Common Ground:
A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families

> History is *complicated*. It is not the story of a few people, it is the story of an immense number of people – each of them full individuals in their own right, each of them having their own greater or lesser impact on developments.[1]

J. Anthony Lukas' book Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families is very different from the history of education books we have read as of yet. First, this book's primary topic is not education, but is instead the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960's and 1970's as it played out in Boston. More central to this paper, however, is the style in which the book is written. Unlike most histories, Lukas uses the experiences of three very different people to triangulate and explore this time. Colin Diver, a white, upper middle class lawyer whom we meet in the first chapter as an editor of the *Harvard Law Review* felt that "[t]he great national struggle over racial segregation was centered in places like Selma and Little Rock." It did not impact on his life.[2] The second person, Rachel Twymon was a poor African American, who Lukas introduced by sharing her reaction to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination: "'. . . what he got killed for makes him my big brother,'" she said, "'because he wanted all of us to be equal.'"[3] Rachel Twymon is portrayed as a strong supporter of integration, believing firmly in its potential for improving her life and that of her children. Finally, Alice McGoff, a poor Irish woman, supported Dr. King in his efforts to desegregate the South, but "[a]s far as she could see, Boston wasn't prejudiced as against blacks-nobody rode the back of the bus, nobody was kept out of restaurants; Boston wasn't Birmingham

[1] Eric Flint, "Preface" *Ring of Fire* (Riverdale, NY: Baen Books, 2003), p. 4.
[2] J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 99.
[3] *Ibid.,* p. 13.

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or Selma."[4]

Each of these three people, and their families reacted differently to discrimination in Boston. Mr. Diver, as noted above, did not see how it affected him at all. Ms. McGoff was in favor of desegregation in the South, but a change of the rhetoric around civil rights impacted her thinking: "No longer were politicians, professors, and editorial writers talking merely about giving Negroes an equal shot at life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. By the mid-sixties, they were proposing to take real things – money, jobs, housing, and schools – away from whites and give them to blacks."[5] More interesting, perhaps, is that Ms. Twymon also did not see Boston as discriminatory towards Boston-bred blacks; it was the southern interlopers that caused the discrimination. In a discussion about the governor of Massachusetts' mother, Mrs. Malcolm Peabody, who was arrested defending civil rights, Rachel Twymon and her friend Magnolia differed on their opinions of northern discrimination, as seen from the following excerpt:

> Rachel thought that Mrs. Peabody was a wonderful woman, a modern exemplar of the abolitionist tradition. Magnolia wasn't so certain. "Oh, yeah," she said, "that's fine, going down to Florida to integrate some motel. But what's that lady and her son, the governor, doing about things up here?"
> "We don't have that kind of discrimination up here, Mag," said Rachel.
> "You think we don't?"
> "No," said Rachel, "or at least we never used to."
> "You had it all along, honey, but you hid it under half a bushel."
> "Mag, I'm telling you, we never used to have any of that sort of thing up here, and if we have it now, it's only because all you Southerners came up here and brought it with you."
> "That's a damn lie," said Magnolia, slamming her coffee cup down on the table. "They don't want you up here any more than they wanted us down there. One of these days, you'll see how you been foolin' yourself."
> Magnolia stormed out and the two women didn't speak again for weeks.[6]

[4] *Ibid.,* p. 21.
[5] *Ibid.,* p. 26.
[6] *Ibid.,* p. 67.

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Ms. Twymon believed in integration; interactions with whites, she believed, had been, and would continue to be, positive for Boston blacks.

Over time, the perceptions of civil rights changed for all three. Ms. Twymon, although still "loath to admit that 'Southern' practices and attitudes had invaded her city," became concerned about the dilapidated condition of her children's school, and was drawn into a controversy over the firing of Jonathan Kozol for teaching the children Langston Hughes's "Ballad of the Landlord," and participated in a demonstration and a sit-in at the school.[7] Ms. McGoff's neighborhood of Charlestown began to be integrated. For the most part, it went fairly smoothly at the start, but there were incidents, including a fight between Ms. McGoff's son Danny and an African American boy named Constantine Solman. Although the incident began as a schoolboy fight, it ended with Mrs. Marion Solman, Constantine's mother, grabbing Alice by the neck.[8] The second and third issues to impact Ms. McGoff and her family was the closing of the Charlestown Navy Yard, eliminating a good number of jobs in the neighborhood, and the judgment of U.S. District Court Judge Charles Wyzanski that then-current entrance exams were discriminatory. His order for new exams and the immediate hiring of fifty-three minority employees resulted in a belief among Charlestown's Irish "that jobs which had once been theirs by birthright would now go to dark-skinned interlopers across the city."[9] Together, these incidents would most likely had an impact on Alice McGoff's previous support of integration. Finally, Colin Diver underwent a fairly radical change in his outlook on race. From someone who seemed fairly oblivious to the issue, he and his wife purposefully looked for housing that would provide "the racial, ethnic, and class mix to be found only

[7] *Ibid.,* p. 101-103.
[8] *Ibid.,* p. 155-156.
[9] *Ibid.,* p. 157.

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in the inner city."[10] They moved onto a diverse block in the South End looking for interactions with people unlike themselves, although that did not always happen in actual practice:

> But it was a constricted community, defined as much by race and class as by geography. Though most of the newcomers had wanted to live in a racially and economically mixed neighborhood, once they were there they had little contact with people very different from themselves. A few middle-class black families eventually moved onto the block and were accepted into the community. But, with a few notable exceptions, the young professionals rarely mixed with the poor – black or white.[11]

In those early years of the decade, then, each of these three people underwent changes to their attitudes on civil rights, integration and desegregation.

The large issue that loomed on the horizon in education at that time was that of busing for desegregation. Lukas shows both sides of these events by presenting the experiences of Ms. McGoff's daughter Lisa, and Ms. Twymon's daughter Cassandra. Ms. McGoff was extremely nervous about busing's impact on her children, so much so that she had to be taken to the hospital as a result of an anxiety attack.[12] To Alice, "the idea of sending her children to a school halfway across the city when they had a perfectly good school right across the street was utterly ridiculous."[13] After spending a very nervous day, Ms. McGoff ended up participating in a prayer march organized to oppose busing.[14] Ms. Twymon's reaction to this situation is just the opposite: "'I'm afraid this isn't going to be an easy year for either of you,'" she told two of her children, "'You're going to be called a lot of ugly names. You're going to be spat at, maybe pushed around some. But it's not the first time this has happened and it won't be the last. It's something

[10] *Ibid.,* p. 163.
[11] *Ibid.,* p. 173.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 252-253.
[13] *Ibid.,* p. 259.
[14] *Ibid.,* p. 274-275.

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we have to go through – something *you* have to go through – if this city is ever going to get integrated.'"(emphasis in original).[15]

As a reader, I find Lukas' style of shifting point of view from Mr. Diver to Ms. Twymon to Ms. McGoff both effective and ineffective. I find it exceedingly interesting and helpful to have the fuller narrative that comes from these distinct viewpoint. That said, I am having a hard time discerning exactly where Lukas is going with this – the narrative is very interesting, but there is not much in the way of analysis. When he reports Lisa McGoff's reactions to the beating of Theodore Landsmark, he does so from her point of view: "Kicking a guy while he was down was no way to prove one's manhood, Lisa conceded, but Eddie was essentially a good guy who was going to get strung up for one stupid act . . . . she felt bad for him."[16] He does not, however, provide anything in the way of analysis, nor much context for the event – I hope that the second part of this book will continue to provide the wonderful narrative, but that it will begin to include some of that analysis that could help me to make sense of that narrative.

[15] *Ibid.,* p. 282.
[16] *Ibid.,* p. 325.

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