

Teaching Culture Understanding the Complexities

by Lisa Mare Rollins

A bit ago, I spoke with an adoptive parent who was very concerned about his ability to "teach" black culture to his newly adopted son. He was very vocal in stating that he would not feel comfortable taking his child to black churches, attending events in the black community or doing things that he knew nothing about. Despite my irritation that he seemed to be more concerned about his own discomfort than that of his child's overall ability to be comfortable in life - I've been pondering this question deeply.

Its not my culture, so how can I teach it? My culture will be his culture. Ahhhh the idealistic dream of colorblindness.

Many of us adult adoptees know - oh yeah, we know white American cultures. We even know distinct white ethnic cultures: Italian, Swedish, German, Russian - because we were raised in isolation from any other cultural frameworks. And yeah, sometimes its fun giggling out and scream singing show tunes, remembering barn or square dancing, shoveling manure. (Yes, I still do this with my mom!) many of us enjoy scarfing down strudel or sauerkraut. Yet, do I feel like I "belong" to white culture?

Lets return to the question: Are you able to teach "culture," even if it is not "yours?" First, I think we have to change teach to participate and develop an understanding of and second, we have to understand the distinctions between race and culture, where they separate and where they overlap.

One of the things that many transracial adoptee's vocalize is that we are clear that most white adoptive parent's do not have the tools to teach us, whether it be experience or basic knowledge, about what it means to be a person of color in a white world. So if white folks do not have people of color in their lives when they are considering adopting a black or brown child, how will

they be able to navigate the sometimes extraordinary racism their child will encounter?

What about first, admitting that there may be things that you aren't able to teach your child? The saying "its a black thing, you wouldn't understand," used to piss me off. Yet, there is some truth in this flippant phrase and the truth is - unless you have some experience being a body that is interpreted in the world as a "raced other" (Asian, Chicano, Latin, Black or in global terms - "black") it is going to be extraordinarily difficult for you to ever fully "understand" what your child is going through. And should that even be your goal?

Consider thinking about how race functions - "whiteness" isn't just a word. It has meaning. The "white" in "whiteness" is similar to the "black" in "blackness." There are particular characteristics that get applied to white folks that don't apply to white folks globally - right (except for the privilege part and even whiteness as a concept here trumps class) ? I'm not privileging experience over education here, I may be suggesting a few things, one of them - without a multiracial and multicultural immediate community - how can you call yourself concerned with the best interests of your child? Having a child growing up in isolation, no matter how much love and understanding is supposedly there, is simply wrong. Are you prepared, do you have a plan for when your child comes home devastated, or confused, or angry, or afraid because of something someone has done or said to them?

Do you tell them to "just ignore those ignorant people?" Do you tell them to "not be so sensitive" or that they "may have been imagining the experience?"

Yes, it would have helped many of us to have a parent schooled in racial politics, who understood how race functions to position black or brown bodies directly against white bodies, or how racialized ideas of

blackness make white people afraid of my friends when I brought them to church. It would have helped to have a parent who read African American literature and who attempted to understand life outside their own cultural framework.

But I fear danger lurks here as well. I watch with interest the communities forming in the past few years for adoptive parents of Chinese girls for example. I watch the ways the new, educated, liberal white parents have taken to heart the importance of assisting your child in making connections to the culture of his or her birth. I watch a these parents sign up their children for Chinese school, language courses, make visits to China, participate in dance lessons and learn Chinese cooking. But where is the line between a voyeuristic, appropriation of cultural practices and a well read, well informed, political participation and commitment to the goals of a Chinese American politic?

And more importantly – how are we learning how to separate the ideologues and lived realities of ‘race’ from the concept and lived realities of ‘culture’? What I mean is – participation in cultural events is one thing, dressing up is all good, but where is the political commitment and concrete understanding of how these cultural practices came out of a particular historical context? And what is happening RIGHT NOW in African American communities that will have a major impact on my son or daughter? What are the distinctions between Chinese and Chinese American cultures? African and African American cultures? And why are these distinctions here? And of course, where does my child find a comfortable space?

I not only needed my father to do some reading, I needed mentors, someone to explain to me why teachers treated me horribly based on my race. I was a black girl surrounded by all white people. I needed someone to assist me to develop coping mechanisms

when little white boys told me no one liked me or would ever date me because they were afraid of getting black on their hands. It was too painful for me to share these things with my mother - how could she understand when she thought everyone was equal? I needed help when someone called me ‘black’ and made it sound like the most horrible thing to be or when someone told me ‘they don’t see me as black’, when girls teased me about my hair. I needed someone who would not be shocked but rather, be experienced in knowing how to struggle with what it all meant, and how to develop a way to resist and respond.

Removing your child from “those people,” distancing your child from “that culture” that you “don’t understand” does not help them grow to be comfortable with themselves. And the converse – overwhelming your child with “authentic” cultural events, practices without a historical and political context, does just as much damage when we are talking about making concrete connections to communities of color. What does it matter if you have your child around other children of color, but all the parents are white? We all need to understand the diversity, beauty and complexity of how race and culture not only function together, but diverge.

If you are uncomfortable with this task, your child will sense that discomfort and internalize it. You better get comfortable, or at least be willing to struggle with that discomfort, because the consequences your children are our at the heart of their ability to develop a healthy, confident self-identity.

Lisa Marie Rollins is the founding President of AFAAD (Adopted and Fostered Adults of the African Diaspora)