

## Dr. Joseph L. White 'Father of Black Psychology'



A great man, and old-time friend, Dr. Joseph L. White, is gone.

In a world burdened with losses and, too often, our heroes just disappear, the Associated Press this morning announced his passing. He was one of the few heroes I had. Now he is gone. Joe was a man who was slight in stature and large with his presence. He had the power to almost instantly fill a room with curiosity and great respect, within moments after he launched or joined a discussion.

In the midst of the civil rights and black power era of the 1960s, Joe campaigned for what is now known as cross-cultural psychology that took into account the perspectives and needs of ethnic minorities. In 1968, Joe became the dean of undergraduate studies at San Francisco State — and other black psychologists formed the Association of Black Psychologists.

During turbulent mid-century times at San Francisco State, when thousands filled the quad instead of classrooms in a fight for equality and the creation of a black studies program, Joe White was the quiet revolutionary who never got rattled and calmed others with his reason and wise rhetoric.

When Joe came up from Long Beach, California to join the faculty and staff of San Francisco State College, a close friend of mine called me to ask if I could give this stranger a place to stay for a few days. I said yes. Joe and I met and instantly became fast friends.

It was a crazy situation as I was the protégé of Dr. S. I. Hayakawa. He later became the acting president of San Francisco State and the man who led the fight against the then-longest college campus crisis in US history.

Hayakawa was like a father to me. And Joe White was clearly my brother. Yet both were at war with each other. They regularly dominated newspaper headlines and television with their different views of what would appropriately resolve the “student riots,” as they were referred to in the media.

Regularly when I left the president's office where I worked, I would go to Joe's office and asked him what time he would be home. Later in the evenings we would sit having a few drinks and watched the media's daily distortions of facts regarding the campus uproar.

At that time Dr. Joe White was the ranking black man in the state college system. A position that periodically brought Don Hayakawa, to the home we shared together. I remember the "summit conference" where Joe, Don and I sat in the kitchen and tried to talk out critical facets of the riots at the college.

What became clear to me at that moment was that this summit conference would ultimately spiral into views and positions that led to violence and a crisis where creativity and openness were lost.

Joe White was one of the most skilled negotiators I've ever met. What was clear to me at that time was that wit and wisdom were folly when the speaker was "listening" with a closed mind. I became to realize that S. I. Hayakawa was the one with a closed mind. Many were the times that I felt torn apart as these Titans struggled to better represent their positions.

As roommates getting ready to go to work every morning, Joe and I would yell back at that each other from our respective rooms while we were getting dressed. We always would say, "What's the thought for the day?" Whereupon one of us would cite the wisdom of a great scholar or hero whom we admired. Then the other person would share a rejoinder with another compatible or sometimes contrary quotation.

Each morning, the words of Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill, or the lines from current popular music would fill the air. That set the tone for the day. Somehow that thought in some way would last throughout the day until we rendezvoused that evening.

The civil rights movement on America's college campuses was shaped in many ways by Dr. Joseph L. White. Silence, skilled readings of people, and choosing his words carefully were the hallmarks of this great man.

I will always love this man. We had a lot of fun together in the middle of all of the campus warfare. We would periodically go off to conduct a weekend seminar for some other college somewhere, about what we called in those days "intergroup relations training." It was the term used to discuss black-white relationships. Those times were a sort of a mental health break amidst the conflicts of the day.

Some weekends we would drive around in my gold-colored 1965 Mustang fastback with the windows down while we repeatedly listened and sang along with Diana Ross: "Someday we will be together again." That was the theme song for those

troubled times, for Joe and for me. He had a battery-powered record player. And we used it to play that 45-RPM disc over and over again as we sang and cruised the streets of San Francisco.

At the end of his stay at San Francisco State College I drove him to the airport where he was off to his next great adventure as Vice Chancellor of the University of California at Irvine.

We referred to each other affectionately as “Boss man” when we would leave for the campus, wishing each other a great and peaceful day. I will never forget what Joe said to me just before I drove away in answer to our standard question “What’s the thought for the day?” He replied, “Boss man, be cool and cautious — find out where the source of power is — and rip it off!”

Some years later when I was going for my PhD in psychology Joe White became one of the advisers on my doctoral committee. Here again his wisdom and gentle power guided me to the day when I receive my doctorate degree.

His family friend and former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said when told of his passing;

“Dr. White was a renowned scholar and will be remembered for his pioneering work in clinical psychology. But like all great professors, his most enduring contribution is that he touched so many lives as a mentor and a teacher.”

Now it is time to say one last time, “So long boss man”. I say so with the full belief that “someday we’ll be together again.”



Love,  
Barry Goodfield

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