

## Eyewitness to Jim Crow Oswald P. Bronson, Sr., Remembers



**"When you were a teacher in the black community in those days, you were a person of great respect--even when you'd go downtown to buy clothing on good credit or something.... Now, if you got 'out of your place,' you'd still be in trouble."**

*[Dr. Oswald P. Bronson talks about his education, his relationship with Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, and his role as President of Bethune-Cookman College, and the effect growing up as an African American in Jim Crow Florida had on his development. A graduate of Bethune-Cookman College, (B.S.), Gammon Theological Seminary, (B.D.) and Northwestern University (Ph.D.), Dr. Bronson, has lectured and taught in mission schools, pastoral institutes and leadership seminars, as well as serving as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. He also has received many honors for his outstanding service to the community and currently sits on numerous Boards of Directors, including the American Red Cross and the M.L.K., Jr., Center for Social Change.]*

### To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- What were the greatest influences on Dr. Bronson's education and how did they impact his life or philosophy?
- In what ways was Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune able to earn and keep respect for Bethune-Cookman College from the white community? Does her approach fall more in line with one of accommodation or of civil rights and political action? Why?
- What changes in the black "consciousness" does Dr. Bronson describe since the end of Jim Crow and what are the pro's and con's of these changes?
- What are some of the challenges Dr. Bronson faced--and still faces--as President of Bethune-Cookman College?
- Can you think about Dr. Bronson's thoughts on how the practice of slavery causes people to view slaves as "things" that serve slave-holders' interests? How do you think we can further our efforts to respect others as individuals with their own creativity rather than viewing them as "it's?"

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*In this passage, Dr. Bronson talks about the people and circumstances that shaped his education, views, and professional pursuits, specifically, beginning with his father, a former high school principal.*

First, of course, [was] my father.... My father, being such a moral disciplinarian--not necessarily a person who was politically sensitive to all of his decisions--had allowed some of the teachers to be fired, [people] whose mothers, parents worked around the homes of school board members and other influential people. And I think it got to him that way. We moved to Sanford, and it was in Sanford that I really experienced discrimination. Even on our way to school some days, men would come by and throw oranges at us, sometimes rock perhaps.

We [also] were very much aware of police brutality in that city at that time. We were conscious of the Ku Klux Klan riding around the town to keep everybody in check. And at Toombs Academy,

which was the "Negro" school at that time, we would discuss what the various black press publications would report regarding lynchings and jailings. A court system where you did not really have anyone to defend you, or even if you did, that person did it at great risk. So, it was a very difficult situation ... even ... the whites who would want to be friendly would do so at great risk. However ... I can not make an indictment against the entire, at that time, white race, because there were those who would dare to come over to our little black church and worship at the same time. White ministers [could] come and preach. As I recall, we weren't necessarily allowed to go back to their churches, at that time. Now, it has changed.

Secondly, my high school teachers [influenced me].... The black teacher had a concern for you, we thought. That's not necessarily the case now in every situation. When you were a teacher in the black community in those days, you were a person of great respect--even when you'd go downtown to buy clothing on good credit or something. You could get all sorts of recognition for your credit [if you were a teacher]. Now, if you got "out of your place," you'd still be in trouble.

Thirdly, there was a Doctor Grey, the father of Bill Grey, who is now the president of the United Negro College Fund, and who, at one time, served as a congressman. He came to speak to us at Cruz Academy in Sanford. His father ... was a Ph.D. And, that was the first time I had seen a live hero. A Ph.D. with a black face. I had never heard of a Ph.D. anybody, for that matter. And, he was a dynamic speaker and able to inspire those of us who were in high school ... to let us know what the opportunities were and give us the resolve that we would allow our present circumstances to determine our future possibilities. We felt then that we could do it. We can do it. And, we looked for the opportunity just to be in college and to move on towards a degree and thereafter. So, I had teachers in high school [and] speakers who would come over to ... our high school to speak.

I think the grandmother, [also] was one of my teachers. She was one of my teachers, too. Strong teacher. And, she said she remembered the night that the Klan came and took my grandfather out and ... beat him, I guess, till blood ran out or whatever.... So, that story, too, grew up in my mind. And, I learned from that to accommodate to the system and make the minor changes wherever I could. Once or twice, I marched with [Martin Luther] King; but, for the most part, I ... saw, in addition to that, other ways of building bridges. I like to think of my life as bridge building.

*Dr. Bronson eventually went to college at Bethune-Cookman College, and, here, he discusses the environment at the time, as well as school president Mrs. Bethune's influence on him personally and in the community during the Jim Crow era.*



[At Bethune] we had to wear uniforms because she [Mrs. Bethune] was very strict. Girls had to wear white blouses and dark skirts. Navy blue skirts, anywhere on campus. Mrs. Bethune got the message [across] that you did not go where you weren't supposed to go, or [go] anyplace that she had vetoed, or you were in trouble. Serious trouble. She would pack your bag and say, "You get out of here." The same was true of our teachers.... And, Sunday, at community meetings, we would drill. The fellows would start out in the quadrangle ... we would get in a circle. We marched first and would stand on a sidewalk in front of the administration building; then, the girls would come in with their white blouses and blue skirts, go in and be seated. Then, the crowd would stand because Mrs. Bethune would walk in and be very impressed. At the end, there were not only northern whites but southern whites as well who took interest in this college.

It was not until I came to Bethune-Cookman College that I really knew what it meant to be in a class with a white person teaching. We always had black teachers who were very strict and

strong teachers.... [And, Mrs. Bethune] could tell you without talking about it ... what the real world was like at this college.

However, because of Mrs. Bethune's stature, the contact she had around town, and the fact that Bethune-Cookman College was about the only location in the state where whites and blacks would come together ... when she would hold these ... community meetings, and they [whites] were coming in sizable numbers to listen to [her] speak. When she would speak, they would take an offering. Then, this college would survive until the next week. So, her stature did a lot in this town, though segregation was very much alive.

I think Mrs. Bethune was trying to carry on the national exposure that she had, as well as [the exposure she had as] the president of the college. For a time ... [her national prominence] ... had been something of a problem, but ... [it] was more of an asset than a problem. We did need someone to do the nuts and bolts. And Dr. Moore came in, and the campus made tremendous growth in building these things, etc.

This is not to say that Mrs. Bethune hadn't done this, because she started with nothing. Nothing! I can remember when we would stand when she would walk in. We referred to her as ... the queen of Africans, and Mary would say that "the people" had just walked in. And, when Mrs. Roosevelt would come in to town, they were making arrangements for her to stay on the beach side. She said, "No, I'm going to stay on the campus of Bethune-Cookman College." That lifted Mrs. Bethune's school to a new level of recognition. Whatever Bethune's view was, she believed in the ... value of a wider humanity rather than [in] just remaining in your own little cubicle.

On a serious note, though, I'd like to know, Mrs. Bethune, what really inspired you to achieve against such great odds, what led you to be bridge builder when even, perhaps, in your young days, you were ostracized. What helped you to have a vision that you evidently had and implement it in your outstanding work as the founder of this college and as the founder of the National Council of Negro Women--that led you to be a counselor, a friend to the President of the United States, a friend of Mrs. Roosevelt, that led you to be a part of the founding of the United Nations, and ... American Red Cross? You remember the day that the president of the Red Cross, the national president came to this campus in a helicopter and landed in the football field? We had a huge gathering, and she [Mrs. Roosevelt] declared Mrs. Bethune to be ... woman of the century. Something of that nature. And, we received the symbol of knowledge that day.

*After finishing his undergraduate education, Dr. Bronson went on to get his bachelor's of divinity degree, and then enrolled in a doctoral program at Northwestern University. He talks about his work as a Methodist pastor in Chicago while working on his Ph.D. and about how he became President of Bethune-Cookman College.*

At that time, in Chicago, the churches, the Methodist Churches, were integrated, and they invited me to serve with another black pastor in a predominantly white congregation. Blacks were moving into that neighborhood. The church was growing. So, if I served with this pastor for a year, then I would be given my own congregation on the West Side of Chicago ... [a] very tough area. It was called the Church of the Redeemer. Huge building. I stayed there two years while I was going to Northwestern. And, I served that church until my degree.

When I [had] completed my requirements, except [my] dissertation, I was invited to come ... to a new theological network of institutions that Rockefeller money had put together. It was called the Interdenominational Theological Center, and it was fully accredited. And, I went back as a faculty member and religious educator. I taught for four years. The third year, I became vice president. The fourth year, I became ... administrative vice president, and, the next year, I became president of the faculty that had taught me. I served there seven years. By that time ... we were accredited ... with other institutions. [Then], I taught some other courses ... in Atlanta, Georgia.... I was also a

member of the United Negro College fund group of colleges. So was Bethune-Cookman. Since I was a graduate of Bethune-Cookman and accredited, ... Bishop McDavid, who was a white bishop over this area, came to see me in Atlanta and asked me to consider the presidency [of Bethune-Cookman College]. I said I would think about it.... Then, Dr. Moore started calling me. Then, several alumni would visit ...

So, I came down to meet the committee.... Usually, [when] they interview you, they want to know your philosophy and what you want to do ... and, at that point, I agreed to come. When I went back to Atlanta, I said, "How am I going to let my community know that I was leaving ... ? I never shall forget the day I made the announcement. Dr. Richardson, my predecessor, walked in ahead of me ... Dr. Mays, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Senior--he was a trustee---went ahead of me. And, as soon as I walked in, everybody stood up. Whew! That was a touching moment.

[When I arrived as Bethune-Cookman College's new president], I sat in that office where my dad would bring me over to visit me with some food as a young child.... Dr. Moore had left a note there for me with ... devotions and something of that nature. And, he said Mrs. Bethune had left him the same note and what it had meant to him. I had to write down my philosophical orientation anyway as well as my emotional inclination. And, I sat there, I thought and I thought, I looked around and, I guess, I sat there enraptured for a couple of hours, and reality started hitting me. ... I knew I had challenges. The first moments were moments of reflection. Gratitude. And, a deep reverence.

*Bronson discusses integration and diversity at Bethune-Cookman College.*

On the faculty, when I came back ... I think it was in '47 when I returned, we had a number of white ... faculty members. I suspect this campus started [integrating our professors] early ... [it must have been] in the mid '40's ... [when] we began to see white faces.

So, there are ways each can preserve what one brings to--for example, our new vice president brings a relationship. Our new vice president comes from a Scottish background. It's going to be interesting to see how he shares that with us. We have now, on this campus, students from ... 26 countries. And, to see the flags going up or to see your neighbors, some days, dress in their native attire, whether they are from the Czech Republic or from China, Bulgaria, Japan, India, England, Puerto Rico, or Russia ... that's strengthening. We have a growing number of international students here.

*He shares his thoughts on how things have changed for African Americans since integration and how our country and people can capitalize on the gains we've made since the Jim Crow period ended.*

As integration took place ... many positions that blacks held in the segregated communities were discontinued when integrated. For example, when schools integrated, we didn't have the need for the black principals, as many of them as we had in those days ... because we had separate units and you did not have to go across that boundary, you know. [During segregation], there was a great emphasis on black pride and black history and on survival. So, you [had] something of a community of consciousness. A consciousness that grew out of our situation. You felt a mutual support and respect. That has changed. Whether it's changed for the better, I don't know. Only time will tell ... in terms of that particular issue.

But, in terms of the larger community, I think there has been some advancement, though we still have black enclaves. I do think, though, that it's much better for us to begin building a new consciousness of human beings, with each human being knowing where he or she originated and bringing that as a contribution to the total community. Rather than being ... separate, unbreakable in our communities. In the long run, it's going to be better. In fact, it is getting better, because you

now have African Americans in all sorts of positions on the national level and other areas in the corporate community that did not exist years ago. Doors are opening. It means, now, that persons must be prepared to compete based upon qualifications in a larger arena rather than in a narrow boundary.

The need, now, is for us to approach each other as people of sacred value. When we learn to revere the other, we somehow enlarge ourselves. I enjoy sharing the story and the philosophy of a Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, who talked about the "I-thou" and the "I-it" relationship. When the "I" relates to a "thou," there's a consciousness. There's a feeling [that is not] there when the "I" relates to the "it." The "it" does not respond consciously. It's an object ... [that is] there for my own use....

The problem comes, however, when we seek to make the "thou" an "it." And, when "thou" does become an "it," I cannot get from "it" what [I need for] my own growth. Each person I meet can somehow contribute to my own development, my own enhancement. A student may, at some point, be my teacher. How can I cultivate that, so that it will open the doors of my life to receive from you what you have in terms of your own God-given creativity ... so I can grow? If I make you an "it" ... you're kept down. [And, when] you make a person a slave, that person becomes an "it." Or, that group of people becomes an "it." Think of the several of the untold numbers of individuals during the period of slavery--not just in American slavery, but across the world, even when they had whites as slaves in many places--from whom you may have lost their individual creativity because that person was circumscribed to a certain level of functioning.

Approach life with reverence. That's my word. That's number one. Because in this age of technology and lack of growth and great possibilities, when you get caught up in that, you lose that sense of feeling about what the divine may be doing in another person's life