

November 2004

Faith and Ultimatum

Barbara Earl Thomas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj>

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Barbara Earl (2004) "Faith and Ultimatum," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 28.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol3/iss1/28>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications and Programs at Seattle University School of Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Seattle Journal for Social Justice by an authorized editor of Seattle University School of Law Digital Commons.

Faith and the Ultimatum

Barbara Earl Thomas¹

It was April 1968. I was out for a lunch break with Jim and Mary, coworkers from the general accounting office where we worked in the University District of Seattle. They were old hands in the office. I was new on staff and excited. This was my first real job out of high school after a string of just so-so jobs. There had been the eyeglass factory where I stood with a mallet, eight hours a day for three months, in a windowless basement knocking lead weights off newly polished eyeglass lenses. A friend of my mother's had gotten me that job. Before that I'd worked as a holiday fill-in for The Bon Marché and Frederick & Nelson department stores. I found this new job by scouring newspaper ads. It paid \$1.22 per hour, a handsome raise up from my dollar an hour at the eyeglass factory. It was an office job, in the University District no less. A plum position.

The air was clear as a bell. The moist chill in the shadows alternated with sun-warmed streaks that shot out from between the low-rise buildings along University Avenue. Jim and Mary, both jacketed in peacoats, were taking me to some new eatery. As we glided along in the shimmer they extolled the virtues of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. On their advice I was struggling through the first volume. It was the hobbits, and the furry-feet thing. I was having trouble with that. What was the point of the feet? I wanted to know.

That same week I'd learned about Goethe's *Faust*, complete with the proper pronunciation of Goethe. This I learned from Sheila, another office mate, who kindly corrected me when I'd picked up the book from her desk and announced in a fairly loud voice, true to my nature, "What's this Gotha's *Faust* thing you're reading?" The slight wave of shock and amusement that skirted across her face, replaced immediately by a smile,

was momentary, but I saw it. That's how it was that spring. I was young, as open to the world as a steamed clam. Everything I touched, like the book on Sheila's desk, transformed itself into something new and unimaginable by the time it reached my hand.

I was a high school graduate of no great distinction, but in my family, my community, graduating from high school was its own miracle. I took cheer in it. My friends like me were off rooting around turning up their own discoveries. Some girls married. Some boys were drafted. Others went straight to Boeing, to technical schools, or off to junior college. I briefly attended Highline Junior College. I promptly exited when I realized that most of the kids in my class were from my high school.

I wasn't so different from any kid anywhere in the United States, except I was black and it was 1968 and the world was in upheaval, an upheaval that sounded in the music and electrified the air, the clothing, and the language. Dizzying. I can see now what I couldn't see then: that the world transformed after the assassination of JFK in 1963 and the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. that fateful spring a mere five years later. What I knew at the time came from a kind of ultrasound filtered through youth and geography. The waves that rippled back were from nerve centers in places that had names like Alabama, Mississippi, and Washington, D.C. They came to us in the Northwest as feedback. That is not to say that to be black and in the Northwest, one was less involved in the Civil Rights or the antiwar effort.

But I remember feeling a remoteness between myself and what I saw on television. I'd learned about Jim Crow, America's apartheid, not firsthand like my parents and grandparents, or the people I saw on television, but from the "freedom schools" I attended in high school. Black kids were given days off from regular class to go to buildings off grounds to sing freedom songs and learn about the ill treatment of southern blacks. Was there mention of the soft-focus racism of the North? No. Yet there was the quiet prohibition called redlining that determined where blacks could live or

bury their kids. Or there was the subtle violence of an eighth-grade teacher who told me, “You don’t want to try too hard and want too much for yourself. I’d hate to see you disappointed,” when I announced I was going to be a physical therapist. These were such small things in the clear light of Jim Crow.

Freedom school was part enlightenment, part embarrassment, not unlike that day in fifth grade when all the girls were excused from class, given little booklets that we were not to share with the boys, and shown a movie called *And Now You’re a Woman*. Did I really need to know this? What was I to do about it? Could I get out of it?

Youth had a way of blurring the edges. When I elected in 1964 to participate in the first year of voluntary busing to achieve school integration in Seattle, it was having the choice to go to Cleveland rather than Garfield, my neighborhood school, that inspired me. How cool, I thought, to go to a school so far away, one that my cousins attended. One that, at the time, was on the border of Seattle’s still semirural communities of Georgetown and South Park, which fanned out into clusters of small truck farms. The kids at Cleveland were mostly Asians from Beacon Hill and poor whites from the rural areas.

Unlike the drama of southern school integration, my appearance at Cleveland High School went unnoticed. There was no fanfare, barred doors, or announcement that I, and others like me, had arrived. I had no thought of bringing black or negro-ness to my new setting. My days were uneventful. The only racial conversation of note during my year there was one I had with a white classmate who asked to see my fingernails. I innocently extended my hand whereupon she examined my nails. With a medical air she said, “You know, you can tell if someone is black by looking at his fingernails.” Blacks, according to her mother, have a blue tinge to their nails. With this we both closely examined my nails, especially at the base near the cuticles. We looked at hers and back at mine, and I think concluded that there was indeed some difference in the undertone

coloration of our nails; hers tended toward a pinkness that mine seemed to lack. After that first year, given travel time and the three buses it took to get me to and from school each day, I opted to attend Garfield High, a fifteen-minute walk from my house.

It is not true to say that because I was in and from Seattle that I had no tie to the South. Like most blacks in Seattle, even by the 1960s, my southern parents were still relative newcomers to the Northwest. Most blacks came in the 1940s, following their parents seeking jobs, like my mother, or as a result of the Army, like my father. My parents were typical hard-working people who had used all of their energy to get as far away from poverty as they could. I had sharecroppers on both sides, though there was little talk of it. Once I overheard an aunt say something about living on a farm owner's land and how they'd used scrip to buy things from the farm store. How they'd not even really seen actual money before they arrived in Seattle. Her older sister shot her a stern look of admonition and said, "That's in the past. Ain't no reason to talk about what's done and over." There we were, kids looking up like chicks, chirping, "What farm? What scrip?" I would not find out the details for years.

My parents made it clear that hard work and a good job were necessary. But they had no life experience to offer me a vision beyond finishing high school. It was from no lack of wanting on their part, they simply offered me the shape of all hope they knew. That hope did not include details about the mysterious path to college, any college. Nevertheless, when I dropped out of Highline Junior College and got a job, there was a certain disappointment that lay around our house and settled in unexplained. But even had I not accomplished another thing the rest of my life beyond graduating from high school and working for the University, for them, my achievements to that point were the winning ticket that paid off their dream; the dream to have their kid have a life that was as different from theirs as any life could be. I would never know cotton picking, sharecropping, or farming. That is beyond the gardens my father and grandfather both kept in

competition with each other to see who could grow the best climbing beans and collard greens. I like to say that while my parents did not actively encourage me beyond a certain point, they also did not discourage me.

Though I worked for the University, my office was off campus. Campus was monolithic and distant. Until I was a senior in high school I didn't even know it was there. I'd gone one day on a Saturday to take the PSAT. Just past the Montlake Cut, the University of Washington emerged like castles out of the landscape. I was herded along with classmates into a room where we took hours of required tests that meant little to me. When the results came back, I was unsure how to read them. My best scores were in language and science. I didn't do especially well. I was a bit uneasy as some of my classmates had done quite well. But I chalked it up to the fact that these tests were for kids who were going to a university. They needed all of us to take the test so the university-bound kids could see where they ranked. That was my theory anyway.

My other theory was that I was average like most of the black kids in my class. There were some of us who fell below and rose above the line, but most of us were average by programming and expectation. The programming was that of the school, and the expectations were our conclusions that followed from the educational process. Additionally, the widely held but unspoken theory was that white kids were smart by environment and money, and any lack of achievement on their part was due to laziness; Asian kids were smart due to genetics, to be lazy was not possible; and black kids were, well, average if we tried. Those who rose above or fell below the line were oddities.

I remember two challenges in high school to do better than was expected of me. Both came from English teachers. That first teacher's name has faded from memory, but I remember her face and her words clearly. She taught literature, and we read *The Scarlet Letter*. It was clear to her from class discussions that I was taken with the ideas in Hawthorne's novel and loved all things creative. When it came time for our class assignments, I

created a construction project that I started with great flourish and for some reason let go of halfway through. She gave it back with my average grade and said, “Barbara, I expected more of you.” A pang of hot white guilt shot through my stomach and tightened my throat. A bit stunned, I was. What had she expected? What had I let go?

The second challenge came a year later, senior year, from Mrs. Jean Hundley, who, as J.T. Stewart, continues to this day to write, teach, and inspire. She was a statuesque, fair-skinned black teacher. Her countenance was serene but she had a reputation for being tough. On the first day of class she announced exactly what any student in her class needed to do to get an A, a B, or a C. Straight faced she said, “Your grade is up to you. This semester we will study the word ‘rhetoric,’ its origins, and its relationship to oratory.” I’d never heard anyone lay out expectations so clearly or suggest that I might have expectations of myself that were separate from those others expected of me. Once again I drifted to average, but this time something stuck: an idea that there might just be more to me than I was demonstrating to myself.

So that day in 1968 when I found myself walking up University Avenue flanked by two new coworkers talking hobbits and middle earth, I was little prepared for the proposition that lay in wait only a block away. I could see the tables from where we stood on the corner waiting to cross the street. They were out in front of a Presbyterian church and attended by a dozen or so young people and a pastor who scurried about. I was not surprised to see such activity. University Avenue, also known as “the Ave,” was a place of leaflets and oddly dressed young people playing flutes who seemed to be attending an endless street fair.

Jim and Mary moved unassailably through the crowd. While I, unbeknownst to them, was pulled aside by some white kid not much older than I was. He held a clipboard, his blond hair was pulled back from his face. He looked at me and asked in quick clipped delivery, “You wanna go to college?” “Excuse me?” I said. He said it again, this time with more

force and slower, “Do you want to go to college?” I looked at him blankly and answered, “I’m on my way to lunch.” In the length of one breath, he explained that the University of Washington had an ultimatum to bring its enrollment of minority students up to some number by a certain date or they would lose federal funding. So, he said, pointing to his fellow workers around him, “We took it as a challenge to find kids to fill that opportunity gap.” And there I was, opportunity-gap filler. Lordy. In what was more of a confession than an answer, I said, “I don’t have the grades to do this. And I’m sure I’m not qualified.” This last bit I offered apologetically not wanting to waste any more of his time. I could see Jim and Mary up the block still unaware they’d lost me.

As his last imperative, he said, “You come back here tomorrow at noon and I will have all the papers you need to fill out.” Before I could respond he said, “Be here at noon, okay?” He took my name and phone number and was off. I rushed to catch up with Mary and Jim who hadn’t missed me. I didn’t mention the proposal or the young man. But I returned the next day. The rest was like a fugue. The young man gave me papers and some instructions, then sent me to another table, and that was the last I ever saw of him. Those papers led to more papers and forms to fill out. Where was I to get the money? Questions spawned more questions until the litany completed itself. I found myself on campus with a tuition exemption, a small loan, and a part-time job, attending my first classes. That was the fall of 1968.

I could have been no more awestruck had I landed on the moon. It was beyond my imaginings and those of my parents. The grounds and the buildings, especially the library, were magical. The Suzzallo Library’s grand stone façade and sharp arches thrust upward. Confident and unimpeded it directed my eyes toward the vast heavens. It was Gothic and, as I was to find, compatible with my personality. What kind of place was this that had so many books? That was so quiet? That would let me look at anything I wanted? I didn’t know the answer but I knew I wanted to be

there. To lose myself, to do whatever it was people did there. Also, I knew instinctively that being average was not going to be enough.

Learning how to stay at the University was no small feat. There were lots of survey courses: sociology, biology, art history, with lots of young people just like me who, for whatever reason, seemed to do so much better than I. What was it? Was my theory that I could produce only average grades going to hold? If so, I would be tossed out on my ear in short order. At that point I would rather die.

One night, during the two quarters I spent living in the dorm, I launched my own personal survey. For a couple of weeks each night after dinner, I walked the halls and lounges and watched kids scamper off to libraries. As I wandered, I poked my head into rooms. Soon patterns emerged. Kids sat quietly, scoured their books, took notes for hours mostly in silence. During midterms the place turned into a kind of a mummy chamber—kids up all night roaming the halls, chanting theories, and memorizing lists. There was something called NoDoz. Could this have something to do with staying up all night? So I too sat in the student lounge, read my books, and took NoDoz. I walked into walls with bloodshot eyes; one day I actually passed out in class. That put an end to NoDoz. But it was during one of these night-of-the-living-dead marathon study sessions that something happened.

It was as subtle as a spring mist, which starts unnoticed and then by the time you are aware of it, you are soaked. I was reading an art history book when I realized I'd lost myself; I was no longer aware of the time or the place or how long I'd been studying. I'd given myself over so completely to the process of learning that it was no longer about the test, the professor, or the grade. It was about my interest and ability to follow the subject matter, to see something in it that allowed me to remember the sequence of things. I was a part of the text, the author's thought process. What I thought might also have an impact. I was stunned by the simplicity of it. All this time I had thought there was something preordained about my ability to achieve good grades, when all it required was studying and my

willingness to stay with it. I was pissed at myself for the time I'd wasted and at the circumstances that had not made this clear sooner.

In quick order, I set about shoring up the holes in my education. There were many hands in the fix. Memorable among them was a literature professor in those first quarters who outlined books I should already have read, especially if I was going to understand the references he was making in class. "Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Joyce—have you read any of these authors?" "Not that I remember." He laughed. "If you don't remember them then you didn't read them." That list came too late for his class but not for my life.

Then there was the French class where I caused a small panic when I announced that no, I wasn't aware that English verbs were also conjugated. Moreover, I had thought conjugation was something purely French. The instructor nearly fell out of her chair when I followed my perfect French conjugation of the verb "to be" with my English version that went "I to be, you to be, he/she/it to be." From that exasperated but dedicated young teaching assistant, I was given an English grammar book and tutorials after class.

Finally there was an art history professor, Martha Kingsbury, a brilliant young lecturer who after correcting one of my essays wrote, "You have great ideas but your grammar gets in the way." She took it upon herself to correct my papers, not only for content but also for grammar and structure. She made notes in the margins that covered my composition. In red ink her notes webbed over and around my text, squeezed between lines, and finally attached in a coversheet. She explained the fine points of composition and style. I inhaled. Took it in.

When my fate and the federal government's ultimatum collided that spring day in 1968, giving me the opportunity to attend the University, I knew in quick order that I'd hit the jackpot. I never once, the whole eight years, looked back or was unaware of my good fortune. It was nothing less than a miracle. Had I only gone and successfully completed my degrees

that might have been enough. But it was that night in the dorm when I learned how to learn that was of incalculable value. It was there in that fertile soil when I finally understood that my abilities were limited only by my interest and how hard I was willing to work. A university is a repository where the act of learning is performed over and over, but the act of learning is not isolated to that place. I could take it with me.

The words *affirmative action* were not a part of my lexicon. And indeed the idea was one that was new and disturbing for many. Were we really going to lower the standards of our higher education institutions? Was I a lower standard? Affirmative action was not to be a permanent fix but one that took into account the lack of preparation of many young people, some through no fault of their own. In affirmative action's wake, we, the country, would take the time to provide a fix for the schools, to raise educational levels, to get all kids who desired prepared for college

After so many years the words *affirmative action* have lost their glow, the original intention drowned in political skirmishes. But the issue remains, what do we owe ourselves, our kids, our country? What if we didn't call affirmative action a free ride, but called it a chance to work hard? However we shape opportunity, we must have it for all kids.

I have no doubt that had my fate been different, I would still have made a decent living. My life would contain joy, good friends, loved ones, good books, and all. But I feel certain that had I missed the immersion in the University and the gift of learning to learn, I would feel an unnamed poverty. The poverty of having missed something I now count as essential. I am a better citizen for having had the chance.

Each day as an act of living in good faith, I attempt to thank all the people that helped me: My parents who dreamed through me. My relatives who in some way own part of my education. Those people in far away states—black, white, and other—who marched, sang, struggled, and died. The professors. And that young man, with a blond ponytail I never saw

again, who entered my life with a question: “You wanna go to college?” He acted on blind faith. And I responded in kind.

¹ Barbara Earl Thomas is a Seattle-based painter and writer who received her B.A. and M.F.A. from the University of Washington in 1974 and 1977, respectively, with minors in French and Art History. She has exhibited at the Seattle, Bellevue, and Whatcom County Art Museums and in museums throughout the U.S. Her essays have appeared in numerous publications and anthologies.