

I grew up in Lincoln University at a time when the local schools and facilities in Oxford were segregated. A community where Blacks and Whites lived together and socialized on an equal footing both within and beyond their community was virtually unheard-of during the 1940s and 1950s. But Lincoln **was** that place, and it was a singular and stunning thing.

Lincoln was always different, and so were those of us who grew up there. Or were we?

I interviewed a group of us with the intent of creating a sort of lyrical group memoir about an enchanting place, then slowly realized that the book I was given was far more complex and altogether different from the one I had envisioned. I had inadvertently stumbled upon an ancient and universal theme—prejudice—and I felt obliged to follow where it led.

And lead me it did—to surprising individuals and to territory I resisted. It became a long, bumpy, and uncomfortable road that pulled me down through the layers of Lincoln’s community into unknown terrain.

There were actually two Lincolns: the university campus and the “Lincoln Village.” The distance between them is far greater than the narrow country road that connects them.

Though I am White, I lived in them both. My father, who taught at the university, died when I was eight, and we were required to move out of our campus home. My mother eventually found a house she could afford to rent in the Village, and we moved, literally and figuratively, across the railroad tracks. That experience—of growing up in both Lincolns—gave me the perspective that called this book into being.

It might seem that I am going to write about race, or about race and class. But my larger focus here is the age-old and worldwide aversion we **all** tend to have to **any** kind of difference, and why I think prejudice is so important to us that it has caused suffering and devastation throughout human time, and routinely overrides our ability to empathize.

Theoretically, we could just as easily be predisposed, as a species, to value, appreciate, and celebrate difference. But we aren't, and we don't. And we never have. Why is that?

This is the fundamental question I finally had to grapple with. And it has become my purpose here to signify this universal human characteristic within the context of our Lincoln community, and to set existing research on diversity into the context of the personal: a story. If we want genuine change, I have come to believe that we need to address our difficulty with diversity in a new way—with courage, honor, and integrity—not with political correctness.

Lincoln was a tiny rural place, so many of us knew each other or knew of each other. The campus kids knew each other, the Village kids knew each other, and some of us from both communities knew each other, primarily because we went to school together. We were Black and White, light-skinned and dark-skinned, financially secure and extremely poor, highly educated and barely educated, the children of refugees and the great-grandchildren of slaves. You will hear what we thought of each other, what we didn't know about each other, and what we thought we knew about each other but didn't know. We loved each other and hurt each other. You will hear many sides of the same issues and events, as well as things that were known only to the person speaking. Perhaps you will question what you believe or think you know, or even who you think you are. It's all part of the human territory we will cover together as we journey down through Lincoln's social layers, from the campus kids to the Village kids to the poorest of the poor.

Our conversations were richer and more honest than I could have imagined and constantly astonished me. It was a great privilege to learn, so many years after we grew up together, what people really thought and went through and came through.

The Lincoln we grew up in was so *alive* and proud, but it was neither a paradise nor an equally happy place for all of us. Why, for example, would the first HBCU experience an unusually high number of suicides among the Black children of its

faculty and administrators? What was it like to grow up in such a place—literally sprung forth in the middle of cornfields—at such a time, and in almost total isolation? What did our parents tell us and teach us? What did we make of people who were different from us? How did our parents and children deal with the segregated schools in the Lincoln Village and the segregated, Quaker-owned swimming pool in Oxford, the nearest town? And how did the Village and campus communities interact?

The Village has a long, complicated relationship with the campus that stretches back for generations and into its Hinsonville beginnings. As Sondra Draper (who grew up in the Village and some of you may know) told me, walking up onto the campus from her Village home felt like “treading on hallowed ground.”

Although Hinsonville, on whose land the university was built, seemed to be a haven for Black folks ever since Edward Wall (1793-1880) first sold land to his African American relatives and encouraged them to settle in the area, its people could not escape the realities of coexisting with the openly racist and segregated Scotch-Irish communities to its immediate west (such as Oxford), and the Quaker settlements to its immediate east. Its location placed it smack dab in the middle of a heated debate between abolitionists and those who thought that all freed Blacks should return to Africa—and that debate split the Hinsonville community. In

addition, “the success and growth of the university doomed the village around it,” as Paul and Marianne Russo, who taught at Lincoln, wrote in *Hinsonville: A Community at the Crossroads: The Story of a Nineteenth-Century African American Village* (Susquehanna University Press 2005, p.3). They also noted:

The university bought up Hinsonville’s farms and businesses, forcing the displacement of the community’s demographic center. Concurrently, following the arrival of the railroad less than a mile south of Hinsonville in the early 1860s, a new settlement of both Whites and Blacks was growing on once-useless swampland that now lay along the railroad tracks. This new community, called Lincoln University Village, absorbed many of the residents of Hinsonville, but it grew in new and different directions. Where Hinsonville had been a community of farmers, Lincoln Village was a community of laborers. (p.3)

This is the place I moved to when I was nine—the place that Mrs. Christie Palmer Lee, a native of the Village, referred to as “the little community behind the university for us colored folks.”

Many Village homes had outhouses, as did the Village schools; chickens ran around, with or without their heads, in people’s yards; and Village culture and social rules were frequently new to me. Most adults were very poor, far less formally educated than the faculty and administrators of the university, and worked in service capacities on the campus and elsewhere. It was a much more down-to-earth environment than the more privileged and sheltered one in which I had grown up—and there was not a single suicide within the Village community.

One of the most valuable things I learned from living in the Village was what it feels like to live on the other side of the tracks. Because everything really did change, from the friendships I'd had since childhood, to my freedom to roam, to our food: hot water with scaly yellow chicken feet floating in it for flavor. I was in my forties before I realized how poor we had been.

The interviews I did travel from Julian Bond, whose name I am sure you know, to Frankie Weaver. Frankie was the son of a man widely alleged to have been a KKK member; he was also *the only White child who attended the Village School for Blacks*. (Yes, *Different* is full of surprises!)

I watched as the individual stories I was told wove themselves together to tell a story of this community that helps us to understand ourselves and each other, and that shows how *people—even those who do not know each other—are integrally related, whether they are aware of it or not, and whether they like it or not*.

Lincoln was a truly exceptional and extraordinary place, as well as a historic one. But, for all its remarkable qualities, it was still a *human* place. So let me tell you about it—and let me share with you these stories, which carry the love, prejudice, anguish, hope, and longing for community that affect all of us, everywhere.

BONNIE SUTHERN – daughter of Orrin Suthern, who changed music at Lincoln, and whose recitals in the chapel are classics (excerpts, Ch. 6)

The funny thing is that I didn't know I was a Black person until I moved to Lincoln. The person who made me aware of it was Jimmy MacRae [son of the dean of students and also Black], because one day he called me a nigger. Oh yes, he did.

I went running home to my mother. "He called me a nigger! And my mother's mouth dropped open all the way to the floor because she hadn't talked to me about race. She said she hadn't talked to me about it before we moved to Lincoln because she was light-skinned and had green eyes, so she got it from the Black folks—"You think you're high and mighty because you have this coloring"—and then she got it from the White folks, who knew what she was and didn't want her. So she said she was not even going to mention it to us until we brought it up. Until Jimmy MacRae called me that, I had no clue.

When she asked me, "What does that mean to you?" all of this stuff started coming out that I didn't even know was in me, in terms of other people's reaction to Black people: "They drink, and they do this and this and ..." My mother was absolutely appalled, like, "Oh my God, what have I done?"

That's when she started talking with me. And it took me a while. I remember that I had some friends that came from Chicago and were brown-skinned, but one of their children was really dark. And he liked me. I didn't want to be anywhere around him, only on the basis of skin color. This was when I was going through this period of, "I don't want to be Black. I don't want to be like *them* because this is what *they* do." And Mama said, "*You are they*, so you have to deal with this." I really had to work to get through that. When we moved to Lincoln, I was eight, and I already had negative feelings that I didn't even know I had.

Even then, I thought, "Geez, where did all this come from?" It's all around, in the papers, and how you're treated, and in conversations—because there always people coming over to our house and talking about where you could go and the fact that there were Black schools. There had to be Black schools because you couldn't go to White ones. Those issues were always being discussed, but I was this little innocent person over here who was just kind of waltzing through it, not thinking about it.

I knew exactly what Jimmy MacRae meant when he said that, which is why I burst into tears and ran home, "Jimmy MacRae called me a nigger." I'll never forget that. It made me realize that I was one of *them*.

SONDRA DRAPER – first Village resident to graduate from Lincoln (excerpts, Ch.8)

I was able to accomplish some things even though I did come from the other side of the railroad tracks. Even though we didn't have a lot of money, we made it... [*Sonne starts crying and can't talk*]. People didn't think we could do it, but we did—we did it. We didn't have to have a lot, and we didn't live in a fancy house and have fancy things [*continues to cry*]. Our parents might not have finished high school, but they wanted us to have an education. They wanted us to do the best we could, and they gave us a lot of encouragement.

Sometimes we were asked to do things that other people might not be asked to do, and that was because of our circumstances. For example, I liked high school, and I was a good student. And in my senior year, a bronze medal was to be awarded at commencement for the person with the highest score in French. I had received the highest score, but the teacher asked me if I would let [a White student] get the bronze because her relatives were coming and would love to see her get first prize.

I said yes because I felt there was nothing else I could say. I don't even think I mentioned it to anyone until afterwards. If I had said anything to my mother, she would have come right out from Philadelphia and the situation with the French award would not have taken place. But it did.

When I went to Lincoln [*still crying*], I got a senatorial scholarship and some aid. Then I worked to put myself through college, and I made it. I only had to pay for my books—I didn't have to pay tuition or for board or food. I could eat on campus and go to school because my father worked on the grounds. I felt very, very proud that I was able to get into Lincoln.

And then, maybe in my second year, it was difficult to be one of the 12 women on campus at the time, with about 500 fellows, because the male students weren't very kind to us, especially if you weren't beautiful. When we first went there, they weren't kind to the girls at all. Mean things were said and laughs were directed toward me. It depended upon what you looked like in their eyes. Skin color mattered, and looks mattered.

Other fellows would come to your defense, but you still heard what had been said. So it was pretty rough for the first six months until they got used to the fact that we were there and we weren't going anywhere—and then we had 500 brothers.

Those were strengthening times. I made it through and weathered the storm. It was a test of strength because, if you were going to do something, you had to put up with a lot of things that were not always pleasant or in your favor. It might have been rough going through it, but, when you came out, it was another notch that steeled you for what lay ahead because there were going to be other things.

There was strength in the families in the Village, even though as kids we might have been made to feel that we weren't as good as somebody else because of the clothes we had on, or the fact that we didn't have as much money. But, in the recesses of our minds, we remembered the things we were told about who we were and that we didn't have anything to be ashamed of. My mother was great at instilling that in us because she worked in the homes of some of the professors. She was always treated well but she saw a different side, too, and she always told us that we were as good as anybody else.

MARITA RIVERO - daughter of Manual Rivero, namesake of the gym (excerpts, Ch. 13)

Lincoln was one of the gifts of my life. It grounded me in many different ways, and I owe much of what I've been able to do to the family that I grew up in, and also to that environment. It was homogenous and almost a make-believe world, but it provided a certain sense of regularity: the seasons would be the seasons, and my parents reinforced that it was beautiful and a great place to live. When people visited from the city and left, we waved goodbye and said to ourselves, "Aw, they have to go back to the city, and we get to stay here with this beautiful sunset." And there was a lot of intellectual exposure because it was a university campus, and somebody's father—it was usually a father—was in charge of some lab, some

library, some gym, some little theater. It offered that, and the sense that you could just run, run, run all day long, and somebody might be looking out for you.

It was an unusual place to grow up, so I always felt a little off the norm. I thought, “I’m not a city kid, I’m not a suburban kid—I don’t fit into some neat box.” And maybe I don’t, but many people don’t fit into a neat box. I realize now that probably seventy to eighty percent of us think we’re a little bit off the norm.

[Laughs]

I think my parents were busy using opportunities to explain race to their children in ways that would not deflate and defeat us. I remember asking my mother, “But *why* don’t White people like us?” It was during that period of childhood when you kill your parents with the *why* thing. “Why? Why?” I can still hear the frustration in her voice when she finally said, “Because, Marita, the White man is preposterous!” *[Laughs]* I said, “Oh, OK.” So if they didn’t like me, it was on them—it had nothing to do with me. They were preposterous—that was terrific!

[Laughs] I also remember my mother explaining that our people came from Africa. “Well, where do *we* come from?” You came from Germany—where did *we* come from? “One grandmother is from Canada, one is from Cuba, etc., but Black people came from Africa.” She didn’t explain slavery, just that we were rooted somewhere.

My brother Juan was kind of a hanger-on listening to all of this, and I think he was five or six, so I would have been nine or ten. And when my mother finished, he piped up with, “So Marita’s an *African*?” My mother said yes. Well, Juan went into wild laughter and ran out of the house to tell everyone on the campus: “Marita’s an African! Marita’s an African! [*Laughs*]. Because, when we grew up, Lincoln had a high percentage of African students, and they seemed different from us—they were Africans, and we were not. So Juan thought it was screamingly funny that *I*, who thought I was *so* clever, was an African! [*Cracks up*]

[In morning devotions at the tiny school in the Village], we all sang “Camptown Races.” ...Every morning we marched up those stairs—the boys on the boys’ side and the girls on the girls’ side. We marched upstairs, sat together, and sang two songs from *America’s Songbook*, or whatever that songbook was, which somebody would play on the piano. We’d say the “Pledge to the Flag,” we’d do “Our God Who Art in Heaven,” and we’d have announcements—every morning, every morning! This is how I learned all those songs: “Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer true. . . .” Where else would you learn those songs?! [*Cracking up*] Every morning, Corinna!

And that book, the Stephen Foster songbook, was written in dialect. But we didn’t know it was dialect. So we are all singing, “De Camptown ladies sing dis song, doo-dah, doo-dah.” We’d sing it just the way it was written. We’d sing “Old

Black Joe...” [She absolutely cracks up.] “. . . I’m coming, I’m coming, but my head is hanging low. . . .” [Laughs nonstop] We would sing all this stuff according to Black dialect. We *loved* those songs. Someone said later, “Why didn’t your mother and father stop that?” I’m sure they didn’t know.

I talked to Julian [Bond] about this. He said his father came down and stopped it: “We will not be singing those songs.” And I said, “Yeah, well as soon as you graduated, Julian, they went back up on the blackboard.” [Laughs] “Because we sang all those songs!”

But they had no bad meaning to you?

No. They had nothing.

Marita tells a story...

The doorbell was ringing, and I said, “There’s a White man on the porch.” Daddy got up, annoyed, and said, “That’s not a White man—that’s a *man*.” And I said to my mother, “What’s he talking about? It is *too* a White man!” [Laughs] And she said, “Well, Marita, you know those pictures of little pickaninnies in books who are bug-eyed? ‘There’s a *White* man on the porch!’ Your father does not have that view of the world.” And I guess he was disappointed that despite everything he’s said [Laughs]—about how every man puts his pants on one leg at

a time—despite everything he’s done, his daughter still tells him that there’s a *White man on the porch!* [*Laughs more*]

My mother saw the whole picture, so I must have been old enough to know what a pickaninny looked like, and what that racial presentation was. I had to be old enough to know that and still be young enough for her to be able to engage me in “After all of your father’s work with his children [*Laughs hard*] to just be citizens of the world, his daughter comes back with, “There’s a White man on the porch!” [*Cracks up*]

It isn’t that we ignored race altogether. When my parents gave parties, they would say, “All the White people are going to show up between 8:00 and 8:15. And the Black people aren’t going to come till 8:30 or so, but they’ll stay till 10:30 or 11:00, and all the White people will go home at 10:00.” [*More laughter*] They were running around, “Oh God, my hair isn’t ready, what time is it? You know the Joneses are going to be here at 8:00—who’s going to answer the door?” [*Laughs*] It was that kind of sense that we’re different people—we had different mores—and of course, my mother was very clear, politically, about the struggle: “This is what’s been going on, and your grandparents,” etc., so we knew all about our family and the efforts they’d made to fight segregation, and a lot of history.

So, when you say that people who have been oppressed pass that on to others, *I think we weren’t seen as being oppressed*. We were to fight the fight against these

people who were *so* stupid and had power to impose stupid restrictions on us because we were every bit as good as they were. I heard stories from my great aunts about what they had said and done and what they had said to Mrs. Roosevelt [wife of President Roosevelt] and what she said to them. We were standing shoulder to shoulder with everybody else.

A leadership role was implied there, though we were never told we had to lead anything or do anything, but “you don’t have to put up with that.” That was my prep for that sort of world. You’re an intelligent person, and you weren’t supposed to hide from reality, and you were supposed to go on with your life—and that entailed having to take on some of those larger issues. But that’s different from a push to achieve. It wasn’t to achieve—it was to push back enough for you to be able to live your life the way anybody else can. It’s a push to recognize your right as a human being to live your life as fully as you can.

Sometimes, we’d be sitting out in the back yard on a summer night, and we’d just have finished this wonderful meal and friends were over, and my parents were having iced tea or whatever. And my dad would say, “I wonder what the White man’s doing today.” The implication being: it doesn’t get any better than this.

So I think the idea was that we’re going to enjoy our life. We’re going to enjoy this life and make it as full as it can possibly be, and we’ll fight for that. But we’re not going to ruin our whole life feeling, “Uuuooo, I wish I were White; uuuhhhghg

. . . I didn't get this . . . ough . . . I can't do that . . . uuugg—it's not worth it to get up in the morning because they boxed me in over here and they... that isn't how we're going to approach life. That's different from pressure to achieve. It's much healthier, I think, and it's what I hope to have given children that I have come in contact with.

CORINNA FALES – excerpts from last chapter, “The Bedrock at the Bottom”

In writing *Different*, I wanted to ask, listen, and learn, which are only possible if we approach others with open minds and hearts (and is even more essential when we expect to dislike or disagree with someone). I learned that even people who felt very close to each other and thought they knew each other well, often knew surprisingly little about each other. Imagine how much truer this is when we think we know things about people we have never even met, especially when they have been labelled. I also learned that the interviewees' honest communication about their experiences and feelings is what allowed us to get to know them in a real way, and is the opposite of politically correct speak. If we want the world to become a better place—if we want others to understand us—I believe that we must talk to each other in this way, even if it sometimes causes friction.

Now to the big question: *What can be so deep and so important about prejudice that it routinely overrides our ability to empathize?*

If we are honest, we will acknowledge that we do not always easily or wholeheartedly accept difference in others, especially differences we don't like. And, if we succeed in changing our attitude, we are proud of ourselves—we feel that we have overcome something.

At Yale University's Infant Cognition Center, they are not studying diversity *per se*—they are studying what babies and very young children perceive about other babies and children, and how they react. I struggled with their research for a year—it was abhorrent to me. For more details about their work, read *Different*, but for now I want to say that their research shows that, while prejudice is also learned, it is in our DNA.

From an evolutionary perspective, this preference for sameness makes sense because it serves as a kind of initial instinctive barometer for distinguishing possible danger from safety, and possible enemy from friend, before we have any other information. So it has worked well for us since the time when our common ancestors hunted and gathered on the African veldt.

However, understanding that does not make racism any less repugnant or dangerous in our current, interconnected world. Moreover, Yale's research shows other disturbing behavior on the part of infants.

If even infants prefer sameness, no wonder we have always had such a difficult time with difference.

This is the bedrock at the bottom—and our innate propensity to prejudice has also served us—*all* of us. We would not have survived as a species without it, and it continues to serve us: we have rich heritages and history and family traditions that anchor us, protect us, give us meaning, and make us proud.

It is surely one of the greatest imperatives and challenges of our time to evolve beyond this primitive instinct lodged in our DNA; and I am convinced that the path to real change lies in our willingness to acknowledge and understand the good reasons for its ancient presence in us. In short, we must forgive ourselves for being human. If we can accept that prejudice is part of the nutshell of our nature, the work of accepting it (not condoning it) becomes fundamental to accepting ourselves and others. It is one of our greatest, ugliest, most intractable, and deadliest of human warts. But, to let it go, I believe that we need to love ourselves and others, warts and all.

Personally, the more I struggle to change something in myself, the more I get stuck. Devoting energy to what I am trying to let go of, fuels it; whereas understanding something, forgiving myself, and letting go of *the energy* I have attached to it, diminishes it. Similarly, the more I think about my foot hurting, the more it hurts. In general, the more anxious energy and focus we attach to a problem, the more we grow it. That's one of the reasons why I think we need to move beyond political correctness to integrity and the "permission" to know who

we are. Political correctness is an artifice to manage our difficulty with diversity, and it interferes with making the kind of real change we need. It is about management, and we are already seeing that there is no end to the list of things we are supposed to be politically correct about. We need to communicate—honestly—like everyone did in this book.

Although we do not like all of the differences we encounter, we can learn to respect them, appreciate their importance and significance to the members of that group, and let them be. We are at a critical moment in the history of the world, and must find a way to at least respect each other enough to evolve beyond what our DNA holds.

When we look truth straight in the eye, distasteful as that might be, we can learn from it and move toward compassion for ourselves and each other. That is my hope. And that is the unexpected book I was given, which I dedicated, with love and compassion, to us all.

If we can accept and own who we are as human beings, get some perspective on ourselves as a species, have a sense of humor, and retain our light, I have hope for change. Since we are indeed bound together, as King said and science shows, we'd better do *something*. I hope *Different* offers a path forward.