

Excerpt from Spokane Jihad

Chapter 2: Vicksburg

**This book is dedicated to Lisa Brockett,
Linda Strait, and Ruth Coe.**

Spokane Jihad: The Joseph Muhammad Story
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Vicksburg

My family came to the Spokane area in the spring of 1977 as I was nearing the end of sixth grade and by way of Vicksburg, Mississippi where we had lived the previous year after having also lived a few months in a rural home outside of Medford, Oregon. My mom and step dad bought a piece of land outside Davenport, Washington in the Hawk Creek area that had been inhabited by hippies in the late 1960s and early '70s before the Baby Boomer generation gave up its counter-culture revolution and donned business and leisure suits for work and the disco, respectively. Neither my parents nor the other families that moved in and took over the land the hippies left behind were exactly "counter-culture" but that did not stop the locals in town and on the farms from looking down on us and labeling us also as hippies despite that we did not live in communes (we lived one family per 20 or more acres of individually-owned land), did not listen to psychedelic music, did not smoke marijuana or take LSD, and did not have either adults or children running around naked in the woods to commune with the trees, grass, and critters. We did, however, live on plots of land without electricity and without indoor plumbing. For this, we were surely misunderstood by the conservative Eastern Washington wheat farmers who lived in the flat lands outside our mountainous alcove.

It was a two-mile walk or drive to the the bus stop each morning during the school year. With gasoline costing what it did and steady work for hippies hard to come by, it was usually a walk even in the wintertime. The school bus delivered us to the little town of Creston where the children in the almost all-white classroom (I recall one Native American family with a son and daughter near my age) were far more friendlier even to hippy children than the white kids had been to us in Vicksburg, a town that represented nothing but misery and pain to me. I was white too and we were not hippies but we were foreign to Vicksburg - or it was foreign to us - and not only did I not fit in, I did not want to fit it.

Prior to Vicksburg and Medford, we had spent about a year or so in Simi Valley, California, but before that I had spent kindergarten through the start of fourth grade in the Los Angeles Unified School District which may not have been the picture of racial harmony in the upper grades but in elementary school it has been pretty close. We sang songs like, "This Land is Your Land" and "Abraham, Martin, and John," and had integrated classrooms for the working class neighborhood we lived in, although I

cannot recall having a black teacher until sixth grade in Vicksburg. In Los Angeles, I had friends on the playground of various ethnic groups - African, European, Asian, and Spanish-speaking Native Americans - but in Vicksburg, there were only two groups, white and black, and they never spoke to each other at the elementary school. They did not speak to each other at the school bus stop, on the bus to school nor the way home, in the classroom, in the lunch line, nor on the playground.

The black students were quiet, polite, and well-behaved amongst themselves and had no interaction with the white students. The white children I met in Vicksburg at two different elementary schools were angry, mean, unpleasant, foul-mouthed tyrants who were unable to speak bad words toward their black classmates without facing suspension so they looked for other targets. In the schools and classrooms where I attended, on the playground and on the bus ride to and from school, I became one of their favorite targets. I do not know what these fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students hoped to accomplish through their bullying harassment of the shy white kid who had come from California to be among them. I doubt they had any conscious plan behind their constant string of ugly words at me, a person they knew nothing about and who did not bother to speak back to them. While I did not share in their anger, I also never judged them for it nor harbored any ill will against them.

The American south - and the entire nation - was changing around them and their parents. Racial tension was high in Vicksburg in the mid-1970s, an attitude no doubt encouraged by the local white power structure whose interests were served by a divide and conquer of the lower classes into two groups - black and white - pitted against one another. The poor whites who lived in the sharecropper shacks down the back roads along the river and cotton fields, with poor black neighbors they never spoke too even though they also lived in these shacks, had somehow formed the faulty impression that all the social welfare, educational, and affirmative action programs of the era were going to propel all their black neighbors out of poverty and leave them behind. I suppose if that had been the impression I had, I would have been angry too.

Years later as a young adult I came to understand while living in Spokane (we did not stay at Hawk Creek much longer than a year before giving up the "back to the land" life to bolt for the nearest city, also known as the nearest center of employment) as a high school student and then Seattle as a college student how it was they had formed the impression

that equal opportunity programs were not also for poor whites. I was in the middle of my junior year of high school when my guidance counselor, Don Walter, came up to me one day in the hallway and asked me where I was considering going to college. I was a straight A student. I told him I did not plan to go to college because my family did not have money to pay for it, a fact of which as my high school counselor, he was already aware. He seemed stunned for a moment but then recovered to do me one of the biggest favors anyone has ever done for me in my life: he told me about government financial aid grants, student loans, and school and private scholarships and even directed me to a little resource room right there in our high school that was full of information and resources to not only help me choose a college or university to attend but also on how to find and apply for the financial help to be able to afford the cost of attendance.

His favor to me had only been outdone by my sister who told me after I got straight As for the first time ever in my last semester of eighth grade at the junior high in Edwall, Washington (our Eastern Washington adventure also included one year of living on a wheat farm) that I could never get straight As in high school. I was determined to prove her wrong. I even put in extra work while struggling through algebra during my freshman year - calling upon a teacher and later a private tutor - to make sure that I got those As she had said I was incapable of achieving. I suspect deep down she knew that telling me I could do it would not have motivated me. My entire college education, all my intelligence, the words I am writing to you right now, and everything I have accomplished professionally or ever will is owed to my sister for that one challenge she issued to me in an inspired moment of doubt. I love her dearly for it. My sister, like my brother, is a very good person and a follower of the Lord. If you benefit from anything I have done or will do, you should give her your appreciation and thanks.

And do thank Don Walter also. From combining their two favors, I found my way to college, first to Iowa State University in Ames where I got away from Spokane for a while, visited an area of the country I had not been to before, and discovered (not to my surprise) that I was not cut out to be an engineering nor science major despite As in math and science in high school up through a year of calculus. To be honest, I never understood anything my high school calculus teacher was saying but I could memorize how to solve the equations to do fairly well on the exams and we received a lot of points in the class toward our overall grade for simply doing our homework. In college, I managed an A (all review from

high school) and a C (new material) for my first and second semesters of calculus at ISU and somehow managed a C in chemistry which was good enough for acceptance into the engineering program, but college-level physics was even worse than high school calculus for not understanding anything the instructor or the textbook was saying. I considered the D grade I received to be a gift for the mere fact that I was in class everyday and turned in all my assignments - a passing grade for effort though I had not comprehended any of the course material. While it was a passing grade, it was not good enough for the engineering program. My choice was retake the class to try to get at least a C or change my intended major. Meanwhile, I had tested out of the first-semester freshman English writing class and had received an A in the second-semester course.

I took a year off from school then enrolled at the University of Washington in Seattle, needing less financial aid to pay state resident tuition than I had needed as an out-of-state student at ISU, and set out on a course to major in journalism. I had showed promise early in life as a writer, writing letters to my grandmother when I was in the early grades of elementary school for the joy of receiving and reading her letters in return. I had never set out with a determination to develop the talent, however, before I decided to become a journalist. A debt of gratitude is also owed to Mary Haugen, my high school senior English teacher who went to great lengths to lead students through a step by step process of learning how to research and write an academic paper. I would not have tested out of one college English class and received an A in the next if it had not been for her diligence in the classroom. For years at high school she had worn the nickname "Mother Mary Haugen" that students had given her as a joking reference to her doting classroom demeanor but it was really a statement of her love for her students and the appreciation the students had in return even if no one would come out and say so directly. I am leaving out a lot of people, for there were a number of teachers at North Central High School who were instrumental in my positive development during the high school years (and the teacher who had helped me after class in algebra during my first freshmen semester was at Lewis and Clark High School, also in Spokane). It was the positive encouragement they gave me that made all the difference in my own level of confidence. Some of them seemed to know I was destined to do some important things in life and I felt not just their encouragement, but their excitement, happiness, and belief in me that I would.

It was at the UW in Seattle where I found closure on my miserable experience in Vicksburg and came to understand the resentment of my fellow poor white cohort there. It was not until I was a junior in high school that anyone brought up the idea of me going to college and only then that I was alerted to the financial aid system that would allow a poor welfare child to do so. Why had these things not been told to us and our parents starting when we entered kindergarten and first grade? Having straight As in high school, I was not in need of any special admission consideration to be accepted at Iowa State nor the University of Washington, but while at the UW, I met a poor white student from Portland, Oregon who had entered the UW through the Equal Opportunity admissions program run by the Office of Minority Affairs. Poor whites also qualified by virtue of their lack of income for affirmative action college admissions! Why had no one told the poor white children and their sharecropper shack-dwelling parents living down the dirt roads along the Mississippi River about these financial aid and affirmative action admissions programs to send their kids to college? These programs were not just for black students, they were for us poor white people too. How come nobody told them? Can you imagine the excitement and joy they could have had instead of anger if someone would have told them this?

The UW did not offer minor degrees to go along with majors while I was an undergraduate there, but while I majored in journalism, I did my own unofficial minor in African American studies. What inspired a poor white person to do so? Coming out of poverty, out of an experience of struggle, I felt a natural affinity with African Americans for the experience they have had in this nation, but it was more than that. It was the year I had spent in Vicksburg not talking to any black students while being punished for things that were not my fault by the white students. That one year in Vicksburg, from the pain of the anger directed at me by those white students and from the depression I felt for witnessing their separation from their black brothers and sisters mired in the same poverty with them, was a life-shaping experience for me. In a way, it determined by entire future. It determined what I am doing now.

It was in the African American studies courses that I learned much history of the African American struggle and came to understand its epic context. I never felt the context of oppression did not include my people - poor white people - too even if I was not able to articulate that nor my own identity as a poor white person until I was in graduate school and thanks to

a comment by African American feminist scholar bell hooks (who refuses to capitalize her professional pseudonym) at a lecture she gave on the UW campus that I was fortunate enough to acquire a ticket to attend. (While a student at the UW, I was fortunate to also attend lectures or talks given by Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, and Rosa Parks!) While talking about her own life experiences, Ms. hooks said there is value in struggle and pain. I walked out of the lecture hall and caught the city bus from the U-District up to Capitol Hill where I lived not remembering anything else she had said that night but with that one statement going around and around in my mind. As I was walking to my home from the bus stop, just a few feet away from the front door of my apartment, the epiphany hit me and with it, waves of joy. My life had meaning! My experiences had meaning!

Before that night, I had never felt a sense of identity. My family had moved so much when I was growing up, I had no sense of belonging, and I never felt like "a white person" because in the social indoctrination produced through the American mass media, to be "white" means to be middle class but my family had never been middle class. In graduate school we looked at studies that documented the over-representation of blacks as poor and of whites as not poor presented to us in situation comedies and even more importantly, on the evening news. That night walking home, the epiphany was that I did have an identity, I did have belonging, I did have a community to which I belonged, and I did have an ethnic group. "I am a poor white person," I excitedly told myself, "and that is meaningful and valuable!"

Something else I learned in the African American studies courses while an undergraduate at the UW was the political and philosophical history of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. I could have titled this chapter "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants" in homage to these two great American religious-political thinkers whose philosophies were shaped and determined by their own personal and their ethnic group's larger 500-year struggle in America. I also learned what "the establishment" or "powers that be" (what today is being called the Illuminati mafia) was and was not willing to tolerate in regards to that struggle. The anti-racism movement could be tolerated, even begrudgingly supported and hegemonically embraced - W.E.B. DuBois' classist philosophy about "the talented tenth" of any ethnic group being able to achieve middle and upper class success could be tolerated and even enveloped into a multi-cultural eugenics belief that divides members of ethnic groups against one another. Attempts had

been made on the lives of Dr. King and Brother Malcolm while they had preached and led movements against racism but not with the urgency and determination their enemies would acquire when what was at stake was an overall challenge to economic injustice. Each man was assassinated at the point he was embarking upon efforts to bring poor black people and poor white people together for a solidarity movement against the economic injustice that affected both groups. To thwart such a movement was why each man was assassinated and also the very same reason why nobody ever told poor white people in Mississippi, Washington state, or anywhere else (except apparently in Portland, Oregon) that college financial aid and affirmative action admissions programs were for their children too.

The divide and conquer strategies that were allowed to continue only because of the assassinations of Dr. King and Brother Malcolm had worked well on the poor white people - my brothers and sisters - in Vicksburg, Mississippi and other places in the South (and elsewhere) and they were absolutely miserable over it. Their children poured out a flood of pain on a daily basis. To put poor white Southerners down, the middle and upper classes like to label them backwards. But backwards is not always a bad thing. In a backwards way - the only way they could have done so just like the only way my biological sister could have moved me to success was through backwards motivation - they had called out to me for assistance against their pain and struggle as poor white people. Having come to peace and reconciliation with my painful year in Mississippi that only by God's grace I was able to survive, my only regret now is that it has taken so long, nearly 40 years later, for me to be able to help them.