

The Talk

As a panelist on Meet the Press last Sunday, Eugene Robinson – Pulitzer Prize-winner and Washington Post columnist, and a man as unreflective as he is reflexive – said it again, smugly, as though black Americans hold the franchise on The Talk. So I did some reflecting of my own.

More than five decades ago my father, a first-generation Italian-American, had that talk with me (his Italo-Slavic son). He had grown up in East Harlem, where I lived until I was eight years old (in the James Weldon Johnson Housing Projects). In my father's day the police were pronouncedly Irish and (for reasons not important here) they did not care very much for Italians. So, seeing that I was going out and about and speaking from experience, he waited for the right moment and gave me the low-down. "Son," he said, "if you get stopped by a cop, keep your mouth shut." I said, "why are you telling *me*?" I was the good son. "Because," he answered, "unlike your brother you like to argue and like your brother you have a temper. So just be quiet. And show your hands. And do as you are told." Me: "But – " He: "There is no but, son." (I would learn that this talk was not unheard of in our precincts.)

That was in May. The next January – that would have been 1965, when I had just turned eighteen – I was on my way to work on a tundra-cold, wind-whipped Sunday morning, very early, in the industrial section of Long Island City, in Queens, New York. The owner of a beer distributor had given me the key to the office and expected the books to be done when he opened on Monday. Now I was at the door, bundled up and slouching against the concrete wall to cut the wind from at least my right side as I searched for the key, when a plain car screeched across the sidewalk to cut me off. I jumped back and, thinking that a car had spun out of control (not that I was a target), was relieved to be alive.

The second person I saw was Officer Good Cop, who would prove to be decent enough, but first there was Officer Thug, who would prove to be genuinely thuggish. They shouted, I put my back to the door, and Thug, having leapt out of the passenger side, grabbed my shoulders, spun me around, and shoved my face into the wall. Right hand to heaven: my father's words banged through my skull. I put my hands up against the wall and said nothing. Thug spun me again to face him and grabbed my chin. "What the #@!?!# are you doing here?"

By then Good Cop was next to me. He slowly lowered Thug's hands. "ID please." I had none. Thug patted me down. "Answer him," he said. I explained. "Prove it," he said. So I told him the key to the door was in my pocket. Good Cop said, "let's see." So I took out the key and opened the door. Good cop said, "we got a call. A young white guy was mugging people under the El. Not many white guys walk around looking like you on a freezing Sunday morning. Sorry for the trouble." Thug said, "and #@?!?!# you too," perfectly reading my mind. Only later did I think how badly things might have gone.

I have long since had the same talk with my son. All fathers (or mothers, uncles, aunts, grandparents . . . you get the idea) should have it with any kid, even the good ones (we tend to have less sense than the other kind), within their authority. PDs (certainly the NYPD) have since changed very much for the better, but it only takes one thug cop. Or one scared cop. Or inexperienced. Or very tired. Or cowboy-crazy. Or having a very bad day. Or bigoted.

Thanks Pop.