

CHAPTER SIX

The use of physical force as a form of discipline is not uncommon in Black American households. The reasons are numerous. Tradition. Religious convictions. Exhaustion. A genuine belief it works. A genuine belief it is necessary, so the child will not meet even worse fates out in the world. A combination of these things. As a result, many Black children experience corporal punishment in some form during their lives. My older relatives told many tales of the “whoopings” and “switchings” they got from parents, grandparents, teachers, church members, extended family members, neighbors, and so on. In days past, any adult could physically discipline any child they had any kind of relationship with or authority over. These relatives’ stories about being beaten with switches – branches taken from trees stripped of their leaves – made me cry as a child. The method was brutal too. The child to be beaten with the switch went outside to select the switch and bring it in the house for said beating. In many cases, they were forced to remove some, if not all, of their clothing, and then they were beaten with the switch. To make matters worse, the child was supposed to know what size switch the punishing adult wanted to use. If the child got a switch not big, thick, strong, or long enough, the adult might go outside and bring an entire forest of trees into the house for the purpose. The child was also expected to hold still, not attempt to run away, and to not cry or make excessive noise. These beatings sounded brutal, and when I would ask what kind of infraction caused such a severe response, the infraction never warranted it. No matter how long ago the beatings took place, my southern elders still remembered how it felt to pick out the switch to be used on them. They described in painful detail the awful sound the wind made as it sliced through the branches of the switch as they walked back to the house. These switchings always left welts, bruises, and other marks on the body. In some instances, the marks were permanent, and the adult might even display them, illustrating the severity of what they survived. It was like listening to traumatized veterans reminisce about their battles. When I heard these stories, I wondered about the unseen emotional scars remaining in addition to those physical scars.

Even my contemporaries have stories about being beaten with belts and straps and extension cords and even the tracks from the *Hot Wheels* toy race car sets. Sometimes things were thrown at them or were slapped or punched as punishment. The same basic “old school” rules applied as far as facilitation of the beating went – the child wasn’t supposed to run away, make a lot of noise, or do anything to make administering the physical discipline more difficult than necessary. And what was true for my elders was also true for my peers; whether the experiences were recalled

as learning lessons, character building exercises, or as amusing anecdotes, some anger or bitterness always lingered alongside the memory.

Is this form of punishment an effective discipline tool or abuse? It depends on who you ask. Some who received this form of punishment insist it was tough love. They remember their younger selves as needing heavy-handed discipline, and often think more of this is needed in modern-day parenting. Others may consider it abuse, but still feel compelled to acknowledge severe discipline back then wasn't viewed in the light it is today. They feel it isn't fair to apply current beliefs about corporal punishment to times past. But no matter what, most manage at some point to chuckle at some aspect of the punishments they got as children. But I never chuckled with them, because I had no stories of my own to share. Unbeknownst to me, my father forbade anyone from using any kind of physical punishment to discipline me at any time, no matter what I did. No one could spank or whoop or beat me. Not my older sister, not my aunts, not my uncles, not my older cousins, not my teachers. (Corporal punishment was still permissible in New Jersey at the time, and I found out later my parents went to my school to speak to my first-grade teacher, who paddled students from time to time.) This rule applied to all adults who encountered me. No one. Could beat me. At any time. With anything. Period. I also found out years later my mother disseminated this information throughout the rest of the family, especially among the relatives we visited during my summer vacations in West Virginia, who were probably the ones who would be most likely to employ such discipline. My dad typically didn't go with us on these trips, but he fully expected any relatives who might supervise me when I visited to abide by his declaration. My mother spread the word, and no one ever laid a finger on me.

In addition to me not knowing my father issued this edict throughout the family when I was a child, I also didn't know my dad's non-corporal punishment attitude was rather uncommon in many segments of my family. Like most children, I assumed other children's homes were like mine, and since I didn't get physical discipline, I figured no one I knew did. Though I'd heard my relatives' stories, I thought of them as historical artifacts. Certainly nothing like what they suffered would go on in modern times. But I was mistaken. While there may not have been physical discipline in my house, there certainly was in other houses, including the houses of my family members. I discovered my relatives didn't think anyone, even a child, was above being beat under the right set of circumstances. Family members talked about my dad's discipline methods. I overheard them saying things like, "Yeah, you can't spank Petula. She's too special." "Her daddy said you better not spank his girl." "Who does he think she is, the Queen of Sheba?" "She's too good as far as he's concerned." "I ain't never heard someone being above a beating, but I guess she is." "He's real stuck

up since he moved up North.” “Yeah, trying to be all White-acting.” “Acting like he forgot where he come from.” But the question of how to discipline me was kind of a non-issue, simply because severe discipline wasn’t necessary with me. I didn’t present discipline problems at school or at home.

When I was twelve, my mom finally told me about my dad’s instructions. While this did explain some of the things I overheard other relatives say, it didn’t explain why he made such a choice. I was certainly glad to know I was safe from that kind of thing, but I was curious as to why he made such a wide departure from our family’s ideas about corporal punishment. It was so forward thinking, even brave in a way. A couple of years later I found myself sitting on our front porch in Baltimore one warm spring evening. My dad was there too, listening to the Orioles baseball game. I sat quietly with him for an inning, listening intently to the play-by-play. The Orioles were killing the Yankees, so I knew he was in a good mood. I continued to sit with him as it got darker and the street light came on. I briefly thought back to me as a child in New Jersey, adoringly sitting with my father on the back porch, listening to the Yankees play. I finally managed to dive in, saying, “Dad, is it true when I was little you wouldn’t let anyone spank me? Why?” He looked at me with a piercing stare, as if he was trying to see through me to see why I asked that question. He turned down the radio, and the sound of the announcer’s voice faded away. The pause continued before he began to respond to my question.

“You know it’s a shame about our people,” he said. “It really is. We are just so violent and cruel and angry. All the time. And you know where we learn how to be violent? At home! From each other. The way our kinfolks would beat us, until we were bruised, had scars...And then we grow up thinking that kind of thing is okay.” He told me he watched Black people inflict violence on each other from childhood. To top things off my dad said, “This is the reason White people don’t want anything to do with us. They don’t want us around because we act so inhuman.” My dad paused again. I couldn’t have responded even if I wanted to. This was a new take on his all-too-common “why good White folks don’t want to be around Black folks” speeches I grew up with. I knew my dad thought Black people were loud and uncouth and uncultured. Now my dad claimed we were violent too. And because we were violent, we made White people feel unsafe, and they kept themselves and all their wonderful White bounty away from us. I held my tongue, thankful the dusk was obscuring my face.

I am not sure why, but my dad shifted gears. He became softer, as if he knew how hard his words hit me. In a much gentler voice, he told me he wanted me to expect to be treated with respect and kindness. He didn’t want me thinking violence

is normal “like most Black people do.” He called me his princess. He told me I deserved the utmost respect. He told me White people would know I was worthy of respect by my demeanor and my actions. Then they would “let me in.” He finished off with, “And once they let you in, you can do whatever you want.” His tone was one full of love and comfort, a father protecting his precious daughter. I managed to continue holding my tongue, but something like a groan leaked out of me.

“What did you say Petula?” my dad asked. I responded with “Nothing. I was just wondering how true it was about you not letting anyone spank me.” I sat there in the shadows on the front porch, working hard to grab hold of the idea he was showing me supreme care by keeping my world free of physical violence. He was ensuring I didn’t experience the kinds of trauma far too many Black people experience. I focused all my attention on that thought.

But I couldn’t ignore the rest. It was right there, in my face. It picked at my conscience with endless sharp pricks. My stomach began to feel queasy, a sure sign I was anxious and uncomfortable. I was connected to my father in a deep, soul-tied way. Could I love him and know he thought our people were savages? After all, how much did it really matter? I had to respect and appreciate my dad’s desire to break the cycles of violence he recognized as dangerous. Right? My dad did not want violence normalized in my life. Should it matter that his primary motivation was to make me acceptable to White people? Something weirdly militant and profoundly Black in me broke through and spoke. “But dad! White people are violent, too. History shows us that. Wasn’t the way they came to Africa, to snatch people away to do work they didn’t want to do themselves, wasn’t that brutal and violent? And kind of lazy, too?” I couldn’t believe I said something. How could I have said something? How could I have been so disrespectful to my father? But I did nothing to retract my statement. I waited to see what he would say. I could sense my dad assessing me.

He lowered his tone and moved closer to me, as if to make our discussion even more personal. “Petula, I know since we moved here to Baltimore from New Jersey, you’ve made friends. Black friends.” he said. “I know you like the people here. But remember how badly they treated you back in New Jersey. I know the ones you’ve met so far have been nice to you. But they’re still Black people. You must keep in mind how they are. Even if they are treating you decently right now, they are still dangerous.”

I paused, and then said it. “They are naturally dangerous? We are naturally dangerous?”

“Well of course not us Petula. Them!” He became more emphatic. “Petula, think about how they treated you. How they bullied you. How they teased you for being light-skinned and reading and speaking well. Think of how jealous people are of you. Think of how much they hurt you.”

My momentary rebellious bravery started to fail me. I didn't have the stamina to go toe-to-toe with him for any length of time. I felt physically tired. And at this point, sadness and disappointment were starting to take over. I didn't know how to be okay with witnessing his self-hate. I got up and left the porch, going to my room to think.