

Divided We Fall

Sergio Hyland

BEFORE YOU READ: Discuss the phrase, “Divided we fall.” Skim the pull-out quotes to get a sense of the divisions the author is referring to.

I was born to an African-American mother and an Italian immigrant father. Growing up was tough. I lived in a poor neighborhood, where there was a lot of tension between blacks and whites. People might wonder how poverty and racial tensions go

[Our] economic system benefits from people being divided from each other and hating each other.

together. Here’s part of the explanation: When you are living in poverty, you are living with a lot of frustration and a strong feeling that you can’t remedy

the problems you face. Meanwhile, you are trying to get along in an economic system that is rooted in usury and greed and that benefits from people



The Southern Tenant Farmers Union organized black and white sharecroppers in the 1930s. Poor farmers (and their children) united across races to defend their shared interests.

being divided from each other and hating each other. Often, those divisions are drawn on racial lines.

I used to get into fights over some racist remark that was directed at me or my younger brother. People thought that just because my father was white, it meant that we had a lot of money. I started to internalize all this negativity, and it began to affect my performance at school. I started acting out in class, just so I would be suspended or sent home. And the school fell for it. Instead of doing something to help me, they just kicked me out, which reinforced my feeling that I didn’t belong. I became anti-social. Even when I went outside to play, I found myself wanting to be alone most of the time. Nobody understood me or what I was experiencing.

I was hurt and angry, and I started hating white people.

Trying to avert catastrophe, my parents nearly went bankrupt sending me to an all-white private school. At

first, I was excited and hopeful. And then it all came crashing down. One day, I asked the white teacher if I could get a drink of water. She started



Whites and blacks united to protest the Vietnam War.

laughing at me. “I see that you’re even speaking like us now,” she said. This was the first time I had been around white people, and I was trying to talk the way they talked. I was humiliated, and I felt extremely small. I was hurt and angry, and I started hating white people and all things white,

Everything is about competition. We’re encouraged to outdo the “other,” in order to gain some small benefit.

including my own father, who I somehow blamed for making me half white.

I soon realized that I was alone. To the blacks in my neighborhood – whom I wanted to be around – I wasn’t “black” enough, and obviously I wasn’t

“white” enough to hang with whites. I was a square peg, surrounded by round holes, and I hated my life. I figured out how to survive in such a harsh world, but it came at a hefty price: in order to survive, I found that I had to hate and distrust nearly everybody I came into contact with.

Even now, in my mid-thirties, I’m still angry – but not towards whites. My anger is towards a system responsible for creating differences among human beings and giving us incentives to hate each other for those differences. For example, everything is about competition. We’re encouraged to outdo the “other,” in order to gain some small benefit. Whether we are vying for programs, grants, jobs, or housing, we – the poor – compete with each other for these things, and it causes hostilities. Sometimes, sadly, the results can be deadly, which causes even more hatred between



Two members of the Justice for Janitors campaign.

people. It’s all a cycle, and we don’t even realize it.

I’ve made a lot of mistakes, and I take responsibility for them. I’ve spent half my life in prison. Too much of my brief existence before being incarcerated was spent fighting back and fighting for respect. Things went too far. I wonder: would I have had to fight so hard if it weren’t for this system that has historically stoked the fires of white supremacy? It has dominated my life to this point, and my life is exactly what I’ve been paying with as a result.

Communities need to work together to educate each other on the issues of race and culture, so that future generations can understand that, while our differences make us different, they don’t make us enemies.

Sergio Hyland grew up in Philadelphia and is currently in prison in Coal Township, PA, where he is enrolled in a computer-aided drafting course. Find more of his writing at <decarceratepa.info> and <booksthroughbars.org>.



Divided vs. United

Read the article on pp. 22-23, “The Construction of Race in the U.S.” What is the connection between that early history and the current conditions Sergio describes here?

The first part of the phrase, “Divided we fall” is “United we stand.” Look at the images that accompany this article. What examples of unity do they show?

Share a time when unity—at work or in your community—made a difference in your life.