

THE ROOTS OF PARALLEL LIVES

Good things often have good antecedents, and that is the case with "Parallel Lives."

Ten years ago, Clifton Taulbert, a lecturer, businessman, and writer, published a memoir of his childhood in the small Mississippi Delta town of Glen Allan. The title, *Once Upon A Time When We Were Colored* (later shortened), made clear his intentions – warm reminiscences with a little fairy tale gloss and an ironic acceptance of a dated, and sometimes deplored term for his race. Taulbert is not in some sort of denial about the times, but he can find pleasure in recalling even such episodes as the time a touring colored minstrel show came to town.

He is explicit on the point in his introduction: "Even though segregation was a painful reality for us, there were some very good things that happened. Today I enjoy the broader society in which I live and I would never want to return to forced segregation, but I also have a deeply felt sense that important values were conveyed to me in my colored childhood, values we are in danger of losing in our integrated world. As a child, I was not only protected, but nourished, encouraged, taught and loved by people who, with no land, little money and few other resources, displayed the strength of a love which knew no measure....They are the reason I want today's world to remember an era that in our haste we might forget – that era when we were called colored."

Gene Dattel, a banker, consultant and lecturer, read Taulbert's book and realized they had grown up during the same period 30 miles apart. He wrote to Taulbert. They corresponded, talked and ultimately developed a version of their childhood stories as a presentation to audiences. Dattel's people, Jewish merchants who settled in Mississippi around the turn of the century, ran a little general store, and the two believe Taulbert's people must have shopped there. They debuted the program, "Just Two Guys From Mississippi," at New York University, then took it several other places including a synagogue in Tampa, where Humanities Council staff members saw it.

Bill Maxwell and Beverly Coyle bring a lot more to their version of *Parallel Lives* than a change of setting

to Florida and a more elegant title. Maxwell (who recalls reading Taulbert's book when it came out rather than recently) remembers the sunny side of his youth in the swimming, canoe and Dodge City escapades. In this piece and others, he shows that a poor, black family could also be a strong family with tough moral values and a respect for education. But Maxwell also adds straight-up personal accounts of experiencing brutal, ugly, incomprehensible acts of racism. He

describes how that left him an angry young man, distanced from whites, and only later able gradually to achieve some reconciliation.

Coyle brings a novelist's roaming sensibility and an evocation of girlishness, both significant enrichments of the dialogue. Both Coyle and Maxwell are talented, full-time professional writers making possible this magazine version of their successful live program. As a critic once wrote of the other William Maxwell – the old, white, Midwestern novelist and short-story writer – he works hard at getting it just right, so that our work as readers is easy.

There is one other salient difference between the original and subsequent versions. Taul-

bert and Dattel grew up in the muck of the deepest of the deep South, literally surrounded by cotton fields. Coyle and Maxwell's youths were in a more generic 1950s-60s South of small towns, churches and shopping centers. In fact – with a little introspection – most of us first-wave baby boomers could probably conjure up a version of *Parallel Lives*, albeit not quite so richly realized as Bill's and Beverly's. Bill McBride, the managing partner of the Holland and Knight law firm, works with an African-American lawyer his age. The two have discovered they grew up a few miles apart in Leesburg, and both played high-school football – on separate white and black teams, of course. Nor does one have to be from the South to participate in this exercise. I'm inclined (accompanying story on Page 31) to look up my old Minnesota schoolmate, Bob Hyde, whom I haven't seen or heard of or thought much about in more than 30 years. ■

– Rick Edmonds

