

The Presumption of Race
By Sandra Jones-Keller
(1,130 words)

“Your daughter should really come down and hang out when the teens from the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) are here,” a board member said to me during a meeting at our predominantly white Unitarian church. I’m one of few people of color there.

“Hmm,” I murmured.

“The kids have a blast out here on the patio. They play their music and break into spoken word, dance and poetry,” they continued.

“Oh,” I feigned interest. It’s not that it was a bad idea, I just didn’t think my daughter M would be interested. My 14-year-old is biracial, can recite the lyrics to Broadway musicals like *Dear Evan Hanson* and *Hamilton*, ice skates and doesn’t know a bit of black slang. She stopped watching the TV show *Blackish* because she didn’t understand the cultural references. Just because she’s brown-skinned doesn’t mean she likes the same things as others do that look like her.

“That’s the problem with pushing people to study their ancestry,” my husband blurted out after thinking about the incident. We had just launched our inflatable kayaks on the jungle-like river

that reminds us of an ancient Mayan city in Mexico that we love when I told him about my experience that morning. M was sleeping in so it was just the two of us.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you box people into a story. You’re following a line that takes you to a dead end because it doesn’t take you to being Spirit. It doesn’t lead you to being a direct download of the Divine,” he said.

“Damn! That’s good honey.” I thought about what he said as we paddled up the river. The beauty and essence of the water, mangroves, live oaks and bamboo trees always calmed my mind. I definitely felt like the board member had boxed my daughter into a story without even knowing it and I was riled up about it.

I’ve always told my daughter I want her to be a citizen of the world. I want her to be comfortable and confident wherever she goes and to feel like anything and everything is available for her life. We travel as much as possible, one because we love to, and two we want to expose her to as many types of people and places as possible. One of my proudest moments was watching her keenly navigate the subway system in Paris last year and direct us to several hip spots around the city. Other times I’ve brimmed with joy seeing her climb up the ruins of Tikal, Guatemala and Palenque, Mexico. I certainly didn’t travel like this when I was a kid.

Then I wonder if she's missing out on other things. Her upbringing is so much different from mine, but is one better than the other? I had barbecues and card parties; she travels and goes to cultural events. I grew up around people of all races in Southern California. I had black neighbors and Hispanic neighbors, white friends and black friends. I went to college and lived in Los Angeles for 30 plus years, the melting pot of the region. There were Thai restaurants, Ethiopian eateries, Jewish delis and Soul Food joints all around the city.

Even with all this diversity, I remember going to a family reunion with my uncle, aunt and cousins and feeling completely out of place. I had nothing in common with the people there—in semi-preppy garb and matching attitude I stuck out like a sore thumb amongst my inner-city relatives. My initial excitement about meeting new family members turned into utter disappointment. I had presumed blood and race would bond us—they didn't.

I fault myself for M not knowing any black slang. I speak some slang around my close black girlfriends, like stretching out 'girl' to 'girrrlll' to add emphasis to a point I'm making, but in general I don't. I sometimes wonder if she is growing up without a culture, without any racial identity. Is being mixed-raced an identity? Does it even matter?

"Does it bother you that you don't know any black slang? That you didn't know what 'Yo face is tore up from the floor up' meant?" Referring to a blotchy rash all over her face.

"No, I'm not around a lot of black people and that was the first time you ever said that to me so I'm not really worried about it," she said. It often seems like the things I trip over in my mind my daughter could care less about.

My white husband teases me about being "L.A. black", which to him means a unique style of black person. I don't think speaking Ebonics and knowing slang makes one person blacker than another. Whatever.

When we lived in Atlanta, most of M's friends were black. Now that we're in Southwest Florida, most of them are white. She doesn't care what color they are as long as they're nice: she loves sleepovers and hanging out, friends are friends.

"How do you decide who you want to talk to at camp?" I once asked her.

"I observe people until I find someone who looks interesting," she said.

"Interesting how?"

"I hear them talk about something I like or maybe they have on a shirt from a show I watch.

Something interesting."

When we first moved to Southwest Florida I stated, "I want to find a black female friend."

My daughter asked simply, "What difference does their color make?"

"Well, sometimes I feel like I can be more myself, or there's a shared experience that's unspoken that we can bond over."

"I just look for people that I have something in common with," she said. I felt her perspective was definitely a better place to come from, but I still wanted my black friend.

As we neared the ramp to pull our kayaks from the water, my husband called out, "We are teaching M about her ancestry."

"Say more."

"Well, we're teaching her that she is the image and likeness of God. That's all that really matters. Everything else is story." It was like he heard my internal struggle.

"Yeah, you're right." Once again, paddling on our favorite mystical river had cleared and calmed my mind enough to receive reflective answers. I thought back to a couple of years ago when M said she knew she was part of something bigger. She didn't call it God, but she knew she was connected to everything in the Universe.

What my daughter has already figured out for herself is that shared interests and values, similar backgrounds and philosophies create bonds and friendships that are not defined by the color of her skin. She doesn't presume that she will mesh with someone just because they may look similar to her.



About Sandra Jones-Keller:

Sandra Jones-Keller is an Intuitive Pregnancy Coach/Spiritual Energy Healer and graduate of the University of Southern California. She is a wife, homeschool mom, visionary, conscious entrepreneur and author, with a vast and varied background. Drawing on real-life experiences from the perpetual balance of family, career and quality of life, Sandra is currently the author of three books: *Intuitive Communication With Your Baby's Soul*, *21 Lessons To Empower The New Age Kid* and *How I Beat Fibroid Tumors for a Successful Pregnancy Over 40*. She meets with private clients whenever possible.

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