At Big Blue, America's first black software engineer blazed a trail but paid a heavy price

July 31 2019, by Jon Talton

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In the "Hidden Figures" era, when people of color and women are

receiving overdue recognition for their contributions to science and technology, Clyde Ford has a remarkable story to tell.

In 1947 his father, John Stanley Ford, went to work at International Business Machines as the first black software engineer in America. He was personally hired by IBM's towering leader, Thomas Watson Sr.

This was the year when Jackie Robinson was breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball, brought on by Brooklyn Dodgers owner Branch Rickey.

First specializing on the IBM 407, the Ur-machine for the advances that followed, John Stanley Ford, who died in 2000, was literally present at the dawn of the Digital Age. He worked at the company for 37 years.

This and so much more are told in his son's book "Think Black," coming in September from Amistad/HarperCollins. Clyde Ford has lived in Bellingham for 30 years.

Part searching memoir, part meditation on race, society and technology, powerfully and beautifully written, provocative and moving, "Think Black" is essential reading. (The title is inspired by IBM's ubiquitous Think signs that dominated its offices and marketing.)

John Stanley Ford knew that as a "first," he would represent his race and had to be twice as good as his white counterparts. He thought he was well-equipped, especially as a chess player accustomed to thinking several moves ahead.

Music, with its unique coded language, and correspondence chess, armed him.

"My father understood the code, and before he even began working with

computers, he understood the power of any code to create, shape and transform the world," Clyde Ford writes. His father played on IBM championship chess teams and lifted his family into the middle class. He prophetically told his young son, "Computers will control your life one day. Better that you first learn to control them."

But he was also shunned by many white colleagues and hit walls of discrimination within the corporation. Minorities continue to be underrepresented in tech (and the media).

The result was corrosive.

"And where I thought to find a contented man reaping the benefits of good fortune to build a comfortable life," the son writes, "I found a troubled soul battling both inner and outer demons..."

Clyde Ford was also baffled that his dark-skinned father accepted crackpot myths about skin color and racial inferiority, as well as controversial social science used to justify discrimination and bigotry.

Clyde rebelled, after his fashion. Although he followed his father as a software engineer at IBM in the early 1970s, he arrived for his first day of work in wide-lapel suit, red turtleneck and massive Afro, the theme from "Shaft" in his head. (In those days, "edgy" at IBM meant wearing a light-blue dress shirt with suit and tie.)

Yet Clyde Ford found that much had not changed in attitudes toward minorities within the firm—and he would not be a Big Blue lifer.

Even today, IBM's chair and chief executive is a woman, but not one African-American is among the company's senior executives. Two board directors are black, certainly an advance from the 1940s, but neither comes from within IBM. This is a widespread challenge in corporate

America.

Technology can appear to be a great equalizer. In fact it has often been a tool of oppression. The breakthrough of the cotton gin made slavery profitable. Nazi Germany benefited from IBM machines and punch cards before America's entry into World War II (although claims that the company was complicit in the Holocaust are overblown).

Today's tech breakthroughs risk perils, too.

Algorithms may be written by people with unconscious biases. On a search engine, say, this can produce a biased result. "You can't fully separate people from software," Ford told me. Tech companies need to employ diverse workforces and to test software on diverse populations through focus groups.

Corporate decision-makers "need people from many different backgrounds," he said. "This will bring a social context they may not know."

Also, the digital revolution of which John Stanley Ford was a part produced dangers as well as advances, ones that affect all of society.

Clyde Ford recalled a conversation he had with writer Kate Manning (author of "Whitegirl"), whose father also worked at IBM during the same era. That man watched all the people obsessively looking down at their cellphones and said, "Oh, my god, we've released a monster." Ford went on: "My father would have said the same thing. My answer would be exactly the same."

Scholars and scientists have only recently delved deeply into the pathologies of digital addiction, although computer scientist Jaron Lanier has warned of it for years. In addition, technology advances have

brought civic isolation, the distortions and lies that become "truth" on social media, loss of privacy and the 2016 election meddling on Facebook.

"But it's still evolving, so it's up to us and coming generations to tame," Ford said. "If we don't tame it, that monster will consume our society, our democracy...."

Ford worries about today's obsession with STEM education to the exclusion or downgrading of the liberal and fine arts. His father, for all his technological skills, was also a musician, chess player, polymath and voracious reader. He was an officer in World War II.

"If I were to try to be a teacher, I would want to go back to the fifth grade" to catch and mold children early, Ford said. "We need more broad-based thinkers."

Advertising

This was once axiomatic at IBM, which wanted people from broad, eclectic backgrounds who could bring new insights into technology. It's a recipe that was also pioneered by the famed physicist and mathematician John von Neumann. Apple's Steve Jobs was a big proponent of the liberal arts.

"STEM ed is too focused," Ford said. "It blinds people to thinking outside the STEM box."

Ford should know. He's a renaissance man. Although he's an IBM veteran and still runs a small software firm in Bellingham, Ford is also a psychotherapist, expert in mythology and an author, even of mysteries.

This has equipped him to tell a deeply moving story of father and son.

This also has elements of a mystery as the son peels back the layers of this complex relationship. So often Clyde Ford felt nothing he could do would be good enough—"I imagine if he were alive and knowing about this book, he'd want to know if it was going to be on the New York Times bestseller list."

The gulf between them grew during the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the son opposed the Vietnam War. The father was a conservative anti-communist. Wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase, he refused to be seen in public with a son sporting an anti-war button, dressing in jeans and boots or carrying a guitar. An elaborate chess game went on between the two for years.

Clyde Ford writes, "My father developed a unique form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of being the first black systems engineer at IBM, one known to many who are racial, ethnic or gender 'firsts' ... a reaction to feeling 'under a microscope,' 'always on display' or 'representing one's race.' " Ford blames this "hypervigilance" on the racism his father experienced in the company.

The son's sense that his father had sold out produced a rift that took years to heal. It also took years for Clyde to understand the tortuous path that left his father, outwardly so successful, so damaged inside. In this sense, "Think Black" speaks not only to important issues of race in America but to the fraught relationships between many "Greatest Generation" parents and their baby boomer children.

In Ford's words, the book is "about a father and son, not just a black man and his son."