just four months before the Little Rock school desegregation crisis



Clinton Twelve walking to Clinton High School, Tennessee, Sept. 5, 1956. Photo © Knoxville News Sentinel

began, Clinton High School senior Bobby Cain graduated. He became the first African American to graduate from a Southern school desegregated by court order. A year later, Gail Ann Epps became the first black woman to graduate from Clinton High.

Racial tensions continued however and on October 5, 1958, a bomb destroyed much of Clinton High School. The school was re-

built following a fundraising campaign led by evangelist Billy Graham, nationally syndicated columnist Drew Pearson, and local citizens. No incidents were reported after the school was rebuilt. Clinton High School would become the first major victory in the decades-long campaign to desegregate schools across the United States.