

# **Mathilde's Awakening . . . And Mine too.**

**by Marie-Claude Provencher**

It started January 2005 when Mathilde was almost 5. I was reading books about Dr. King because his birthday was coming up. One night she said: "I don't want you to read books with people with brown skin!". She then went on to say that they were just too sad. I wondered what she was talking about.

See, Mathilde was born to me. She is white like my husband and I. She also is the middle child in our family. Her older and younger brothers are both African-American adopted boys. I went downstairs and started looking at the books in our home library. She was right! The vast majority of the books portraying African American characters were sad.

As importantly, the vast majority of the books portraying white characters were funny, happy or about every day "normal" life. I later went to our city's main library. Oakland's children's library has labeled some of the books in an effort to make it easier to locate particular kinds of books. For instance, all books with African-American characters have a little yellow label on the spine with the words "African-American". The other categories include African, Asian, Fairytales (I wonder how they categorize an African-American fairy tale).

As importantly, there is no "European" category. Since then, I have made intentional efforts to find books with people of color in every day contemporary life which has not been easy. Mathilde had unveiled one of the white privileges in children's books. Fast forward to last January, Dr. King's life celebration at my children's elementary school.

Mathilde is now in first grade. As we are walking up the hill to our house, she is telling me that it is a very sad time to be in school. I was surprised because she has always enjoyed school.

She said: "Mom, did you know that white people poured ketchup on Black people's head? It is people like me who did this to people like my brothers! I hate the color of my skin. I wish I was Black like them". Somehow Black history month had introduced "white guilt" into my daughter. She then said that she was happier when she was in kindergarten because her best friend, who since then moved to Berkeley, had brown skin. Her new best friend did not have brown skin (she is Asian). She also said that in first grade the kids don't mix up anymore. White boys play with white boys and black boys with black boys only. She also made a list of non-white friends she had. Jumping from racial inequities to "mixing up" has been a constant theme in her young life.

A week later, driving back from a play date (love those moments when we are stuck in the car and we can not escape the conversation...), we had a conversation that went like this: "It's not fair that there are not enough Black people in books" Mathilde said. "You are right. What can you do about it?" I said. "I'm going to write books with Black people in them" she said. "I'll help" her older brother Jules said. "What will the story be about?" I asked. "It will be about a bad white American President" said Mathilde. "And all blacks and whites will team up to get rid of him" said Jules. "How will they do it?" I asked. "They will organize marches, make signs and make t-shirts" said Jules (Keep in mind they had just studied Dr. King's life!).

When we got home, Mathilde went straight to our home library, which I considered pretty diverse. She took a big pile of books and started to sort them in 4 categories: all white, mostly white, mostly Black and all Black. She ended up with the all white pile being the highest. Interestingly, I did not agree with how she sorted some of the books. She was considering books as being white when I would not have. I did not say anything.

Then she said: "I'm so mad about that!" What are you going to do about it?" I asked. "I'm going to write a poem!" she replied. (What a good left wing activist she will become!) Here is her poem with her first grade spelling:

Black-Pepolle-Black-Pepolle  
Black-pepolle, Black-pepolle,  
Respect the Black-pepolle,  
Blak-pepolle Black-pepolle,  
let them in boocks, on signs, in science,  
Black-pepolle, Black-pepolle,  
I love the Black-pepolle!

Two weeks later, she wrote a book. The title was "The white girl who met a black boy". Here it is with its original spelling: "

Once upon a time there was a litle girl named Matilda, she lived in the time of Martin Luther King Jr. time. But she wanted a fraind. Matilda relly wanted a fraind of onother coller of hers. But her mother said: "Those pepell are bad, so keep away!" Matilda was sad after that.

*Note: after reading that page I asked Mathilde why would Matilda want a friend of a different skin color than hers. Mathilde answered, very matter-of-fact: "She had enough white friends." I asked her why was Matilda not satisfied with her white friends and was searching for friends of color and she answered: "Because it's the right thing to do."*

One night, Matilda snuck out of her house with a flashlight, to finde a fraind a difrent colered skin. It was darck and scary but Matilda cept on going. Matilda fuonda a black boy looking for a fraind. They met ech other and played and played until htey wher tiyird. They introduced them selvs and the boy's name was Julise [her older brother,s name is Jules]. e was a very bright boy but, his life was exactly like Matilda's life. His family was like Matilda's family. When Matilda's mother saw them playing together she seperated them. Matilda explande what hapind. Her mother was sorry and said sorry.

Another episode of Mathilde's trying to make sense of being white happened during last year's April break. We went to New York, where we lived pre-children, to visit our friends. One of our friends, Jean, has bought a house in a Black neighborhood in Brooklyn (Bedford Stuyvesant). Jean is a white man. When we went to his house, Mathilde noticed that we were the only whites in the subway station and everywhere else. She said: "This is not right. There needs to be more white people here."

So she wrote this entry in the journal we had bought her for this trip:

"What I will be when I grow up. When I grow up, I will be president Mathilde. I will try my best to change the world and mix people of difrent colers. I will talk to a big crowd with black people and white people all mixed up. I will say "you will have a better world if you mix up in the world with not a lete of people with your coler of skin". I would have to work very hard, but that is my dream so I work hard to make my dream come true. This is my dream that I wish to come true. She was completely obsessed with this idea of mixing up and wanted to talk about how not right it was for either black or white to be self-segregated. She said that she had a lot a work to do.

The next day she wrote:

Presidend.

When I am Presidend, I will ask people to mix up more with people not: your coler, your type (I asked her what this meant and she said it meant religion), your langige, and your aptite. And also, you could go to a country with a difrant language of yours. Like that, you lern anather language. Being presidend is imporent and you need to be.... successful to be presidend. But just follow your Presidend dream and youl become president of the U.S. and led people to a good wold and to good health. This is why I want to be presidend.

Mathilde is now in Second Grade. I have noticed that none of her close friends are white. I suspect it is because she believes it is important to mix up so she does. I have also noticed that she only checks books with people of color on the cover from the school library. Yesterday I asked her that I had noticed that and if she could tell me more about it. She said that it was because they were interesting and that there were not enough books with people of color on the cover so it was important to check them out.

What changes did these white racial expressions make to our family life? Well, before I was focusing almost exclusively on my sons because of adoption, race, racism, etc. Now I know my daughter's life is also affected. Being raised with Black boys makes whiteness and privileges very clear to her. She helps me learn about my own privileges and conditioning. I can't wait to see what will come out of Black History month 2008... In the meantime, I'll get ready to coordinate her Presidential Campaign of 2035!