

# AColyte

September 2019

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things  
at Austin College



# What kind of story is this?

## AColyte

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College

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# WHAT IS THE *AColyte* AND WHY DO I HAVE ONE?

Welcome to the first edition of the *AColyte* for the 2019-20 school year.

This journal is intended to provide a forum for the Austin College community to discuss theological issues and keep up with what's going on in our various Religious Life programs.

We operate with a fairly broad definition of theology around here. As far as we're concerned, anybody who spends time thinking about which things matter more than other things is a theologian.

That probably even includes you.

The use of the term "AColyte" for our title is based on our hope that, like an acolyte who lights candles in a worship service, we can also be "bringers of light," or "bringers of flame," or instruments to help "lighten things up." If nothing else, we can promise to provide ample opportunities to practice the virtues of patience and forgiveness.

Feel free to reply if you have questions or comments or corrections.

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## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Exiled from the Chapel (temporarily)  
Thinking about Diversity  
and a story my Dad told me  
September 2019

*In the dawn before the light  
You live and die by shades of gray.*  
--Robert Earl Keen

*It's been a long time, a long time coming  
But I know a change is gonna come*  
--Sam Cooke

I've been thinking a lot in the past few months about a story my Dad told me last January.

He and my son and I went driving through West Texas on January 19 and it seemed like every little town we drove through reminded him of a story.

Dad worked 35 years for the electric company that became TXU. So Joseph (my son) and I heard lots of electric company stories as we drove from Ft. Worth to Abilene to Graham and back to Ft. Worth. They reminded me of growing up in Ft. Worth and Odessa and hearing a lot about the business of generating and transmitting electricity.



That's why Reddy Kilowatt is pictured above.

Throughout the mid-twentieth century Reddy Kilowatt served as a sort of mascot for electric companies like the one Dad worked for. He feels like a childhood friend to me.

My Dad was educated as an electrical engineer, but much of the work he did-- particularly in the latter part of his career -- was in the area of personnel and human resources.

In 1969, our family moved from Odessa back to Ft. Worth and, in early 1970, Dad was given the job of implementing the Affirmative Action program for Texas Electric Service Company (TESCO).

According to a helpful summary on Wikipedia:

**Affirmative action in the United States** is a set of laws, policies, guidelines and administrative practices "intended to end and correct the effects of a specific form of discrimination" that include government-mandated, government-sanctioned and voluntary private programs. The programs tend to focus on access to education and employment, granting special consideration to historically excluded groups, specifically racial minorities or women. The impetus toward affirmative action is redressing the disadvantages associated with past and present discrimination.

In the context of TESCO in 1970, Affirmative Action meant that the company set out to make intentional and ongoing efforts to hire African-Americans, Hispanics, and women -- something that they, and many other US companies, had not previously done.

And it was my Dad's job to go from town to town and office to office and encourage, require, urge, instruct, cajole, and mandate that TESCO offices recruit, hire, and train employees from groups that had previously been overlooked or under-represented.

There was more than a little resistance in many of those offices.

There were arguments and rationalizations about why, while the goals of Affirmative Action in general might have been okay, there were particular reasons why "it just won't work in *our* town or *our* business."

But my Dad – with the complete support and backing of the Board and executive leadership of the company – kept at it.

Nobody had any illusions that racism or sexism would somehow be completely eliminated from TESCO or the cities and towns that they served.

But, little by little, some African-Americans, Hispanics, and women who might never have been considered before were hired by TESCO and many had successful careers.

...

I knew that story.

I've always been proud of my Father's role in implementing the Affirmative Action program for TESCO.

He's one of thousands of Americans in the 1960s and 1970s who took steps to change our society in real ways and help us live together in a more fair, more just, more honorable, more equitable way than we used to live.

But, last January, as we drove through one of the towns served by TESCO, Dad told me another story.

His work regarding Affirmative Action at TESCO began in 1970 and lasted a few years.

He went on to other jobs and duties within TESCO and eventually became their Personnel Director.

He was eventually made a Senior Vice President—a position from which he retired in 1998. I'm not sure that part is relevant to this story but my Mom thinks it's important to mention.

Dad received a phone call one day in 1982 from a local manager in one of the small west Texas towns he had visited in the early '70s.

The manager said, "Paul – are we still trying to hire them n...?"

And then the manager used the "N" word;  
a word that I have never heard my father use;  
a word that I will never use and would prefer never to hear.

But that's the word he used in his phone call to my Dad.

*"Paul – are we still trying to hire them n...?"*

Dad said, "We're still working to recruit and hire African-Americans."

The manager said, "I thought so. We've got a boy here who just graduated from the high school..."

by the way, his use of the term "boy"  
was problematic as well.

He said, "We've got a boy here who just graduated from the high school. He's from a good family and I think he'd make a good lineman for us."

In this context,  
"lineman" refers to electric company employees  
who work to maintain and repair transmission lines.

Dad told the manager that he thought that sounded like an excellent idea.

That TESCO manager hired the young man.

He served for years on line crews.

TESCO helped him earn a degree from UT Arlington.

He eventually got a management position and had a long career with the company.

That's a good story.

It has a happy ending.

...

But what about that manager with the racist vocabulary?

It's true that he used a terrible word in that phone call.

But it's also true that he *made* that phone call.

Apparently he had been paying attention to Dad's Affirmative Action speeches and memos and conversations all those years before.

And he had paid enough attention to things in his small West Texas town that he recognized an opportunity to use his position to offer a job to a young man whom he might not have previously considered.

*That's* the story I've been thinking about for the last few months.

It's complicated.

**Is it a racist story?**

I think it clearly is.

Racism (along with sexism) is the reason Affirmative Action was necessary in the first place.

Racism is evident in the vocabulary employed by that West Texas manager.

And you and I both know that racism has not been eliminated from our society.

Racism is the context that gives this story its unique meaning.

This is definitely a racist story.

But is that all it is?

**Is it an American story?**

Of course it is.

Neither racism nor the desire to combat and overcome racism and other forms of discrimination are unique to the U.S.A.

But the particular details of this story;

- the legacy of racism,
- the racist language employed by the local manager in the conversation,

- the fact that African-Americans had not previously been considered for many of the jobs at TESCO

are all evidence that this is an American story.

But the role of Affirmative Action also makes this an American story.

The concerted effort by many Americans to figure out ways to live together in a way that is more closely aligned with the values we say we have – and the desire to treat each other more fairly and more equitably than we used to – also make this an American story.

Part of why this story is a story at all is because many Americans in many places and from many backgrounds decided that there was a better way for us to live together than the racist and sexist culture they inherited.

It's an American story.

**Is it a political story?**

TESCO leaders did not simply wake up one morning and decide to change their hiring practices.

Affirmative Action was the result of years of conversation, debate, protest, civil disobedience, reflection, anguish, and conflict about whether or not African-Americans and other marginalized groups could and should be treated as full and equal participants in American society.

Of course many of those issues still exist – in his country and throughout the world. That's part of the whole truth.

But the whole truth also includes the fact that--after years of conflict, debate, violence and activism – the Civil Rights Act became law in 1964. That law ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on ethnicity, religion, gender, or national origin.

And it's a straight line from that Act and the political drama that led to it to the fact that, eighteen years later, one African-American man, in one small Texas town, was considered – and hired – for a job that would not have previously been available to him.

This is a political story.

## Is this a corporate story?

In a lot of the circles I run in “corporate” is a dirty word.

It’s often treated as the opposite of “ethical,” “responsible,” “generous,” or “kind.”

And that makes some sense.

There is ample public evidence that many corporations make decisions that seem to be much more concerned with maximizing profit for shareholders than with caring for individual employees or the society as a whole.

Off the top of my head, I can think of ways in recent years that corporations like Volkswagen, Facebook, and Wells Fargo have done blatantly unethical and illegal things for the sake of maximized profit.

And I frankly think they should have been held accountable to a greater degree than they have been.

But there’s nothing inherently evil about corporations.

The story of the man hired in west Texas depends on decisions made by a corporation to work actively to hire a more diverse workforce than they had before.

A corporation paid my Dad to go help people in regional offices understand why their corporation had decided

- not only to stop discriminating against job applicants based on their race or gender,
- but also to actively seek job applicants from groups that had been previously rejected, ignored, or overlooked.

That lineman in West Texas was a good employee who served his company well.

His company also served him well – helping him a get an education that certainly made him a better employee but also made him a better citizen.

And TESCO was by no means the only corporation to seek to move beyond its own historic discrimination. Lots of people who were leaders in lots of corporations made similar decisions.



There are many corporate heroes.

This is a good corporate story.

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My Dad has been telling me stories for 57 years.

There are some that he tells regularly.

Sometimes he gets started and my Mom or my brother or I can cut him off and go straight to the punch line and save us all a lot of time.

But – every now and then – he comes up with one that I don't remember hearing before.

I guess that means I need to keep listening.

Because I'm liable to get one like the one about the African-American lineman and the racist manager.

I like that story a lot.

As I sit here in my temporary office and think about the 1300+ amazing students who are around here hatching your plans to change the world, I think my Dad's story includes some relevant lessons for you:

- Racism is real (and so is sexism);
- American ideals are as relevant as we make them;
- Politics matters;
- Corporations (including the ones some of you will end up leading) can and should be part of the solution.
- Don't give up on the ones who don't get it right away.

Ultimately, I think my Dad's story is

### A Hopeful Story

because – if nothing else – it proves that things don't have to stay the way they are.

Isaiah 43:18-19 says,

*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

I think that means we're not off the hook.

Let's get busy.

Until next time, I remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Concerned that--the older I get--the more I resemble Reddy Kilowatt,

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain