

Coming Clean

the true story of a true story

The first time I participated in a storytelling event was in 2013 at a Moth StorySlam in Santa Monica. If you haven't been to one it's exactly what it sounds like, an evening of storytelling, but it is framed around a scoring element. Call it a competition if you'd like and then it becomes one, such is the power of words. At the end of the night the person with highest score is called winner and on that night I ended up being that person.

After there are ten winners there is a GrandSlam and the process repeats itself. While I recall much of that evening with crystal clarity a rather significant segment is more than a little hazy. Yet even in that haze I'm fairly certain I not only came in last but the host skillfully and thankfully performed a mercy killing and literally walk me off stage. While the night I scored the highest was truly nice, the night I scored the lowest was literally one the best of my life.

Now, not all that long ago I revisited the first story I told, the one with the highest score, thinking I might want to use it for, well, for what you're hearing to right now dear listener. In doing so I came to realization I shouldn't have won because it failed to meet a rather important criteria set forth by The Moth. Turns out I did not tell a true story which is the only type of story they accept. I won under false pretenses.

I'm taking this opportunity to set the record straight and, since it's unlikely any of you were there, I should probably begin with the story I told that night. So, if you'll indulge me...

This portion is recorded and available as "The Second Question" at WindowLoom.com/episodes

Have you ever had such a rush of intense emotions...anger, sadness, confusion, nearly the whole damn spectrum...that energetically you have a sudden surge and then, just as quick, it all collapses, you're numb, and the only thing you're sure of is you don't know what to do next?

It was a Sunday afternoon. My friend Doug and I had driven up from Orange County to the Bonaventure Hotel in downtown LA. When we get there we pull into the parking garage across the street, the one that has an elevated walkway the leads right into the lobby.

Now maybe because it was a Sunday afternoon the garage was nearly empty and as we head towards the garage's elevator that takes you to the walkway, something inside me says...you know...this...this is a good place to get mugged.

We reach the elevator. I press the button. The elevator travels down. The doors open. Inside are three guys. We look at them. They look at us. I place my hand on the elevator door, ensuring it stays open, and step to the side.

A moment passes.

Then the three, who are starting to look a little confused by what we're doing, simply walk out. Doug and I walk in, and a split second later two of the guys pivot around and re-enter the elevator forcing us into the back corner. One guy pulls out a gun and says, "don't move." The other pauses...lets those words sink in...and then simply says, "Hand it over."

Now, when people hear this someone may ask 'Were you scared?' Well, yes, but not nearly as scared as I was a few months later. Or they might ask, 'What happened next?' Well, we didn't make any fast movements, they took our wallets and walked out.

But other times, not frequently but more often than I would have thought at first, there is a second question...and it's almost always the second question...asked by someone who pauses, looks around to see who is within earshot, and then whispers, 'Were they black?'

That's when the surge of emotions happens. Boom, boom, boom. Surprise, anger, sadness. *What?....What?...What?*

What do you say when that question is asked by a stranger...by an acquaintance...by a friend?

Now, I'm not black, so it is fair to ask if this is just the self-indulgent indignation of some white guy from Santa Monica. I really believe the answer is no for two reasons.

One, as I said at the start, I was living down in Orange County at the time.

The second reason has to do with what I just mentioned, what happened a couple of months later, when I truly was the most scared I have ever been.

It's Friday, about midnight. Carin and I are walking down the road from the Griffith Park Observatory to where I had parked the car. It takes a while because when we arrived it was crowded, the observatory's lot was full, and I had to park part way down the hill.

We arrive at the car. I start the engine. I pull away, Thump, thump, thump. Flat tire.

Not a problem I think to myself. I'll slowly drive back to the observatory's parking lot where there's plenty of light and working space.

Now when we make it back to the lot, two things happen. First, I notice everyone is gone. There is only one car left in the lot and not a single soul in site. Then, all at once, all of the lights in the entire parking lot turn off. It is now completely dark.

I start to panic at this point because of the recent mugging and the fact I'm with Carin and worried for her safety. As the panic really starts to take over I notice in the distance a couple walking out the darkness and towards the only other car in the lot.

I run over, probably babbling incoherently at this point, and attempt to ask the guy if he could move his car next to mine and if he could park it so the headlights would give me enough light to work, and then I could.....and the next thing I know this guy, who for some reason is dressed in a suit and tie, has changed my tire for me.

Now I've told these two stories... getting mugged and getting a flat...about the same number of times. But I have never, ever been asked if the guy at the observatory who changed my tire was black.

When it finally occurred to me I will never be asked that question and when I took that in, I mean really took in it to my marrow, something shifted. I no longer just knew but then truly comprehended there are things I will only understand conceptually, words like prejudice or discrimination I no longer just knew but then truly comprehended there are things I will only understand conceptually, words like prejudice or discrimination, or as was shared a few years back, hearing car doors lock as you walk across the street and the weight those must experiences carry.

So, were they black?

The first two times I was asked that I regret to say I answered the question. The next two times I just ignored the question. Neither of those responses felt right. Then the thought occurred to me what if I gave an answer that not reframed the question but put the focus back where it belonged.

Now whenever I am asked, 'Were they black?', *I pause...I let those words sink in...and then simply say, "Well, the gun was."*

The events in that story happened in 1980. Two entire generations have been born since then. So one might think the story isn't true because I misremembered something.

That is not the case. Doug, Carin, and I all have similar recollections. So it's not about the events I described. It's about how I described **what I took away** from those experiences, how I tied it all together at the end and wrapped it a pretty little bow.

I claimed getting mugged, the resulting panic attack it caused over a flat tire, and being asked if the muggers were black while never being asked if the man who changed my flat while I was busy panicking - never being asked if he was black, which by the way he was - that as a result of going through all of that in quick succession "I truly comprehended that there are things I will only understand conceptually, words like prejudice or discrimination." That's the part of the story that isn't true.

I mean if it was, why didn't I call it what it truly is: racism.

Now, does it really matter what you call something? Well, some might say it depends on whether you ask a winner or a loser . . . just don't ask someone whose both because, I tell ya, nothing gets those people to shut-up.

But, really, does it matter what something is called?

I keep recalling what a teacher of mine would say on occasion: “The moment you label something, you stop experiencing it . . . the *moment* you label something, *you stop experiencing* it.”

No matter how I said what I said, it basically comes down to this: I took the realization I would only have a conceptual grasp of racism and mistook a realization for an actual understanding.

Now, while coming to that realization does demonstrate a degree self-awareness, the original assumption shows nothing more than a shit-ton of delusion.

The simple, hard truth is I do not know or understand jack about this and because of nothing more than the absurd and arbitrary lottery of genetics and geography, I never will. Period.

For over four decades I had been so sure, so confident that I truly “got it” that even after recently revisiting this story the possibility that it might not be true never crossed my mind. The most accurate way I can think of describing it is this: I was truly dead certain.

So, what broke through?

Well, what crossed my mind at the time was the then recent murder of George Floyd and its aftermath. I was concerned there might be something in the story I wrote over a decade ago that would now be seen as offensive or poorly worded in our current times. So I decided to run it by a former co-worker, Ivor.

I met Ivor a few years back while doing some part-time work. Tall, lanky in a NBA-player-from-the-60s way, affable, charming, Ivor, who is black, has led a rather amazing life. Ivor also has a sharp mind and is a rather keen observer. I find his opinions, thoughts, and perspectives intriguing. That’s why I was curious to get *his* feedback on the story. It’s not like Ivor is the only black person I know . . . Ivor’s married.

Not wanting to influence him in any way, I never mentioned the story’s content and my concerns about wording. Instead, as we were going our separate ways after meeting for coffee, I just happen to mention i’d been working on a project, would really like to get his candid feedback, and explained it was important to me that he would be honest. He said yes, I pressed send on my phone, and we parted.

About half-an-hour later it occurred to me that if he never mentions it, I am going to have to ask directly. I start kicking around of how to put it into words, can't really point to anything in the story's text I actually find troubling which – given the way my mind works – clearly indicates something is profoundly wrong, and think maybe I should just be direct and ask if anything comes across as white privilege for lack of a better phrase.

The moment that thought arose from wherever the hell thoughts arise, the phone rang. It was Ivor.

I hadn't even made it back to my place.

While I truly had no idea how Ivor would react, I wasn't expecting to hear him laughing as I answered. "Hey Art," he chuckled, "just finished it. So...what is it you're wondering?"

Now I don't know what he was laughing at, and I should probably ask one day, but it doesn't really matter. It's just that hearing his casual chuckle while I was busy pondering the weighty responsibility I had voluntarily take on, the serious and noble work (you're welcome, by the way) of solving race relations on behalf our country, that hearing Ivor laugh pushed me into a Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo* moment. You know, I was feeling a little disoriented, shall we say.

All I can recall is talking for few sentences before concluding with something like, "...you know like any red flags that need addressing, anything that could be seen as white privilege."

There is a pause, a type of shift in energy which conveys an understanding, and a change in tone which instantly assures me everything is okay but there are some things to discuss.

We started with clarifying my understanding of what Ivor means by white privilege.

Now I am going to put this in my own words partly because I don't want to speak for Ivor but, more importantly, its the only way I know how to convey my understanding of the *functional and emotional* definitions of that phrase.

Seems to me – to me – white privilege points to freedom.

I don't mean the basic ones, the documented ones, the givens...or perhaps I should say *aspirationally* givens, the '*well, one day...*' ones if you know what I mean.

Rather it points to the ones to which we are dull, the mundane ones. The ones for people who, by choice or circumstance, live on this portion of the planet and share my pigmentation, especially those of us with a Y-chromosome. I'm talking about the freedoms that for many are so routine they're invisible.

This is **not** an American problem.

This is not a planetary problem.

This is a people problem.

Keep the different combinations of chromosomes and pigmentations, add in all the belief systems, mix in ever other delicious flavor we humans come in, and I can't think of one spot on this rock where some variation of this problem isn't true. The only place I can even conceive of where this might not be an issue are the locations where there is no word for *other*.

(beat)

I will mention one thing Ivor said to help me understand what he means by white privilege. He said to think of it as a variation in our morning routines. Generally speaking, we basically do all the same stuff, no doubt in a different order, but with just one exception. There is something he has to do that I don't have to.

Before he walks out the front door he stops, reaches down, picks up the end of a rope, ties it to his belt, gives it a tug to ensure the other end is tied to an unspeakably heavy weight, and drags that weight around until the moment he returns home.

As I understand it, the weight's heft is due to the material from which it is made. This includes but **is not limited to**, things like caution and fear of who today is going to say 'that word' under their breath, which staff member in the store will let him know he's being watched, which staff member will overlook him and serve another person as he continues to wait in line. Those things. And that's just the most trivial stuff....or, so I assume.

By this point any thoughts or concerns about the story I told that night at the Moth aren't even memories. The more we talked the more topsy-turvey I felt. I'm not sure how we transitioned to the final part of our conversation. I actually think it was an attempt to ground myself by asking, ".....so, like, what about the words...is there anything that..."

Ivor never responded to that question. Instead he just proceeded to answer the question that was behind it, the question I didn't even know I was asking. "The only way things will start to change is if we speak our truth. Don't worry about how you're going to say it, just speak your truth."

Ivor waited a moment then asked if he could share his truth with me. I said yes and by the time he was done, just a few minutes later, my entire world had changed.

To understand why I had such a strong reaction there are a few things you need to know about Ivor. This description of his childhood comes from the book he has written.

FYI: text in blue is Ivor speaking in his own voice (already recorded)

“I was born black and poor in Manhattan to an unwed mother who was hospitalized for depression; I ended up an infant in an orphanage, and at age 3, I became a foster child. I grew up tall, skinny and nervously shy but, through it all, I learned to count my blessings. I counted 11 just now!

“And then, just before my eighth birthday, I got hit by a speeding truck that jumped the curb and knocked me clear across the street! Now I know what you’re thinking—and you’re right! My ‘hard-knock life’—one that came with some really hard knocks—was just another blessing in disguise!”

Yes, that is Ivor talking, and I think his greatest blessing, and suspect he would agree, are the people who entered his life during this period. Ivor’s foster parents were such a positive influence that he refers to them as Mom and Dad. Another foster child under their care was also such a strong influence Ivor refers to him as his brother.

Something else from Ivor’s childhood you need to know:

“I was five when I began asking my dad how I could become an astronaut and he would always duck the question. Then one Sunday in June of 1960, he surprised me and said that he would answer all my questions—but on one condition: all I had to do is point out a billboard that featured black people in the ad—while we drove to church. Our church, Transfiguration Lutheran, happened to be in Harlem—the biggest black community in America—so there had to be at least one black face up on a billboard. Advantage me!

Unfortunately, I saw no blacks on billboards—and then, just a few blocks from our church on 126th St., I finally spy a black face on a poster plastered on a fence. The poster is an advertisement featuring two boxers set to fight at the Polo Grounds. I shouted out, “There’s one, daddy” but dad wasn’t impressed. “Sorry son,” he said. “That’s not a billboard—that’s a handbill and it’s illegally posted.” The inconvenient truth was this: in 1960, there were no black faces on billboards—even in Harlem!”

It was around this time the mother of one of Ivor's childhood friends gave him the nickname luftmensch. Now my Latin is more than a little rusty but at first I assumed it had something to do with the sky because of that airline and a good person because of that Coen Brothers' movie. Turns out it actually means what one might charitably call an impractical dreamer.

Flash forward about a handful of decades and change.

Our supervisor at work came over to Ivor's cube and asked how the museum is going and they went on to talk about something I couldn't quite follow. A day or two later Ivor brings in a book titled *My Adventures in The Traveling Space Museum*.

It couldn't have been given a more appropriate name because this isn't a PowerPoint and poster board presentation. The museum makes its way from school to school in an 18-wheeler. When it arrives at a location it unloads its cargo somewhere outside on the school grounds because a 1/4 scale model of a stealth fighter, a full-size replica of Harrier Jump Jet cockpit, and a car-size mock-up of a NASA lunar rover won't fit in a classroom. According to many students having all this on display as they arrive for school makes for a rather favorable first impression of Space Day.

The Museum began making the rounds in 1998 and, as of 2022, it has had a direct impact - it has made science *both real and tangible* - for 250,000 students at over 330 schools.

The museum has also been part of science festivals and events that draw 100,000-200,000 people annually including twice at New York City's World Science Festival and twice by NASA itself at Ames Research Center in California and Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland for their Open House events. Toss in a couple dozen airshows and the total outreach grows from 250,000 students to over 800,000 people.

Those are the numbers. What has been the impact?

Along with the museum Ivor help create several programs to mentor students interested in science, some specifically in aeronautics and space, like Justin Houchin. At age 16 he became the youngest person to fly a military jet at the National Test Pilot School thanks to TSM's First Teenager In Space program. Other times when a student's interest was elsewhere Ivor would find a connection to space and aeronautics. Elizabeth Clemmons' interest was in veterinary medicine so Ivor had her research the life of a chimpanzee named Ham who was the first astronaut NASA trained and sent into space. Elizabeth became so fascinated with

chimpanzees and had so many questions Ivor suggested she reach out to Dr. Jane Goodall who was more than a little familiar with how Ham and other chips were trained and used. One thing led to another and Elizabeth and her fellow TSM Protégés were able to meet Dr. Goodall in person and ask questions while she visited Los Angeles. This interaction helped her get a scholarship and Dr. Elizabeth Clemmons is now licensed and practicing veterinary medicine

The true impact of the museum can perhaps best be measured by events that aren't as high-profile, like a letter from someone who attended his first space day in 2001 while attending pre-K. Seven more space days would follow while in elementary school. He wrote to Ivor to let him know not only is he is now majoring in mathematics but three of his elementary school classmates are also majoring in the sciences. Each of them point to Ivor and the Traveling Space Museum as source that sparked their interest and shaped their education.

As I looked through the book it seemed that with nothing more or less than sheer will, determination, and charm Ivor created the Traveling Space Museum.

So, that's Ivor, or that's part of Ivor. It is also the backstory which provides **the context** that makes his truth so powerful and painful.

Again, Ivor said, "The only way things will start to change is if we speak our truth." In other words, the only way out is through.

When I replied yes to the invitation to hear his truth, Ivor said, "I have made peace with the fact that I am going to die and never know if the light we've been marching towards is real or a mirage."

(beat)

...I have made peace with the fact that I am going to die and never know if the light we've been marching towards is real or a mirage.....

It has been a bit of a challenge to describe what it felt like to not just listen, not just take in, but to absorb those words as they were said. That's because it was almost, yet not at all, like a non-reaction. It didn't provoke immediate anger or sadness or any emotion actually. Yet it wasn't like going into shock, which I've experienced, or going numb.

Turns out all the emotions were patiently waiting quite literally just around the corner for me to continue my walk but, in that moment, as soon as *those words* were said, something shifted and, just or minute or two, *everything* became very, **very**.....still.

(beat)

Now, before proceeding, I both truly want and need to take a moment and be crystal about something that's critical for you, dear listener, to keep in mind.

I do not know what the hell I am talking about except for one *very* specific thing: what I'm about to say is, as best as I am able, a description of *my experience*. This was *my reality* but **only** for a bit. Then it just faded away.....and that's what made the sunglasses so cool....and so dangerous. The sunglasses never let you forget.

You see it felt like I - having just walked off the *Vertigo* whirly-gig with my pal Jimmy, mind you - that I then walked right into John Carpenter's *They Live - The Racism Cut*.

Chances are you're not familiar with the movie. Outside of certain circles it seems to have been overlooked or, worse, dismissed. Perhaps it's because it isn't an exercise in subtlety which, at times, is precisely what's needed. Another reason could be who played the lead, someone who I feel was an inspired choice and the perfect messenger to deliver that message to its audience.

However, in the context of this story the only thing you need to know is an oversimplified plot summary: It's about a man who sees the world one way and comes across a pair of sunglasses that allows him to see it a completely different light.

You see, thinking back to all the *Ivor* has accomplished....far more than I ever will.....and see his coming to the unarguable conclusion that he will die without ever knowing the basic liberties others of us have...that he will for all his life drag that weight around wherever he goes didn't just made me wonder, it made me feel....that if doing x is difficult because of racism. then what about doing y, doing z, let alone doing a, b, or c.....

I'm going to make an assumption that there are moments when the weight might feel normal, that he might...perhaps....forget that it is something he drags around. But **even if** those moments do exist, **even if** there are times when he can forget, does that make the sting, the pain, less hurtful or more deep when someone walks by and utters under their breath, "slurer".

Such is the power of words.

(Beat)

So. . . .why then? Why...all this, why all the fuss, why all the upset, why does it matter?.....why right now?What's *the real* intention?

How the hell would I know? Like I said early on I'm not black. You're asking the wrong guy.

Ivor told me his why without my having to ask.

I recall him saying that it was for understanding. The only thing sought was to be truly understood.

(Beat)

Now some people say it is really all about making white people feel undue guilt. This is not a trivial matter, so I'm going to address it head-on.

*If **you don't think** at least **some guilt**, some amount of **basic, decent shame** isn't **exactly what's appropriate** in these circumstances, then the **only thing** I can say about **you** the **only thing** I can say is. . . .you were **NOT** raised Catholic.....So....*

(beat)

....So.....so Ivor says to speak your truth. Well then what's my truth after all this? What I have learned from the last 40 years or, I dunno, should it be last handful of months? Pretty weird math either way if you think about it.

For me for me in one sense it all comes down to this:

Ignorance **is not bliss**.

Ignorance is ignorance.

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