

THINGS IN MOTION ...

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Man, as we know him is a poor creature; but he is halfway between an ape and a God, and he is traveling in the right direction.

--Dean William Ralph Inge (1860 - 1954)

A LESSON FOR FATHER AND SON

I WAS FOUR and had recently learned the joy of having a playmate. My father was the overseer of a Georgia farm which relied on resident workers as its manpower source. There were six families of blacks living on the farm, their houses separated rather than being grouped in the "quarters" arrangement of earlier times. There were black children, of course, and one of my age; his name was Booker T. Washington Johnson. "Book" was being raised by his grandmother--a widely accepted situation in those days. We became friends when my father sent the two of us along with several older children to the barn where cotton was stored--with instructions to "stir the cotton good" which was how the normal buildup of heat was dissipated. After that, Book and I played together at every opportunity. We climbed trees, filched green peaches from his grandma's trees, found and played with baby rabbits, waded in the spring-fed streams and did what most four-year old farm boys did in those days. We were blissfully unaware of it, of course, but we were constantly watched by someone in authority, and nothing we did went without note by one adult or another. I had always gone home for the noon meal as my Dad instructed me--then I began to arrive late or not at all, in which case he came to Book's house and got me. The third time he came

to get me, he brought a switch and used it on my backside all the way home. I wasn't late for several days after that, but eventually he had to come after me with that switch again. By then I had acquired a reputation among the farm workers; I was stubborn--but they used the term "butt-headed."



My Dad, of course, tried a number of ways to find the penalty that would convince me to come home at noon, but nothing seemed to work--then he hit on a plan that worked so well he never had to use it again. I was in trouble again for playing too long, and just as he was about to give me another session with the switch, he noticed a new plow line rope that he had put aside for one of the farm workers. He uncoiled the new rope and loosely tied one end of it around my waist. The other end he tied about six feet up on one of the posts that supported the roof of the porch--the white rope acting as a sort of flag that attracted the attention of anyone passing by. As the farm workers walked by on their way home at dusk, each one had a comment for me--and each one laughed his way out of the yard. I was mortified and hid my red face, already dreading having to see all of them again tomorrow. That episode ended my being late for lunch--or any other occasion. My Dad had found my greatest weakness and I had learned a valuable bit about myself that is still true today.

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