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## ***Remember the Titans***

In 1971, over a century after Abraham Lincoln addressed the United States with the Emancipation Proclamation, the United States was still divided by color. During this time two schools in Alexandria, Virginia, one black and one white, were forced to migrate. The state and school board expected them live and work together with no animosity. It was obvious that parents of both races were livid about the change. In their opinion, it was outrageous to assume that people of different races could abide together in a peaceful manner. But, “In Virginia, high school football is a way of life. It’s bigger than Christmas day,”<sup>[1]</sup> and it was exactly what Alexandria needed to come together.

“By sharing common fantasies [or experiences], a collection of individuals is transformed into a cohesive group.”<sup>[2]</sup> This process is known as Symbolic Convergence, a theory founded by Ernest Bormann. In 1949, when Bormann graduated from the University of South Dakota, he could not have known just how valuable his theory would become to a country trying to bring two worlds into one. The American people needed someone or something to direct them, and whether they knew it or not, this theory may have helped them join together.

The first day of football camp, the boys of the T.C. Williams High School football team had no idea their lives were about to change. “I don’t care if you’re black, white, blue, green or orange,”<sup>[3]</sup> Herman Boone said as he assigned bus seats and room arrangements to the football players. Much to their shock and disapproval the team was now divided by the offensive team and the defensive team, not by color. Boone, a black football coach, was

intolerant of any racism and demanded that the boys treat one another with regard and act as one team. He demanded respect and imposed the same rules for players of both races. His goal was to teach them that neither race was better than the other, rather that they were all football players with the same goal.

While each football player had the same love of football as the next, the first week of camp for these boys was unsuccessful. The only convergence that took place during this time was tolerating each other enough to be on the football field. The time spent on the field, however, was quite unproductive. Everyone was looking out only for themselves or for their teammates of the same race. It was apparent to Coach Boone that his team was still divided. With unity in mind, he took the team to the Gettysburg Memorial and tried to help them understand the importance of working as a team. "If we don't come together right now on this hallowed ground, we too will be destroyed, just like they [Gettysburg Soldiers] were. I don't care if you like each other or not, but you will respect each other. And maybe, just maybe, we'll learn to play this game like men."<sup>[4]</sup>

It wasn't long after their experience at the Gettysburg Memorial that the boys started playing together as a team. This change resulted in a bond that was formed both on and off the field. "Left side! Strong side!"<sup>[5]</sup> was the chant led by the team captain, Gerry Bertier, and his teammate Julius Campbell. This bonding experience for the team followed the steps of symbolic convergence just as Em Griffin describes, "Graphic digressions and boisterous talk aren't signs of a flawed process. Rather, they are evidence that the group is coming together."<sup>[6]</sup>

After two weeks of camp, the team had felt the unity and respect for one another that Coach Boone intended. On the first day of school, however, they were reminded that

the world hadn't changed as they did at camp. Rioting and protestors lined the streets and the boys found that they were back to a place where segregation was the norm. They were still teammates, and acted as such during regular school hours, but it wasn't until their first game that they came together again and experienced symbolic convergence.

"That football field out there, that's our universe," [7] Coach Boone told his team before their first game. And it was. The T.C. Williams Titans took their first win and continued on a winning streak throughout the season. Despite the odds against them, the team proved to be powerful and gained community support. Their victories were cheered and celebrated, but the people were still divided.

After it was apparent to the white community that Coach Boone was not going to fail as head football coach, their frustrations were evident. It only took one brick through the front window of his home, endangering his family, for him to speak out. "We will not be intimidated, we gonna play a football game. Hatred and violence will not intimidate us!" [8] After this, the team knew they had to come together more than ever or the community would tear them all apart.

"Everywhere we go... People want to know... Who we are... So we tell them... We are the Titans... The mighty, mighty Titans..." [9] was the cheer fans heard as they watched their team enter the football field the very next game. The crowd came alive! After a couple more wins, the school was alive with team spirit. Em Griffin, author of *A First Look at Communication Theory*, said, "Once a fantasy chain catches fire, the theory predicts that the group will become more cohesive and of one mind." [10] That's exactly what happened with the community, they came together in the name of football!

The Titans swept their season and qualified to play for the State Championship.

After the last regular season game the fans, black and white, came together to cheer on the football team in a post game celebration. Even Coach Boone was applauded by his neighbors as he made his way home that night. Although these were great examples of symbolic convergence, it took a tragic accident to see what affect this theory really had on the town.

That night Gerry Bertier was in a car accident and found out he would be paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life. It was at this moment that everyone truly realized who and what was most important to them. It was a heartbreaking experience, but Bertier reminded everyone, "I'm hurt, I ain't dead,"<sup>[11]</sup> when they gathered together expressing remorse for the permanence of his injuries. The team knew they had no choice but to win the State Championship in a tribute to their team captain.

The night of the big game, as the community gathered in support of the team and anxiously awaited kickoff, something amazing happened. Gene Bertier, Gerry's mother, was welcomed by the entire stadium with a sincere round of applause in her son's honor. The Titans played better that night than they ever had before. They knew it wasn't just for Gerry or for themselves, it was also for the people of Alexandria. To any other high school taking the State Championship would have been just another successful win. For the T.C. Williams Titans it was a sign of change.

The integrated crowd cheered on the Titans throughout the game and rushed the field in celebration of their State Champion football team. It was at this time that the town had caught fire. They were no longer divided by race.

The Titans made history in 1971. They were ranked the second best high school football team in the country with their perfect thirteen and zero season. It wasn't just the

wins on the football field that mattered, it was the fact that the community found common ground and came together. In a world full of hate and discrimination, T.C. Williams High School made a difference. The symbolic convergence may not have crossed any other city lines, but at least it brought the people of Alexandria together.

In *Remember the Titans*, Director Boaz Yakin portrays the unity that was built among the people of Alexandria through something as simple as football. From this true story, he was able to demonstrate several examples of symbolic convergence throughout the movie. One example involved only two people, Gerry Bertier and Julius Campbell, of opposite backgrounds coming together as brothers. Another instance created a bond among the team, and so on until the community was united as a whole. It wasn't easy and it wasn't perfect, but it worked. Sheryl Yoast described this well, "People say it can't work, black and white, but here we make it work every day. We have our disagreements of course, but before we reach for hate always, always we remember the Titans."<sup>[12]</sup>

In today's world, people seem to disagree more than ever and form relationships based on hate rather than finding the good in those around them. *Remember the Titans* is an exceptional reminder of what we should strive for in our lives. If two entirely opposite communities can put their differences aside and overcome years of built up hatred, there is nothing that should stand in our way now. It's not realistic to say that we are free and clear of all things evil, but it is possible to look past adversity and come together as the Titans did.

It doesn't take much to create symbolic convergence among a group of people if they can find common ground. As Yakin accounts for in his movie, symbolic convergence can be anything that brings people together, even football. When there is understanding,

identification of values, aesthetic appreciation, agreement or a reform in society, it can be considered an accomplishment of the theory. Whether it's football, family or friends, it should never be forgotten that, "We ain't nothing if we can't play together."<sup>[13]</sup>

## Works Cited

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## References

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3. *Remember the Titans*. Herman Boone performed by Denzel Washington.
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5. *Remember the Titans*. Gerry Bertiere performed by Ryan Hurst. Julius Campbell performed by Wood Harris.
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