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Child psychiatrist, author, and educator Robert Coles is currently professor of medical humanities and psychiatry at Harvard University. His several books include the multi-volume work, *Children of Crisis*, which was recognized with a Pulitzer Prize in 1973.

Much of Coles's research and writing has centered on impoverished children and adults. He is, among many things, an acute and sympathetic observer of the spiritual in the lives of these people. The following article comes from Coles's early experience in the South, where, during the racial turmoil of the early 1960s, he encountered a special and inexplicable manifestation of grace. The article is adapted from Coles's Stone Lecture, delivered last year at Princeton Theological Seminary.

*To set the scene for this story, remember that it was 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that public schools should be desegregated. Six years later, in the fall and winter of 1960, a federal judge pressured New Orleans's all-white schools to admit black students. This was the first test of the federal will for desegregation in the "Deep" South.*

*On November 14, after various delays, three black first-graders entered McDonogh School No. 19. Another child started classes at William T. Frantz School. Her name was Ruby Bridges.*

When a federal judge ordered four little black girls to go into two white New Orleans elementary schools, you would have thought that the Devil himself had arrived in that old cosmopolitan port city. Fear and anger erupted into street scenes and demonstrations.

I was drafted into the air force in 1958. A psychiatrist, I was put in charge of a psychiatric hospital in Biloxi, Mississippi. I had my own struggles with certain air force policies and decided to undergo psychoanalysis in New Orleans, where there was a training institute. That is how I came to know that New Orleans was aflame with racial violence and social upheaval.

One day I was early for my appointment, so I decided to go and see what was happening at one of those schools. Outside the Frantz school I saw a mob of people standing and screaming. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, and I realized they were waiting for something. I asked one of the people what was happening.

He answered, "She's coming out in a half an hour."

I said, "Who's she?"

And then I heard all the language about who she was—all the cuss words and the foul language. I decided to stay and watch, even if I didn't get to see my doctor.

Soon, out of the Frantz school came a little girl, Ruby Bridges. And beside her were federal marshals. She came out and the people started in. They called her this and they called her that. They brandished their fists. They told her she was going to die and they were going to kill her. I waited when she left in a car, and I wondered who was going to come out of that school next. But then I found out no one else was in the school. The school had been totally boycotted by the white population. So here was a little black child who was going to an American elementary school all by herself in the fall of 1960. That is part of our American history.

Before going south I had done some work in Boston at the Children's Hospital, with children who had been stricken with polio during what was the last polio epidemic we will probably ever see in this country. I had studied stress in the children and presented my conclusions to the American Psychiatric Association.

In New Orleans, I thought to myself, *Why not do another study right here? Here too is stress—social stress.* I figured I could get in another little study there before I went home. I could present another paper at the

American Psychiatric Association.

With the help of Kenneth Clark, a black psychologist in New York, and Thurgood Marshall, then the NAACP legal fund attorney, I eventually established contact with Ruby and her family. My wife and I went to the Bridgeses' home, knowing the family was under terrific stress.

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"How are you doing, Ruby?" I would say to Ruby twice a week, and she would say, "I'm okay."

"Mrs. Bridges, how is Ruby doing?"

"She's doing fine."

I had learned these questions in my study of pediatrics and child psychiatry. One expects children or their parents to answer them with some evidence of turmoil. But:

"Mrs. Bridges, is Ruby sleeping okay?"

"Oh, yes. Ruby's sleeping fine."

"Are you sure she's sleeping fine?"

"Yes."

"Well, how is Ruby's appetite?"

"It's fine."

"Are you sure she's eating well?"

"Fine."

"How do you think Ruby's doing with her friends when she comes home from school?"

"Ruby's fine when she comes home. She plays and sometimes she reads from the books that she brings home, or tries to read the books. She's just in the first grade learning how to read."

"Does Ruby seem upset at any time?"

"No, Ruby doesn't seem too upset," said Mrs. Bridges.

I said to myself, *Maybe Mr. and Mrs. Bridges do not know how to pick up these symptoms.* I had been used to having parents come to see me from all the well-to-do suburbs of Boston, and you can be assured that parents there knew how to pick up the symptoms. As for Ruby, she was probably more upset than she realized. Eventually she would realize it, or if she didn't, I would realize it. And I would tell her; and if not her, the world. There was a world waiting for our news.

The days turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months. And one day the school teacher, who saw Ruby every day, all by herself in the classroom, said to me, "You know, I don't understand this child. She seems so happy. She comes here so cheerfully." This teacher spoke about the way Ruby went through those mobs, escorted by the federal marshals.

So I said, "Well, I'm a little puzzled myself, but I think that sometimes people under tremendous stress gird themselves mightily and it can take time to find out just how upset they are." Then I remembered what I had learned as a resident in child psychiatry: you ask the children to do some drawing. Perhaps their pictures will tell you something.

Ruby did some drawings, and they were interesting. She did show that she regarded white people as being bigger and stronger, and black people as being vulnerable. And I would point this out to her, and she would say, "Yes, they certainly are stronger, those white people." And I would think to myself, *Well, that is no great discovery for her.*

But I kept on asking her how she was doing and how she was getting on. And what I began to notice is that here was a girl who was six years old, whose parents were extremely poor, were illiterate so that they did not even know how to sign their names. They were going through tremendous strain, day after day, and they did not seem to be complaining, parents or child. What a contrast with the well-to-do middle-class people I had seen in Boston whose children, for one reason or another—all of them white, by the way—were having all sorts of difficulties. *Now, how do you explain that?* I would ask myself. And I did not know how to explain that. I was accumulating all this information, but I was getting rather frustrated.

Ruby Bridges came into New Orleans when she was three years old. Her parents had been tenant farmers near Greenville. We would later learn, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to call such people culturally disadvantaged and culturally deprived: poor folk, poor black folk.

Mr. Bridges was a janitor. Mrs. Bridges, with three small children, took care of those children from morning to night. When she tucked the children in, she went to other homes, got down on her knees, and scrubbed the floors. Then she came home in the middle of the night and was ready for the next morning after just a few hours of sleep. What both parents obviously wanted for their children was a better life than they had.

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One day the school teacher said to me, "I saw Ruby talking to those people on the street this morning. She stopped and seemed to be talking to the people in the street." Every morning at 8:00 there were at least 50 people there waiting for her, and every afternoon another 50 or 75.

We went to Ruby's home that night, and I asked her, "Ruby, how was your day today?"

She said, "It was okay."

"I was talking to your teacher today and she told me that she asked you about something when you came into school early in the morning."

"I don't remember," Ruby said.

"Your teacher told me that she saw you talking to people in the street."

"Oh, yes. I told her I wasn't talking to them. I was just saying a prayer for them."

"Ruby, you pray for the people there?"

"Oh, yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

I said, "Why do you do that?"

"Because they need praying for," she answered.

"Do they?"

"Oh, yes."

"Ruby, why do you think they need you to pray for them?"

"Because I should."

"Why?"

"Because I should."

Then Ruby's mother came into the room. She had heard this line of inquiry, and she said, "We tell Ruby that it's important that she pray for the people." She said that Ruby had the people on a list and prayed for them at night.

I said, "You do, Ruby, you pray for them at night, too?"

"Oh, yes."

"Why do you do that?"

"Well, because they need praying for." Mrs. Bridges told me Ruby had been told, in Sunday school, to pray for the people. I later found that the minister in their Baptist church also prayed for the people. Publicly. Every Sunday.

I said to Mrs. Bridges, and then to her husband later, "You know, it strikes me that that is a lot to ask of Ruby. I mean, given what she's going through." And they looked at me, very confused.

"We're not asking her to pray for them because we want to hurt her or anything," said Mrs. Bridges, "but we think that we all have to pray for people like that, and we think Ruby should, too." And then she looked at me and said, "Don't you think they need praying for?"

"Yes, I agree with you there," I said. "But I still think it's a little much to ask Ruby to pray for them."

I talked to my wife. "I don't understand why this girl should be praying for them—she's got enough to bear without that."

My wife said, "That's you speaking, but maybe she feels differently." Then my wife asked, "What would you do if you were going through a mob like that twice a day?"

"I can tell you one thing," I answered. "I wouldn't pray for the people who were doing what they're doing to Ruby, or trying to do to Ruby—telling her they were going to kill her, for instance."

My wife constructed the following scenario. "I can just picture you trying to get into the Harvard Faculty Club through mobs. What would you do if to get into that club in the morning and leave it in the afternoon you had to go through those mobs, and even the police wouldn't protect you?" (They wouldn't, by the way, protect Ruby in New Orleans. Hence the need for federal marshals.)

I assured my wife I would not pray for those people. What we decided I would do was this: First, I would call the police. Ruby couldn't call the police. The police were on the side of the mobs. The second thing I would do is get a lawyer, and fast. Ruby had no lawyer. Ruby had not even been born at the hands of a doctor. The third thing I would do would be to turn immediately on this crowd with language and knowledge. Who are these

thing I would do would be to turn immediately on this crowd with language and knowledge. Who are these people, anyway? They are sick. They are marginal, socio-economically, psychosocially, socio-culturally, and psychohistorically. But Ruby did not have the language of sociology or psychology to turn on this crowd. She would not even call them rednecks.

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The fourth thing we agreed that I would do, of course, would be to write an article about what I had gone through. Maybe I would even turn it into a book. But Ruby was just learning to read and write.

Ruby and, by the way, many other children we got to know in Little Rock and Clinton, Tennessee, and later in Atlanta, who came from humble homes and who were black people in the South in the 1960s, again and again showed this inclination to pray for their persecutors. What was it? Personal dignity? Prayerful dignity? Once, a couple of weeks after the first time I mentioned it, I again asked Ruby about this praying. "Ruby, I'm still puzzled. I'm trying to figure out why you think you should be the one to pray for such people, given what they do to you twice a day, five days a week."

"Well," she said, "especially it should be me."

"Why you especially?"

"Because if you're going through what they're doing to you, you're the one who should be praying for them." And then she quoted to me what she had heard in church. The minister said that Jesus went through a lot of trouble, and he said about the people who were causing the trouble, "Forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing." And now little Ruby was saying this in the 1960s, about the people in the streets of New Orleans. How is someone like me supposed to account for that, psychologically or any other way?

Here I could get very sophisticated and say that perhaps, although Ruby was saying the words, she did not really understand what they meant. When I tried this observation on my wife, she said, "At least she was saying them. I know a lot of people with a lot more money and power and white skin to boot who wouldn't say it."

"Me included," I said. "I wouldn't."

"That's the point," my wife responded.

So now what was I supposed to do? Call Ruby and her family masochists? Say that they were making statements they didn't comprehend? That they had not studied in college, had not read the implications of what Christ meant when he asked this forgiveness of his tormentors, as interpreted by X, Y, or Z philosopher-theologian?

Later, when I would talk about the mobs in the streets in New Orleans, others would tell me how ignorant they were. They were rednecks, the kind of people who would behave that way. That sounded convincing to me

were. They were rednecks, the kind of people who would behave that way. That sounded convincing to me. These poor people in the streets, they were ignorant. They lacked education. It sounded plausible.

The only thing is that one day my wife and I started recalling some of our twentieth-century history. Germany in the 1920s and 1930s did not have a large uneducated population. It was one of the most educated nations in the history of the world. There were great universities in a culture rich and finely textured. It was the nation of