

Wyoming Tribune Eagle of December 14, 2016: "Vulnerable suffer the brunt of "white rage"

In 1936 in Indianapolis, Indiana, Darold Cook was born into a working-class family. A tragic turn—childhood polio at age six—caused Darold not to follow in the footsteps of his working-class elders. He once told me how a nurse at Children's Hospital gave him a stern talking-to when she found him goofing off instead of doing school work.

"You'll never earn a living with that body of yours," she said. "Start using your brain!" The message sank in. Darold earned a scholarship to Rose Poly, now Rose-Hulman, a highly-regarded private college in Terre Haute teaching engineering, mathematics, and science. During the school year he earned room and board with kitchen duty and meal-planning in a fraternity house; summers he worked as draftsman at another manufacturing plant.

Long before college, however, when he was but a little guy in grade school, his two much-older brothers played cruel games with him. They tied him into a chair, threatening to kill him if he wasn't able to free himself; he was scared enough to believe them. They made him eat vile concoctions as punishment for some transgression or other. They called him "cripple" as casually as they used the "n" word against the residents on the other side of the motor speedway.

Where were the parents while this went on? Darold's dad worked on the assembly line of a thriving manufacturing plant tied to the automobile industry, which sponsored the yearly Indy 500 auto races. When the time came, Darold's brothers joined their dad at his workplace. Later they branched into business—one in construction, the other in food—but neither encouraged his children toward a college education. The "academic" lifestyle was considered enfeebling; besides, everyone thought the robust American industry would keep humming forever.

The mother lay ailing; she would perish of cancer when Darold was in high school. Earlier she had made it plain to sons and husband, she hated the late-in-life pregnancy that resulted in the new baby, blaming her mate for the burden of childrearing when she thought she was done with all that. In response the father, on coming home from work, holed himself up in his man cave downstairs. He owned a garage once but had to give it up when his youngest fell ill. The hardship of a maimed child was God's punishment for his (the dad's) transgressions, he told me many years later, when he visited us in California, accompanied by the woman he married soon after his wife's death.

In time, Darold himself often bullied his children. How could he not? It's the only parenting he ever knew.

What of the dark side of a working life now recalled with nostalgia? Assembly-line duty is boring yet stressful, and the burden of a handicapped child was something no one was ready to acknowledge. Once the oldest was married and out of the house, the next-in-line joined the navy. Darold was left to care for his dying mother, a woman who told him once, she thought his physical deformity would only get him a janitor's job, if that.

I learned of other family stressors, other children who suffered. Years later nieces from the two families whispered of the violence, incest, and alcohol abuse that damaged their childhoods. The women, each now the mother of several children, did not think to steer their offspring toward college. Perhaps they were too anxious and overwrought to lay plans for the future.

Since then the manufacturing jobs have evaporated, though the Indianapolis 500 persists. The male ego has become more fragile. Who gets beaten up by the defeated bullies? The dark-skinned ones on the other side of the Indy track? The immigrants who are blamed for a lack of jobs? The women who are perceived to enervate American culture? I listened to an NPR report recently that explained why watching football games has become ubiquitous at Thanksgiving. The practice came in vogue when women were deemed to "feminize" American culture with suffragette and other demands. A few decades later, the civil rights and women's movements were perceived to further beleaguer the embattled American male, read white male.

Such reactions are with us still, in "white rage" outbursts that mushroom like cancers in the current political climate.

As Ferguson, Missouri, erupted in August 2014, media commentators called the African-American response to the slaying of Michael Brown a "black rage." The Washington Post, however, published an essay by historian Carol Anderson that stated, here was "white rage at work." With the attention focused on the flames, Anderson observed, "everyone ignored the kindling."

The article culminated in "White Rage," a book showing that every time African Americans have made advances, white reaction has fueled a series of rollbacks of their gains. Anderson meticulously documents her findings.

Sadly, it's the vulnerable ones in our society who suffer the brunt of "American" rage.