

## *The Presentation*

October 2016

How it begins, today and yesterday and probably tomorrow: I'm standing alone in a ballroom miles from home, getting ready to talk to a white cop who won't want to listen.

This cop, he's over by some coffee urns, holding court with two other white men in shirtsleeves. They're looking at him like he just walked on water. Probably saying how much they liked his speech, the one he gave a few days ago, to kick off this conference, a national conference on community policing. That's why I want to talk to him, too. Because I saw that speech, and I didn't love it. And because this man is not your average cop. He's also a scholar, and a lawyer, and director of the organization putting this conference on. He's a celebrity cop. A leader of cops. A cop other cops learn from. And I need him to learn from me.

I check my wristwatch. It's barely noon. There are more talks today, and seeing them is the whole reason I came all the way to Tempe, but after three days of sitting and standing, standing and sitting, walking from panels to trainings to luncheons to more panels, I'm tired. I'd like to go to my room, just sit at the window and enjoy the fleeting feeling of looking at something new. But I can't do that. Because what this cop said—and what he *didn't* say—bothered me. And a thing I've learned is: if I don't bring up what bothers me, who will?

My name's Richard Brown, by the way. I'm retired. I've been thinking, lately, of making cards that just say that: *Richard Brown, Retired*. Some

folks think my cards should say, *Activist*, but I don't know. I've never felt a need to advertise that. And anyway, *Activist*, it feels too broad, or maybe not broad enough. My friend Ronnie once said I'm like a geodesic dome: at any one time, you can only see a few panels, but if you move around me, you'll find more and more and more. So maybe what I really need is a whole deck of cards: *Richard Brown, Photographer*; *Richard Brown, Walking News Quote*; *Richard Brown, Grandpa to All*; *Richard Brown, Black Man in a White Room*.

That last card, it's the one I need today.

Today I'm at Mission Palms Hotel, in Tempe, for the Problem-Oriented Policing Conference, an annual affair for the few who care or profess to care about community policing. Probably, if you've ever even heard of community policing, you think it's an add-on, an à la carte item—just a few officers shaking hands and petting kitties while the rest do the “real” work. But community policing is a philosophy. A religion. It is the ethos of a police force that partners, top to bottom, with civilians on the problems that *lead* to crime. I know this because, for a while, police in my city actually adopted this philosophy. Those were good years. They were hopeful years. They are long, long gone.

I'm thirsty. I head to the cooler and fill a paper cup. As I drink, I scan. There are a few hundred people here, but I'm one of a dozen civilians and maybe the only Black one. By now, I'm pretty much used to this. I've spent a lot of time with cops. I've ridden along with them, walked crime scenes with them, trained their trainers, gone to their weddings. For a time, I was a regular at these conferences, too, but lately I've been out of the loop. I guess that's why I came: to see what I've missed, what's changed.

I wish I was more surprised to say that not much has changed.

These last few days, I've sat through dozens of presentations by police about their successes in community policing. A trio from Washington explained how they'd tidied up a cluster of motels at the center of a prostitution ring. A group from England told us about cleaning up a neighborhood plagued by drunken brawls. And a few officers from my home of Portland, Oregon, spoke about “engaging the community” in an effort to deal with drug dealing and violence on a corner near a college campus.

That bugged me.

It bugged me because I *live* in that community. For years I've lived there, blocks from campus. And I'm telling you: Portland police didn't engage anyone. No regular people, at least. This project wasn't about regular people. If it had been, they'd have helped us with that corner decades ago, when crack was flooding the streets, when kids were killing kids, when we were telling police exactly how we wanted to be engaged. They didn't listen, though, not until last year, when the college president, keen to clean things up in advance of a campus expansion, began talking about stopping the violence. Then, the cops *engaged*. They sat down with that president and some business owners, and they made a plan, then got up in front of the cameras and told the rest of us about it. That's what gets at me. Police know how to do community policing. They just mostly do it with people who already have power.

This cop is still over there, talking with his fans. I can't tell if he's noticed me noticing him. Probably. I'm kind of hard to miss. Today, like most days, I'm wearing a tan suit and hat, purple shirt, tan bow tie, and a sterling tube on my lapel—a tussie-mussie, it's called—that holds a purple silk flower. I got the tussie-mussie from a TV show based on some Agatha Christie detective story. But the bow tie? That's all me. I've worn one most days for as long as I can recall. It gets some attention. And it makes it easier for white folks, who can describe me as the guy with the bow tie instead of just the Black guy.

Off to the left, something flashes. The skin behind my ears goes tight, and I spin left, reach down for my camera. And now here it comes, the double disappointment. Because that flash? I think it was just overhead light strobing off a mic stand. And I'm not even carrying my camera.

Used to be, I didn't miss a picture. Not a one. My feeling was, any change around me, it could be something, and good or bad, I wasn't going to miss it. Honestly, that's still my feeling. But lately I'm missing a lot. Take yesterday: I walked around Tempe for three hours, on streets full of people, in softening light, but I didn't take a single photo. And that hurts. Because for years, taking pictures was all I did. I photographed thousands of Black faces, and a lot of white ones, too. For a time, I couldn't go outside without someone asking, hey, wasn't I the picture man? And I was, until one day, I stopped. Just like that, I did. Stepped away from my camera and

into the frame. I've stayed there for decades. And though I have no regrets about that—no regrets about where I've gone, what I've done, or why—I do miss taking pictures. Every morning, I tell myself I'll start again. And every evening, I tell myself again.

Finally, this cop is on the move. He's walking like he's being watched: chin up, shoulders back. I *really* don't want to talk to him. Just thinking about it makes me tired. After years of making people listen to what I have to say—about respecting us, about treating Black boys like boys—I'm wearing down. And the best way I can explain it is, this thing has been happening. The thing is, I start crying. I start, and I can't stop. I'm not one of those men who's got a thing about men who cry. I have nothing against criers. I just never was one, not until lately. But lately, whenever I flick on the TV, I end up on one of those dramas where someone's struggling to make a difference, struggling hard until, near the end, with everything against them, they break through and make it. Or hell, maybe they don't. I couldn't tell you. Usually, by that point, I can barely even see the screen.

And now here comes this cop. About to stride right past me. If I'm going to talk to him, it's got to happen now, so I muster a smile, step to the right, and extend a hand.

"Hey there!" I say. "Glad to see you."

He stops, and he gives my hand a shake, still holding that half smile, looking me over, probably wondering how he knows me, if he knows me, if he's confusing mine with another Black face.

I let him wonder.

"I'm Richard Brown," I say eventually. "From Portland. Thanks for your speech."

He relaxes and releases my hand, thanks me for being here and compliments my bow tie. But already his eyes are moving toward the door, toward whatever's more important.

I jump right in. I begin, as always, by complimenting what I can of his speech. I let him know who I am: a civilian who's spent years working with cops, many of whom who eat, breathe, and sleep community policing. Once he's smiling, I switch gears. I tell him that *none* of what I've heard today feels like real community policing. I tell him about the Portland cops and what their talk left out. And then I tell him what I'm here to

tell him: I tell him there was this *other* meeting, of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, like a week ago. And he sighs, like he knows what I'm going to say. And what I say is: their president? He apologized for police's "historical mistreatment of racial minorities." It didn't go far enough, at all, but it was a big deal. It was rare. Papers ran headlines about it for a day, but since then it's been crickets. I haven't heard a word about it here. So I ask, "Why?"

"That man," he says, his smile now gone, "got a lot of flak for that statement."

I drop my eyes. I've heard white folks say words like these way too many times, so I'm feeling a lot. But I know how white folks feel about my feelings, and I can't have this guy running off, so I gather myself and say, "I bet he did. But I'm glad he said it. And I hope someone here will, too."

I see it in his face: he doesn't have time for this. For some cranky old Black man who just wants to criticize. But I stay where I am. I wait. Because if he asks me a question—any question—I can begin to tell him what he doesn't know. I can tell him that I've ridden along in squad cars hundreds of times; that I've been on more search warrants than most active officers; that for a few years—a few *decades*—cops would page me pretty much whenever there was a shooting, a bust, a whatever involving Black people; that I led a citizen foot patrol every night for a year-plus in a gang-addled area the police were barely policing; that, for a decade-and-a-half, I ran a weekly meeting that brought civilians and city officials into one room to solve real human problems; that I've felt, for years, that a city is a yardstick, with police at zero inches and Black folks at thirty-six and everyone just yelling; and that I've been standing strong at eighteen inches, and I'm still standing, but I'm getting tired.

This guy isn't asking me anything, though. Of course he's not. He sees no reason to. He's just shaking my hand again and saying, "It's nice to meet you," then heading on his way.

I watch him walk off. I try to swallow my feelings, just move on. But it's hard. Harder than ever. Because every day I get older. And lately it seems that's the only thing that's changing.



Two months later, early morning in early December, I'm making the hour-and-a-half drive to Salem to visit to the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training, aka the Academy. The Academy is the place that trains and certifies every law enforcement officer in Oregon. Every last one. And I come down here, week after week after week, to try to help them do it right.

I started here a decade ago as a governor-appointed board member, and when I termed out three years back, the director asked me to keep coming, so I did. I don't have a title anymore. Now I'm just a civilian who keeps showing up. Mostly I sit in on trainings. My presence, it makes white folks—and it's mostly white folks—think harder about what they do and don't say, and if someone says something incomplete, or ignorant, I address it. I'm forever pushing the people in charge, too, to overhaul the curriculum, make it so that race is woven in everywhere, not balled up in a corner to be picked up for an hour, then set down and forgotten. It's slow work. Slow doesn't begin to describe it. But what we do here touches all cops. It catches them when they're young, before their habits harden, before they're on the street with a gun in my neighborhood. So I keep coming.

Most Wednesdays, I'd be parking my coupe in the back lot and walking through the courtyard and over to the classroom where MacLellan—a good teacher, if a bit too fond of sports metaphors—teaches his use-of-force class. But this week's special. This week, right here at the Academy, there's yet another conference on community policing, this one specific to Oregon. There are a whole bunch of guest speakers, one of whom happens to be that cop from Tempe. So today I'm heading over to the Hall of Heroes to catch his speech, and then catch him, continue that conversation we started.

I walk into the hall and say my hellos—to some instructors, some recruits, a custodian—and then I take a seat. I sit through the guy's talk, during which he again attaboys cops for some half-assed community policing. When he's done, I clap, I stand, and I wait. I watch him smile and shake hands until, finally, he's free. And then I walk up and say, "Hey there! I've been thinking about our talk."

I'm not wearing my bow tie. Rarely do at the Academy. And I'll admit: it feels good, standing here, watching this guy's cheeks flare as he wonders how he knows me, if he knows me. After a moment, I take mercy and remind him. His eyes flash from confusion to relief and right on to impatience, and I ignore that, just smile and say, "We're happy you're here."

Maybe it's because of that *we*. Maybe it's because, as I talk to him, a few people—an instructor, a recruit in her fifth week of training, a receptionist—walk by and say, "Hello, Mr. Brown." Maybe it's because I'm now mentioning Hope and Hard Work, that meeting I led, the one that brought cops and the community together to solve problems, week after week. Whatever it is, this guy's nodding. Seems like he's really hearing me. I'm getting ready to transition back to his speech in Arizona, to the things he and the rest did and did not say, when he cuts in. "You know there's a city in Florida that's thinking of trying the sort of meeting you're talking about? I just spoke to their chief. Maybe you should, too."

All I can do is drop my eyes. Stare hard at speckled floor tile. I'm thinking of that saying about how you can see a person's soul through their eyes. I'm thinking I don't want this man seeing mine. I take a breath and look back up. I tell this man he's misunderstood me. I tell him that I'm not asking for advice. That I *did* this thing he's only considered. That I'm not proposing anything new at all. That I brought police and Black people into the same room, every week, for sixteen years.

Somewhere behind his eyes, a light switches on.

"Sixteen *years*?" he asks.

Suddenly, he's interested. He's animated. He's asking me all sorts of questions. At least I think he is. But at the moment, I can't hear him. Can't hear much at all. I'm sinking way down into myself, sinking deep, and all I can make out is a low, watery drone.

I'm tired.

I'm tired of having to work so hard to be heard. Tired of having to explain why I belong where I am. Tired of being ignored because I don't have a badge, a bunch of abba dabbas after my name, a fancy title, a white face. I'm tired of saying the same things to people who aren't listening,

who don't have enough urgency, who aren't tired enough of watching Black boys die.

I raise my eyes. Seems like this cop has stopped talking. He's looking at me. Maybe he's finally decided he's ready to hear what I think, what I can teach him. Good for him.

I glance over his shoulder into the cafeteria. Across the way, three white recruits, who look not a day over twenty, and who I know just finished a training about firing weapons, are laughing, laughing so hard they're almost crying. Beside them are a couple of instructors, old guard cops, the sort of cops I could reason with for five centuries and still they'd never change their minds about anything.

I look back at this cop standing before me. There's a large part of me that doesn't want to open up to him, to this man who deserves none of what I have—a part of me that's feeling too tired, and too proud, to say what I've been saying for so long to men who are terrible listeners and expert forgetters.

And yet.

I can already feel them, these old words, swimming up out of my chest.