

Clifton L. Taulbert

Overcoming obstacles of segregation, he went on to achieve success as an entrepreneur.

Chapter 01 - 0:55

Introduction

Announcer: Clifton Taulbert was born in Glen Allan, Mississippi, a small town in the Mississippi Delta in 1945.

He graduated valedictorian from O'Bannon High School in Greenville, Mississippi, in 1963. He received his B.A. in History and Sociology from Oral Roberts University and graduated from the Southwest Graduate School of Banking at Southern Methodist University. He later obtained an associate degree in health care management from Tulsa Community College. Clifton also spent a few years in the United States Air Force, where he attained the rank of sergeant and served in a classified position with the 89th Presidential Wing of the US Air Force in Washington D.C. He is now an internationally acclaimed speaker, author, entrepreneur, and filmmaker.

Listen to Clifton Taulbert tell you about his days picking cotton, books he has written and how he deals with his childhood memories and the legacies of slavery and segregation on the oral history website VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 7:45

Papa's House

John Erling: My name is John Erling, and today's date is May 23, 2018.

Cliff, would you state your full name, please?

Clifton Taulbert: Clifton Lamar Taulbert.

JE: Anything attached to your name, named after somebody in your family? How did the names come about?

CT: Well, it's interesting. My first name, Clifton, a Jewish lady in Glen Allan, Mississippi, her name was Clifficstein, and named me Clifton.

JE: Oh, really?

CT: Yeah.

JE: And then your middle name?

CT: The middle name, Lamar, where, I'm not quite sure, because Taulbert is basically a French name. And when I go to New Orleans, I'm never introduced as Clifton Taulbert; I'm introduced as Clifton Taulbere. And the name, Taulbert, really derived from Tolbert, T-o-l-b-e-r-t, prior to the Civil War. And a number of African Americans, after the war, uh, before that timeframe, moved to Alabama, and the French were in control.

So T-o-l-b-e-r-t became Taulbere, and by the time it got to me, that's the way it was.

JE: Interesting. Your date of birth?

CT: February 19, 1945.

JE: That makes your present age?

CT: Seventy-three.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

CT: We're recording it in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in my office.

JE: Where were you born?

CT: I was born in Glen Allan, Mississippi.

JE: Your mother's name?

CT: Mary Morgan Taulbert.

JE: Where was she born? Where did she grow up? And a little bit about her personality.

CT: My mom was born in the Glen Allan area as well. An incredible lady. She was not raised by her birth mother, because her mother and father divorced at a very early age, around nineteen or twenty. And she was raised by her grandparents. The same great grandparents who also raised me up until the time they passed away.

JE: So her personality was . . . ?

CT: In describing my mother's personality, I would think more very quiet, not very outgoing, but very knowledgeable, but not pushy. Very inviting for others, but never overpowering.

JE: Were you around her long? You said you were raised by—

CT: I was raised by my great grandmother up until she died. Then I went to live with my great aunt. And I stayed with her up until I graduated from high school. But, see, this is part of the life a community in the South, in that my great aunt, all of her kids were grown and she lived alone, so I went to live with her. Then after I graduated, another sister went to live with her. And when she graduated, another niece went to live with her. You'd never let people live alone.

JE: So is that why your mother sent you, or released you to her?

CT: I would say that, at least as I understand it, there could be other reasons that were never told me, but because of the subsequent sisters and cousins and nieces who went to live with this same lady—because she was like the matriarch of the family, I'm assuming that was part of it.

- JE:** It was a tradition.
- CT:** Yeah.
- JE:** Your father's name?
- CT:** My father's name is Willie Jones. My father and mother were never married. I didn't know my father until I was seventeen.
- JE:** Then did you get to know him very well at seventeen?
- CT:** At seventeen, I graduated from high school. He lived in another state, another city, and I went, actually, to live with him, after graduating from high school. But only was with him for, oh, maybe two years at the most. And by that time, I enlisted in the United States Air Force. During that period of time, that was a four-year commitment, then I came back to Tulsa to go to school at Oral Roberts University. And it was in that period of time that my father passed away.
- JE:** So you probably didn't draw much on him—
- CT:** No, I did not at all, I mean—
- JE:** . . . as a mentor or leader.
- CT:** . . . but the, not as a mentor. But, certainly, he came in my life at a good time, and I think it was a meaningful time.
- JE:** Brothers and sisters of yours, how many?
- CT:** My mother had four girls and two boys. The only father that I knew was Moses Taulbert. That's the father that I really list as my dad and not my birth father. Because that's the father that I grew up with for about fifteen years.
- JE:** Your mother was married to him?
- CT:** My mother was married to him. After I was born, she married him.
- JE:** Moses Taulbert.
- CT:** Right.
- JE:** Was he important in your life?
- CT:** I have to say yes because anytime your path crossed that of another human being, it's going to impact you. And all of that impact was not necessarily good, but it was impactful nonetheless. And his younger brother, my uncle, is still one that I would consider the best uncle that I guy could have. So in that regard, he impacted me in a very impactful way.
- JE:** Glen Allan, Mississippi, a little bit about that town.
- CT:** Glen Allan was situated at one time to be a country girl with a silk dress—but it never happened. The Mississippi River took a turn, the railroad stopped coming, but Glen Allan is situated on Lake Washington, probably one of the most incredible and beautiful lakes in our country. It never had a lot of people, maybe at the height 750 people, a combination of white families, black families, two Jewish families, one Italian family, and one Chinese family.
- JE:** Let me say at the outset, you've written many books that we want to talk about. Some of what I talk about here comes from your book *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*.

But I'll talk more about that later.

Papa is a character in your book.

CT: Oh, yeah, that was my great grandfather. And I would say, probably the most impactful man in my life, at least. I mean, there were two impactful men, but I would say my great grandfather, I would put him as number one.

JE: Tell us more about him.

CT: My great grandfather was a leader, very gregarious, outgoing, he was a Baptist minister. He pastored a number of churches in the Washington, Issaquena, Sharkey County areas. He was very high on education, college education was very important to him. And in our house, there was always a lot of books, always a lot of conversation going on. And I liked the fact that I could travel with my grandpa.

When we would go to town, I'd be on that front seat sitting right by him. And I had a place, you know. My birth was circumstantial with a lot of challenges but my great grandfather was there to erase all those challenges for me.

JE: He took a special interest in you?

CT: He took a very special interest in me.

JE: The first house you lived in?

CT: The first house where I was born was the same house where my mother was born and where her mother was born. My great grandfather and great, great grandfather, they were artisans. They were part of that group of men and women from Alabama, that traveled throughout the South, happened to build antebellum mansions. So the house that they built for themselves in Glen Allan, Mississippi, was not shotgun house. It was unlike the typical houses of most of my family and friends.

I remember it clearly. It had a long front porch, a screened-in end of the front porch. We actually had a living room with couches and chairs and bookcases. There were separate bedrooms. There was a summer dining room, and then there was the winter dining room. And there was a kitchen, there was a storehouse. It was a wonderful place, Papa's house was a wonderful place. It was built by the hands of Great, Great Grandfather.

JE: So that early childhood, four, five, six, seven, eight, is that a happy time for you?

CT: It was a happy time for me.

Chapter 03 - 6:45

Church

John Erling: Church, was that important?

Clifton Taulbert: Church was the center of our lives. I don't even know if you could define it as important, it was more than important, I mean, it literally wrapped itself around us. And

when your great grandfather is a Baptist minister and well-known throughout the area, you had so many people visiting our home. Black college presidents would visit our home. Especially those who were presidents of colleges that had been founded by the black churches.

So all of that was part of my life.

JE: Songs that you learned in that Baptist church, probably still real to you today.

CT: Very much so. I look back and remember clearly and maybe understand even more today, the importance of church, not only for their spiritual life, but it was also the center of their social life as well. Because everything else was legally segregated. Everything that was publicly owned, we could not participate in. So the church was ours, it was the social outlet, the religious outlet, it was the activity outlet, it was everything.

Going to church on the fourth Sunday, and the reason I know the fourth Sunday because that's the Sunday that the pastor came, and he would preach his rousing sermon. But what I remember most is the deacons. These were the men who would lead the prayer service on the Sunday mornings. And on Sundays, they would still have on khaki pants and khaki shirts, didn't have a tie, but their brogans would be shined, their shoes would be shining.

They would pull a chair up to the front of the church and they would get on their knees. But before, they would walk from their seats, where the deacons had a special place, and they would walk to the front of the church. And on their way walking, they would sing what we know as a Dr. Watts' hymn. And they would always sing, "Before this time another year, I may be dead and gone, but I'll let you know before I go, where I'll be." I will always remember that, because their lives were so chancy and they understood the chanciness of their lives. And they used those times to reaffirm their light, to reaffirm their faith, and to deal with the reality of being black in a segregated world.

JE: I lived up North in a Lutheran church, but I'm sure that if you named some songs, and you could, I'm sure, now, I sang them too. But they probably had more meaning to you as a black person.

CT: You know, I would think so because I remember the songs as being extraordinarily passionate. I remember them as being a telling of a story. Let's say you had a bad day, a bad week, picking cotton was no fun, so don't let anybody tell you it was fun, it wasn't. Chopping cotton from sunup to sundown was even worse. And I would say 85 to 90 percent of the people who were not maids or butlers or tractor drivers would spend their lives either picking or chopping cotton.

So when they would come to church on Sunday morning, it was kind of like a cathartic event, I call it. You had a chance to say, "You may work me till I can't move, but I have this moment now and I'm okay."

- JE:** Yeah. I was going to save this until later but we had a royal wedding last weekend. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. I don't know if you watched it or not.
- CT:** Barbara and I got up at three o'clock. We watched every bit of it.
- JE:** The bishop of the Episcopal Church of America, Mike Murray, was there to speak.
- CT:** Right.
- JE:** And he referenced Martin Luther, very close to the beginning, then he referenced a balm in Gilead.
- CT:** Right.
- JE:** And a balm in Gilead had to have had a better meaning to you than maybe it did to somebody in North Dakota.
- CT:** Right. Or the audience that heard him say that, especially those audiences who were royalty or friends of royalty. You know, a balm is a healing substance, it is there to get rid of hurt and to give you some reason to believe that life is going to be better, that you're going to be okay. But if your life has always been good, you don't quite understand the importance of that phrase, "a balm in Gilead."
- But coming from Glen Allan, Mississippi, during the era of legal segregation, I clearly understood everything he said.
- JE:** He quoted, "There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin sick soul." When he said that, I remembered it and then I thought about you immediately because I knew we'd be talking, that that had to have a special meaning.
- CT:** Yeah, yeah.
- JE:** That you sang that song in your church.
- CT:** Oh, yeah.
- JE:** Right.
- CT:** I mean, that was typical because you're always looking for *that thing* to change *that other thing*. To make you feel better, to give you a reason to purpose your life continuously.
- JE:** You must have felt proud and happy to see that bishop, who was standing in front of royalty and his style is so much different than their ministers preach. I don't know what his background was, could be somewhat similar to yours. Had to make you feel good.
- CT:** I think the whole thing was a message, from my perspective. Unplanned but planned, unrehearsed yet rehearsed.
- JE:** Yeah.
- CT:** But a message of mass proportion. Very seldom do you talk about a wedding a week later.
[both laugh]
- JE:** Right.
- CT:** But that was more than a wedding. It was, to me, a symbolic gesture as what can be. And I think it spoke that loud and clear. I don't know if I'll ever get a chance to meet Harry and

Meghan but that's one of my objectives. I was so impressed with their touching, I was so impressed with their leaning into each other, because it was them, but it was also symbolic to a great extent of all of us. We have the ability to lean into each other, should we choose. We have the ability to touch each other, should we choose. And we have the ability to live our lives together, should we choose.

JE: For the record, which will be recorded in many other places than this, Meghan Markle is half black and half white. So that invitation to the bishop came, obviously, because of her.

CT: Right.

Chapter 04 - 2:30

One Room Schoolhouse

John Erling: Your education, the first school you attended?

Clifton Taulbert: Glen Allan Elementary School. It was one room. I didn't know you could have two or three—

JE: Yeah.

CT: . . . or four. There was one room. Miss Mary Maxey was my first grade teacher. It's still hard for me to imagine all of those classes being in one room, divided by aisle. And when you weren't in class, you leaned your head on your desk and the others would sit up straight for their teaching.

JE: So the teacher could know who she was teaching to—

CT: Yeah.

JE: . . . on that hour.

CT: Yeah. Yeah. [both laugh] But the thing about it also was this level of expectancy. That is one thing that I will always remember is that the black educators saw their work not as their job but this was their ministry in life, to educate their children, change their trajectory, give them reason to become productive, caring citizens. And that's what they did.

Our schoolbooks were secondhand but the teaching itself was forthright. The expectations were forthright. The stick-to-itiveness to get it done was forthright. They demanded the best of us.

I had a kid laughing the other day, he was fourth grade. And I said, "Oh, I remember the fourth grade."

"You do?"

I said, "Yeah. I had to learn the Gettysburg Address and recite every word of it. I had to learn the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling."

“How long was that poem, Mr. Taulbert?”

“A lot of verses, young man, a lot of verses.” [both laughing] But we had to do that. And I still quote the Gettysburg Address but I learned it in the fourth grade.

JE: Wow. Did your mother teach?

CT: My mother taught as well.

JE: How long were you in that one-room schoolhouse?

CT: I would say by the time I came along, I may have been in it for about maybe a year.

Because that was a wooden building. They had started to build, for black education, uh, real schools. It was being built while I was going to the other school. So I actually saw the progress of going from wood to brick. Going from outside toilets to inside latrines. Going from getting water from the pump to water from the fountains.

JE: What did you do for entertainment, as a youngster?

CT: Play ball. You had choices, you had night life, which I could not participate in, the juke joints, they were in abundance but my great aunt had heard the word from God, I’m sure that’s what she said, “You can’t go there.” But playing ball was okay.

Chapter 05 - 5:50

Clifton Picked Cotton

John Erling: You referenced picking cotton, did you pick cotton?

Clifton Taulbert: Oh, I picked cotton, started at five years old.

JE: Tell us about that.

CT: I remember the mornings, my great aunt and I, I was living with her by then, the field truck would come to pick us up. It would be dark, the sun had not come up yet. We would stand by the gate and I would find my way onto the back of the truck and my great aunt was privileged, she would ride in the cab with the driver. But I was loaded into the back of the truck with all the other people that they had picked up and the others that would be picked up along the way.

We would go to the fields, early on, most would have nine-foot sacks, that’s what you put the cotton in. But at that age, I had like a little croaker sack, a gunny sack, as it were. My cotton would go in my great aunt’s sack or some other adult’s sack.

Now, this is what I think, I’m never quite sure of this because I’m that young, but there were no such things as nurseries and places to keep kids.

JE: Hmm, okay.

CT: So it wasn’t that I was mandatory working, but I was in the fields picking cotton at five years of age. Because I was also being kept and watched while in the fields.

JE: How many years?

CT: Did I pick cotton?

JE: Right.

CT: Up until the age of fifteen.

JE: Wow. That's tough on the hands, isn't it?

CT: No, there's a better word, it kills your hands. The bolls of the cotton, they were made to be picked by machines, but it took a long time for the machines to come around and do it. And your hands, all this part of your hands, would be bleeding quite often because the bolls were tightly closed, but as they began to open they opened in a V shape and it was very sharp at every V point. Like a triangle.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CT: It was sharp at every point. So being bloody on your knuckles and hands was just part of it.

JE: And you couldn't wear gloves?

CT: Oh, you could, I'm pretty sure you could.

JE: Yeah.

CT: I don't remember not being able to—

JE: Right.

CT: . . . I just know that I didn't.

JE: How much cotton would be picked in a day? By the pounds, I guess?

CT: By the pounds. Boys were expected to be men, at certain points in your age. Your childhood was left behind pretty early. I was expected to be able to pick two hundred pounds of cotton a day.

JE: Wow. That's a lot of cotton.

CT: That's a lot of cotton. I remember a lady named Miss Donnell, who was one of my great aunt's close friends. She said, "That boy ain't going to amount to much because he can't pick two hundred pounds of cotton and every time you see him he has his head in a book.

JE: [laughing] Right.

CT: Because in those days, you were measured by the amount of cotton you could pick, your manual labor.

JE: And were you a reader?

CT: I was.

JE: From early on?

CT: From early on.

JE: And that was nourished by?

CT: It was nourished at Papa's house and then I went to my great aunt's house, it continued to be nourished.

JE: So you learned a strong work ethic from the very beginning.

CT: From the very beginning.

JE: When you hear any reference to picking cotton in this day and age, it can be used as slang too. It just must strike you in the heart.

CT: Well, not really. Let me give to you a real quick story. My son, who had graduated from Oral Roberts University, had moved out to LA to work, had gotten a job but he had to travel the 405, which is that busy highway in LA. And he called me one just ranting over the phone, he was stuck on the 405, the air-conditioner wasn't working and he just went on and on and on.

Finally, to get him to shut up, I said, "How much cotton have you picked?"

Then he hung up. He called me back the next day, he said, "Okay, Mr. Taulbert," he called me Mr. Taulbert, he said, "Okay, Mr. Taulbert, I get the point. I got your point."

JE: [laughing] That's a great life lesson. Yes.

CT: I said, "You haven't picked cotton, Son, you haven't had a problem."

JE: Now most of this cotton was on land that was owned by white landowners.

CT: Most of it, but also there's another, I'm going to call it, "unknown slice of history," but after the Civil War, probably in the 1870s, black had purchased a lot of land from the railroads. So they owned their own cotton farms. We lived in the town, so I never lived on a plantation. But I would work for both black cotton owners and white cotton owners. And the truck would take you to either place.

JE: Were you treated the same?

CT: Well, it depends on whether or not there was a white straw boss at the white plantation. That was the one who rode a horse to make sure that you were doing what you were supposed to do.

JE: Yeah.

CT: He didn't show up as much during the picking cotton season as it did during the chopping cotton. Because chopping cotton, you work by the hour. Picking cotton, it was up to you. So you couldn't stop, I mean, once you started, you could go to the bathroom but it was a steady movement. You couldn't stand up and talk, it was steady movement. So the straw boss was there to make sure that there was steady movement.

Now on the black farms, you had a straw boss but it would usually be the black owner. And he would never be called a straw boss, that was a term usually relegated to whites. But the same principles were in place for the most part.

JE: Straw, why straw boss?

CT: Oh, probably because he had a straw hat on.

JE: Okay.

CT: Probably.

JE: So the act of chopping, was that with a tool?

CT: That's weeding. It's like a hoe, a garden hoe.

JE: Oh.

CT: That's weeding the cotton field. And when you think of weeding your flower patch or your tomato plants, you have to weed hundreds of acres.

JE: Was this an eight-hour day? Come to five o'clock, you punch a clock and go home?

CT: Didn't punch a clock, didn't have a clock, but—

JE: Yeah, no.

CT: . . . you got paid by the day. I think we got two dollars and fifty cents a day.

JE: Hmm.

CT: Or three dollars a day, I think.

JE: So was that a ten-hour day?

CT: I can't remember if it was ten hours or not.

Chapter 06 - 4:07

100 Miles

John Erling: Ma Punk.

Clifton Taulbert: She was the matriarch of our family and the matriarch of our life after our great grandmother passed away. She was the daughter that stepped in and filled that. She was the one that ensured education. She was the one that ensured you went to church. When I went to live with her, this was her promise, "You will get an education."

After I graduated from Glen Allan Elementary School, I had to travel a hundred miles round trip every day to Greenville, which was the school in the city. But she'd get up every morning before I would and stand on the front porch in her flannel gown and pull the strings on a 60-watt light bulb on the front porch, so that the bus would know that someone was at our house. She did that every day for four years.

JE: Wow.

CT: And I never missed one day out of school.

JE: It does take a village, doesn't it?

CT: It most certainly does.

JE: And when you went a hundred miles round trip to school, there was a white house school—

CT: Right behind my house.

JE: Okay.

CT: I could run to it, maybe a mile.

JE: So by now, you're fifteen, sixteen years old—

CT: Right.

JE: . . . when you're doing that. Did you resent that?

CT: It's funny, no, I didn't resent it because I didn't know to resent it. You know, whether you're white or black, as a baby you're born into a culture that already exists. And that culture tends to determine how you respond to the life that's around you. And that had been the culture for my parents, my great grandparents, and my great, great grandparents. Segregation was simply a way of life. It wasn't a way of discussion, it was a way of life, and so you didn't discuss it.

JE: That was all you knew.

CT: That's all I knew.

JE: Mama Pearl.

CT: Mama Pearl was the great grandmother.

JE: Okay.

CT: Yeah, she was the great grandmother.

JE: You talked about her.

CT: Yeah, after I was born I lived at her house.

JE: Did you work on the Wildwood Plantation?

CT: I did. That's where the straw boss was.

JE: That's what we were talking about, we just gave it a name now, where you were working—

CT: Yeah.

JE: . . . the Wildwood Plantation.

CT: The Wildwood Plantation.

JE: Wasn't it a big thing in your life to be able to work in a grocery store?

CT: Oh, working in a grocery store was tantamount to getting hired by Bill Gates. [both laughing] It changes your life. Ah, it changes your life. You can have lunch and you're not sweating, you're working inside, you're not outside. You wear decent clothes. It was a whole different world.

JE: How old would you have been then?

CT: Probably, I'm thinking, fourteen, fifteen, something like that.

JE: But you'd been picking cotton since five years old.

CT: Old, right, right.

JE: Until that age.

CT: And then I got the job at the grocery store.

JE: And what did you do in the grocery store?

CT: Well, Mr. Hilton, who owned the grocery store, was kind of an interesting man. That's all I can say. They treated me well but they had a kindred relationship with the Klu Klux Klan. And he used the N word once in my presence. But he pulled me aside, he said, "You will

never hear me use that word again.” He didn’t say he wasn’t going to use it, he just said I would never hear him use it again.

JE: Yeah.

CT: When they would cook food for themselves, I ate with them, but I couldn’t use the restroom.

JE: So what did you do?

CT: He walked to the back of the store, which was backed up to Lake Washington, and there was a wooded area that was snake-infested. He just looked out the back and said, “I don’t know what you’ll do but you can’t use the restroom.”

JE: Did he have other blacks working for him?

CT: I was the only black person working for him.

JE: Was this a big deal for him to hire a black?

CT: It was, most times those jobs were held for white guys, young white guys.

JE: He must have come to know you or your family?

CT: I had a job before that working at the post office.

JE: Oh.

CT: I cleaned the floors and oiled the wooden floors of the post office. I would see him come in and out of there and, apparently, he was watching me. But that precipitated that opportunity.

JE: So you didn’t know you were displaying a work ethic as you were cleaning those floors.

CT: Right.

JE: There’s a good life lesson to any child that’s listening to this.

CT: Right. That’s what I tell my son today, I say, “You may not be doing what you want, but never cheat yourself out of doing the best that you can.”

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 07 - 5:48

Writing—Drug of Choice

John Erling: High school, was that a good experience for you?

Clifton Taulbert: It was a great experience.

JE: What, beyond your studies, were you involved in?

CT: You know, male, black, tall, football—I flunked out of football. I have no athletic abilities at all. I kept my head in a book.

JE: There weren’t any extracurricular activities?

CT: Oh, I was involved in a number but they were not athletic activities.

JE: No, but there are other things too?

CT: It would be like year, yearbook, and all those things that require that type of academic leaning, school plays and things like that.

JE: All right. We know you for many things but, obviously, we know you as a writer. When did writing come into your life and you knew, *I like to do this and I'm good at it?*

CT: Writing came into my life when I was in the military.

JE: Oh, later.

CT: Later.

JE: Beyond high school?

CT: It's beyond high school.

JE: All right.

CT: But you asked a good question because we had a lot of writing assignments and I always made an A. My friends would always ask me, "Cliff, write mine for me." But I never associated that gift with being a writer. Just words were easy for me. And I think I got it from my great aunt, Mama Pearl, because she was a constant letter-writer. Letter writing was an intentional act at her house. She had a fountain pen that nobody could use but her. And she had the ink bottle.

She would sit in her rocking chair looking out the windows and she would write her letters out loud. I would hear her as she was writing and talking. So her letters were conversational. And I think that probably stirred up something inside of me that precipitated this idea of writing conversationally.

JE: Well, maybe we should follow up on the writing in the military. What was it in the military that clicked about writing?

CT: I was afraid, it was toward the end of the Vietnam War, and the AFIC that I had, most of my friends were being shipped to Vietnam. And many of them died. As a result of that, many of the guys, great guys, became involved with drugs and drinking, not because that's what they wanted, but that was a very difficult period of our lives. When your friends are dying.

JE: Yeah.

CT: So you want to grab the best out of like you can because you're not sure if you're going to hold on to it. And for me, writing became my drug of choice. For whatever reason, I would get in my room in my barracks, I didn't go out to drink, I would just sit there and I would just write and write and write and write and write.

JE: What were you writing?

CT: I was writing about Papa. I was writing about Mama Pearl. My first three books evolved out of the writings that I did in the military.

JE: This was a diversion activity so that you didn't think about the possibility of going to Vietnam?

CT: It was a diversion.

JE: You just went, *I'm going to block that out and I'm just going to do what I enjoy doing?*

CT: It was, it was a diversion activity.

JE: And you had no idea, did you?

CT: I had no earthly idea that a writer, a real writer, lived inside of me. I had no idea.

JE: And that you could make a living doing it.

CT: I had no idea.

JE: You were valedictorian of your class.

CT: Right.

JE: Graduated in '63.

CT: 'Sixty-three, right.

JE: You spoke to your class.

CT: Right.

JE: What did you talk about?

CT: All I remember are the first words. I remember being introduced. I remember my great aunt, my mom, everybody was there. A lot of people from my little home town of Glen Allan had driven up to Greenville. Because graduating from high school was a big thing. And it should always be a big thing.

But when I was introduced, I said, "I do not know what the future holds but I know that I will have a future." And I can't remember anything else I said.

JE: But I'm sure you got an applause and a standing ovation.

CT: I got an applause.

JE: So it's obvious you were born with a high IQ, you were born with smarts, and that's what helped you walk out of the background you were in. Am I correct?

CT: I would say that plus, and the plus would be the dreams and the visions that those ordinary people had for me. For many of them, their dreams would go unanswered.

JE: Yeah.

CT: Unknown. But for their children, of which I was one, we would become the carriers of those dreams.

I remember when I left home at seventeen and was at the Illinois Central Railroad Station in Greenville, Mississippi. And my great aunt was there, everybody was there, you know, for the most part, my mother and everybody. But my great aunt, she grabbed me around my neck and she said, "You're leaving home but remember this: You gotta do good and don't make us ashamed."

JE: Hmm.

CT: Because I had a job to do, and that job was to live out their dreams.

JE: I don't know if you can appreciate the warmth and nurturing you were getting then as much as you think about it looking back on it now. I mean, you couldn't really fully appreciate it then, as you look back on it.

CT: When I look at it from a comparative perspective at other families, other friends, the worst of my days were some of the best of my times.

JE: Can you explain that?

CT: Sometimes we wouldn't have food, or if you had food, it would be the same thing over and over again. That's not good. But then, as I look back and heard other stories, there were other kids who had nothing.

JE: Yeah. So you were poor?

CT: I was poor.

JE: And didn't know it.

CT: And didn't know it.

Chapter 08 - 7:00

St. Louis

John Erling: We've kind of moved fast here because I'm sure we've already alluded to that. It wasn't always pleasant and fun.

Clifton Taulbert: No.

JE: You left Glen Allan, and you said you were almost seventeen?

CT: I was seventeen.

JE: You were seventeen, and then where did you go?

CT: Went to St. Louis, Missouri.

JE: Why St. Louis?

CT: St. Louis is where my birth father lived.

JE: This is when you meet him?

CT: Yeah, that's when I met him, first time.

JE: He had stayed connected to you, the family?

CT: No.

JE: Well, then, how did you even know he was in St. Louis?

CT: I don't really know the full story of that but I do know in my senior year is when we were reconnected, or connected. I shouldn't say reconnected but connected.

JE: So you went to meet him for the first time.

CT: First time.

JE: What was that like?

CT: There aren't any words to explain it because, I think motherhood kind of grows naturally. And I think fatherhood is something that grows through the process of being there. And he wasn't there. I had a positive affinity, I suppose, but nothing overwhelming.

JE: Did he take you in and warmly embrace you?

CT: I would say, within the context of that world, I was very much warmly embraced by him.

JE: Was he married?

CT: Yeah, he was married, had a family.

JE: And you lived with him?

CT: I did not. I lived with one of his relatives. It was not an ideal situation, but what I needed to get out of that situation was that embrace and that welcome and that sense of being part of. And I think maybe that was all I was supposed to have gotten out of that.

JE: What was your first job in St. Louis?

CT: My first job in St. Louis was washing dishes. Pots and pans room of a big downtown department store.

JE: What was the name of that department store?

CT: It's Scruggs Vandervoort, I believe—

JE: Okay.

CT: . . . and Barney's. But it's Scruggs.

JE: Yeah.

CT: It was a big department store in St. Louis.

JE: Washing dishes?

CT: It was worse than washing dishes. It was the pots and pans room. That was a little room by itself.

JE: And was that better than picking cotton?

CT: Ummm (thoughtful sound), yes and no. Because I was there by myself in the pots and pans room. It was just wading in water up to your ankles. Everything that nobody wanted to clean came in there.

JE: How long did you do that?

CT: Three or four months, maybe five months.

JE: How much money were you making?

CT: Not much, I think thirty-five dollars a week.

JE: Were you able to keep that and use it for spending? Did you have to pay where you stayed?

CT: I had to pay where I stayed, and I also sent money home to my mother.

JE: Wow. And you thought, *Is this going to last forever? How am I going to get out of this one?*

CT: I don't know what went through my mind but I do know I was never rooted there. I was never rooted in Glen Allan, even though that's my home, but I knew I was leaving and I

knew that St. Louis had a hold on me. But I wasn't holding St. Louis with the same hold. But I didn't know what that other place and thing would look like.

JE: You had a high school diploma, were you thinking about college?

CT: I was always thinking about college but I had no money.

JE: You said you'd washed pots and pans for four months? Where did you go then?

CT: Well, something really sort of strange happened. That was right during the midst of the Civil Rights Movement in St. Louis. The news ABC, NBC, and CBS St. Louis on the news every night all across the country.

JE: So we're talking the mid '60s, '64—

CT: Yeah.

JE: . . . the Civil Rights Act came about so we're talking about '60—

CT: It would have been '63.

JE: Yeah, that's when you graduated, right?

CT: Yeah, it would have been that year. They were building the arch and St. Louis was under siege. It was protests, people lying in the streets. They said, "Stop building the arch." Everything was shut down, basically.

Garrick Utley was the news guy.

JE: Yes, I remember him.

CT: He was on the news every night. And Jefferson Bank and Trust was the point of entries. And they had never hired a black person to work inside the bank. As I understand it, no black people worked inside of banks, you could only work as a messenger, and that is to carry the unused checks to the Federal Reserve System. So that was the protest. Black people were banking at banks but they couldn't get a job inside the bank.

Long story short, even though I was washing pots and pans I was still trying to find something else. I went to an employment agency, I didn't have a resume. You know, you don't have to have a resume to pick cotton. I just told the lady what I did and that I came from Mississippi. And nothing I said made sense to her. She said, "Well, we don't have a job for you." And I just walked out.

But there was a Jewish guy, young guy, probably in his mid-twenties, overheard her. He worked there. And as I walked out, he came to the window, he hit on the window, and he mouthed out to me, "Don't leave, wait till my boss leaves and come back. I'll stay late."

JE: Don't leave, wait till my boss leaves—

CT: Boss leaves. I will stay late and come back.

JE: Okay.

CT: He had a job for me, and it was a job that was open at Jefferson Bank and Trust.

JE: He was an officer or something?

CT: No, no, no, he was a kid, he was a young guy, just worked at the employment agency.

JE: So then he could say that he had a job for you at the bank?

CT: The opening at the bank, that was on their information at the employment agency. There was an opening. But the lady said, his boss said there were no openings.

So then I went back. He helped me fill out all the paperwork and everything, because I had never done that before, and sent it in to whomever at the bank. And I was hired.

When I was hired, the Civil Right marches ended. They started back to work on the arch.

JE: So that became a news story?

CT: Yeah.

JE: Were you part of the news story? Your name?

CT: I was in the history books.

JE: Really?

CT: Yeah.

JE: First black to work inside a bank.

CT: No, what happened is they had a black messenger. He went inside, I took his job, but I became the first black to go to banking school. There was a young son of the president of the bank, his name was Mike Ross. I said, "I want to go to school." You mention school, that was my life. I said, "I want to go to school," when they had never paid for a black to go. The idea was that we were not smart enough to go to banking school.

Well, they agreed that I would go, but my thinking is that I would go and not do well. But I made straight A's in banking school.

JE: Where was banking school?

CT: It was the American Institute of Banking in St. Louis.

JE: How long did you go there?

CT: I was there probably for about a year.

JE: Working at the bank and going to school?

CT: I was working at the bank, yeah. And then I was also working inside the bank and outside both, at the same time.

JE: Are you feeling pretty good about yourself right about now?

CT: I am but I'm very thankful that I was not comfortable. Because I always tell my son, "Comfortable does not mean you're successful."

JE: Right, that's good. You said you were in school for a year. And obviously school for everything that goes on in a bank.

CT: It was a total banking school.

Chapter 09 - 2:45**Air Force**

John Erling: Then you come to the end of a year?

Clifton Taulbert: Well, by that time, the Vietnam War was still going on. And I enlisted in the United States Air Force. That was my next step. I felt that I had to do something else.

JE: What part of the Air Force were you in?

CT: I started out at basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio. And from there to my permanent duty station, was Dow Air Force Base in Bangor, Maine. That's where I started writing, in Bangor, Maine.

JE: And you were deferred from Vietnam because you were going to school?

CT: I was going to school, *but* I also worked for the base commander.

JE: Okay, while you were in banking school though you were deferred.

CT: No.

JE: No?

CT: No, it's really interesting because I had enlisted—not enlisted, what's the word you had to do when it was required for every guy had to do this?

JE: When they were drafted?

CT: Drafted. But all of my information would have gone to Mississippi.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CT: Not to St. Louis.

JE: Okay.

CT: 'Cause I hadn't changed anything officially. So the day that I went and enlisted in the Air Force, the next week I got a letter from my great aunt, that had come to the house, "You are hereby welcomed." That would have been to the army.

JE: Right.

CT: And I can absolutely assure you I would have been sent straight to Vietnam.

JE: So you knew that was going to happen and you jumped the gun and joined the air force?

CT: I didn't know it was going to happen.

JE: But you knew you'd be drafted?

CT: I knew that I could be but I didn't know when or what, so I said, "I'm going to go the air force."

JE: No, yeah, so you beat it.

CT: I beat it, yeah.

JE: So that year is?

CT: That would have been '64.

JE: 'Sixty-four?

CT: End of '64.

JE: That was a good experience in the air force for you?

CT: Great experience.

JE: We've alluded to your writing there—

CT: Yeah.

JE: . . . and so how many years were you in the air force?

CT: Four years.

JE: Meanwhile, the Vietnam controversy goes on—

CT: Right.

JE: . . . because it was a controversy of war.

CT: Right.

JE: What specific job did you do in the air force?

CT: Well, my first job in the air force, a supply administration specialist. So I worked in the movement of aircraft parts. That's what I did at Dow Air Force Base. And when I went to the 89th Presidential Wing in Washington, DC.

I worked with the first computers, and it had to do with the president's plane, Air Force One, and where foreign dignitaries came in. I did work from the pentagon to embassies. Because I was in the presidential wing.

JE: Wow! That was a great experience. First computers?

CT: Yeah.

JE: And they must have been bigger than the size of this room.

CT: Bigger than this room, and they were cold as ice.

JE: Oh.

CT: The rooms. And everybody that worked wore white jackets and white pants, just like they were surgeons or something.

JE: Did you enjoy living in DC?

CT: I did.

JE: Took advantage of everything that was there?

CT: Yeah. I fell in love with Georgetown and still love Georgetown.

JE: So we get you through the air force and you leave then in what year?

CT: Nineteen sixty-eight, I come to Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Chapter 10 - 8:48

1968

John Erling: Let's talk about 1968 for a moment, because that was a major year—

Clifton Taulbert: That was a major year.

JE: . . . in the history of our United States.

CT: It was.

JE: And we think in 2018, we're going through things. I would say '68 was a bigger, tough time for the United States than even today.

CT: Yeah.

JE: Nineteen sixty-eight was the death of Martin Luther King.

CT: Luther King.

JE: April 4th.

CT: Right.

JE: How did you hear about it and how did it affect you?

CT: I was on my way from my room to the bathroom because you had congregated bathrooms in the military. But you had separate bedrooms but congregated bathrooms. It wasn't a pleasant hearing because a white kid had heard it already or had it on his radio. And I don't want to repeat what he said but he was very delighted. That's how I heard it, that he had been killed.

JE: That gave me chills when you said that. Moving on then, you saw it on television?

CT: Right.

JE: And probably saw his funeral and all that. Some more thoughts?

CT: If—he had become symbolic of his conversation around hope, and that's what human beings have the capacity to do, to either become symbolic of good or symbolic of bad. And he had become symbolic of good, not just for us but for America as a whole. And had been recognized internationally as such. And he was relatively young, extraordinarily young, so you're not expecting him to be killed.

I was very, very distraught, that was very shattering.

JE: Did you think it was an attack on all blacks?

CT: I didn't think it was an attack on all blacks but I thought it was another nail in the coffin of being perceived as less than?

JE: Umm. Did you struggle with that a lot? Even though you're being successful.

CT: Yeah.

JE: We've tracked you through to where you were and you're living in a successful time, in the air force and special jobs. Did you carry that less than feeling a lot with you?

CT: You know, that's the reason I wrote the book *The Invitation*. Because the less than is perpetrated by culture, to a great extent. But when that culture is absorbed into the very fabric of your life and is based on something that is not changing, which is the color of your skin. Not the content of your character, not your intellectual ability, not your skills, but simply the color of your skin—that's it. I had that and I was going anywhere.

So even though I found myself in wonderful situations, I had done work while I was in the military there for *Look* magazine. I got to know Warren Rogers, the editor of *Look* magazine. Was always invited to their homes over the weekend.

General Omar Bradley—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CT: We had a photo shoot together. And I had worked on Robert Kennedy's campaign for president, during my off duty time. But still, with all of that, that shadow would periodically show up. And it's just like any other shadow. You know, you don't see your shadow all the time, but when you see it, you see it.

JE: Yeah.

CT: And that world of less than, by virtue of the culture that surrounded us, was a shadow. What I call "the lingering lessons of race and place."

JE: How frustrating it had to be, you knew you were as good as anybody around you. You knew you were just as smart as anybody around you. And you look in the mirror and say, "Because of the color?"

CT: I don't think that I actually voice that but I was always frustrated with the fact that I understood that others did not know how bright I really was. Or that there was nothing that I couldn't do or learn to do.

JE: Because they looked at you as being black and they didn't think you'd be as smart?

CT: They didn't think I would be as smart. In fact, to get into the 89th Presidential Wing you have to have an FBI background check, because I was in a top secret position. For whatever reason, the paper that came back, the only thing that I ever saw, my code name during that period was "Bright Boy." I thought that was very ironic.

JE: [laughing] Yeah, that's so neat. That's great. Or quickly, why were you involved with *Look* magazine and the photo shoot and so forth? Was that part of your MOS?

CT: No. By that time, I was becoming politically involved thinking, but I could only do certain things, as a soldier. And I made sure that I stayed within the context of what I could do. But working at Kennedy's headquarters, I'd gotten to know Robert Kennedy and the people that worked for him and *Look* magazine's Warren Rogers and his wife, they were really, really nice people. They lived in Georgetown, and they would invite there on the weekends to their home.

They had a son, not too much older than me, I've often wondered where he is, what happened to him. But I remember the day I was there one Saturday. Because they assumed that I was going to get out of the military. I was either going to go to Georgetown or George Washington University, because they had seen the word "Bright Boy."

I said, "No, I'm coming to Tulsa to Oral Roberts University."

And she had a pitcher of milk and she dropped it on the floor. [laughs] “Oh! You can’t do that!”

I said, “Yeah, that’s where I’m going.”

JE: Why ORU?

CT: ORU was closely aligned with what I believed in, from a faith perspective. And even as a kid growing up in Mississippi, I had wanted to go there.

JE: So through all of this, your faith has been important? And in—

CT: Always. Yeah.

JE: . . . the air force you would attend—what church did you attend? Or churches in DC?

CT: I attended the churches similar to the ones that I would have gone to at home.

JE: Baptist churches?

CT: Yeah. And the same thing in Bangor, Maine.

JE: So the faith always remained—

CT: Always a part of my life.

JE: So you knew about ORU way back when?

CT: Right, way back.

JE: And that was your direction.

CT: Right.

JE: Do you meet your wife, Barbara, any time in here?

CT: I meet Barbara after I graduated from ORU. It was the closest thing to a Japanese-arranged-meeting you could possibly have. I can’t call it a “Harry and Meghan,” it wasn’t quite that good. It was my mother knew Barbara’s great aunt. My mother had met Barbara and she wanted me to meet Barbara. So it was kind of arranged.

I had to go to a funeral. I think the funeral was on a Saturday, I believe, and that Sunday, I drove my mother over to Eudora, Arkansas, where Barbara and her family lived. That’s where I met my wife.

JE: When you met her, was that “Wow!”?

CT: I’m seven years older than Barbara. I was a little bit afraid, slightly intimidated. I was never real forward but I was very comfortable with Barbara. So we dated for probably less than six months and got married.

JE: Okay.

CT: And we’ve been married over forty-three years.

JE: You said it was arranged, but it wasn’t forced?

CT: Oh, oh, no, no, no, no, no.

JE: Right. From that marriage, you have children?

CT: I had two children: my daughter, who passed away when she was seven, Anne Kathryn. And our son Marshall, who is now married and lives in Los Angeles.

JE: What does he do in Los Angeles?

CT: He's an entrepreneur. He has two businesses, Taulbert Media, that works with the film industry, and he has another business called Products of Privilege, a clothing design company.

JE: Wow. A bit about Anne and why she passed away at seven?

CT: Anne, Anne died from sickle cell disease. She had it when she was born but we never thought it would kill her. But she had about twenty-one strokes. And died.

JE: You had to draw on a lot to get yourself through all that.

CT: Yeah. And you still draw it. It's never left behind, it's just that death's circle becomes wider and wider. That place remains where it's always been, you don't get there as frequently as you once did but you always go back, you always get there.

JE: Yeah.

CT: You walk in that circle. But the circle gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Once you get to that point of the circle, the same hurt, the same pain, the same tears.

JE: Yeah. What would she have been doing today?

CT: May 19, when Harry and Meghan married, was Annie's birthday. So we celebrated her birthday watching that. We had tea and crumpets because Annie would have been thirty years old.

JE: Wow.

CT: Eventually, I want to be able to tell the Duke and Duchess of Sussex that on the day they had great joy was a day they gave us great joy, because we celebrated the birth of our daughter who passed away.

JE: How about that? Have you written about her death?

CT: Not really.

JE: Are you going to?

CT: The other day it hit me, because I've written three children's books, and I've promised myself I would write seven, for her age. The first three are about Little Cliff. And I'm trying to figure out how to write a book about a story of a little girl who came for just a season.

JE: And that will come to you, won't it?

CT: Yeah, that's what I've been thinking about lately.

Chapter 11 - 5:00

Robert Kennedy

John Erling: You were around Robert Kennedy.

Clifton Taulbert: Yeah.

JE: You saw him up close and heard him speak—

CT: Right.

JE: . . . in probably think and strategy meetings or campaign and so forth. I point that out because it was in '68, June 6, that Robert Kennedy is assassinated.

CT: Right.

JE: Tell us about that day.

CT: We were scheduled to meet in Washington, at his headquarters. He was coming back to some strategy meeting, coming back from California. We were all excited, very excited about that. And all of a sudden, I get a call, because I had gotten to know a number of people that worked there. You know, they were not in the military as I was but we had all become friends. And they said that he had been assassinated.

His assassination was probably more shocking to me than Dr. King's was. Dr. King's assassination was shocking but at least I had a sense of how disliked he was by many people. So it was shocking but not necessarily unexpected.

Whereas, Robert Kennedy, being white, running for president even though his brother had been killed, you just didn't think that that same arrow would strike twice in a family. So it was very shocking.

JE: Yeah. We didn't talk about JFK, that was in '63.

CT: Yeah.

JE: And that was the year you graduated.

CT: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Tell us a little bit about that.

CT: Well, I was saddened because I was in St. Louis at the time. I remember being remorseful, I remember the tears, but I don't remember a long prolonged sadness, as it would have been with Robert Kennedy, because that's who I knew.

JE: 'Sixty-eight, we had the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where tens of thousands of people were demonstrating against the Vietnam War.

CT: Right. Right.

JE: And then, of course, Lyndon Johnson decides not to run again because of the Vietnam War. You didn't participate in any demonstrations?

CT: No. In the military, I couldn't.

JE: No.

CT: The only thing I did while I was in the military, I did attend the last thing that Dr. King was involved in, the Poor People's March. I did go there.

JE: Okay.

CT: I was there.

JE: Did you hear him speak?

CT: Yeah, I was there. After I got off work at the base, I'd go every—

JE: And you'd hear him speak?

CT: Yeah.

JE: Had to be moved by that?

CT: It was so many people there and I was so far away, we could hear him but it wasn't like I could see him—

JE: Yeah.

CT: . . . or talk to him or anything like that.

JE: Oral Roberts University, you graduated then with a degree.

CT: Right.

JE: What degree was that?

CT: Sociology and history.

JE: Then you went on to further education.

CT: Right.

JE: Where?

CT: Well, I had a job at ORU, working at the retirement center. And in order to do that job when they built the healthcare facility I had to get a degree in healthcare management. I got that through Tulsa Community College. There were offering that associate degree.

By that time, I wanted to go into banking, which required another level of education that I didn't have. They were having the program at Bank of Oklahoma, at the time, because even at that time you were headed toward integration of jobs and opportunities. So I kind of got there at the right time, and Marcus Tower seemed to have been very instrumental in that push at the time. So I became, for lack of a better term, an intern in the banking industry. And then had the opportunity to go to SMU to the Southwest Graduate School of Banking for three years.

JE: Southern Methodist University.

CT: Right.

JE: At ORU, a little reflection on Oral Roberts. You'd see him in chapel and—

CT: Right.

JE: . . . your thoughts as you watched this man.

CT: I was—

JE: And how did it affect you?

CT: I would say I was mesmerized. The more I got to know him, I saw his humanity as well. And I'd never change being mesmerized but the close-up gave me a better sense of his humanity. He was no different than us but he had great gifts. I really appreciated the fact that when he found opportunities to come against segregation, he would do it. And oftentimes, it was not the best thing for him to do economically.

I remember with Mahalia Jackson was on the show, how much negative mail he got. And I remember when I graduated from ORU, Mayor Bradley, Tom Bradley, was the graduation speaker. And this is something that Mr. Roberts arranged. I mean, he was always, in his own way, moving that dial forward. And I always appreciated that.

JE: Your time at Oral Roberts University was really growing, and were you writing then at school?

CT: I was writing then. Yeah.

JE: Is it coming clearer to you that *I could write a book*?

CT: Yeah, I say it was coming clearer that, that I could.

JE: College is all about writing and—

CT: Yeah.

JE: . . . you must have been excelling in all that and was fun for you?

CT: Yeah, that was, writing was never a problem for me, it really wasn't.

Chapter 12 - 6:05

StairMaster

John Erling: Eventually you move on from ORU. You go to Graduate School of Banking. What's going on next?

Clifton Taulbert: Right in the midst of my banking, you know, there's always been this entrepreneurial bent in my life, but I don't think I called it that at the time, it's just something I picked up growing up in Glen Allan, that if you can own your own business, that's the thing to do.

So StairMaster came along and I became involved and our company had secured the government rights to StairMaster, all over the world.

JE: Your company?

CT: Yeah.

JE: You had established a company?

CT: I—I had—yeah, I brokered a deal that I probably should not have brokered but I brokered a deal that a business was sold to a guy and I got a percent of that sale. And I was so afraid that I asked my lawyer to go pick up the check. [both laugh]

To be quite honest with you, because that was not something that black guys were doing every day. And I said, "I can do this." But then, when I got it down to the very last point, I said, "What if I get there and, all of a sudden, it ain't working?" And I asked my attorney to go, who was a young white guy.

He said, "I'll go."

JE: So race played a part in that?

CT: In my thinking?

JE: Yes.

CT: Yes, in my thinking, yeah.

JE: In Tulsa, Oklahoma?

CT: Yeah.

JE: What year are we talking about?

CT: Probably '78, '79, something like that.

JE: Okay. I came out of Minnesota, North Dakota, Omaha, Nebraska, to here. Would you agree that this is probably where the South begins? In Oklahoma?

CT: I don't think I would say it's where the South begins, because Oklahoma is relatively strange, with so many different people from so many parts of the country. It is definitely southern, but Tulsa is also eastern as well. When you consider the white founders of Tulsa. Especially those in the oil industries. Many of them were from Philadelphia.

You have the Native Americans, who many of them came from southern states here.

JE: Yeah.

CT: And the blacks that migrated here, they would have come in from southern states, but there were some from New York as well. And because it was a territory for so long, where people did right things, in spite of all the other things that was going on, I don't know what to call it. I call it an experience state, I don't know.

JE: I think there's some attitudes in Tulsa that are of the South. I interviewed a lady, Marina Metevelis. She's connected to TCC, Tulsa Community College. She talks about living in Wichita. She'd be coming down here to visit family and when the train crossed the border from Kansas to Oklahoma, they changed the signs in the restrooms to "Whites Only." That kind of fed into my thinking that attitudes of the South are beginning here in Oklahoma.

CT: I know prior to 1907, there was two territories and things were a lot different. But in 1907, I know that they embraced legal segregation. They—

JE: Yes, we had a segregated constitution.

CT: Yeah.

JE: Right, very much so. Talk to me a little bit more of your life as a businessman. Because you've gone on to other things, you're president and CEO of the Freemont Corporation?

CT: Corporation.

JE: What does that do?

CT: You know, to talk about my life as a businessman, I have to take you back Glen Allan for half a second, to Uncle Clee. That's my uncle that owned the icehouse. The only business in Glen Allan that served whites, blacks, Chinese, Jews, and whomever, and it was the only icehouse there. And I had an opportunity to work for him after I left the grocery store. That was a great mental change for me.

Working at the grocery store got me out of the fields and got me inside. Working for my uncle got my mind out of the fields. Because now I'm seeing a man who looked like me who owns his own business and is serving the entire community. And as a boy, a young man, I should say, working for him, I had to pick up his habits. I mean, he had a code of conduct that if you broke it you're out of there. He had great respect throughout the community, a great sense of decorum. Everything about him I admired.

And I think that is what really propelled me into the opportunities of thinking I could do likewise.

JE: The seed for business was planted right there.

CT: Right there.

JE: So then bring you back to Fremont Corporation.

CT: Corporation.

JE: What does it do?

CT: Well, you remember when I was afraid to pick up the check?

JE: Yeah.

CT: I got the check. The first thing I did when I got the check, after telling my wife, I said, "Okay, let's establish a company."

"What you going to do?"

"I don't know. But I know if I don't start somewhere I'll probably never do it."

JE: I thought you had a company going as you had StairMaster.

CT: Well, StairMaster was a company, but StairMaster happened after the check. I haven't got the timing, but we talking about StairMaster earlier. The Fremont Corporation was the company that enveloped StairMaster, but Fremont was established after that first initial sale that I made, I established Fremont.

JE: The sale of StairMaster?

CT: No, that land sale. You remember we talked about a business that I helped to broker that business?

JE: Yes.

CT: The money I got from that, I was afraid so I sent my lawyer to pick up that check.

JE: Okay, and that was sizeable enough for you to say, "I can invest this in a business"?

CT: Right. And the first thing I did was to incorporate. I had to get a name, and that's where the name Fremont came from. Fremont was a plantation that my mother's great grandfather owned in the Mississippi Delta.

JE: Hmm. Well, that says a lot, doesn't it?

CT: So I got my business cards and all of that.

JE: Is Fremont Corporation many businesses operating under that umbrella?

CT: No, it's a basically a marketing and consulting company. The work that I do around the

country, the phone calls that I've recently had since we've been here, that all comes under the auspices of Fremont. That's the workshop, that's the facilitative, that's the strategic planning that I help companies do. All of that comes under Fremont.

When I travel to Australia to lecture at the Charles Sturt University and work with the aborigines there, that's all under Fremont.

JE: Okay. This is out of context but—

Chapter 13 - 2:50

Coffee Business

John Erling: . . . you became a public speaker and you were around one of the masters of public speaking in Oral Roberts, did you think you should have been a minister?

Clifton Taulbert: That's a good question. [laughs] I got a letter from someone the other day that said Reverend Taulbert, and I said, "Maybe they're sending it to someone else, maybe to my mom." But I think in some regards, committed to your faith, you automatically become a spokesperson for your faith. But not in a formal way.

JE: So you didn't feel pressured or feel like maybe I ought to consider that?

CT: No, I didn't feel pressured.

JE: The call never came to you?

CT: No.

JE: In another business, you're in the coffee business.

CT: Yes.

JE: Tell us about that.

CT: The coffee business is a chip off of StairMaster, to a great extent, because StairMaster was totally new to me. As I said, I was not an athlete, so athletic equipment really didn't mean a whole lot to me. But I began to understand what StairMaster meant for the heart. And I knew that everybody had a heart, so somebody should be buying this machine to make their heart work right.

So when the coffee business came along, that opportunity came along, I was never of the mindset to say, "I can't do this." It was a challenge put in front of me, and don't ever put a challenge in front of me because I will look it over a thousand times and find a way to say, "Yeah." I'm going to find something bright in that challenge.

The guy who founded African Bean Company said, "I need someone else to do this. I can't do this. And the brand is Roots Java Coffee." He said, "If you could sell StairMaster, that nobody wanted, surely, you could sell coffee that everybody drinks."

So I had to really think in terms of how do I learn this business? I'd been in it for five

years but the first two years I was learning the business. I mean, there was so much I didn't know. The only thing I knew about coffee was Maxwell Coffee, because that's what I'd go down to the store to get for my great aunt when I was a kid. That's all I knew about coffee, so I had to learn everything, how it grows, all of that about it, the different blends, everything. I had to learn it from ground zero.

JE: Who are you marketing that to, a specific audience or is it grocery stores so everybody can buy it?

CT: We're not in grocery stores but we have an online store that we sell from LA to New York.

JE: What's special about Roots Java?

CT: The coffee is imported from the mountains of Rwanda, it's absolutely incredible. It has no bitter aftertaste. Plus, whoever drinks a cup of Roots Java Coffee or buys a bag of Roots Java Coffee, they're helping to rebuild the country of Rwanda that almost disappeared in the horrendous genocide that happened for them. And they are now back in control of their lives and we work with about three to five hundred independent entrepreneurs in Rwanda that grew that coffee up in the mountains. I mean, it has a great, great taste.

JE: Yes, I can imagine.

CT: It really, truly does.

JE: I'm not even a coffee drinker and I might like it, huh?

CT: You would, you would.

Chapter 14 - 9:40

Once Upon a Time

John Erling: All right, so while you're being a businessman the issue of writing books is also, so you're a pretty busy person.

Clifton Taulbert: Right.

JE: The first book *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*, when does that begin? Do you remember the years?

CT: It began in the military so it would have been before '68.

JE: But you hadn't really thought about it as being a book then?

CT: In the military I had a friend named Paul J. De Muniz. A white kid, we were both kids then, from Portland, Oregon, who ended up being the head of the Supreme Court for the state of Oregon. He was one of my best friends. Very intellectual. He would read my stuff and he said, "Clifton, you ought to write. You ought to make this a book." He said, "I swear to you, Clifton, I can smell the food you're talking about, I can walk the streets you're talking about, you are a good writer."

And Paul really encouraged me to write. So I began thinking about a book, but for twenty-four years, at least the first twelve years, everything I sent in was rejected. But the twenty-fourth year my life changed here in Tulsa. I had all these little short stories in a pasteboard box, no book, just short stories in a pasteboard box that I had written and took them with me from Bangor, Maine, to Washington, DC. And every time something would happen, I'd write a story about, something about Glen Allan. Out of that box came the first book *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*, was written here in Tulsa, all of that was compiled here.

JE: You said rejected, your writings had been rejected?

CT: I'd sent the short stories in—

JE: To where?

CT: *Look* magazine, *Time*, every—

JE: Any magazine?

CT: . . . every, anybody that was publishing short stories.

JE: And everything was rejected?

CT: Everything was rejected.

JE: You had to begin to wonder, *Really, am I as great as I think I am?*

CT: No, I had put the thing in a pasteboard box, sealed it up, *It's obvious I can't write, just nothing's going to work.*

In Tulsa, do you remember a book called *Cleora's Kitchens*?

JE: Yes.

CT: Okay, I did a review of *Cleora's Kitchens* and the publishers, whom I had never met, were there. That was Council Oak Books, I had never met him before him before.

JE: Yeah.

CT: I didn't know anything about them. But I did that review of *Cleora's Kitchens*.

JE: What was *Cleora's Kitchens*?

CT: It was a cookbook and a story about a black cook here in Tulsa, in the '20s and '30s. And the major Tulsa families that she worked for. It was an incredible book. The publishers were there and there was a lady there who had had maybe a couple of glasses of wine. She came up to the publisher and said, "He writes."

I said, "Oh, God, don't say that." I had walked away from it.

And they said, "Will you send me your stuff?"

I said, "No, I won't do that." I said, "If you let me come and read a story—"

They said, "Well, we don't usually do that but we'll do it."

So I read the story, which is called "The End of a Season." And they said, "If all of your writing is like that we will publish the book." That's the story of *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*.

JE: Wow. And you stumbled into it.

CT: I stumbled. If there's something worse than stumbling, I did it. [both laughing] I did that, it wasn't a strategic effort on my part at all.

JE: So this little paperback book I'm holding in my hand took on legs.

CT: It took on legs.

JE: And what became of it?

CT: What became of it was shocking. They told me at Council Oak that they would print five thousand copies. But it wasn't because they thought the book was that good, it was because that was the break-even point for the publisher and the book, get it down to a nice per item cost. And you'd make their investment back, depending on how many they would sell. But they said, "This should last you about five years."

In about three months, they were gone.

JE: Really?

CT: Then they had to reprint. And then the next thing that happened, I was invited to be on the *Phil Donahue Show*. First time in New York City, went there totally unknown. There were four other writers on the program with me. They all had their people with them. And I had nobody but me. I was sitting by the guacamole dip in the Green Room.

Phil Donahue came in, introduced himself, very gracious man. But all the other people had PR people with them. So they were telling all these anecdotes to Mr. Donahue, but I had nobody to talk for me. I was there by myself.

But long story short, we got out on stage, it was all taped live. They had about five books there. He began looking at all the books. And when he finished looking at all the books, my book ended up on top. So he started reading. There was a chapter called "Luggage, Legs, and Gorgeous Colored Women."

JE: Yeah.

CT: He began reading that and didn't stop. He never got to the other books. I came to New York unknown, I left New York known all over Phil Donahue's world. And the telephone lines in Tulsa were breaking down there were so many calls coming for that book.

JE: At Council Oak Books?

CT: Yes.

JE: And they were sending them out? Wow. So that was your big break there.

CT: That was, that was the big break.

JE: But then, it says right here on the cover, "Now a major motion picture."

CT: Picture.

JE: How did you stumble into that?

CT: I stumbled.

JE: How did that come about?

CT: Stumbling is not bad.

JE: No, it isn't.

CT: The newspaper in Boston, what is it?

JE: *Globe*.

CT: The *Boston Globe* did an incredible review of this book. And I started getting calls from agents all over LA about a movie. And that's what led me eventually to Tim Reid, because he was part of that, and whomever was his agent must have called about it. So over the course of time, he became the producer of that.

JE: Who starred in the movie?

CT: Phylicia Rashad, Al Freeman, Jr., Polly Bergen, were the three major stars.

JE: You can buy that today, can't you?

CT: Yeah, yeah.

JE: On Amazon.

CT: Right.

JE: Well, what a thrill that had to be.

CT: It was. But one thing I did learn that it doesn't matter if it's your life and your book, once you sign the papers to the producer, it becomes their life and their book. [laughs]

JE: Did you like the way they produced it?

CT: I did. There was one scene in there that I didn't like, it was an untrue scene. But I realized they were working a movie. In the movie, I'm born in the field. And I told, "Oh, no, no, they got that wrong." I said, "I was born in my great grandfather's house."

And he just looked at me, and he said, "But not in this movie." [both laugh] And that's when I realized that I had lost my voice.

JE: So was it fun to see yourself being played on screen?

CT: You know, I think the story, the over-arching story, was more important to me than me being there. Because it was one of the first times that they had gone into the pre-integrated South, to look inside the house. There was a couple of scenes about the Klu Klux Klan, but for the most part, it was the interior lives of African Americans prior to integration.

JE: We didn't talk about Klu Klux Klan. Did you feel that as a growing boy? You said you were picking cotton and all that.

CT: Oh, it was always, I mean, it was just part of the culture. You knew who were members of the Klu Klux Klan. And there were times that they rode, and little towns like Glen Allan was probably not on their radar, to a great extent.

JE: So you didn't see burning crosses?

CT: I've never seen a burning cross.

JE: You didn't see them riding in on horses or coming into your town or anything?

CT: I've not but I knew who they were, because everybody knew who the members of the Klan were. They were disposed to keeping themselves in secret, they wanted you to know who they were.

JE: This book *When We Were Colored*, just a moment about that title.

CT: When we were colored, what does that mean and what are you today?

JE: Well, that really has nothing to do with it. Let me tell you what really happened, how I got that title. Because there was no title for the book and Council Oaks said, "We got to have a title, we've got to have a title. What are you going to call it?"

I said, "I don't know."

Our son was a little boy at the time, so I was up in his room reading to him a children's book and it said, "Once upon a time . . ." and it just hit me like a lead balloon. Because the title of the book was not *When We Were Colored*. *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*.

I called Paulette Millichap with Council Oaks, and I said, "I got the title: *Once Upon a Time . . . When We Were Colored*. Because I wanted to define a period in time that existed for nearly every African American in this country. And that period of time was defined when all of our legal documents, everything was defined as colored. The Glen Allan Colored School is where I went. We went to the Glen Allan Health, was the colored, everything was defined by color.

Black was a term not used at the time. Negro was used but not as frequently as colored. Colored was the term. But that also became the parameters of time that I was talking about as well.

JE: When did black become a name? Who, who started it?

CT: In the '60s, I would say the Black Movement, the Black Panthers, that movement, "I'm black and I'm proud." Because that was a term, just like I haven't ever seen a white person either. I've seen people who have been a different color than me but this paper is white, and I've never seen a person that looked like this.

JE: Yeah.

CT: But that's the term that defines them. So the term that if I was black, for whatever reason, we had been to believe that black was a negative term. So we didn't use it. You used everything else other than black. But all of a sudden, somebody said, "No, I'm from Africa, I'm black, I'm from the black race."

So the term "black" became the next term of description.

JE: It took you a while to get used to that?

CT: I would say it probably took me a while to get used to it because you African American, and then you had black. You know, so it was a sequence of terms. And that's the price you pay for having come through the disposition of slavery where names were dropped in

the Atlantic. And once you got to South Carolina, to the shores, you were given names by other people.

JE: And now we interchange black and African American both.

CT: American, right. Um-hmm (affirmative).

Chapter 15 – 8:28

Sandra Day O'Connor

John Erling: The chapter “Some Glad Morning, Some Glad Day, I’ll Fly Away,” give us a little synopsis of that.

Clifton Taulbert: That’s a song, and that was a song of hope, that was a song of the reality of many of the people that I grew up with, the older people, is that no matter what happened to their lives, no matter how mistreated they may have been, overlooked, or ignored, there would come a time that their lives would be celebrated. And that celebration was part of their faith. So “Some glad morning, some glad day, I’ll fly away.” I’m going to leave this, dropping it all, and I’m going to become who I was destined to be.

JE: When do you do your best writing, morning, afternoon, does it make any difference? Upon inspiration?

CT: Upon inspiration. Upon inspiration, if it hits me at one o’clock in the morning, I’m in bed, I wake up.

JE: You’ve got to do it?

CT: I, I got to do it. I cannot put it off. And my wife is a testament to that. She would tell you that some days I’ll write for three days and won’t quit. But then I’ll go for months and not write.

JE: How many times have you thought of something and, *I’m going to write it later*, and it’s gone?

CT: Many times.

JE: And you—

CT: And I don’t want to ever put myself in that position when it’s time to write. I have to write when the inspiration hits me.

JE: Then you wrote a second book, *The Last Train North*.

CT: Train North.

JE: That just happened to be nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. [laughing]

CT: And it also won the first African American to win the Mississippi Institute of Arts, and that is an award for nonfiction. It won the Doubleday Book of the Year Award. I mean, it didn’t stop winning.

JE: The way we talk about it, it sounds easy. But writing is not easy.

CT: Writing is not. It's not, it's a task. It's a lovely task, but it's a task.

JE: You know you've got to write, do you get writer's block?

CT: I don't get writer's block, because writer's block is almost like something blocks you. But when there's nothing else to say, I stop. Now many people will call that writer's block because if they want to write five hours a day and they've only written two, they got three hours left, and they're being guided by, what I would call, a fictitious timeframe they've set up.

I don't look at it like that. I look at when the inspirations stop, I stop.

JE: Who was it, a famous writer said, "You take a blank piece of paper and you stare at it until blood comes out of your . . ."

CT: [laughing]

JE: Isn't there a quote that goes like that?

CT: I don't know, it could be, but I . . .

JE: Yeah. It just sounds like the worst thing in the world. And maybe that because you write on inspiration. Maybe there are people who *I've got to get this written but I don't have anything to say today. And I'm sitting and looking at this computer screen and I just can't do it.* And some have said, "If I can write one sentence in a day, that's okay."

CT: Well, essays I write a lot. I may have the inspiration to start but I keep till I finish. That's a different type of writing than the books that I write.

JE: You have thirteen books?

CT: Right.

JE: *Eight Habits of the Heart.* One of those books garnered an invitation by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to address members of the court and their invited guests. How does this book come to her attention?

CT: Think the Mississippi Delta Queen, think Natchez, Mississippi, think some of the most important people in the world, they're on this boat. They have decided to make it a literary tour of the American South. And there's a writer chosen for every port that the boat will come to, the Mississippi Delta Queen.

I was chosen as the writer for the Port of Natchez. I still don't believe it but I was. 'Cause Shelby Foote was there. You got the guy who wrote the *1927 Flood*, I'm trying to think of his name right now, I can't think of his name right now. And I apologize for that. You got incredible southern writers and I'm there in the midst of them at the Port of Natchez.

Unknown to me, Sandra Day O'Connor is in the audience. I had no earthly idea, I'd never met her, don't remember having seen her before, because in those days, you didn't have C-SPAN, I don't believe, because you never saw who these justices were.

So anyway, I've given my speech at Melrose Plantation. You had about 120 people there and they're literally from around the world. Some of the world's wealthiest people and most well-known.

At the end of my speech, I get a standing ovation, people standing in line to shake my hand, and I'm talking about *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*, what I'm talking about at that time. But I'm talking about the *Eight Habits of the Heart*. Before the book, *Eight Habits of the Heart* grew out of *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*. So they're a combination of two things, conversation.

Now the book had been printed but I was using both to talk about the story. There was a lady came up to me and she had tears in her eyes. She had on a yellow jacket and a pair of white pants. And she said, "This was just incredible. We need to hear more about this." And that's all she said.

And the guy behind me said, "Do you know who you just talked to?"

I said, "I haven't the slightest idea."

He said, "That was Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor."

I said, "Are you kidding me?"

That afternoon, I got a call from her husband, John O'Connor, said, "Would you be willing to have breakfast with the justice, and that's tomorrow morning?"

We were all standing on the Mississippi Delta Queen and I was so afraid I would oversleep, I stayed awake, sat up all night. And I decided for breakfast that I would not have grits or eggs or anything that I could have any problem with. I would get a bran muffin and orange juice, that should be just fine.

So I go up, I get down there, everybody is there, John O'Connor meets me, really nice guy. I get my bran muffin and when I see the justice come down and the head of the FBI is there as well, I'm—this is big time. I got the muffin in my hand but I don't realize that I'm so nervous that I have squeezed the muffin to death. It's coming out on my fingers.

JE: [laughing]

John O'Connor sees this and he taps me on the shoulder, he says, "I think you need some help, Mr. Taulbert." [both laughing]

It's an embarrassing moment but an unforgettable moment as well. I finally got my hands cleaned up, got another muffin, went to the table. We talked a little bit about the books that I'd written and how I grew up and things like that.

She just said, "Well, we need to have you in Washington. Washington needs to hear this."

I've had people say things like that before, you know, nothing ever came of it. About a month later, we get a call in my office, she calls directly herself. And the guy who worked for me, Doug Decker, lives here in Tulsa. Still works for me part-time. He said to me, "Clifton, somebody's playing a gag. They say they're Sandra Day O'Connor. You know ain't no Supreme Court Justice calling this office."

A month had passed and I had kind of forgotten it. I said, "Wait a minute, wait, wait, wait, wait, it could be." And I picked up the phone and it was her. Wanted some time that I could come to Washington. That's how it all happened.

JE: If you were just an author, not all authors and writers can speak.

CT: Yeah.

JE: So you were also given that gift. And it was because of your speaking. She knew the book but you were able to speak—

CT: Right.

JE: . . . about it, and so you've got a double whammy going here. Who did you address when you went to DC, and the members of the court?

CT: First, first of all, I met the Honorable Dr. James Billington, who is the librarian for the United States, because I was going to speak in the Library of Congress, in its incredible room. He's a good friend of Sandra Day O'Connor. He introduced Sandra Day O'Connor and Sandra Day O'Connor introduced me. The justices who attended, I think there was seven, all of them didn't attend, but I think seven, they were all seated on the front row with pencil and paper in hand.

It was the most nerve-racking time of my life. I mean, this is not something I would have counted on or looked for or thought about or anything like that.

JE: Tell me about the room. Was there a lot of big tables?

CT: Oh, no, no, no.

JE: They sat in the audience?

CT: It was like, there was an audience, maybe two, three hundred people.

JE: But they were sitting on the front row?

CT: They were sitting on the front row, as was Sandra Day O'Connor. They were sitting right on the very front row. So I gave the speech.

JE: Did you feel good about yourself? I mean, you were nervous but did you think you did a good job?

CT: I think I did a good job, I don't think I did an excellent job because I was too scared.

JE: But, obviously, they had to be very appreciative and—

CT: They were, I mean, the people there, there were generals. The Supreme Court made up a guest list.

JE: You did—

CT: And then I could invite people to as well.

JE: You did tell them you picked cotton?

CT: Oh, yeah, by the time they left they knew the story.

JE: [laughs] Oh, what a wonderful thing for you to be happening, huh?

CT: Yeah.

JE: This thing about not feeling as good, is that going away? I mean, look what happened to you here.

CT: Yeah, it goes away or it doesn't show up as frequently, I would think, maybe that's it.

Chapter 16 – 10:30**The Invitation**

John Erling: All right, let me come here, finally.

Clifton Taulbert: Okay.

JE: To *The Invitation*. And I have read this book. You received an invitation to supper, I believe—

CT: Right.

JE: . . . in Allendale, South Carolina.

CT: Carolina. I had gone to Scotland to speak. They were at an old castle in Scotland, they were comparing my works with that of Robert Barnes, which I thought, *Nobody would believe that*, but they were. That's where I was, I had just returned from Scotland and was invited to speak at a conference at Philadelphia at the Turn of the Century.

At the end of my speech there, there was several white ladies running the halls to catch me. They said, "Mr. Taulbert, will you come to South Carolina and speak for us?"

It was in that speech, that time, I met a lady by the name of Camille Narren, who worked for the Department of Education for South Carolina. She invited me to speak and at the second speaking, I met her mother, but I didn't know it was her mother at the time. I just simply met a very classy older white lady who looked as if she was the epitome of the old South. But very gracious, very nice.

And I remember getting a letter from her, a handwritten letter, saying how much she enjoyed my speech. That was the end of it.

So I got invited back there and because her daughter worked in education and she was at an educational conference, I just assumed her to have been a retired school teacher. As most of the people there were retired or working in the field of education, higher education and secondary.

I worked with a team of consultants from Boston University, so we were all meeting at the airport there in Columbia. Once we got in a car, the plan was we always went out to have dinner together to talk about what we had to do the next day.

I said, "Well, are we going to dinner?"

They said, "Well, we've been invited out to Miss Camille's house."

I said, "Oh, that's the lady that I met, the older lady that I met when I was at Salkehatchie."

"Yeah."

I said, "Oh, she's a retired school teacher, right?"

They said, "No, do you know who she is?"

I said, "No, not really, that's Camille's mother, that's all I know."

They said, "Clifton, she's the owner of Roselawn Plantation from the 1700s."

JE: [laughing]

CT: “She’s growing thousands of acres of cotton and her house is on the Historical Register. She is the epitome of the antebellum South.”

So that’s where we were invited to supper. And for whatever reason, I’m not quite sure why, the drive there and finding out who she was, you got off the four-lane highway, you got on a two-lane highway, you got off that highway, you got on a two-lane blacktop road, and eventually, you get off the blacktop road and you’re on a dirt road that has ruts from wagons in it. You go through this long lane of oak trees that are dressed in Spanish moss on either side. And when you get to the end of this lane, there’s this low country mansion, seemed like growing out of the ground, surrounded by cotton.

And all of a sudden, my world just sort of collapsed in front of me. The tie, the suit, the briefcase, I was back in Glen Allan, Mississippi, the world that I had left behind. And I couldn’t tell the people who were with me. I think it would have been embarrassing to me. I knew I didn’t want to go in, and I was dealing with all of this in my head.

So, finally, I had no other choice, but to get out of the car. And we went through the back, the steps were so tall I said it was like walking up the Mayan Ruins. You finally get to the back veranda and I’m upset with myself because the memories of being at the Governor’s Mansion at the state of Mississippi, my home state, was just flooding me.

And I remember the butler who opened the door there and I didn’t even know his name. Don’t know his name today, never shook his hand, he was just like an animated human being. And I just fell in line with the animation. And I promised myself this would never happen to me again.

So I was prepared to meet the butler to shake his hand, introduce myself, ask his name. And when the door finally opened, after knocking on the door, you could hear all the laughter inside and everything going on, there was no butler at the door. It was the 5’4” lady, Miss Camille Cunningham Sharp, the matriarch of Roselawn Plantation.

JE: Hmm.

CT: And our paths would cross for five years. The year she died, which would have been 2007, the winter of 2007, I got a call from her daughter, said, “Clifton, Mama has passed away and we wanted you to know that.”

But it was in those five years, our lives had crossed. And I told my wife that day, I said, “Barbara, I have to write this story because no one could believe what happened. And what happened could not have been orchestrated or arranged. Our paths were meant to cross for a purpose and a reason.” And it took me seven years to write that one book.

JE: After her death?

CT: After her death.

JE: Somebody came along with you when you went into that plantation house.

CT: Right.

JE: And who was that?

CT: Mike and Kathy Padgett, Dr. Kathy Padgett was the evaluator for the University of South Carolina. When a program is done by another university, you have another outside evaluator to make sure everything is going according to the contracts. And she was the outside evaluator.

JE: All right, but there was someone else.

CT: Oh, yeah, huh, you did read the book, didn't you?

JE: Yes I did.

CT: When I was in that car driving down that dirt road, all of a sudden, the car became crowded. There was no longer three people in the car, there was four. Little Cliff, from Glen Allan, Mississippi, as real as day. I felt as if he was sitting beside me, holding conversations all along the way.

JE: And you were talking to Little Cliff.

CT: I was talking back. We weren't arguing but just talking. It was as if he was looking out for me and telling me what to be aware of and what to be conscious of.

JE: As I recall in the book, there was a particular picture you saw in the hallway, I believe?

CT: Yeah.

JE: And that was a riveting experience for you.

CT: Very much so.

JE: Tell us about that.

CT: This is probably around the third year of my paths crossing with that of Miss Camille. Most of us stayed in bed and breakfasts, everyone that favorite bed and breakfast, they would put us up in. But that third year, she said, "I want Clifton to stay here at the mansion." Which was very difficult for me, I didn't want to do it. Nineteen fifty-five came alive. I had not thought about Emmet Till, ever, I guess.

I'm out in the woods, surrounded by cotton in this low country mansion. Miss Camille is an older lady, closer to ninety but she's white. The teachers that were staying there were all white. She had a dog named Summer, which was female and white. There was no way I wanted to stay there so I tried to get out of it.

But there were a couple of guys there from Assumption College, they loved those out there. I said, "Why don't you guys stay?"

They couldn't stay. Her daughter said, "No, Mother has decided that you will stay here."

But that was how I was feeling about it. And when everyone left, I felt alone. But Miss Camille was very gracious. We had eaten tons of food. And in the South, they think that food can cure anything. So late at night, "Mr. Taulbert, would you like some more food?" [laughing]

"No," I was just at odds, apprehensive. We were walking. She said, "Well, let me take you to your quarters." That's what she called where I was staying. 'Cause the other two teachers who were there had already gone to their rooms.

She walked me through the house. It was a slow walk that probably took twenty years in my mind to walk through that house. And we got to a, she called it a galley, and it had beautiful furniture there. I said, "Everything that was not burned during Sherman's March was at that house."

JE: Hmm.

CT: And there was a picture, and I can't intelligently explain this, because it was a small picture, and all the other pictures were big ornately framed pictures that she had shown me about relatives and things like that. And named everybody, gave me a story behind everybody. This small picture was right over a small desk and there was a glowing yellow light over it. I felt drawn to the picture, is the best way I can say it.

I went and looked at it and nothing extraordinary. There was a white couple of ladies and a guy in a wagon and it's in a cotton field. That's all I saw. But the picture had a force with it, something was going on inside my head and I couldn't leave the picture. I stayed there and looked at it again, the same thing, that's all I saw. And, finally, I got down on my knees and literally peered into the picture as deeply as I could because I couldn't leave that one picture.

And at the back of the picture of the fields what I had assumed early on to have been trees stuck by lightning that had burned or whatever, when I got on my knees and looked into the picture I saw that they were black people. They were in a position of picking cotton but caught by the camera so that it was like an odd shapes. Because they were moving down to get cotton out of the boll, they were not known to have even been in it. I don't think anybody thought anything about it.

And as I looked at the picture, I began to cry. Because I thought of *The Invisible Man*, the book by the Oklahoman Ralph Ellison, very well-known for having written *The Invisible Man*. And I said to myself, "I missed these people. They were here all the time and I didn't see them." I said, "They were overlooked, they were there all the time and totally overlooked." And I felt so badly and was asking myself the question, Who had overlooked these people? How had they been overlooked? And how had I made that mistake of doing likewise?

JE: At first you didn't see it, until you—

CT: Yeah, but I stood there, you don't know how long I stood there looking at that picture.

JE: Until finally you looked.

CT: Until finally when I got down on my knees and—

JE: And you overlooked them.

CT: . . . looked, I saw them.

JE: Yeah.

CT: They were there. But the picture was not about them, the picture was about life in the South and the people who were up front, not about the people who were at the back.

JE: Yeah. Well, we could go on, and rather than do that, we'll tell people to read the book *The Invitation*. And you do write one chapter, chapter nine, "Invisible People."

CT: Right.

JE: And that's what you're talking about.

CT: That's what I'm talking about.

JE: Which you just talked about now.

Chapter 17 - 8:35

Our Bridge to Cross

John Erling: And then maybe this is a way to bring closing here to this, "Our bridge to cross." What does that mean?

Clifton Taulbert: There's still something to do regarding race in America and maybe race in the world. There's still a bridge to cross. Miss Camille and I crossed a bridge. We honestly crossed a bridge. And left me with the idea that the impossible is possible, that we can live together, we can share our lives together. She treated me like I was her son.

JE: Then when she sensed the end was near, she didn't want to die in the plantation house.

CT: She didn't. She wanted to die in a house that she had designed. But it was more than the design of the house that was important. There was black person, a lady that I've never met, they had been friends all of their lives. But in the older years, she said, "We will spend our last years together." She didn't tell me she was black until the end of it. Went through the house, saw the rooms, everything, beautiful place. I mean, walked right out of *Architectural Digest*. Just beautiful. And she said, "She will have everything that I have. Everything will be equal in this house."

I will never forget that.

JE: Hmm. Did you go to her funeral?

CT: I did not, I couldn't go to her funeral. I wanted to go badly and I either was out of town or out of the country. But when the book came out it made its debut in Natchez.

JE: Okay.

CT: All of her family came. And we've stayed in touch throughout all the time.

JE: Think a motion picture can be made out of this?

CT: Either a motion picture or a Broadway play, I think it will lend it because there's only two major characters, really, that's she and I.

JE: All started on an invitation.

CT: Yeah, just a simple invitation to supper became an invitation to the possibilities of our future.

JE: If I asked you who had the greatest impact on your life, it probably wouldn't be just one person.

CT: No.

JE: You'd have to name several others that you've already named.

CT: I would have to name some others.

JE: Just name them.

CT: My great grandfather, Joe Young. My great grandmother, Mama Pearl. My great aunt, Mama Punk. My uncle Clee, who owned the icehouse. And my mother, Mary.

JE: And your career as a writer, here we are in 2018, you've written thirteen books. Do you have other ideas for books later on or have they not come to you yet?

CT: They have not come to me yet. Something tells me that there's something else I need to write, I just don't know what it is. Nothing has happened to ignite that writing passion. Because when it was time to write *The Invitation*, I rewrote that book three times. I was not satisfied.

JE: That's something to write it three times.

CT: Three times. Because I didn't want it to be a treatise on race. I want it to be exactly as it happened. Two people's paths crossing for five years. We never discussed race.

JE: Completely opposite of each other.

CT: Completely opposite of each other.

JE: She had hired your kinfolk.

CT: Hired?

JE: In spirit, not actually, but she hired cotton pickers.

CT: Yeah. But her great grandparents owned slaves. We were on the same plantation. The only reason the house hadn't burned down is because during the Civil War the North used it as one of their headquarters. That's where General Fremont had his regiment based there, at Roselawn Plantation.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CT: It was a slave plantation.

JE: Now we didn't attach slavery to your story. Is there slavery that you know about?

CT: In my family?

JE: Yeah.

CT: Yes. My great, great, great grandparents, Saul Peters and Adelia Peters, they were both born slaves in Marengo County, Alabama, 1849, was my great, great grandpa, Saul. And his wife was born in 1855. Both born into slavery.

JE: Do you embrace that? Some, I've read, they kind of shun, "Well, I come from a slave background," and so forth. Look how successful you are, it would be real easy for you to say, "Yes, I come from slavery. I come from cotton picking."

CT: Yeah. I've never had a problem living with the truth of my life. And I've never had a problem living with the fact that the road of my life is still being traveled.

JE: Yeah, this journey you're on, somebody upstairs did a lot of directing.

CT: Oh, no doubt.

JE: And—

CT: You know, you look up there, I'm at the FBI Headquarters, speaking at the Bohemian Club in San Francisco. Sandra Day O'Connor up there for that meeting. The staff I'm working with in Boise, Idaho. This is my wife. I'm giving a speech for Frank Keating at the Governor's Mansion, and it was right before the people came in, I took a picture of Barbara there.

That guy that I worked for, a white guy that was very close friends, that's one of the officials ballets from South Africa, when Nelson Mandela became president, he said, "Clifton, you should have this, not me."

JE: Nelson Mandela? I have it in my notes here, he requested a copy of your book.

CT: The first book *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* was requested by Nelson Mandela through the ambassador to South Africa, who called David Boren's office to see if he could get a copy of that book. They called me. In fact, it was Ken Levitt, the same Ken Levitt that's here today. He was a young lawyer in Washington, DC.

Ken called me and I autographed about seven books, trying to get my name right, and I finally sent one in. Never heard back from them. They got it but they never said anything about it. And about five years later, through the International Visitor's Program out of DC, Oklahoma and Tulsa in particular, was chosen to host a number of attorneys from Africa and other countries in the world. There were several from Pretoria. We hosted the several from Pretoria at our home.

And when she walked in, she didn't even speak. She said, "Mr. Taulbert, we know of your work in Pretoria. The president keeps the little book on his desk."

JE: Wow. Blessed, can you use the word "blessed" in your life?

CT: I can, without any question, because I look at how my life started and how it could have ended. I can only say that the hand of faith, f-a-i-t-h, faith, was dealing the cards.

JE: Right. So we know what racism was like way back in your days and when you're five and six years old. Here we are in 2018, we'll always have racism on earth.

CT: Yeah.

JE: It'll always be there, it'll always be that tension between Palestinians and Jews, between blacks and whites. Is it better today or is it more refined? Do you still feel it today in that community?

CT: I would say I still feel it but I feel it from a different perspective. I feel it from knowing that someone has issues that they haven't gotten over. I try not to let it dictate my actions and my response to humanity.

And like we started in our conversation, Harry and Meghan. When I looked at the official picture of the royal family, the wedding, with Doria Ragland, Meghan's mother,

obviously African American, standing in the midst with the King and Queen of England, the princes, the duchesses, and their children, the royal family, that had sent a very stirring message to the world of what is possible.

And you are right, we will always have those who are not like that picture. But we will always have those who said, "I waited for this picture all my life."

JE: But there were many who were waiting for the first black to be president of the United States.

CT: Right.

JE: And that happened too.

CT: Right.

JE: That had to make you—

CT: You know what I was doing the night President Obama became president?

JE: What?

CT: I wasn't at Tulsa, I was helping to train the FBI. There was two being trained at the same time; the FBI was being trained outside of Chicago, and the FBI in Arizona. Who was going to be the detail group that would take care of the president?

JE: And you were training them?

CT: At part of it. There's a whole training session of the work that I do. And these were the people who would eventually be his protectors in Chicago.

JE: Really?

CT: Yeah. And I went back to my room that night, and Barbara and I was on the phone talking back and forth, watching. And when they said, when he had won, I mean, it's just like more water came out of my body than out of a fountain.

JE: [laughing] Right.

CT: I cried in complete joy for disbelief. Because I never, ever, ever thought I would see that in our country.

Chapter 18 - 1:33

Advice to the Young

John Erling: Young people will listen to this. Fifty, sixty, a hundred years from now because of our technology. Advice to young people that are coming out of school, out of college? It could be advice as a whole or to blacks, give us some advice.

Clifton Taulbert: For the future that I haven't seen, but the future that will surely come, I've tried to live my life based on unselfishness. And that's a timeless universal quality, if we choose to grab it. If unselfishness becomes part of your life, it gives you an incredible

opportunity to reach beyond yourself and discover your own humanity that lives within the humanity of others.

Whatever your profession might be, wherever you might live, and whatever you might choose to do, I would suggest that you embrace unselfishness as the worthy companion for the journey of life.

JE: Very good. Well, I've enjoyed listening to your journey and your story. I thought I would coming in, but I think I enjoyed it ever more. You're easy to talk to and, of course, a good speaker. So thank you for giving us several hours here of your time.

CT: No, thank you. I had to think and rethink youth placement. I think in position to look back and do a collection. Because when I do that I become more appreciative of the people who laid the foundation for me.

JE: Right.

CT: My launching, as I call them. I didn't know where they were sending me, but they were sending me somewhere.

JE: Yeah.

CT: And I would simply ask, "Don't shame us."

JE: Right, okay. Thank you. I appreciate it.

CT: No, thank you, sir.

Chapter 19 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

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