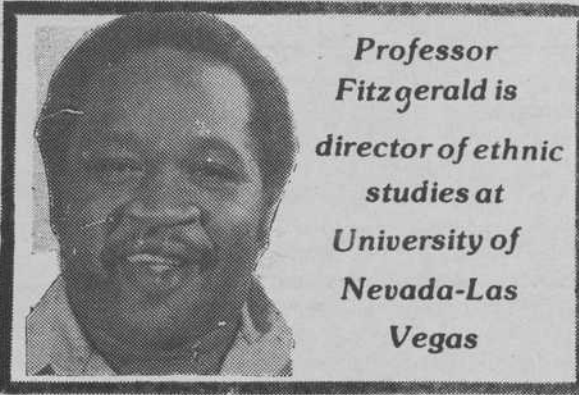


WATCHING AND WAITING FOR THE LAW



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by Professor Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Let there be no doubt about it, this is not an essay justifying excuses. Rather, it is an offering of possible reasons why so much has changed in such a few years.

There was a time when we were about the most law-abiding and family oriented people in this country. One couldn't read about it because it wasn't written about in the books and newspapers and magazines. It wasn't talked about because with outsiders it wasn't important and with us, it was so normal that we didn't notice it.

Think back. Remember how unusual it was to hear of anyone going to jail for having committed a crime? Remember when we were put in jail it was for such things as drunkenness, fighting or some trumped-up charge? This is not to suggest that there was a time when we were all angels because we were not. There have been highwaymen, train robbers, cattle rustlers, bank robbers, petty thieves, arsonists, rapists, muggers, con men and so on since the end of slavery. The thing that is most important to remember is that those who were involved in such activities were few--they were the exception and not the rule. To be a crook, as recently as one generation ago, was a disgrace and to go to jail disgraced the entire family. Who among you remember being told by your parents: "If you land in jail, don't call us."

I think part of the rationale behind those values being a part of our up-bringing had to do with the fact that our parents and their parents before them realized that the law was not there to protect and serve us. The laws were "Jim Crow" and society was racist. We were in enough jeopardy without actually doing anything wrong. If we broke the law we only compounded our problems.

Family. We truly had extended families. We knew the names of all our aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, first, second and third cousins on both sides of the family and all of their relatives. Wherever we went somebody there knew us. Every adult had authority over us and could chastise us and report any wrongdoing to our parents. To have such a thing happen would be tantamount to saying to

our parents that they were not doing a good job of raising us. We were never to bring dishonor to the family.

Responsibility was a key ingredient in our upbringing. Understanding that there was a time and a place for everything was also important. Adults were always addressed as Mr. or Miss or Mrs. We never used profanity in their presence. I remember that even though my parents knew I smoked cigarettes I never smoked in front of them. I never drank alcohol in their presence. One of my most vivid recollections has to do with an event that took place as I approached my twenty-second birthday. I was a senior in college and I had returned to my hometown to do my student teaching. After the first day at school I came home, changed clothes, worked on my lesson plans for the next day and did a few things around the house. A couple of hours after supper I got dressed and was about to go out of the front door when my mother asked: "Where you going?" I replied that I was going to a local watering hole called, quite inappropriately, "The White House." She looked at me for a moment and then she said: "You can't go down there no more. You're a teacher now." I looked at her for a moment, walked back up to my room, changed clothes and we watched "The Real McCoys" together on television. There was no discussion--no debate. She had spoken and that's all there was to it.

How many of you remember coming home from could see how you were having to visit all the people in the neighborhood so they cold see how you were doing? Back in those days we were part of the entire family of the community. To come home and not visit everyone, go to church, out to the old school and visit with former teachers was unheard of. At no other time in my life have I more firmly believed that "no man is an island."

It was almost idyllic. It was the closing years of the "Age of Innocence." The change began slowly enough but it was completed before we know it. 1954. That was the year the Supreme Court rendered the Brown decision. No more "separate but

equal." The schools were to integrate "with all deliberate speed." The law was ignored by the states and black people watched and waited for the law to be upheld. The following year, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks was arrested for sitting in the wrong seat on a bus. A boycott followed and black people were beaten, bombed and murdered and we watched and waited for

the law to be enforced. Two years later, in Little Rock, Arkansas, a handful of black children attempted to enter Central High School and all heck broke loose. The governor of the state, Orval Faubus, broke the law and black people watched and waited for him to be punished. He was not. The following year, in Arkansas and Virginia and a few other places, the governors of

those states completely shut down the schools and black people watched and waited for someone to do something about it and no one did. In Selma, Birmingham, Jackson, Greensboro, Nashville, New Orleans and dozens of other places they were beaten for lunch counter sit-ins, wade-ins, pray-ins and a variety of boycotts and we watched and waited for the government to do something about it. In An-niston, Philadelphia, Ruleville, Greenwood, Fayette and dozens of other places freedom riders, civil rights workers and other were arrested for no reason, beaten, bombed, murdered and black people watched and waited for the law to protect and serve.

For more than a dozen years we waited for the laws to be enforced and they were not. The numbers murdered, maimed and disappeared

grew rapidly. Chaney, Sch-werner, Goodman, Lieuzo, Evers, Washington and others and no one ever brought to justice. It was like the old west and we were all ending up on Boot Hill. Many went to jail because of where they wished to sit, sleep or eat. Then there was the business of voting. Police dogs, fire hoses, horses and cattle prods. That's what law and order came to mean to us. Then Martin was murdered and somehow we knew that the rest of us didn't stand a chance.

Yes, we were law-abiding people for years. We were that way until we got it beaten, bombed and murdered out of us. The law has got to redeem itself. It must earn our respect now. It must understand the role of reciprocity in relationships. If the law does not respect the citizenry, the citizenry will not respect it.

Testimonial Dinner Slated for Rev. Jesse D. Scott, President, NAACP

A Testimonial Dinner, "An Evening With Minister Jesse D. Scott, President of the Las Vegas Chapter, NAACP, has been scheduled to take place Saturday, June 9, 1990 at the Dunes Hotel on the Las Vegas Strip.

Rev. Scott, who is also the Minister of the Second Christian Church, 940 West Owens Avenue, is being honored for his long and faithful service rendered in

Nevada.

No-Host cocktails will begin at 6:00 P.M. with dinner following at 7:00 P.M.

Attire for the affair will be Black tie and the donation is \$35.00 per person. Your donation will fund the Minister Jesse D. Scott Scholarship Fund.

Tickets for the event are available at Larry's Sight and Sound, 811 W. Owens; Second Baptist Church, 500 W. Madison; and the Las Vegas Branch NAACP, 940 West Owens.

For further information call Dr. Porter L. Troutman, Jr. at 646-1662.

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