

Why I Write

I pondered why it was that my city, my world, was so divided by color.

By Ellis Cose

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I did not seek out the '60s; they found me: in my living room where, as a kid during a hot summer night, I bore witness to the madness of the times. That madness took the form of a massive police assault unfolding outside two buildings just across the way. As my parents, my brothers and sisters and I sat huddled away from the windows, listening in horror to the gunshots and screams, I knew that something huge was happening outside and that the world I thought I knew was about to change.

The assault was a response to a sniper attack. Upwards of 100 policemen flooded the area and eventually evacuated the two huge buildings about a block away and cater-cornered to my own. This happened during the riot that broke out on Chicago's West Side in July 1966, after police turned off a fire hydrant sprinkling water on residents trying to escape the heat. That riot was only a prelude to the explosion to come. Two years later, in April 1968, my neighborhood was among those that erupted after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

I lived in a housing project a couple of blocks away from the Madison Street commercial strip that was the epicenter of the '68 explosion. Some 1,500 National Guardsmen were rushed to the area as Madison Street went up in flames. Some days after the worst was over, I took a walk and was amazed that I could still feel the heat from fires extinguished hours earlier.

The high school I attended, Lane Technical, was for boys who tested well. Its mission had nothing to do with integration, but with giving bright young men who could not afford private school the kind of education public-school kids didn't typically get. Attending Lane meant that, every day, I left my almost all-black community to go into one that was virtually all white. After the riot, I pondered why it was that my city, my world, was so divided by color. And why was it that the distance between those two worlds seemed so difficult to bridge?

My obsession with such matters led me to write a paper on race and riots in America that grew into a manuscript of more than 100 pages. My English teacher, Helen Klinger, suggested I send the opus to Gwendolyn Brooks, then poet laureate of Illinois. Brooks invited me into her writers' group and told me to focus on becoming a writer.

Both the Chicago Sun-Times and the Chicago Tribune, the city's two mainstream dailies, did an impressive job covering the chaotic events of 1968. But they covered my community, for the most part, as if it were a dark, forbidden universe. "The white man trespasses on West Madison Street. He has crossed into a foreign country, he bears no passport, and the natives mistrust him," the Tribune observed in one article I recently reread. At another point, the same article refers to the "West Madison Street Jungle," and notes there were "only 2,500 policemen ... to control about 300,000 blacks." Reading such stuff years later, it's easy for me to remember why I concluded I might be able to produce better journalism than the writers I was reading. I, at least, knew I didn't live in a "jungle" and that my 300,000 (generally law-abiding) neighbors did not need to be controlled by the cops.

After the riots of April, my interest in journalism grew. The more I read, the more convinced I became that I had something to contribute. In many news accounts, the 1968 Democratic National Convention, held in Chicago, was chronicled as a war between the forces of order and deranged hippies—with innocent newsmen caught in the middle. I suspected the real story was much more complicated and regretted not being able to report on and tell the story myself. I also suspected that, with the streets in seemingly constant turmoil, there would be plenty of things worth writing for some time. So I endeavored to follow Brooks's advice. I wrote editorials and edited stories for a college publication. And at some point after my 18th birthday, I decided I was ready for the big time. I applied to the Sun-Times for a columnist job that had not been advertised and did not really exist. Instead of laughing me out of their offices, editor James Hoge and managing editor Ralph Otwell took me under their collective wing. They gave me a column in a small Sun-Times publication; and when I was 19, still in college but presumably somewhat better prepared, they gave me an op-ed column in the newspaper itself. Their decision confirmed, at least for me, the sagacity of Brooks's counsel and set me on a new life course.

The building where I spent my childhood has since been torn down; a condominium development is going up in its place. The new residences will feature fireplaces, granite kitchen counters, balconies, private backyards, garages and other luxurious amenities, according to prominently placed signs. The old neighborhood, in others words, is no more, finally having reached the end of a cycle of destruction and renewal that began with the fires of '68: the same fires that shook my world, upended my life and turned me into a writer.