

Q&A: Jeremy McCarter

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This week, we have asked a variety of people to comment on the Shirley Sherrod episode. Today we hear from Jeremy McCarter, a senior writer at *Newsweek* and the editor of [*Bite the Hand That Feeds You: Essays and Provocations by Henry Fairlie*](#) [1].

The question: What does the Shirley Sherrod episode tell us about race and politics in America in the age of Obama?

Jeremy McCarter: Shirley Sherrod suffered a devastating early trauma: her father was murdered, and the white man who shot him was subsequently exonerated by an all-white jury. Later in life, as a government employee, she had difficulty dealing with some of the white people she was expected to help. But she overcame her animosity. She found within herself the ability to reconcile.

This is an extraordinary story, with more pain and pathos than most novelists could imagine. We should study it not just because it reminds us about the ugliness in our past, but because it affords some modest reason for hope. We're all a little better off for hearing Shirley Sherrod's story.

But hers isn't the story we've been discussing lately. Over the past week, our national conversation (such as it is) has been dominated by a vengeful blogger, a jumpy administration, and the supine media. What should have been a cause for reflection about race and America has become a sorry circus: name-calling, a resignation, ineffective apologies.

President Obama's campaign speech on race seemed to foretell a richer and more honest discussion of the subject. The prospects for such a discussion have grown dimmer since his election — the media has gotten louder, faster, and more reckless, which isn't helpful — but the need for him to make it happen has rarely been so great. If he's serious, it's hard to imagine a better starting point than the story of Shirley Sherrod.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.amazon.com/Bite-Hand-That-Feeds-You/dp/0300123833>