

“The Inexplicable Prayers of Ruby Bridges”  
By Robert Coles

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In 1954 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.

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 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.

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 Bridges’ home, knowing the family was under terrific stress.

“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.

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, who 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.”

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. So when I pray I say, “Please, God, try to forgive these people because even if they say those bad things, they don’t know what they’re doing. So You could forgive them just like You did those folks a long time ago when they said terrible things about You.” 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?

When I did prod the child a bit, I got this evidence of what I then concluded to be fearful piety: “They keep coming and saying the bad words, but my mamma says they’ll get tired after a while and then they’ll stop coming. They’ll stay home. The minister came to our house and he said the same thing, and not to worry, and I don’t. The minister said God is watching and He won’t forget because He never does. The minister says if I forgive the people, and smile at them and pray for them, God will keep a good eye on everything and He’ll be our protection.”

She stopped and seemed positive. I thought I felt some doubt, some uncertainty. I asked her if she believed the minister was on the right track. “Oh, yes,” she said, and then came a kind explanation for the benighted, agnostic, Yankee visitor: “I’m sure God knows what’s happening. He’s got a lot to worry about, but there is bad trouble here, and He can’t help but notice. He may not rush to do anything, not right away. But there will come day like you hear in church.”