

From the Blackest Kid to Believer to the Highest Bench: The Life of Clarence Thomas

This year Clarence Thomas enters his 25th year on the Supreme Court. In the 226-year history of the court, he is the second African-American Supreme Court Justice, after Thurgood Marshall, who served from 1967 to 1991.

Clarence Thomas' life is unusual because he is a black political conservative who lost his first marriage, conquered rage and alcohol and survived a high-tech lynching, by holding on to the promises of the Bible.

He worked in the Reagan administration, and was nominated for the Supreme Court by President George H.W. Bush. Based on his own memoir, this is his story the way he tells it. All the quotations are from *Clarence Thomas: My Grandfather's Son: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

Savannah Was Hell

He was not always a conservative. He grew up in Savannah, Georgia. "When I was a boy, Savannah was hell" (6). His parents were too poor to feed him and his brother, and so gave them up to his grandparents. He named his memoir after his grandfather, whom he called "Daddy" to the end of his life. "I had been raised by the greatest man I've ever known" (28).

But it was not easy. "He never praised us, just as he never hugged us. ... In his presence there was no play, no fun, and laughter. ... Once, years later, I got up the nerve to tell him that slavery was over. 'Not in my house,' he replied" (26).

His grandfather converted to Roman Catholicism and tried to get a good Christian education for Clarence.

That too wasn't easy. "In those days it was an insult to call a dark-skinned Negro black, and more than once when our teacher was out of the room, someone would call me 'ABC – America's Blackest Child,' an epithet that made many of my classmates roar with laughter" (30). Outside, in the streets, things were not better. The Ku Klux Klan held a convention in Savannah when Thomas was 12, and 250 of its white-robed members paraded down the city's Main Street (22).

But he pressed on and excelled in a mainly white Catholic school. "I was never prouder than when I got my first library card" (17). "Some mocked me for trying to 'talk proper' and accused me of thinking that I was better than they were" (36).

The Pathway to Rage

His father wanted him to be a priest, and sent him to study in Kansas City at Immaculate Conception Seminary. Here the rage was born. It was a mainly white school, and when Martin Luther King Jr. was shot on April 4, 1968, he heard one student say, "That's good." Another replied, "I hope the (expletive) dies" (43). Two months later, when Thomas heard that Robert Kennedy was shot, he collapsed: "I fell to my knees and burst into tears" (46).

This was too much. All the painful memories flooded his enraged soul—as when his grandfather ...

received a traffic ticket for the fabricated violation of driving with too many clothes on, or when a white woman called him 'boy' in front of [his grandsons]. Every southern black had known such moments, and felt the rage that threatened to burn through the masks of meekness and submission behind which we hid our true feelings. It was like a beast that lay in wait to devour us. ... I lost my battle

with the beast in the summer of 1968. (47)

In that rage, he abandoned the pursuit of the priesthood and the faith of grandparents. He went to the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts, and moved in a politically radical direction. “It was in Boston, not Georgia, that a white man had called me (expletive) for the first time” (78). He moved on to Yale Law School and graduated in 1974.

The Pathway Out of Dishonest Invisibility

But a sea change was about to happen in his worldview. He began to feel a tension between his own honesty and his persona as an angry black man. There was a kind of awakening as he recalled Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. (“So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man.”)

There it was. How could a black man be truly free if he felt obliged to act in a certain way – and how was that any different from being forced to live under segregation? How could blacks hope to solve their problems if they weren’t willing to tell the truth about what they thought, no matter how unpopular it might be? I already knew that the rage with which we lived made it hard for us to think straight. Now I understood for the first time that we were expected to be full of rage. It was our role – but I didn’t want to play it anymore. I’d already been doing it for too long, and it hadn’t improved my life. I had better things to do than be angry. (63-64)

Between 1974 and 1980, when Ronald Reagan was elected President, Thomas came to see things very differently. One of the Democratic staffers told him, “Black is a state of mind.” His response, in his own mind, was, “That kind of all-us-

black-folks-think-alike nonsense wasn't part of my upbringing, and I saw it as nothing more than another way to herd blacks into a political camp" (125).

But could he really make this change? Could a black be a conservative? "I'd never known a black person who called himself a conservative, and it surprised me that we rarely disagreed about anything of substance" (124). But he took the step.

I have decided to vote for Ronald Reagan. It was a giant step for a black man, but I believed it to be a logical one. I saw no good coming from an ever larger government that meddled, with incompetence if not mendacity, in the lives of its citizens, and I was particularly distressed by the Democratic Party's ceaseless promise to legislate the problems of blacks out of existence. (130)

Other Independent-Minded Friends

He would go on to take positions in the Reagan administration. The price was high. "Any black misguided enough to accept a job in the Reagan Administration was automatically branded an Uncle Tom" (145). "I could only choose between being an outcast and being dishonest" (133).

But lonely as it was, he did find some soul brothers. "Hearing Thomas Sowell, and speaking to him privately ... was a landmark event for me." Along with Sowell, there were Walter Williams and Jay Parker. Thomas said, "[They are] smart, courageous, independent-minded men who came from modest backgrounds. Politics meant nothing to them. All they cared about was truthfully describing urgent social problems, and finding ways to solve them" (126–127).

His closest relationship with a journalist was Juan Williams. He trusted Williams to transmit his views truthfully and so

told him what he believed.

I was opposed to welfare because I had seen its destructive effects up close in Savannah. Most of the older people among whom I had grown up, I told him, felt as I did, sharing Daddy's belief that it would be the "ruination" of blacks, undermining their desire to work and provide for themselves. I added that my own sister was a victim of the system, which had created a sense of entitlement that had trapped her and her children. I went on to say that I opposed busing, preferring to give school vouchers to poor children trapped in dysfunctional schools. (132)

[I told him] I think segregation is bad, I think it's wrong, it's immoral, I'd fight against it with every breath in my body – but you don't need to sit next to a white person to learn how to read and write. Nor did it matter to me if certain neighborhoods were predominantly white or black, so long as they were safe and blacks could freely choose to live in either. I was sick and tired of the theories and statistics that had come to dominate the discourse on both sides of the political fence. What mattered to me were individuals and their problems, but most of the people I met in Washington, Republicans and Democrats alike, seemed hell-bent on winning arguments instead of solving those problems. (163–164)

Common to liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, is the tragedy of divorce. Thomas walked away from his first wife and son.

I left my wife and child. It is the worst thing I've done in my life, worse even than going back on my promise to Daddy that I would finish my seminary studies and become a priest. I had broken the most solemn vow a man can make, the one that ends ... as long as you both shall live. I still live with the guilt, and always will. (135)

The Crushing Pathway Back to Christian Roots

The devastation of his marriage and the ongoing dependence on alcohol to ease the pain sent him back to church looking for something he had lost (136). On the road to awakening, he was nominated for the Supreme Court from his position on the Court of Appeals of the District of Columbia. This would be the hardest test of his life.

Anita Hill stepped forward with charges of sexual harassment. The accusations were brutal and globally public. On top of that he was branded an Uncle Tom.

For daring to reject the ideological orthodoxy that was prescribed for blacks by liberal whites, I was branded a traitor to my race. ... If I dared to step out of line, if I refused to be another invisible man, then I wasn't really black. I was an Uncle Tom doing the Massa's bidding. That wasn't politics, it was hate. (184)

At the crescendo of the Senate hearings concerning the harassment, Thomas bared his soul to the world with these words:

This is a circus. It is a national disgrace. And from my standpoint, as a black American, as far as I am concerned, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas, and it is a message that, unless you kowtow to an old order, this is what will happen to you, you will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate rather than hung from a tree. (271)

With every day's crushing criticism Thomas was moving toward God as his sustaining hope. "The only good thing about these

attacks was that they encouraged me to return to the faith that had sustained me in my youth. ... My closest friends ... helped guide me back to the place where I belonged. By running away from God, I had thrown away the most important part of my grandparents' legacy" (184).

Each day I left the caucus room tired, tormented, and anxious, and each day Virginia [his second wife] and I bathed ourselves in God's unwavering love. ... I knew that no human hand could sustain me in my time of trial. After years of rejecting God, I slowly eased into a state of quiet ambivalence toward him, but that wasn't good enough anymore: I had to go the whole way. I recalled one of Daddy's sayings, "Hard times make monkeys eat cayenne pepper." Now with Virginia at my side I ate the pepper of faith and found it sweet. (237)

The more hopeless things appeared and the more vulnerable I felt, the more I turned to God's comforting embrace, and over time my focus became primarily God centered. The words of the apostle Paul were never far from my mind: "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak then I am strong." (249)

A White Friend and Christian Brother—Forever

Sen. Jack Danforth was a close friend during the difficult days, and had played the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers" for Clarence and his wife to encourage them. On the last day of the proceedings Danforth sent Thomas a cassette of the hymn with this note:

Dear Clarence—

Here's a gift to remind you of what was good about this past

week. At your time of greatest weakness, you called on God for strength. He answered your prayer.

Win or lose tonight, glory to God, for he has won a great victory.

For the rest of our lives I will always be as close as your telephone. Whatever the outcome, I will always be

Your brother in Christ,
Jack (279)

Clarence Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court Oct. 15, 1991 by a vote of 52 percent to 48 percent. His memoir ends with a prayer, "Lord, grant me the wisdom to know what is right and the courage to do it. Amen."

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