

The Colour Of Hope

On this day of sober reflection and introspection, I thought it fitting to speak of a book that probes delicate issues about race and identity with uncommon grace, a book that's been described as a beautifully crafted hymn from a son to his mother. I had meant to speak about this book before the unspeakable tragedy of September 11, and no doubt would have had different thoughts to share had world events not taken such an abrupt turn. But like all good books that stand the test of time, *The Color of Water* reveals new truths when seen in a new light, even — or perhaps especially — when that light is clouded with the debris of unimaginable destruction and untimely deaths.

First published in 1996, James McBride's *The Color of Water* is not a new book but one worth revisiting all the same. In fact, it is really two books, the stories of two braided lives, that of James McBride and his mother, Ruth. And by anyone's standards, Ruth McBride's accomplishments are nothing short of remarkable. With very little material wealth at hand, she raised eight children before her first husband died at a young age, and had another four children with her second husband. Despite the odds, all twelve children went on to become professionals. Included in the mix are doctors, professors, teachers, a social worker, a nurse. The achievements of all the McBride children read like a catalogue of honourable work. Ruth McBride herself graduated with a degree in social work at the age of 65. All this, of course, would make a mother proud. But Ruth McBride was a different kind of mother all together. You see, this pillar of the black community, this woman who gave her heart and soul to Jesus, who founded the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church, was, in fact, white. Only when he was an adult did James McBride learn that his mother Ruth was born Ruchel Dwarja Zylska, an Orthodox Jew from a small town in Poland. She came to the United States as a young child and promptly became Rachel Deborah Shilsky. After years of travelling from town to town with her itinerant rabbi father, Ruth's family settled in Suffolk, Virginia, where Fishel Shilsky eventually opened a grocery store, exchanging his *tallis* for an apron.

Put yourself in James McBride's shoes as you watch your mother slowly, painfully excavate a past long buried, dislodging memories from a stubborn soil. You identify as a black man, your roots in the black community run long and deep, and suddenly the life you've always known has to be reassembled. Suddenly, you have to reinvent yourself. As McBride writes: "I can't describe what a shock it was to hear words like "Tateh" and "rov" and "shiva" and "Bubeh" coming from Mommy's mouth as she sat at the kitchen table in her Ewing home. Imagine, if you will, five thousand years of Jewish history landing in your lap in the space of months."

And therein lies the first lesson *The Color of Water* offers, a lesson made more meaningful in the wake of September 11: what we absorb as children stays with us forever. It's an obvious truth, but tragedy has a way of cloaking old truths with a new urgency. Ruth McBride abandoned Judaism but Judaism did not leave her. Long after she left her family in Suffolk as a way of survival, as a way of driving a wedge between herself and the father who sexually abused her, Ruth McBride could not shed the Jewish life she knew as a child. Her interviews with her son James unearthed many episodes of a painful childhood, but amidst the shards were the riches of Yiddish and warm memories she had laid to rest. To hear Ruth McBride speak of her childhood all those years ago is to listen to a woman

who waded through the waters of Judaism only yesterday. She speaks with a fluency, with an ease, about the *rov*, the rabbi of high order who oversaw the arranged marriage between Ruth's father Fishel and her beloved mother Hudis. She talks of her Orthodox Bubeh wearing a *shaytl*, or wig. She recalls the *piezyna*, the goose-feather quilts her mother brought from Europe that were "warm as a house."

"We loved getting ready for Passover," she told her son, as she savoured the memory of her mother's matzoh balls, kneidlach, gefilte fish, kugl and chopped liver. Sadly, her mother's love was overshadowed by her father's relentless abuse. At Passover, Ruth recalls wishing she was wherever Elijah was, "eating over somebody else's house where your father didn't crawl into bed with you at night, interrupting your dreams so you don't know if it's him or just the same nightmare happening over and over again."

But it's not just the Jewish foods and holidays Ruth McBride remembers. As she forged a life as a devout Christian she carried with her a perspective moulded by Judaism, a sense of values that did not go unnoticed by her son James. "There was a part of me that recognized Jews as slightly different from other white folks, partly through information gleaned from Mommy, who consciously and unconsciously sought many things Jewish," he writes, and continues, "It was in her sense of education, more than any other, that Mommy conveyed her Jewishness to us." And so the McBride children found themselves travelling to public schools an hour away from home, the only black students in schools that were predominantly Jewish because Ruth McBride knew Jewish parents put great stock in a child's education. And if lunch bags weren't always filled with the protein the family couldn't afford Ruth McBride made sure her children's upbringing included a diet familiar to many of us. As James recalls, "We thrived on thought, books, music and art, which she fed to us instead of food."

Food was but one of the challenges Ruth faced. Clothing was another necessity. So where did this tireless woman take her flock to be clothed? She'd schlep her kids across town to the Hasidic merchants on Delancey Street, where she was convinced she would get the best deals. There stood Ruth, going head to head with the Jewish shopkeepers, haggling over a pair of shoes, lapsing into Yiddish as she drove a hard bargain. Her children watched in awe. God knows what the Hassidim were thinking.

And so Ruth McBride's mother tongue surfaced well into her own experience of motherhood. While it is self-evident that what we give our children - a language, the laws and codes we live by - will have profound and long-term consequences, the fragile bridge between the self-evident and self-awareness is often a casualty of war. The responsibility we have toward our children is monumental, higher than any skyscraper, to be sure, but no less vulnerable. Amidst all the dreadful and disturbing images that emerged in the wake of the terrorist attacks are those of young children whose minds have been poisoned with hate, children who were encouraged to dance a victory dance while the twin towers were still smouldering. Whatever misery has befallen their parents it is their parents who have avoided the formidable task of shattering the legacy of blind hatred. For surely that's an unconscionable abuse of another sort: to contaminate a child's mind as surely as you violate their body. Both leave unseen scars. We here in the West have our own tasks to face, for we must ask ourselves some difficult questions about the conditions a world away that spawn such hatred, not to justify the unjustifiable — for that cannot and must not be

done — but to try and understand our place in a global equation in which enormous imbalances prevail, in which hatred is often the sum of grievances, however misguided. As we watch others dance to a rhythm we simply can't fathom, as we see others declare as heroes the very individuals we believe personify evil, as our children hang on to our every word, we must exercise caution and restraint and ensure that disgust doesn't curdle into hatred. We've seen extremists quoted in newspapers, inflaming people with lies and twisted history, suggesting that New York, not to mention the Western world, is run by Zionists, and the Zionists would love nothing more than a war between Christians and Muslims. In the face of such vulgarities we must take the high road and commit ourselves to building a future — a future defined by the children we are raising today — in which differences are acknowledged and accepted, and not wielded like swords.

Hudis Shilsky, Ruth's Polish-born, Yiddish-speaking mother knew what it was like to be different. She faced not only cultural, religious and linguistic barriers all her life but was further hampered by polio that left her left side paralyzed. Ruth, the first daughter and the second of three children, was, as she states, her mother's "eyes and ears in America." Leaving the misery of Suffolk for good when she was barely twenty meant Ruth had to leave her mother behind but leave she did. A divorce, poor health and, undoubtedly, her beloved daughter's departure took a toll on Hudis Shilsky, who died while still in her mid-40s. A corrosive guilt has gnawed at Ruth McBride ever since. What Ruth wanted but never had was the opportunity to tell her mother she was sorry. "I was so so sorry," Ruth says, "deep in my heart I was sorry, but all your "sorrlys" are gone when a person dies. She was gone. Gone. That's why you have to say all your "sorrlys" and "I love yous" while a person is living, because tomorrow isn't promised."

Tomorrow isn't promised. What a poignant, truthful, and timely phrase. Who better than the thousands who lost family, friends and colleagues on September 11 know that tomorrow isn't promised? How many wives kissed husbands, how many parents hugged children, how many of those who died told friends that fateful morning, "I'll see you tonight"?

Ruth McBride is right: tomorrow isn't promised. We take life, and our loved ones, for granted, and squander the opportunity to say what we want to say, saving it for another day, another tomorrow. We live with the expectation that tomorrow is promised, and when that promise is not kept we forever remember the day it was broken. Dates when lives were taken prematurely are permanently etched in our psyche, whether we suffer the personal loss of a loved one or the communal loss of thousands consumed by the fiery might of collapsed office towers. We all know where we were on September 11, a date permanently stained by terrorism. And while we have a duty to mourn and to memorialize the day when lives and innocence were lost, we must be careful not to allow one dark date to overshadow other dates that represent joyous gains. Let us also speak of days of birth, and not only death, of planned arrivals, not only unexpected departures.

And so I call upon you to join me in an act that is both collective and deeply personal. Think of someone you love: a wife, a husband, a child, a parent, a sibling, a cherished friend who has always been there for you. Now think of the date of their birth, and reflect upon how that date has changed your life. Think of the joy that person has given you, the countless moments that, over time, become the very mortar that binds a loving relationship. Think of that person's date of birth. Think how easily we toss off dates of

birth, failing to recognize these dates for what they are, dates that mark the arrival of human beings who have touched us, taught us, transformed us. To those who have succeeded in making September 11 a day of infamy let us begin our own quiet campaign to balance the books, so to speak, by saying aloud the birth date of someone who has enriched your life in immeasurable ways, someone without whom life as you know it would be unimaginable. In a moment I will ask you to say this person's birth date aloud, and as you do, think of the person who arrived on this day, and what they have given you, and the world. And before the sun sets tonight I urge you tell this person that you love them, for love, like life itself, is something we take for granted, too often forgetting that tomorrow isn't promised. In the same way that Kol Nidre is said three times, say the birth date of your beloved three times: once for your sake, once for theirs, and once for ours.

"Tomorrow isn't promised" is but one of the phrases in *The Color of Water* that resonate. Some are laced with humour, as when Ruth McBride says of the Jewish family she was born into, "They're all dead now, or in Florida," which in her mind was one and the same. Speaking of his stepfather, James McBride writes that, "race was something he never talked about. To him it was a detail that you stepped over, like a crack in the sidewalk." Would that we could all walk in the shoes of Hunter Jordan. The question of race, of identity, permeates *The Color of Water*. Whereas Ruth McBride came to define herself as a Christian — despite a Judaism that is marrow-deep — as a child James McBride sometimes tugged at the woven strands of an interracial family.

"I thought it would be easier if we were just one color, black or white. I didn't want to be white. My siblings had already instilled the notion of black pride in me. I would have preferred if Mommy were black. Now, as a grown man, I feel privileged to have come from two worlds. My view of the world is not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul. I don't consider myself Jewish, but when I look at Holocaust photographs of Jewish women whose children have been wrenched from them by Nazi soldiers, the women look like my own mother, and I think to myself, There but for the grace of God goes my own mother - and by extension, myself. When I see two little Jewish old ladies giggling over coffee at a Manhattan diner, it makes me smile, because I hear my own mother's laughter beneath theirs. Conversely, when I hear black "leaders" talking about "Jewish slave owners" I feel angry and disgusted, knowing that they're inflaming people with lies and twisted history, as if all seven of the Jewish slaveowners in the antebellum South, or however few there were, are responsible for the problems of African-Americans now. Those leaders are no better than their Jewish counterparts who spin statistics in marvellous ways to make African-Americans look like savages, criminals, drags on society, and "animals". I don't belong to any of those groups. I belong to the world of one God, one people."

One God, one people is, I suspect, what the loathsome terrorists had in mind, too, though in their perverted interpretations, all people would become one people according to their edicts, and God help everyone else. As it's been noted in the recent past, and many times before, God must be exhausted, pulled this way and that, dragged into every corner of the world by those who are convinced that God is on their side.

I'm partial to Ruth McBride's definition of God. Here is another passage from *The Color of Water*, and it's particularly revealing of not only who Ruth McBride is, but the internal struggle with who she once was. One afternoon, as a child, James McBride asked his mother why she cried so often in church.

"Because God makes me happy."

"Then why cry?"

"I'm crying 'cause I'm happy. Anything wrong with that?"

"No," I said, but there was, because happy people did not seem to cry like she did. Mommy's tears seemed to come from somewhere else, a place far away, a place inside her that she never let any of us children visit, and even as a boy, I felt there was pain behind them. I thought it was because she wanted to be black like everyone else in church, because maybe God liked black people better, and one afternoon on the way home from church I asked her whether God was black or white.

A deep sigh. "Oh boy God's not black. He's not white. He's a spirit."

"Does he like black people or white people better?"

"He loves all people. He's a spirit."

"What's a spirit?"

"A spirit's a spirit."

"What color is God's spirit?"

"It doesn't have a color," she said. "God is the color of water. Water doesn't have a color."

God is the color of water. Another gem from Ruth McBride. I have a theory. It's not written in stone, it certainly hasn't been proven scientifically. It's simply an idea I've been mulling over since rereading *The Color of Water* after September 11. The reason God doesn't have a colour is that all of God's colours have been given to us, here on Earth. Our responsibility is to celebrate these colours in all their splendour. By celebrating colour we celebrate life. Turn a blind eye to the colours in our midst and you risk living a life robbed of texture, making it all too easy to rob others of the same. I'm sure many of you have read another fine book, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. You may recall a conversation between Celie and Shug, a conversation about God in which Shug says, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."

In light of what happened in New York and Washington and Pennsylvania, we owe it to God, and ourselves, to notice the color purple in the fields we walk by. Surely that is one way of living affirmatively in the face of such devastation. One news report described Ground Zero as being bleached of colour. And it's easy to see why. That wasn't God's work, despite what the fanatics would want us to believe. God, I believe, is on the side of all those who see colour everywhere, in all the obvious places, and some unexpected ones, too. And so take the time to notice the colours in your life that are so easy to overlook. The colour of excitement in a child's voice when they share what they learned at school that day. The colour of laughter amongst friends. The colour of passion that blooms in the warmth of a long kiss. And then there are the more concrete colours that surround us, colours that are particularly radiant at this time of year, when the blazing leaves of autumn trees remind us that although life is a cycle, history need not repeat itself. By celebrating colour we are saying yes to life. We are defying the despair that fell like rain in the days following September 11. But we must also recognize that hate has its own hues. And therein lies one of the biggest challenges that face us: recognizing our own prejudices within, and how they colour what we see. For we can't be selective and see only what we want to see and ignore the rest. We must see the radiant colours in skin that is different than ours. We must see the colours in people with misshapen teeth and mottled skin, people whose culture, religion and history we often misunderstand or misconstrue, and sometimes fear. We must strive to see the colour in the eyes of our enemies, expect no less

of them, and remind ourselves that God's palette holds colours we haven't even dreamed of.

For all the heightened security at airports that will become a staple of life I have come to believe that the technology that could have stopped the terrorists in their wicked tracks does not exist, and never will. For you see, no machine can peer into a person's soul. Had we been able to do just that, it would have been plain to see that those who were about to commit these terrible crimes had no colour in their soul. Some sharp-edged anger or hate punctured their hearts and all the colour within leaked out. And so they were left colourless, lifeless as rubble.

Evil will always be with us, will always shadow us. We must not allow it to cripple us, to tear the very fabric of our lives, our family, our community, our people, our world. When James McBride travelled to Suffolk, Virginia for a first-hand look at where Ruth McBride had once been known as Ruth Shilsky he was touched by how warmly he was greeted.

"I found it odd and amazing when white people treated me that way, as if there were no barriers between us. It said a lot about this religion - Judaism - that some of its followers, old southern crackers who talked with southern twangs and wore straw hats, seemed to believe that its covenants went beyond the color of one's skin."

That is the task we must take up today, and every day, never more so than in these days of imminent war, when strategists have already calculated how many innocent civilians will perish. As Jews and those helping to nurture Judaism in our small corner of the world, we must believe that our covenants go beyond the colour of one's skin, and urge others to do the same, to interpret their religious codes in ways that do not trample on human dignity. No one group or people, no nation or religion has a monopoly on morality or the right to impose their political, religious or economic doctrines onto others. We must not, we cannot forsake the possibilities of a workable peace. Above all, the one colour we must work tirelessly to preserve and never allow to fade is the colour of hope.

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