

*This is an excerpt from Robert Coles' Doing Documentary Work. Coles is a child psychiatrist and professor emeritus at Harvard University. He wrote over fifty books and won a Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction writing. In part of this book, Coles shares about his time as a young psychiatrist documenting Black children tasked with desegregating schools. Here, in a chapter called "The Person as Documentarian: Moral and Psychological Tensions," Coles writes about how research methodologies and personal convictions shape documentary work. He also shares a scene from the end of his experience that exemplifies the complex relationship between researcher/journalist and source.*

I proceeded, therefore, to follow closely the entry of the black children, follow closely their psychological ups and downs, follow closely the gradual success of their initiative; and follow closely, too, the open and all too pitiless resentment and resistance of white children and their parents (and many teachers) in those early days and weeks and months—and follow closely, as well, a gradual if reluctant accommodation. With such a self-imposed mandate, one that seemed in obvious accord with that vaunted virtue "common sense," I was spared the need to pursue a Tolstoyan rationale that would acknowledge malice and sin as fairly universal and moments of decency or charity as not any one kind of person's property, in favor of a "research methodology" that concentrated on certain kinds of "evidence": the anxieties of black children, as expressed in their drawings and conversation, and the psychological strengths that they nevertheless displayed; the tears of white children, as expressed in their drawings and remarks, and their day-by-day willingness, over time, to live with the inevitable, the necessary, and their slow but steady capacity to see their new classmates as individuals rather than as members of another race, to the point where there were finally moments of real (psychological) integration in these at first fearfully desegregated classrooms.

I have memories of queasiness, of biting my lips as I heard unattractive comments and worse in certain black homes, and of scratching my head in disbelief as I heard wonderfully kind and sensitive remarks spoken by white parents (to their children, to other children, to my wife and me) who at the same time were unalterably opposed, so they said, to "this integration thing," a phrase I heard in house after house, not all of them occupied by followers of the devil. No wonder, then, I was as quick as my black minister friend who spoke to me in 1965, to observe the earnest enthusiasm of those white students for all black folks in the Delta of Mississippi.

[...]

Nor do I now withdraw what I once felt or said—try to rewrite it all at a much later time for a much different era. In the long retrospect of a life, I simply understand a bit more adequately the moral and psychological tensions that this documentarian encountered as he did his work, and realize how those tensions influenced the way he thought, the way he went about doing his interviews, the way he wrote them up, the way he presented them to the world. In that regard, I

well remember Kenneth Clark's observation to me when we talked (in 1960) about the plan I had to get to know those New Orleans black children who pioneered desegregation in that old cosmopolitan port city. "If you were Negro and poor, you'd be hearing different words from those [Negro] children, writing up a different research project; and you sure wouldn't even be thinking of (not in your wildest dreams!) doing interviews with white children and their parents—or with the schoolteachers.

He had stated the obvious, and though I was embarrassed by what he said and felt more than vaguely ashamed (for all of us in America, not just for myself), I didn't (I couldn't, I guess, and still can't) realize the full import of his comment. There I was, in pursuit of some objective truth, so I thought, of a kind I could apprehend with those so-called "tools" of a particular "trade": Anna Freud's "direct observation"; the use of crayons and paints to enable a child's psychological expression and an observer's documentary expression; the interviews I would do with parents, with teachers, with relatives and neighbors, all tape-recorded, all to be heard and heard again, the themes noted and analyzed—a mid-twentieth-century psychiatric and psychoanalytic investigation. There Dr. Kenneth Clark was, however, first telling me that a darkening of my skin's pigment would make all that scientific know-how and planning irrelevant, and then going further, saying these unforgettable words to me: "I couldn't do that project, either—even in the Negro homes." I wanted to know why! "I'm a Northerner, and I've lived a protected, comfortable life; it would be hard to leave it for that world of danger and violence." Meanwhile, race and class presented no apparent problem for me—indeed, served to protect me not only literally but figuratively: I was a white knight who needed have no fear, and who thought (had to think) he could go anywhere, talk to anyone. I cringe, today, at my naiveté and my self-assurance, and maybe my unknowing (as it often is!) arrogance—even as I frankly doubt that without such a psychological, never mind racial and social, background I could have gotten even to first base on either side of those railroad tracks I visited in those beleaguered Southern cities of the early 1960s.

But the considerable obstacles in the way of such an inquiry, to which Dr. Clark was alluding, would soon yield to another kind, not sociological or historical or even necessarily racial: What are one's obligations not to oneself, one's career, the academic world, or the world of readers, but to the people who are, after all, slowly becoming not only one's "sources" or "contacts" or "informants," but one's graciously tolerant and open-handed teachers and friends—there, week after week, with answers to questions, with hands ready to pick up crayons, with the courtesy and hospitality of food and drink, with advice, with revealing second thoughts to discussions one had long ago put aside, but most important, there in their available yet so vulnerable and hard-pressed and precarious lives? Toward the end of my stay in New Orleans in 1964, Ruby Bridges' mother and I were sitting over coffee and cake (she was a wonderful cook and hostess), and she was talking about the future, that of her child and her family. At a certain point, however, I began to realize that she was also talking about a particular human involvement,

which she and her daughter (and her husband and her other children) had been enjoying, coming to an end: "We'll be missing you. We've got so used to your coming here, that we forgot you're only going to be with us so long, and then you'll be on your way! Ruby told me she was sure you'd stay here [in New Orleans] and that we'd see you the way we have, because you're our friend, so that's when I told her 'he is' (their friend), but he's got his work to do, and it's all over, so he won't be visiting us like in the past--maybe now and then."

I was surprised, embarrassed at her directness. I'd always had trouble ending my "relationships" with my patients; all that talk of "termination" (the very word!) used to bother me, the recitation by my supervisors of the forthcoming anxieties and moodiness—yet it was always true. An intense human connection was about to be concluded, an affair of the heart, often enough, put to rest, hence the sadness and the apprehension. But in clinical work there is an entire tradition that helps one sort out such feelings and move on— the two of you are doctor and patient, or the group of you are a doctor and a family with whom you've tried to work, and you've done so in a clinic or an office, with the clock setting its own limits and helping to define what is happening; a professional life, with its "hours." There, in Mrs. Bridges' humble yet tidy kitchen, with the aroma of her French market coffee and her mouth-watering coffee cake cut into enormous slices (a clear and present temptation), it seemed quite different: "termination" felt like a kind of finality, a death, for which I hadn't prepared myself. There were no colleagues with whom I might have discussed this, no clinical seminar at which I could have made a presentation; rather, I was learning about the documentarian as loner, out there in that "field," stumbling along, and now brought up short by the thoughtful remarks of one of the people he was "observing," "studying"—as if Mrs. Bridges had decided that this fellow needed a bit of the "help" his kind is known for offering others.

What started as a casual comment on the part of Mrs. Bridges turned into a long conversation. I knew that she was a careful observer herself: she worked in the home of a well-to-do white family, and she watched them and listened to them attentively. She asked me about my future plans, asked me where I'd eventually settle down. She and my wife, Jane, had become good friends, and Jane and I had ourselves been discussing some of the questions Mrs. Bridges was putting to me—including the one that both Jane's parents and mine had very much in mind then: When would we start a family? I realize today that in a sense Mrs. Bridges was with me *in loco parentis* that morning. Jane, a teacher, had gone to visit with Ruby's school-teacher, and Mr. Bridges was at work. In the quiet of a modest apartment a sensible, tactful, wise wife and mother and worker and fellow citizen, a fellow human being, a friend of four years by then, was helping me to think of my own life, not hers or her daughter's. She was also, by gentle indirection, bringing up moral as well as psychological matters. "I hope you won't forget our people," she said, after we'd discussed my future plans. I was surprised, speechless. What did she mean—or what was she implying? I answered, finally, with rote reassurance: of course not. Still, later that day, driving along the Gulf Coast on my way to a SNCC meeting in Biloxi, where I'd previously

lived for two years while in the air force as a psychiatrist (under the old doctors' draft law that made us all serve in the military at some early point in our careers), I kept going back to that remark with a rising curiosity, and, I admit, with no small amount of discomfort—as if I'd been quite subtly and politely accused of something. My thoughts went like this: I've been deeply involved in this school desegregation struggle for four years, and also in the larger civil-rights effort being waged by SNCC, soon to culminate in the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964. Why would I ever want to forget Mrs. Bridges, her daughter, their family, all the other families Jane and I had been so fortunate to know? Why would I ever want to forget the "people" Mrs. Bridges had mentioned, the people who had, in fact, not only tutored me daily as I went about my work, but also had given that (psychiatric) work a kind of focus and direction and meaning it had hitherto and otherwise sorely lacked?\*

Other whys also came to my mind, I'd better admit. Why was Mrs. Bridges saying that, then? Surely she wasn't merely giving voice to an offhand "hope"; she had more for me to contemplate. Why had she referred to "our people," rather than to her specific family, or perhaps to others I'd come to know in that endlessly intriguing, inviting, exhausting "city that care forgot"? Anyway, why was I now so preoccupied with that one brief assertion, that polite wish, it could be considered, that sensitively spoken acknowledgment of a parting soon to come? For me, it seemed, a handful of words, offered in passing, not portentously or reprovingly, had become quite some-thing that addressed me, my purposes and values, my life. A worry, finally, that had become an accusation, I gradually realized as I looked at the quiet, blue expanse of the Gulf of Mexico while standing under a noonday sun and a clear sky beside my car as it was being filled with gas at a familiar Esso station in Gulfport, Mississippi. Suddenly clouds of worry, of self-criticism, of egoistic alarm came over me. Mrs. Bridges had become a stand-in for the "people" she had mentioned, and, beyond them, for the people of the world who get observed and studied by those of us who start our projects, conclude them, and go on to new projects, which will also be finished, world without end—all to our personal credit, if not our glory: we build a documentary life, with its bibliography, with the critical response of fellow writers, with a reputation.

\*I had made this lack quite clear, actually, in an article that I wrote before I started my Southern fieldwork; it was published just as that work began: "A Young Psychiatrist Looks at His Profession," *Atlantic Monthly*, July, 1961.