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Meaningful Social Contact

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Abstract

The resegregation of our schools presents a loss for many suburban students who now lack the 'meaningful social contact' that is necessary for successfully integrating into a multicultural society. What happens when white students are denied the opportunity to regularly connect with people of other races and backgrounds? What kind of thinking do we construct when we racially isolate our suburban students and how do we deconstruct that thinking so that they can become more tolerant, self-aware, liberated human beings? In this narrative essay, a teacher asks her suburban, mostly white students to examine their notions, experiences and identities regarding race through journaling and class discussion. A dynamic dialogue ensues and is shared, along with the author's own journal responses to prompts about race, white identity and interracial relationships. What is revealed is the other side of the implications of resegregation.



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“Without meaningful social contact, talk of tolerance and cooperation are nothing but an abstraction.”

- U.S. Federal District Court Judge Nancy Gertner

I sit on an empty desk in front of the room. The desks are in rows but only because it is state testing week and we have to keep them that way while they borrow our classrooms. We were asked to take down any posters that may contain help for students taking the test. I was not sure whether my list of ‘clichés to avoid in writing’ or ‘rules to follow during workshop’ counted as help for students on the test. For this reason, and because I was exerting my silent protest of the test, I left my posters up. This morning when I came in they were slumped over, face down like ashamed students, the top tacks having been removed.

The only reason I have a desk to sit on is because there is a student absent. That makes only twenty-seven today. I can barely see them all, even though I am at the front of the room, let alone keep all of their attention, so I swivel my head from side to side and talk quickly, reminding Danielle to face forward, asking Joe to put his iPod away. Only a few are looking at me. I am armed with my handout: Today we are going to talk about race. Seven years of teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* to a population of suburban, high school freshmen and I have finally decided to talk about race with them—really talk about it. The handout is a list of questions to generate discussion from an anti-racism website a fellow educator designed. I have answered the questions myself but have never tried them with students before.

“Take out your journals” I instruct. They do so, used to this drill. Once we are settled, I read the first question on the handout to them:

When was the first time you noticed race? Think back to your earliest memory of meeting someone of a different race than you. What did you think? What did you feel?

We write for ten minutes.

My earliest memory of noticing race takes place at K-mart, in the town next to ours. We would shop there once a month, get McDonald’s and head home. Black people lived in that town and also shopped at K-mart and ate at McDonald’s. Hiding behind my mother in line one day I noticed a pair of lean, gray fingers investigating the candy bars. They were not the creamy, pink color of mine and I came out from behind my mother’s legs to see the owner. He was a tall man in a thin, grey overcoat and his face looked gaunt and haggard. His eyes caught mine and I was scared of their red rims that looked like raw sores and by the absence of the usual smile. Quickly, I stole behind my mother’s legs once more. She shooed me forward, staying between the man and I.

The teenage cashier, also black, rang up our purchases without emotion while my mom looked on, her hands folded in front of her chest, clutching her credit card. The imposing beeps of the register amplified the silent gloom hanging around us, palpable as the smell of dirty mop water and plastic chemicals. I kicked at a loose tile by my feet, only to be shooed forward again by my mother, who grabbed my hand tightly and rushed us out the door into the parking lot. We crossed away from a large black family rolling boisterously along with its shopping cart and crossed back again when they had passed, to get to our car.

From the window of the back seat I peeked at another brown face at the McDonald's drive-through. My mother's voice was high-pitched and impersonal as she paid, said thank you, and sped off. The warm, greasy smell of the forbidden junk food, coupled with the view of a ditch full of sunken coffee cups and graying hamburger wrappers solidified my impression of this neighborhood: Here was a broken, sad place. A place uncared for, with people to avoid; a place that terrified me with the thought of my ever getting stuck here, as they were. Crossing back into the verdant woods of New Canaan, with its mossy stoned walls and two-car garages, my mother finally rolled the window down for fresh air and sighed out with relief. Once home, I discarded the images and people I had seen as easily and completely as tossing out my wad of trash from McDonald's.

The students partner up to share by scooting their desks closer to the person in the row next to them. There is an even number of students so I do not have a partner. Instead, I walk through the aisles, listening in on conversations, smiling madly in an effort to dispel any discomfort, which is like trying to calm a rabid dog by petting it. It is only a matter of time and perhaps that is why my cheeks are hurting. When the chatter dies out I sit back on the empty desk. "Who would like to share?" There is silence, of course, but I have learned to wait this out. There is an hour left of class. Finally Emily raises her hand. Good, I think. She is from another district and perhaps for that reason doesn't seem to mind having different thoughts from her peers. She is a curly redhead and often stops to think when she is speaking, looking off into the distance to retrieve her ideas- a good sign.

"The first time I met a..." she hesitates. "I don't want to be racist," she blurts out, her eyes full of vulnerability, which makes something rise in my chest. She has broken the ice. "I'm afraid to say anything racist. I don't even know what to call...them," she draws her neck into her shoulders slightly at this word, then sits up tall. "Is it Black? African-American? Colored?" Now she is gesticulating so wildly I am afraid her pen is going to fly out of her hand, but she freezes and sticks the end of it in her mouth to stop herself from saying any more.

Breathe, I tell myself. Take a breath before answering. There are many things I could say here. This is my first time being asked this question directly, in front of a class. The very way she has phrased the question illustrates the distance at which she has placed herself, the lack of commonality she feels. This seems like too much to address and we are only at the very beginning so I think about the terms she has named and while I think about them I write them on the board. Meanwhile, I am carefully aware that I am also educating Scott, who is the only student of color in the room and who is biracial, like my own daughter. I think of her briefly, and what I would want her teacher to say if she were sitting in the class as Scott is now.

"People have lots of different ways of identifying. And language changes over time. As we have moved forward," and I am carefully placing the 'we', hoping they will notice it or at least be surprised by it, "the terms we used have progressed also." I go on to talk about segregation and water fountains labeled 'colored' and 'white', pointing out that we don't want to get stuck with language from that era. I talk about the debate over whether one is African or not. I end by addressing perhaps what is most important. "No one is going to call you racist. We are not here to decide who is racist and who is not. We are all brought up in this society, we all suffer from racism," and Beverly Tatum comes to my aid, "it is like the air we breathe. What matters is that you are being respectful and listening and trying to understand." This last comment seems cliché and empty but it is all I can think of for now and I have already been

talking too long. Anyway, Emily has relaxed and settles into a story about meeting a girl who was black while on vacation. She shares that she didn't notice anything different about this girl and wonders aloud why now race seems like such a big deal. "When did it become so important?" she asks. Another student chimes in, "Yeah. It never mattered when we were kids. We would play with anyone. Now, everybody is all separated. I mean, why does that happen?"

I nod my head, "What do you guys think?" Nobody answers, though lots of eyes are on me, hoping for an answer. This is the most engaged the class has been since the first few days of the semester and it is almost June. I decide to let the question linger and move us on to the next prompt. We write for another ten minutes.

What is your background (race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, etc.)? When have you felt good or bad about growing up with these social identities?

The unrelenting pound of rain on the tin roof jarred me awake. I lay in bed, covered in sound, half-expecting the roof to fall in. Yaw ran around the front room where he was cooking soup for me, cursing and slipping, trying to catch rain in the free pots and bowls until he needed them. A nurse in the neighborhood had come in the middle of the night to jab a syringe into my upper thigh, giving me two shots of Chloroquine. I had stopped taking my pills and had had malaria for a week now, this being my third round of injections. I could taste the chemicals on the back of my throat and saw four of everything. My head felt like it was smeared all over the walls.

I closed my eyes and started to drift back to sleep, slipping back into a recurring dream I had been having since the malaria set in: I was caving with my family. My father had led my brother, my mom and I into the bowels of the earth through a slight crevice in some rocks. We followed him for hours, crawling single-file through small vertical tunnels and shimmying sideways down wet passageways. Far off was the sound of water dripping. When we reached a room at the deepest point in the cave my father instructed us to switch off our headlamps. There, in darkness so thick I had to close my eyes to get my bearings, I felt a rare moment of closeness with my family. My father had brought us here to share the total absence of sound and light- his version of paradise.

Since arriving in Ghana, I had been swept up in a wild gallop of light. Everywhere we went there were people, noises, smells and bright colors. The smells were layered and earthy: There was the ubiquitous smell of campfire smoke, then a thinner, sweeter and more toxic layer of smoke from oil lanterns. Beneath those was a ripe smell of fecund life- bulging mangos, bananas and overripe pineapple. Beneath that were the smells of the women whose hands bore these things- the cocoa butter they had rubbed on their rumpy shoulders, the fresh soap they had scrubbed with, the powder they had sprinkled. Later in the day bodily smells began to emit from feet, mouths, and hidden corners of flesh. Beneath that were animal smells: goat, chicken and fish lying in chopped piles on tables buzzing with flies. And beneath all of that a layer of garbage from the earth eating itself: orange rinds decomposing into soil, paper decaying into slop, rotten flower buds dropped to the ground, nourishing the roots of their mother tree.

The sounds of Ghana were also layered and complex: Horns honking, tro-tro drivers hanging off the back of their vans, shouting endless chants of their destinations: 'Old Road, Old Road, Old Road', highlife and reggae blasting from taxi cabs and store fronts. And the drums from the performing arts center at the University where I was staying: compelling, stirring and

comforting all at once. At night came the incessant, rhythmic sounds of insects and frogs, then the deranged sound of dogs howling just before dawn.

In the middle of all of this was the sound of Twi- of language, communication; clicking sounds at the back of the throat to support a sentiment, low, hearty chuckles of collusion, high soars of joy and surprise, and diaphragmatic grunts of disbelief. There were rises and falls, scales and slides of sound, voices nearly singing as they spoke, percussive stops of spit from tongues touching teeth and lips pursing; pops, roles, kisses of sound, all punctuated by touches- palms slapping, hips colliding, elbows nudging; hugging, hanging on each other as if on words; mouths hanging open, ready to emit sound, teeth exposed like a row of children standing by, watching and learning.

I had stopped taking my pills because I wanted to belong to all of this- this sound and smell and life. But here I was, feverish, retching and dreaming of caves, of space and silence, the absence of existence. The chaos of Ghana now felt like a huffing, puffing machine, spinning out of control and I longed for the lonely coolness of my ego, on sail by itself. Was this my white inheritance? Was this my culture, to be cold, barren and alienated? I loathed the slow torpor of thought that marked my ancestry; my family was bred of taciturn, Mid-western farmers; our weather was aggressively cold and isolating; our competitive, industrial system made it impossible to feel part of anything larger than one's self. I wanted Africa to turn me inside out and smash my brittle shell to pieces like a glass ball flung from the family Christmas tree. I wanted to be less white.

Several hands shoot up before I have even gotten the request for sharing out of my mouth. "Yes, Giovanna?" Giovanna is Italian, I presume, though I have no reason other than the sound of her name to think so. She is blond, blue-eyed and one strand of hair falls perfectly out of place. "I feel bad for being white. My people did everything bad." She draws the stray hair behind her ear as she says this and shakes a little. She is being bold. I admire her for her honesty. Is it because she has high social status in the classroom that she can take this risk? Others still have their hands up so I decide to just let it all out and get back to any issues that come up, if possible. I point to the students who want to share one at a time. "We don't know anything about people with harder backgrounds." "I am not judged by anyone, so I tend to be the one judging everyone else all the time." "I don't feel like I have a race or a culture. I'm just normal." They are describing privilege. I allow their comments to form a definition we can all hear out loud. Perhaps we will discuss privilege later. For now, I just let the words fill our ears. Some share stories about being Irish or Polish and celebrating family traditions. Someone echoes Emily, "I am afraid to say anything when we talk about things like race in class or when I'm around students of color. I don't want to be called racist." One offers, "I hear racist jokes in the lunchroom all the time. It is totally normal and nobody says anything." This is a 'high-level' class; these are kids who generally follow the rules, get the right grades and keep things relatively impersonal. But today they are letting go of their tight control. It makes me sad that they have so few tools to deal with the racism they see all around them and within them. I decide to push further to investigate where it comes from. We go to the next prompt:

What ideas and attitudes about people of different races were expressed in your family? How did you respond to these attitudes and ideas?

Celeste Drake had two loose braids on either side of her head and always wore a dress to school. She was gentle yet animated and we were the same petite size so she was easy to play with. The only black child in my elementary school, I sensed no difference between us when we were playing but I often wondered what her house looked like inside. It couldn't look anything like mine. I pictured it darker, with longer hallways and mysterious corners. When I tried to imagine her parents standing in it, I was stumped. It was as if I had never seen a black adult before, which, of course, I had- on TV or at K-mart. So why couldn't I picture them? Was it because they were a kind of black adult I had never witnessed? One who was more 'normal', like me? I wondered if they even spoke English and how Celeste managed to communicate with them.

Celeste and I were in my bedroom, changing into bathing suits before heading down to the town pond. It was our first official play date. I was ecstatic to have her at my house. As I bent down to pull on my suit I glanced up to see her naked. I was stunned to see that her body was a mirror of mine but everywhere was a light brown color. It was completely possible for me to be her, just a little darker, or even vice versa. Was that really all there was to it? What about her alien parents? I squinted my eyes and pictured her parents finally, standing together outside the house, her father in a yellow, button-down shirt, her mother in a plaid, pastel dress- a larger version of what Celeste wore to school- waving goodbye to the Celeste on the school bus, a golden retriever just like ours panting beside them.

Celeste interrupted my reverie. "What are you staring at?"

"Nothing," I said, grinning. "Let's go."

We swam that day and stayed friends for a few years but every play date was arranged the same way- I never saw the inside of Celeste's house, never encountered her parents.

Again, Giovanna is the first to share. "When I was like four or five this little black girl moved in next door to me. One day I was outside and she came over and asked me if I wanted to play. I remember I didn't think anything of it, I didn't even notice she was different. We went over to her yard and started playing and we played every day after that for like a month. Then my Mimi- that's what I call my grandmother- she came to the house one day and saw us playing. She got really mad. She talked to my mom and my mom told me I couldn't be friends with the girl anymore because she was black. I really liked this girl; she was my good friend. We played together all the time. I didn't understand but I stopped playing with her. I remember being really sad. My Mimi just said she wasn't the type of friend I should have and that was it."

I am surprised, once more, that Giovanna has opened herself up like this. She risks having her grandmother be labeled a racist. When she is done reading, she looks up at me and waits. What do we do with this ugly truth? These are the skeletons in our closet.

"Why," I begin, letting the question come to me, "-without hating on grandma, because we love grandma- why do you think she felt that way?"

"I don't know," Giovanna says, closing her journal. "I guess she thinks we're better, because we're white. I don't know."

This shame Giovanna is feeling has struck a chord of defensiveness in John, another student who has been listening silently. John is more working class than the other students. Although he can keep up intellectually, he lacks the support at home and so does not always complete his work. His papers are often late or missing, his homework is sloppy or forgotten.

When I call home I have trouble reaching anyone and when I do conversations are rushed and don't accomplish much. He talks about playing video games a lot and is not part of any sports or clubs after school. The way classes are leveled, it is rare that a student with his perspective would be in a class like this one. Now, he is demonstrating anger at the implication that racism is a bad thing.

"But, what if the black person really is acting like, you know, like black people are known for acting?"

"What do you mean, acting how?" I ask.

"Well, bad. Lots of black people are bad. They disobey the law, they rob and steal and kill people. If you don't want your children growing up around people like that, then you should be allowed to make that choice."

I am glad John is being so candid; otherwise, we might not get to confront our own racism head on, but here it is. I think of Scott again, and my daughter, and wonder if I am being unfair by making him sit through this. I am convinced that the unraveling of racism something we all need to learn how to do, still, I worry how he is feeling.

While I am thinking of how to respond, Emily jumps in. "White people do all those things, too."

"Yes," I say, nodding my head and meeting as many of their eyes as I can to let them know we have arrived somewhere important. "All people are capable of behaving badly. When we start to assign race as a reason for the behavior, then that becomes the problem. That's racism." I hold out my hands as if presenting a small, wounded animal. John shrugs his shoulders and shifts uncomfortably.

"It's a new way of thinking," I say. "Sometimes we have to rearrange the way we think about things."

I decide to move on to one more topic that will shift us into thinking more concretely about the role of race in our present lives:

What experiences have you had recently in trying to make relationships with people of other races?

Three minutes into the woods, Harold's cell phone went off. Andy stopped at the front of the line, turned and spat, "I told you no cell phones."

Harold blinked his eyes slowly. "I need my cell phone."

The two young men stood at either end of the line: Harold a tall, black student, Andy, a stocky, white teacher. Everyone in between glanced from face to face. It was our first stand off.

"You can't have it," snapped Andy. "I specifically said no cell phones. You knew that was the rule." I thought maybe the trip was over.

"How am I supposed to call my mom? What if there's an emergency?"

"I have a cell phone," retorted Andy, "I will make any necessary calls. We are here to be away from all that," he waved a hand towards the road, where we had left the school van. "I knew you were going to do something like this, Harold." Andy faced forward again and Harold

looked at me. I realized that, as the only other teacher here, I had to help make a decision.

Harold and I had a shoddy past. He had honed in on me since day one, following me with a critical look as I walked around the classroom assisting students. The charter school was a new project in a city plagued with poverty. Our building—abandoned except for the floor we occupied—sat between empty lots of rubble where housing projects had been torn down and former industrial sites where shattered glass littered the sidewalk. Broken windows and gaping holes in the children’s education bespoke violent neglect from the state.

One morning in the elevator, after my commute from my father’s house the suburbs, I found Harold staring at my face.

“You should bleach that shit,” he said to me, gesturing to his own upper lip.

It was seven thirty in the morning. I was living alone with my father after my parents’ divorce and had been depressed and unconcerned about my appearance since returning from Ghana six months ago. There was another student in the elevator and he covered his mouth to stifle a laugh. “Harold, yo, I can’t believe you just said that.”

“What?” defended Harold, turning to me again, “They have somethin’ for that, you know?”

I seethed inside. That night I went home and looked in the mirror. Sure enough, there was the outline of a dark mustache casting a gloom over my face. When the weekend came I bought a box of cream and went to school Monday morning, hoping nobody, especially Harold, would see the faint line of color where the bleach had turned my upper lip a paler shade of white.

When I decided to experiment with dread locks and stopped brushing my hair for a week Harold picked up immediately on that as well.

“You look like you just rolled right out of bed and came to work,” he commented in front of the whole class, then mumbled something about ‘white people’. He was disgusted with my slovenliness. The head teacher in the classroom noticed and told me that teaching required a tough skin and that I’d better develop one soon.

One day when I was selling snacks in the lunch line, Harold picked up a pack of cookies. “How much?” he asked. I told him the price and he tossed the cookies back at me, which missed the box and hit my chest. When he laughed, I decided I had had enough. “You need to apologize,” I said.

He was indignant: “For what?”

“You missed the box.”

“So?” He slid his tray along the line.

I stood for a moment, speechless, then left the line and went to the office to write him up. Harold had lived in the projects that were torn down. He was angry about it and had written a story about how he had tried to go back in as a young child to retrieve a favorite stuffed animal but the authorities wouldn’t allow him. I felt implicated by the injustices that made his childhood so much different than mine and didn’t know how to traverse that inhospitable sea between us, so instead of confronting him directly, I fell back on demanding his respect by getting him punished.

Given the sea of paperwork that surrounded our dean, I never found out if Harold got detention for my write-up but he was sullen in class for a week after and refused to acknowledge me. He crossed his arms and stared at the ground when I walked near him, mumbling things I couldn't hear, thankfully.

All of this was suddenly flipped on its head now as Harold stood before me with his backpack on, cell phone in hand. His eyes were soft, hopeful, and pleaded for me to be his ally.

"We want you to stay on the trip, Harold," I said, surprised to hear myself speaking gently, "but you're not supposed to have a cell phone. Why don't you run back and put it in the car?" He straightened up.

"I'll be right back," he shouted, turned and in three bounds cleared as much of the trail as was visible.

"No!" Andy shouted after him, "You can't go back to the car!" But Harold was already gone.

"I told him to put it back," I said.

Andy turned and shook his head, continuing up the trail. As the line moved again I smiled at the backs of all the heads. Harold and I had forged a truce. I glanced behind me, awaiting his return.

When we arrived at our destination—the entrance to a small cave—Andy and I sat apart from the students, watching them climb around excitedly on the rocks. Harold became a little boy, jumping and playing, wandering off to explore the surrounding woods. I was reminded of my brother and I as children, how we ran and played the same way when our father took us into the woods. It felt odd being the one seated, supervising. We gathered the kids up, had them form a quiet, straight line and file into the cave but within moments they were rowdy again. Andy and I tried to hush them and get them to turn off their helmet lights, but they would not be still long enough for us to experience the silence or darkness in the cave. Instead, they pushed past each other, laughing and chasing their friends over the rocks.

At one point, we came across a stream that needed traversing. Harold ran ahead and placed himself in the middle, balanced on two rocks, offering to help everyone across. As I watched him extend his hand to each person, full of confidence and compassion, I wondered why I had never seen this side of him before. When it was almost my turn, I got nervous. Would he take the opportunity to make a joke or leave me hanging? Was it still 'teacherly' of me to accept his help? My turn came and we took each other's hands; I gave him some of my weight.

"Watch your step," he said and guided me safely to the other side.

We continued our boisterous journey through the cave, echoes of jubilant voices bouncing off the wet, rock walls and cones of pale light from the headlamps flitting about like happy ghosts.

This time Cameron raises his hand. Cameron is the largest kid in the room. Because his legs cannot fit under a desk, he sits sideways, cross-legged, a clipboard holding his paper on his lap. He has a full, orange beard. Aspergers makes him socially awkward but intellectually ahead of his peers. Here, he seems to be stuck just where they are. As an outsider himself, I almost expect him to understand the closed mindedness that is at play here, but he doesn't-

least not yet.

“I don’t connect with anyone of color but it is not because of their race, it is because of their culture. They just are so different from me; I don’t even notice them. We just don’t get along.”

“Do you have trouble connecting with white people from a different culture?” I ask, trying to muddle my way into his thinking.

“Well, yeah, but it’s not because of their race, like I said. Most of my friends are on line anyway, so I don’t even know what race they are.”

“So, how do you know some of your friends on line aren’t people of color?” I ask.

One hand is in the air, palm up, defensively, the other clutches his clipboard. “Well, I would just guess they’re not. I don’t think most black people play the types of games I play.” I smile at him, wondering if he can see the absurdity in what he is saying. I think he does, because he begins to try to justify himself by talking about the obscurity of the videogames he plays, ending by saying that none of us really know what he is talking about. I see that he is feeling threatened so I nod and back off.

Jane jumps in. She is the opposite of Giovanna. She has blond hair, but it has more body, won’t conform. She is taller and athletic. The sly smile in the corner of her mouth bespeaks irreverence and she sometimes sits in her chair backwards. I like her but she rarely talks. I feel she doesn’t trust me.

She shares, “I feel awkward when I walk by that group of black kids in the hall. But it’s not because of their race. It’s just because I don’t know them.” Some of her friends nod their heads.

“Do you feel awkward when you walk by a group of white kids in the hall you don’t know?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says, sitting up straight. “I feel awkward all the time.” This is meant as a joke and several kids laugh in response. It dispels some tension in the room. I have hit a wall for now. I want them to turn inward and see themselves, wonder what is really there, what thoughts they are having when they pass other kids in the hallway, what baggage they are carrying that they can’t see.

This reminds me of a conversation I recently had with a student in another class, Tim, who was doing a project on prejudice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. To illustrate the idea that characters had judged each other by outside appearances and not by the ‘content of their character’, he had decided to make a cardboard cutout of the character accused of rape, Tom Robinson. On one side, he drew Tom as a smiling, gentle man, in work clothes, with a gimpy arm and a picture of his family in his hand. This was the real Tom. Tim was stuck on how to portray the perceived Tom, the bad, scary rapist that the other, white characters thought he was. Tim’s idea was to make him, as he put it, a ‘gangsta’. He explained his visual plan to me: “I’ll put like, gold necklaces, and a baseball hat, and big sneakers, you know, make him look all ghetto.”

Tim is an intelligent kid. He understood the idea of stereotypes and prejudice and I could see he was really excited about his project. What baffled me was that, in trying to capture the stereotype the whites in the book were using, he was drawing on another that he had learned

himself. How could I show this to him without shutting down his enthusiasm or making him feel accused?

“Why is that the way you want to present him?” I asked.

“Because that’s how they see him.”

“But they don’t, because this is a modern image and the book is set in the thirties.”

“Well, you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t,” I said, shaking my head.

“This is a bad guy,” he said, pointing to the sketch he had made of the project.

“Why?” I asked. “How do you know?”

By now, his partner, Nick, had wandered over and was listening. Nick is an athlete and was dressed in gym shorts, sneakers and a T-shirt. He chimed in.

“Because every guy who looks like that is a thug. When you go into Springfield, you see guys like that and you know, you’re lucky if you don’t get shot.”

I couldn’t keep myself from reacting. “Are you serious?” I had to be careful not to turn this into a game of me against them. “How do you know? Do you even know these people? Do you have any friends that look like this?” They were dissolving into their own conversation and turning in towards each other, shutting me out. I was about to give up, tell them to find another idea for their project and walk away, when Tim found something inside himself.

“Actually, one time, ok, one time I was in Springfield, right, and I was waiting outside the store for like my mom or something.” He shifted back and forth on his feet while he told the story. Nick took a drink of his soda. “So, like, these black guys, you know, like big ghetto guys,” I flinched at the word again but I liked where he was going with the story so I just let the face I made speak for itself, “they are all standing there watching me. And I’m getting really scared, you know. I’m like, ‘what are they going to do?’ So my mom comes out of the store and she like, she drops this thing, something falls out of her bag, cuz she has all these bags. So the guy, he comes and picks it up for her, and hands it to her. And then he like takes her bags, cuz she has all these bags, and brings them to our car. And he said hi to me and stuff and it was cool.”

I nodded my head.

“But,” he said, making sure I didn’t misunderstand him, “that guy is like the exception. He was like the nicest guy but most of them are not like that. Most guys who look like that are totally not like that guy. It was just really weird.” I couldn’t help but laugh out loud at Tim’s desperate clinging and I walked away, refusing to let him convince me. He was smiling, too, and I felt we had gotten somewhere. They scrapped their project idea and made Tom look scary another way, one more accurate to the text.

At this point, however, I am in front of this particular class, stuck wondering if it is ever possible to get these students to look at themselves carefully and with enough bravery to begin to change. I wonder if, without real relationships, without enough ‘meaningful social contact’, we can ever get beyond our judgment, fear and separation. If I had never traveled, never left the suburbs to teach in an urban district, never stood alone in a room with Celeste Drake, never rubbed up against people who pushed back, like Harold—could I have really changed? Can a

white person, isolated in a white suburb, really challenge their notions of identity and grow in their understandings of race and difference among people? Every time I come up against a lingering stereotype or racist assumption still drifting in my head, I am able to annihilate it with an image of a real person I know. Without this catalog of relationships I would only have abstract theory to rely on. Is that enough? One thing is for sure: keeping our schools segregated is slowing, if not eradicating the possibility for progress. We are left talking in circles while one thing remains a gaping absence: Meaningful social contact. In my students' stories, it is the moments of real, human interaction that make the most impact and shine a light for them to follow.

Scott, who has been chewing steadily on a pen cap, now finds an entry into the conversation. He is an athlete also, and perhaps because of his difference in skin color, he is given lots of status among his peers. He is a black student who assimilates. His family is wealthy and his parents are college professors. Coming from a private school background, he is ahead of his peers intellectually. The girls like to flirt with him and the boys idolize him for being 'cool'. He has not seemed uncomfortable in all of this, but now, chooses to show his discomfort in a surprising way.

"This school is not racist," he announces, sensing that that is the subtext of this conversation. "I mean, yeah, we all make a few Mexican jokes now and then, but nobody here is really racist. It's not, like, a big problem." The class laughs out loud at his comment about Mexican jokes and my eyebrows knit together. Only Emily seems uncomfortable and draws her neck into her shoulders again. Scott puts his pen cap back in his mouth and waits to see how I will respond. I take another deep breath.

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