

Introduction

by James Baldwin

*Her brother's smart, he's got more sense than many.
His patience's long, but soon he won't have any.*

STEVIE WONDER, "Living for the City"

ABLACK CHILD is able to relate, though somewhat painfully, to what black people see, but he is utterly at a loss as to what it is white people see. As a black man who was once a black child, I must confess that this bewilderment does not necessarily diminish with time — for example:

Not so many years ago, I was working in a small New England town, an old, very handsome, and well-to-do town, where some very pleasant people lived. I was not, however, working for anyone in the town, and I had not brought my family with me, and the social life of the town was not so irresistible as to cause me to feel left out of it. In short, I was no problem.

There was a bomb scare during that time; that is, we were once again, monotonously, on the brink of war, and the villagers in the drugstore where I was having breakfast one morning were being very plucky. The owner, a big, good-natured man, was describing to a rapt audience what to do when the alert sounded. Relief stations had been, or were being, set up along all the roads leading out of town — stations for gas, food, milk, first aid, et cetera — and each citizen was to leap into his car, with his family, of course, and take the road to which he had already been assigned. Each citizen was to take as little as possi-

ble with him. I listened with an altogether intelligent wonder and did not increase my popularity in that town by asking, during a charged, patriotic pause: "What makes you think there'll be any roads?"

Or: a girl I knew, who lived on East 72nd Street, had a bomb shelter in her basement — a private one, her family had built it — and it was stocked with goodies from here to eternity, and it could hold fifty people. She and her father had made up a list of the people who should be saved, and I was one of them. When the siren sounded, I was to leave my Horatio Street apartment immediately, with the overnight bag I was always to have in readiness, leap into the nearest taxi, and drive straight to her house where drink and good food and good company would be awaiting me — like, forever. I told her I didn't know the other forty-nine people.

I am not trying to be outrageous. I am edging myself obliquely into Mr. Campbell's book by forcing on my own attention, again, the fact that Americans are, among other things, ridiculous, and this quality proves that they have some of the more endearing human qualities. Well, this is not quite enough for love, just as the fact that they are blind is not enough for forgiveness. It is not always easy for a black man to remember that Americans are human. Many a black child never finds this out, or when he finds it out, it merely increases his hatred. A twenty-three-year-old black sailor went berserk somewhere in America not long ago, killed a couple of people, and got wasted himself; the news report I read said that this had come about because this one-time honor student, after having joined the navy, "*somehow*" (italics mine) began to hate white people. (His mother, to no avail, attempted to bring light into this darkness: her son, she said, just wanted to be a man.) There was a photograph of the boy from high school, when he was about eighteen, bright, smiling, eager, ready to embrace the world. By the time I saw the photograph, he was twenty-three, and dead.

Many of our children are mowed down very much sooner — even before they have "somehow" learned to hate. And this destruction is not accidental. It is deliberate. I will not go so far as to say that this destruction is accomplished by wicked people, for that is much too easy. But, for the victim, certainly — and to go no further than that — the distinction between a wicked person and a wicked result is not worth making. If one's son, or brother, for example, is a junkie, and one knows that this is a result of the demoralization he encountered in the ghetto school, it does not matter that this result was accomplished by upright Jews and Christians, good white Americans all, who meant the child no harm. The harm is done. And once the harm is done, it is very hard to believe that the harm was not intended. The harm done to black children in the ghetto schools operates, in any event, to reinforce the power held by white people in this country. The ghetto operates to guarantee that very few black children — certainly not the bulk of them — will ever gain the authority or the means to challenge this power.

It is the school that makes vivid to the child his helpless inferiority. It does this by having no respect whatever for the child's experience. Until the child gets to school, his circumstances, however wretched in appearance, however hard in fact, are coherent: in school he discovers that these circumstances are also shameful, so shameful that no one wishes to hear anything about them. He talks the way he has talked since he learned to talk, the way everyone around him talks: suddenly it is all wrong. He wonders what his aunt would think of his teacher; then he wonders what his teacher would think of his aunt. She would think the same thing that she thinks of him. He is colored, that is why he is so lazy. Or he is lazy, that is why he is so colored? The school assures him, anyway, that he deserves his condition. It is in school that he learns that if he had not been brought to America, he would still be a savage, in Africa. (Savage? Africa?) He learns that — in spite of his journey to

America — he has never been a poet or an inventor or a composer or a statesman. He will learn nothing of black artisans, architects, clockmakers, or inventors. He may be given a dim sketch of Matt Henson as a kind of polar Gunga Din, but he will learn nothing, or worse than nothing, of Frederick Douglass, or of his involvement with John Brown; indeed, if he hears of John Brown at all, he will be told that he was a fanatic, who deserved to hang — the proof being that the slaves have been set free. (*He, the child, is proof of that!*) He will learn nothing of Alexander Pushkin or Alexandre Dumas or Ira Aldridge or Bert Williams or Paul Robeson. He will be told something about Booker T. Washington, who will not attract him, and George Washington Carver, who will attract him even less.

He will not be told that the wealth of Mississippi, as well as the wealth of Massachusetts, was created by his labor, that his forefathers lined the railroad track and then stoked the train engines and drove the trains over these same tracks, to carry the fruit of *their* labor to market. Neither will he be told that the millions of dollars amassed by Tin Pan Alley were almost all stolen from black people, hence stolen from him. (He will learn nothing about Bessie Smith.) *He* never had anything worth stealing — that is what he learns in school. He is told that he was born without any inheritance at all, and now he can never have one, unless and until he makes himself ready. Ready? How? For what? When the school is finished with him — or he with the school, which comes to the same thing — he is ready for the streets, the needle, the jail, the army, the garment center, ready to be used in nearly any way whatever, always assuming that white people — for that is absolutely all that Americans are to him by now: white people — have any use for him at all.

There is a brutal efficiency in the means, to say nothing of the speed, with which this debasement is accomplished: such miracles of efficiency cannot be accomplished by people who do not know what they are doing. They can, however, blind themselves to what they are doing, and to such an extent, indeed,

that many of those most responsible for this devastation are perpetually suggesting ways of aiding the “disadvantaged”: “I weep for you,” the Walrus said: “I deeply sympathize.”

This liberal sympathy — for I have never met a Northern school teacher who did not claim to be a liberal — is rarely equal to the dry-eyed task of teaching. I know that a good teacher is rare. I also know that they are not as rare as all that — I am a survivor of the ghetto school — and that their rarity is not the problem. The problem is that they are deliberately made rare and relentlessly weeded out. This process is also efficient, and it, too, operates on a level which absolves any particular individual of personal responsibility.

Children are probably the toughest and the most fragile human beings in the world, and, bar none, the most important. They are also the most exasperating, cunning, devious, self-centered, ruthless, unpredictable, and exhausting people in the world; a hard day’s work in the mines can be less grueling than walking a child through the park. The reason, for me anyway, that a child is so difficult and so valuable — sacred, really — is that while it is virtually impossible to fool a child, it is very easy to betray him.

Children, for example, do not believe in Santa Claus for very long, and without our testimony, neither could nor would have believed in him at all. The belief in Santa Claus is nothing more than an opportunity for the child to exercise his imagination, an opportunity, in fact, to play games with us. The child lets go of Santa Claus without a qualm since, after all, *we* are Santa Claus, and he knew that all along. He is very smug and happy to have so shrewdly seen through his elders — one of the complex of reasons that he does not immediately make public his discovery. He waits, as it were, to see if *we* are as smart as *he* is. The point is, however, that *we* are there, and as long as *we* are there, who needs Santa Claus?

And if *we* are *not* there, Who needs Santa Claus? For, on the

other hand, if you promise a child that you will see him at a certain hour, on a certain day, everything in the child concentrates and hurls itself forward into that day and hour: if you do not keep your promise, the child begins to get lost. If you tell a child that he need only pray to God for something he deeply desires and that God will answer his prayer, the child will believe you; he will take you at your word. And if the child prays and his prayer is not answered, it is not God whom he will reproach, for it is not God who has betrayed him. He can live without God, as he can live without Santa Claus; a child can live on astoundingly little, but he cannot live without love.

It is very difficult to avoid making the child the vehicle, if not the extension, of our fantasies and terrors: many of us, after all, are very poorly equipped to give love, partly because so many of us did not, at our beginnings, receive it. One must always attempt to tell a child the truth. But one cannot do this without telling oneself the truth. A child imagines that there is such a thing as the truth, as palpable as the hand he is holding, but we know better and must attempt to prepare him for that threshold. We know, too, as he does not, that there *is* such a thing as a lie. But, in a child's world, a lie is absolute and his imagination has no defense against it. He would rather that the hand had struck him, for a blow, at least, is real.

Most adults, including you and me, can be fooled very easily. We really prefer to be fooled a great deal of the time because we wish to be reassured as to where the boundaries of reality are to be found. *Nowhere* is the only real answer; reality is shifting and changing all the time, and the word itself is a desperate makeshift. But no adult can live consciously under this pressure from day to day, because he has an adult's responsibilities. His primary responsibility involves making decisions, and these decisions can be made only in the context of a given reality. In order to live, an adult must take a great deal for granted — the trick, of course, is not to take too much for granted. An adult is, by definition, a fixed, a limited form, and while great adven-

tures, let us hope, continue to occur within this form, the form itself is unlikely to change. For example, if one has been a magazine editor for twenty years, it is unlikely that one will suddenly so transform oneself as to embark on the discovery of a new solar system.

But the child may discover a new solar system: the child may do, become, anything, anything at all. And when I say a child is sacred, I mean that we have a sacred responsibility toward the child: to protect without stifling him, to guide without tyrannizing him, to correct without terrifying him, to punish without demoralizing him. To show him where the boundaries of reality are to be found, and to suggest, once he has mastered these, that these boundaries are, after all, quite new: men pushed these boundaries to where they are now. Well, if men could push these boundaries to where they are now, perhaps *he* can push them further. But the price for this is to respect and examine the present boundaries — or, in other words, discipline is the key to freedom.

The above may sound like an outrageously abstract concept for a child's mind, particularly in a ghetto school. But I do not think so: particularly in a ghetto school. In my experience, the difficulty is almost always to be found in quite the opposite direction, that is, in the mind of the adult. In any case, teaching is not lecturing. Teaching is a two-way street, for a genuine teacher also learns from the child. If this two-way street can be kept relatively uncluttered, or if the child knows, in spite of everything, merely that the street is there, that the street is real, the child can find his feet on it. We say that he is *learning*: he feels that he is *living*. He cannot feel that unless he also feels that *he has a right to be here*. If you, the teacher, feel that he is valuable, that he has a right to be here, he will — very slowly sometimes, and by putting you through many a grueling test — respond to that. And if you feel that he is worthless, or if you pity him, or if you fear him, or condescend to him, he will feel that, and he will feel it no matter what you say or what you do

or how you smile. He will never trust you; you will never be able to reach him, and he will never learn anything from you. He has learned quite enough already: that you doubt his value. His value is all he has, and you have hurt him, at the very threshold of his life, as deeply as any human being can be hurt.

Now, this is a racist country. It was born that way and has grown up, or has failed to grow up, that way. It is impossible to be an American and not be infected in some fashion, and to some extent, with this disease; the most dangerous carriers of all are those who imagine themselves to be immune to it. Unlike the author of this remarkable book (who, by no means incidentally, is a Southerner), they have never located this virus in themselves, have never been forced to recognize to what extent this foul disease corrupts and constricts their lives, have never been forced, so to speak, to confess it, to wrestle with it, to kick the habit, to sweat it out. That their freedom, then, is a delusion and their ability to teach virtually nonexistent is proved not merely by the ghetto schools, but by nearly *all* schools, and the bulk of their alumni, all over this nation.

It is from all these schools, it is from all over America, that the people who teach black children come; from all these schools, from all over America, come the people who constitute the boards of education; come governors of states, mayors of cities; come heads of unions, and the rank and file. Quiet as it's kept, children, not that it's kept that quiet, this spells power, the main chance, and power is allied with money: one forgets that Education is a billion-dollar business. No one thought of this, for example, when, a few light years back, one watched the brutality with which white Southerners (proving how well they had been educated) treated black children during the Southern school crisis. It was very hard to believe that grown men and women could treat any child that way. But black people knew that when the Northern hour struck, as it inevitably would, though the details of brutality would be different, the principle would be exactly the same, and the results even more devastat-

ing — as they had been already, in the North, for many a generation. When the experimental schools began, only a handful of people, outside of the people directly involved, believed that the experiment could possibly succeed. And the experiment was discontinued after three years, not because it failed, but because it did not fail. An energy was tapped in the ghetto that had never been tapped on such a level before. I have nieces and nephews in school; I know a few teachers, and I have made a few visits. I grew up in Harlem; I was a school boy there. It is quite impossible to describe that particular version of *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the pilgrim — oneself — moved inexorably from one level of despair to another. One's sense of self, one's dream of living, receded, blurred, dimmed. One's actual future encroached, was literally present; one saw it and heard it everywhere; it could not be escaped. There was only one out, or, at most, two — the civil service or the army. Otherwise, one had to find a way to make it on these mean streets. One wanted more than that. One had more to give than that. But nobody wanted what one had to give. This accumulating sense of one's own worthlessness is the climate in which most of us grew up.

But there was a new climate in the halls and classrooms of the experimental schools. For example, the children who wanted to paint, painted, and their work was on view. All of it was alive, however awkward — a child's awkwardness, anyway, contains a very moving grace — and some of it was astounding. And this was not so much because one was confronted with what a child sees, but because one was confronted with reality. I remember watching one child painting, and thinking to myself that I would never have seen a fire escape *that* way: but it was, incontestably, a fire escape, something between a trap and a leap. And the children moved and rang with purpose. They looked you in the eye, instead of at the door or the floor. When they spoke, they spoke as though they wanted you to hear them and not as though they wished to God you'd go away. This climate was contagious. The children carried it home with

them. The parents carried it into the streets with them and to their jobs. The message was: We aren't helpless. We're coming through.

This is subversion. Not only does this make for a future scarcity of decent maids and porters — a statement neither facile nor malicious, merely blunt — it attacks an unspoken order of things involving rewards and punishments. Rewards and punishments are administered within a specific context, and this context is the received, the given morality, a particular carrot and a particular stick, and this context is not to be questioned. An ex-junkie friend of mine was working with ex-junkies in a city hospital, and these men, attempting rehabilitation, asked me to visit, which I did, along with one of my brothers. These rejects were very remarkable men, far clearer, more honest, and stronger than many of the people I meet outside. We rapped and laughed; some of the men painted and some of them wrote, and they showed me their work. We were having a great time, all of us, and then the supervisor, a hideously hysterical white chick, came and threw me and my brother out. It was a terrible thing to do to the men, an act of real vindictiveness, and there was absolutely no reason for it; we had not broken any rules. But the men were happy and at ease, and this cannot be allowed. If you think I am exaggerating, visit one of our institutions and try it yourself or check with any survivor.

It was on the rock of this terror that the experimental schools crashed. In the first place, and I speak now as someone born and bred in the ghetto, it was neither intended nor expected that the experiment would succeed. Though it came about in seeming response to the parents' demands for community control, it was not understood how passionate was this demand. It was not foreseen, either, that the parents would actually enter the schools and work in them. It was not imagined that the teachers would actually evolve new ways of teaching children, so that the children actually learned. This immediately brought into question, of course, traditional ways of teaching and tradi-

tional ways of judging a child's progress, and mightily displeased the Board of Education. But what broke the camel's back was the effrontery of the community in daring to pass on the qualifications of some of the teachers to teach their children. Rhody McCoy transferred several teachers out of his district, and this opened the saddest, most acrid, and most revealing chapter of the entire struggle.

McCoy's dismissal of the unsatisfactory teachers was not intended to be an attack on the United Federation of Teachers. McCoy was the head of his district, responsible for and devoted to the well-being of the district, and there was no particular reason for him to have thought of the union at all. But his dismissal of the teachers meant that he thought he had the *right* to dismiss them. (McCoy felt that he had the *duty* to dismiss them.) That he *had* no such right had to be made immediately and abundantly clear, not only to protect the power of the United Federation of Teachers, but also to prevent any of the billions of dollars involved in the Education business from being controlled by black and Puerto Rican communities. Therefore, the head of the United Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, called a city-wide strike. This was to put McCoy in his place and to make certain that his exercise of authority would not constitute a precedent. The strike was to have devastating repercussions: it is to be hoped that Mr. Shanker loves his own children, if he has any, for he certainly has no love for any others.

Mr. Campbell gives a nobly restrained account of this disaster, which injected into the school struggle (which scarcely needed such an ancient red herring) the question of anti-Semitism. This question was injected arbitrarily and with no justification whatever, and I have no hesitation about accusing the people who thus attempted to defend their conduct of the most ignoble cowardice. In the first place, the dismissal of the teachers had had nothing whatever to do with their ancestry, whatever, indeed, their ancestry may have been; nor was any-

one in the ghetto so deluded as to imagine that the strike had been called for the special benefit of Jews. The very supposition is an insult, for blacks did not arrive here yesterday and know far more about America than that. They took it for what it was, a power play, more proof of the American determination to keep the nigger in his place. Jews were helping them to do this (but Jews are Americans), which was certainly nothing new, and in this context, the Jew might as well have been a Swede. If no one scrawled "dirty Swede" on the walls, it is because Swedes, as Swedes, have never operated in the ghetto, don't arrive to collect the rent, and don't run the pawnshop. Jews do, and have for generations, and there is no point in pretending that this isn't so. Jews may often be inconvenienced in this country because they are Jews, but they do not suffer here as a black man does, and they know this very well. They also know that, even if black people hated them, black people certainly do not have the power to destroy them. And it is cowardly, and indeed a betrayal of whatever it means to be a Jew, to act as a white man, benefit as a white man, treat black people as white men do, and then accuse the victim, when the victim reacts, of being an anti-Semite.

The man who wrote this book is very honest, very loving, and his children are lucky: he must be a beautiful cat.

St. Paul de Vence
January 30, 1974



Prologue