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Norris & Norris

Frederick W. Norris

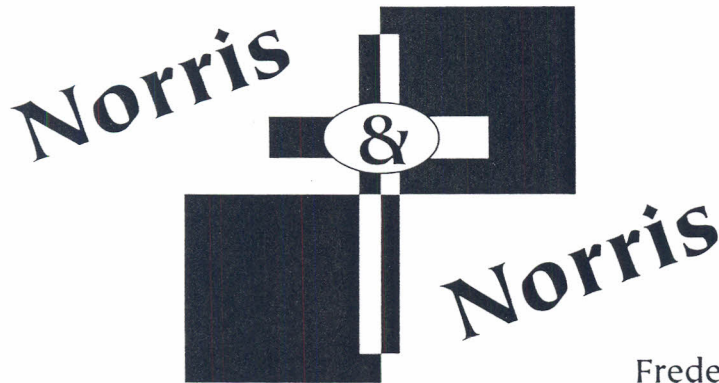
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Frederick W. Norris

He was curled up in a fetal position by the window, almost without facial expression. Black hair, black sunglasses, black pants, black sandals, and black skin. We were all unhappy. The plane from Chicago to Portland was late leaving. I always like an aisle seat; they were gone. I did get the middle one behind the bulkhead separating first and common class. More leg room. But my companion seemed even more upset than I.

I spoke first.

“Would you like for me to turn on the air above you?”

“No.”

“Do you mind if I turn on the air above me?”

“As long as it doesn’t blow on me!”

A split-second thought ripped into my consciousness. It’s a good thing that we all have to go through the metal detectors. At least this guy doesn’t have a gun or a knife to go with his sullen attitude.

After about half an hour’s conversation with the white man on my right, an engineer/accountant who set up new programs for utility companies, the black man spoke again. We had complained about the full flight; he was miffed because he could not get his usual upgrade to first class. Um. More money and miles than I had.

As talk of work and education increased, he chimed in once more and then took his own turn. He came from a family of deep commitment to learning well back into the previous century. His degrees were earned in prestigious Eastern schools, and his Ph.D. was in physics. Working for a famous scientific laboratory and then a well-known think tank in Washington had not suited him. Now he served as an international business consultant, flying all over the world to help fix companies in trouble, this week taking a bit of time off after multiple-month work in the Middle East and then Asia.

Nearly three hours of conversation flew at jet speed. Near the end he thought we shared enough in common to tell me about the different attitudes his grandfather, father, and he had toward race. His Southern grandfather saved his money, bought property on his “servant’s” pay, and now was in conversation with a hotel chain that needed one piece for which it would pay handsomely. He hated whites because of what they had done to his race, his country, and especially to him. The young man’s father merely put up with the grandfather, kept a closed countenance about many things, and deeply distrusted white folks in spite of recognizing some positive changes during the civil rights era. California’s live-and-let-live attitudes suited his needs. The young fellow himself didn’t get along well with his father, who had thrown him out during his teenage years to take a second wife, a younger woman. He and his father talked now, but not

well. The accomplished son found affirmative action good for struggling children, but not for those above high school. He wanted people to know he had made it through his own gifts and achievements, not through unneeded assistance.

At the same time, he worried about how to help his race. Should he continue in his high-profile business career, or should he go back to a black college and teach physics? Which would serve his people better? An interesting man who might lead reconciliation, particularly if he took his Roman Catholic roots more seriously.

My observations about me? I have more racist thoughts than I recognize. Why should I have thought he might have a knife or a gun? I grew up mostly among whites,

but blacks were education partners and never harmed me. North American culture slips us ideas through media that become our own and need to be rooted out. I have walked in parts of our inner-city ghettos and felt the fear. One morning a black jogger running the streets of Louisville scared me to life and made me recognize some nasty, deep-seated distrust inside. In East Tennessee I would more likely be shot or knifed by someone white, not black.

Race grows within economic, social, and educational root tangles. I could see the color; it took time to find out how much our paths from the poor to the empowered were alike. My grandfather quit school the first time when he was eight—went to work in a brick factory to feed the family. I don't think I am greatly

prejudiced about different economic, social, and educational backgrounds, but I do find it easier to talk to an academic colleague for long periods of time. How much do I allow my style of life to determine those with whom I speak? Only God, who broke down the middle wall between us all, can give me the strength to get out of my skin, to move out of my cozy surroundings and be a reconciler.

Forgive my sin, Lord. Keep working on me.

By the way, my last name and the young man's first name are the same.

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