One Duke Professor’s Trayvon Martin Moment

By J. Lorand Matory

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My family recently had a Trayvon moment. Like many, this uncomfortable interracial encounter might be dismissed as a harmless mistake by good-willed, color-blind people. Or it might be read as an instance of unconscious racism, in which a right-acting young black man was prejudged “suspicious” and, even after proven innocent, subtly accused of not knowing his place. Like the man who innocently invited his new moose friend for a drink in the hunting lodge, many white readers will be surprised by the new friend’s reaction to the moose heads on the wall.

Since moving to our mostly-white Durham neighborhood four years ago, we have been active socially and civically. My wife, our children and I have been guests or hosts at numerous parties. Neighbors have toured our house, pre- and post-renovation, and my wife volunteers in the neighborhood association. So everyone on our street knows us by face and by name. They know that our children are polite, and that they attend top-tier colleges. Our son has done volunteer or paid work in several neighbors’ homes.

Before her week-long vacation, our next-door neighbor asked our 18-year-old son, whom I’ll call “D–,” to take care of her house. At 10:30 one night, having returned from working his two summer jobs, he stepped onto the neighbor’s brightly-lit front porch to get the watering can, which he took back to our yard to fill it from our spigot. Little did he know, he had fallen under the suspicious gaze of a group gathered on another, nearby porch.

Next thing, three white men marched up onto our driveway to confront him.

“Just wanted to see what was going on,” one of them said.

Standing in his own yard, my son answered, “I live right here. Z– asked me to take care of her house.”

“Oh, it’s just D–,” announced one man.

Polite words were exchanged, and, with Obama-esque equanimity, my son concluded, “No problem. I’m glad you’re concerned about the safety of Z–’s house, too.”

The story was so normal and yet so disturbing. The three white men were motivated by good, neighborly intentions. On the other hand, my son was in danger, by no fault of his own.

I needed to talk to my neighbors, to share the fear and pain that I felt, hoping that our shared discomfort would deepen, rather than harm, our friendship. That day, family and friends had again
gathered on their porch to enjoy the homeowners’ new granddaughter. A kind man, the grandfather made sure to introduce me all around. Spontaneously, his son—the baby’s father—declared, “We had a little run-in with D— the other day.” The genial 28- or 29-year-old projected the out-loud confidence of the boss’ son in the family business.

“It was bold!” he exclaimed with a laugh. “11 o’clock at night, this fella just walks RIGHT UP onto [the vacationing neighbor’s] porch, even with ALL OF US sitting over here on the porch! It was bold!”

The grandfather added, “It was funny!”

I said, “I don’t think it was funny at all. I heard that everyone was polite, and I appreciate that. But the first thing I thought of was Trayvon, and I wanted to make sure that my boy was safe.” And I had to ask: “Did any of the people who approached my son have guns? Because I know that a lot of the people on our street have guns.” The grandfather assured me that they did not.

I struggled to keep my voice calm—to preserve our friendship with these good neighbors—but my upper lip quivered with instinctual fear for the life of my son and involuntary anger that this young father’s words still implicitly blamed my son.

An empirically minded person who witnesses a young man walking straight up onto a brightly-lit porch might see the actor as someone with nothing to hide, as someone who belongs on that porch. The recollection that they have a young black neighbor might have bolstered the impression of normalcy. Never mind the fact that we all knew Z—had made similar arrangements with a young white male neighbor in the past, and that that young neighbor was no longer around. Yet, even days after my neighbor’s son learned who was on the porch that night and the entirely proper reason why, he persisted in recalling my son’s behavior as “bold!”

Did this young man’s continued confidence in his judgment, his conduct and his jovial words reflect youthful hubris? White-skin privilege? Being the boss’ son? Or was it just insensitivity to what it’s like to see a row of heads like your own mounted on the wall? I don’t know. But this young white father still clearly felt qualified to judge the “boldness” of people like my son and deputized to check it when necessary. I had the strange feeling of being in another century.

On the Fourth of July, our friends and family celebrated the gradual fulfillment of the promises of the Declaration of Independence—especially for our gay brothers and lesbian sisters. Yet I quietly lamented the endurance of the casual assumption—even among well-intentioned neighbors—that some young men are inherently suspicious. I have good neighbors, but we all need to talk, because sometimes a right-acting young black man pays for a neighbor’s mistaken boldness with his life.

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