

The Vintage Voice

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The Help

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A short time ago, my wife, Mari, and I attended the movie, *The Help*. This powerful and moving film was based on the best-selling novel by Kathryn Stockett and relates the stories of African American (in those days referred to as colored or negro) maids who had primary responsibility for raising and nurturing white children in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi. Though a fictional account, it has an historic basis on the actual experiences of maids throughout the South. We were pleased to see this fine film receive some recognition at the recent Academy Award ceremonies.

But this column is not intended primarily as a motion picture review or recommendation. Both the film and the book (which we read after seeing the film) had a strong emotional impact on me. There were moments that brought tears to my eyes, the flow of which were difficult to stem even after leaving the theater. I was almost inconsolable. What was going on? What was happening to me? Although the story was fictional and its events occurred in the South, they reflected some of my own experiences growing up as a child of privilege in Manhasset, Long Island, New York . . . in the North!

I am the eldest of three children who, in our youngest years, were entrusted by our parents to the care of a series of nannies and babysitters, some black and some white. But Ruth and Francis, an African American live-in couple who spent years in our parents' employ, made the strongest impressions on our lives. Francis was the cook, butler, and handyman (I've never had pancakes to equal his since), and Ruth performed the household chores (cleaning, laundry, etc.). Beyond that, both oversaw the day-to-day lives of us children . . . providing our meals (we ate with our parents only on special occasions), seeing to it that schoolwork was done, and yes, even providing occasional discipline. I recall complaining to my mother about that, but she always backed Francis.

At that age, color was no barrier to me. Of course I knew Ruth and Francis were brown but, in the world I grew up in, the differences between us had more to do with class than race. I do recall mother setting aside special dishes (older ones, sometimes chipped for the "help" to eat off of, and they did have their separate bathroom). But these good folks were people, parental figures who loved and cared for me. Ruth and Francis (and others) were my adult security figures, and the fact that they were doing a job for which they were paid rarely entered my consciousness, except when I rebelled and said, "You aren't my parents and can't boss me around." Wrong!

At about that same time, I recall a yacht trip down South and being dropped off in Jacksonville, Florida, at the movies one afternoon. A black man was in the line ahead of me, and when he saw me he said, “Excuse me, sir” and moved behind me. I was both puzzled and embarrassed. This was 1946, and “sir” was nine years old.

Sometime around the third grade, I was packed off to the first of a series of boarding schools where I remained until college with a brief exception in public schooling for my freshman and sophomore years in high school. Though this journey had many lonely moments, over the years I was embraced by any number of school masters who took me under their wings, and I learned what it meant to live in community with any number of others who did not look like me.

The Help brought a flood of memories back to me, prompted, I suspect, by a mixture of deprivation, blessing, and empathy for those in whose care I had been entrusted. To be sure, I had been deprived of some of the normal functions (and dysfunctions) of family. At the same time, I have been blessed by visitations from so many angels . . . messengers from God, agents of my salvation, so many “help”: Irene the maid who wailed in the middle of the night at the news of her mother’s death; Kai, the captain of my parents’ yacht; a chauffeur who consoled my brother and me as he drove two weeping children back to school; Stella, my Grandmother’s “help” who sat and played cards with me the very week her son was killed in Germany during World War II; Mr. and Mrs. Smith at St. Paul’s School (in Garden City, Long Island) who embraced me in my homesickness; and of course, blessed Ruth and Francis (oh, those pancakes!).

And although I would not describe them as “help” in terms described in the movie, I am grateful for the hundreds of God’s messengers, congregants, and clergy colleagues (of all hues) who have nurtured me (supported, affirmed, loved and, on occasion, called me to account and forgiven me) in this journey through life and forty-five years of privilege to serve in ordained ministry.

And most of all, I give thanks for my beloved helpmate, the Angel Mari, who has been my partner for almost fifty-eight years.

To quote the immortal words of the late Lou Gehrig in his farewell at Yankee Stadium when he was dying of ALS (the disease which, informally bears his name), “I consider myself the luckiest . . .” (and I’d add, most blessed) “. . . man on the face of the earth.”



Sandy Hampton and his wife Mari live in Anacortes, Washington. After an eight-year career in advertising he and his three children (now four) packed off to seminary. He served congregations in the Dioceses of Chicago, Utah, Eastern Oregon and Washington, D.C., prior to serving as Suffragan in Minnesota, Assistant in Olympia, and Assisting in Oregon.