

Snakes, Cakes, and Fireflies

It's pretty quiet these days at the old Yoder farmhouse. The first firefly of the season lit up the front yard last night but with the coronavirus, I can't look forward to catching fireflies with Nina and Simon, as they don't plan to take their annual trip through here to the beach.

But it's not lonely. We have long-time neighbors. Tuesday night Gloria's excited voice from the street was calling: "Robby! Help!"

A shiny, slithery six-foot black rat snake was streaming across her front steps. While her husband wished he had a hoe to dispatch the reptile, Robby gently coaxed the snake around the house and encouraged it back into the woods to continue to practice its art of rodent control. She had known exactly who to call.

The same evening, a plate of devil's-food cake with creamy white icing showed up from George and Regina, our other neighbors whose back yard begins at our garage. George says all is well when he sees the garage lights burning late, with Robby standing under a car on the lift.

The Floods and the Battens have lived here on what was Yoder farmland since the 1970's. They raised their families side by side with ours. They know us well. Both families are African American.

When Hertzler and Yoder purchased 1200 acres of worn-out plantation land in 1897, slavery had left its mark not only on the soil, but on the very fabric of society. My grandparents, coming from Ohio, did not have the white southern mindset. My great-grandfather Stemen fought against the institution of slavery in the Civil War. My great-uncle died in the terrible battle of Nashville, leaving nine children fatherless.

My Yoder grandparents did not take part in the war, but their Christian faith informed their interactions with people of all races. They instilled this in their children.

As a schoolboy growing up in this house, my father Lauren, knew a shortcut through the woods to go to Denhigh School. The path led past a humble home

where an old woman was sitting on the porch. "Good morning, Auntie!" he would always greet her. And she always greeted him back. He respected her for her age and because she had been a slave. I wish her name had been preserved with his story.

My Aunt Mary (Nice) had a story, too. One day when she was a young girl, it fell to her to prepare the noon meal for the hired hands here on the Yoder Farm. Her parents and older siblings were away. She was a great cook, so that wasn't a problem. The hungry farm workers came in to take their places at the table, all but the one who was black. He insisted on taking his meal outside. Mary was terribly flustered and upset! No one had prepared her for this situation, and it felt totally wrong for him not to join the others at the table. But the strength of the local caste system was too much for this serving girl and eat outside he did.

These days as sickening events take place in our country showcasing violence and injustice against people of color, I reflect on how I can live a life of racial harmony. My community has given me guidance and role models such as Nelson and Dorothy Burkholder and many others I could name.

However imperfectly, Warwick River Church took down racial barriers for me as a teenager in a way that public school or general society did not do in that age of segregation.

Long before black families like the Floods and the Battens bought homes here on Mennonite farmland, I made black friends through church. Angie Bass (Williams) took part in our teenage fun with picnics down at Haystack Landing. A lifelong friendship with the Polks started in the church nursery where Gerri and I were tending our babies. In the years since, we have all enjoyed meals at each other's tables. We have shared heartaches, inside jokes, and years of living on the African continent. We have watched the children grow, and then the grandchildren.

Even with the advantages I've had, though, I find I continue to make mistakes of ignorance, negligence, or worse when it comes to issues of race in the forefront. I must try to keep my heart tender and open to learning new ways to further truth and justice. Meanwhile, Robby and I stand with our neighbors of whatever color ready to chase a snake, enjoy a piece of cake, or watch the fireflies blink their little golden lights.

