

## The Blackest-Ever White Tree

What happened in Jena, an otherwise quiet and sleepy town in Louisiana, was succinctly summed up by Bill Quigley in San Francisco Bay View:

*An all-white jury sitting before a white judge agrees with a white prosecutor and all-white witnesses and convicts Black youth in a racially charged high school criminal case.*



And that little town in Louisiana changed for ever. Then on Thursday, September 20, it almost mirrored the cities like Selma, Oxford, Montgomery and Birmingham from 1960s - a perfect setting for the civil rights movement of the 21st century. Yes, 'almost' - because there were no rifle-butt assaults or baton-charging or blood gushing. But make no mistake; there was lot of pain, anguish and suffering in the Black communities all across and beyond the land-of-free-and-fair.

I must confess. Until recently, I never quite understood the phrase, 'there is nothing like grey; there is either white or black'. But now I do, duh.

For the black youth, the September 20 march on the streets of Jena was an 'I've a dream' moment without Dr. MLK. For the elders who had been in the center of it once before, it was a moment of déjà vu, a spark of unforgettable painful nostalgia and, the revival of a nightmare all over again. Irrespective of who was there, it was indeed a golden moment with a bit of romanticism as it showed what unity for a common cause could do.

Apparently, in their fervor to punish the black youth and be done with (fueled and

emboldened by the alleged '*one stroke of my pen could make your life disappear*' statement by LaSalle Parish DA J. Reed Walters), people grossly underestimated and miscalculated the formidable power of modern technology's tools and boons, blogs and airwaves created by predominantly 'white' and then some 'not-so-white' nerds. This, coupled with the conscience awakening among the blacks made the otherwise below-the-radar Jena 6 episode an international phenomenon. And it has remained so for sometime.

The event in its entirety has gone through typical undulations with allegations and counter-allegations, and now faces a grave ending. At stake are six lives and yet it leaves several questions unanswered. What troubles me most is another character in this story that has long since diseased and gone. You see, I love nature. I consider anything and everything that affects me as alive and should be treated as such. So, what bothers me most about this Jena thing is the proverbial 'white tree' - a beautiful old Southern oak with outspread boughs offering a haven of cool shade in the center of the High School courtyard - where the entire problem seems to have sprouted from to begin with. Some of the questions I'd like to ask are:

- Why was the tradition that only white students were to sit under the 'white tree' in the school courtyard and the black student sat on the bleachers, never discussed or challenged in the board of education or PTA meetings?
- When one of the black students sought the permission to sit under the 'white tree', why was it not made known by the school principal to the entire school population, including the faculty and PTA?
- Why did the principal not make it clear that no student based on his or her skin color was barred from sitting under the 'white tree'?
- When that led to the scuffle between white and black students, why didn't the principal address the entire school population and gave his ruling as to who can and who cannot sit under the 'white tree'?

- Was the incident of noose hanging from the 'white tree' thoroughly investigated and unanimously determined to be nothing but an 'adolescent prank' and not to be made 'a big deal about it'?
- What was the motivation behind felling the 'white tree'? Was the decision discussed with the student body and PTA?

Everyone knows what a noose means (even an immigrant like me who came here not very long ago - who must learn the history and take tests to become the US citizens, remember?), especially when it is hanging predominantly in front of black folks. For them, noose is a powerful symbol that invokes the history of lynching in a supposedly bygone era. So, calling it an 'adolescent prank' by no other than the High School Superintendent was not only callous but also ignorant and arrogant - in that order because in all cases ignorance alone leads to arrogance.

But when calling it a 'prank' - adolescent or not - didn't cut it, the board of education cut the very 'white' tree instead where it all began. You are right, my thought too: *what were they thinking?* I'm guessing that it was based on the 'cause and effect' rationale. They thought if the tree is gone, so will the problem. So, you see, the big old oak is gone, razed in a bid for what school board member Billy Fowler called "a clean slate." All that remains now is a stump - and the roots of old pain still deep under the surface.....

That's where it becomes really nasty. Little we know about symbols or their power. While some symbols are of strong historic connotation, some are ingrained in our psyche and soul. Some become part of our lives. Take the symbols of stripes and stars on our flag. In decades gone by, people have made ultimate sacrifices for them and what they symbolize; thousands are still doing it everyday, several continents and countries away. Most of the times, when symbols are slighted, raw nerves are touched. Something deep within us bordering on our humanity or religiosity or both, is molested. It is common knowledge that for weeks and months following the 9/11 attacks, small school children shied away from drawing pictures of airplanes, because they symbolized death and destruction. If you think about it, a

cross, a swastika or a noose are mere simple geometric shapes and symbols. But are they really, when we see them burned or painted on the walls of a Jewish synagogue or dangled in front of an African-American?

But this symbol thing got me really thinking about another fight, albeit thousands of miles away. If only the felling of a tree could appease or bring peace and harmony between the majority whites and the minority blacks in Jena, the President should have used the 'stroke' of his pen to order cutting down trees all across Iraq. This would have surely led to lasting peace between the majority Shia's and the minority Sunnis without much kidnapping, car bombing, shrine blowing or, indiscriminate killing. But then, you couldn't call it 'Green Zone' anymore, now could you? No brainer there either, duh, duh.

In the wake of the resurgence of neo-Nazism on one hand and the militant extremism on the other, the last thing we need is a code 'White' threat. Intolerance is no substitute to coexistence. This great country is called the finest melting pot on this planet for nothing. But it seems that lately the pot is simmering, beginning to froth at its rim and is showing the signs of a boiling spill. This should worry us lest it forms a noose and hangs everyone. Too bad, it wouldn't matter how many trees we fell then.

This is not to suggest that all whites are color-blind or carry a head full of superiority-conscious mush. But then all it takes is an isolated incident and a solitary cell for an idea to germinate and take root in. Look at the history. That's precisely how the seemingly innocent concept of National Socialism morphed into diabolic Nazism (*Nationalsozialismus*) in Germany that wreaked havoc for everyone who was a non-Aryan. In this country, KKK was born under the banner of 'white supremacy'- almost imperceptibly. The story is not very different for Taliban or Al-Qaeda either. Sadly, over the millennia, we haven't overcome the urge to bully one another with race or religion as perfect intoxicant.

So, the dilemma we face now is this: should Jena hereafter become the symbolic acronym for Justice Extinct Now in America? I reckon it will take more than a verbal NO to prove otherwise.