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A Daughter-in-Law's Tale: One Perspective on Race, Class and Educating my Children

My ex-husband was the first in his family to get a college degree; his father had only a sixth grade education. His childhood was scarred by domestic violence, alcoholism, and divorce; his sister, who spent some time "on the street," doesn't know the identity of her son's father. My second husband and his siblings, on the other hand, were raised in a healthy, stable environment with the expectation that they would become college-educated professionals like their parents (a judge and a schoolteacher). Which of these men would you guess is black?

It is the second, but I can understand why you might not think so. Michael's background doesn't fit the insidious racist assumptions about African Americans that are so pervasive in our culture. Playing word association in America, the phrase "black male" is still more likely to be linked with "doing time" than "Mr. Right." Yet the truth is, that despite huge obstacles, a growing number of African Americans have achieved that great American dream: the solidly middle class life. Through my relationships with Michael's family and friends, I've had the opportunity to participate in and reflect upon the oftenoverlooked world of the black middle class. Now, as a white adoptive mother of a multiracial child, these experiences are shaping my approach to parenting a child of color.

I'll never forget my first visit to Michael's family in Los Angeles. After the extended-family Christmas extravaganza, a small group gathered to celebrate Kwanzaa. As we discussed the concept of self-determination, Michael's mother turned to me and said, "What was it that Nietzsche said?' At that moment, I had to confess I had no idea what Nietzsche said. Now granted, she might have been showing off a little for her son's new girlfriend (in the years since, we have had no further discussions of European philosophy), but her point was made. I was not to make assumptions about her cultural knowledge based on the color of her skin.

If you are black, much of what I am about to describe may seem obvious, but if you are not, it may be less so. Since being welcomed into the bosom of Michael's family, I have seen the important role racial pride plays in their lives. The achievements of African Americans are routinely noted and celebrated, paintings, sculptures, and photographs of African Americans grace the walls, along with shelves of books and music by black authors and musicians--all practices recommended to white parents adopting black children. But the family's interests are not limited to the cultural products of the African diaspora. Michael and I are as likely to be called to "come see this" when the Nutcracker ballet appears on the television as when a gospel concert is shown. Copies of The Fire Next Time and Black Etiquette sit next to a Spanish-English dictionary and a set of World Books. My points of reference in LA are now such African American strongholds as Baldwin Hills, Leimert Park, and the First AME Church. But I have also spent many hours with my sisters-in-laws trawling the shops of Beverly Hills, and our excursions have taken us from the African-American Museum to the Getty Center.

Now that I am a mother, I think a lot about my mother-in-law and how she raised her children (now an attorney, a scientist, and a historian). Both consciously and unconsciously, she passed down to them family and cultural traditions that ranged from codes of conduct to figures of speech, religious observances to recipes. At the same time, she was determined that they be exposed to and feel comfortable with a broad range of influences and experiences. I hope my own child will grow up with this same mix of pride in heritage and unlimited cultural and intellectual curiosity.

Because my mother-in-law and her late husband had ambitious dreams for their children, they were passionately concerned about their education. Michael attended his local elementary school, but as middle school approached it was decided that a better education lay outside the neighborhood. By high

school Michael was traveling to a school forty-five minutes away, where he was one of the few black students. He has described high school as something he "just had to pass through" in order to get to college. It sounds like it was a lonely time. But pass through it he did, moving on to one of the top universities in the country.

I thought about this history when I attended a workshop on schools and transracial adoption. The workshop leader made the point that it is essential to consider whether your child will see many other children (or teachers) who look like him or her at his or her school. I agree that this is an important priority. When I talk about schools with families of color, the issue of diversity is always on the agenda. But so is educational quality. One African-American acquaintance described her dismay at visiting her local public school and finding the students acting out the emotion "angry" to the lyrics of a violent rap song. This, she concluded, was not the place for her son. She and her husband ended up placing their son in a private school with a diverse student body.

My point, in part, is that when I make a similar decision about my child's education someday, I will be emulating African American role models in my family and community. There is nothing "authentically black" about attending a failing public school, or living in a crime-ridden neighborhood. These are the outcomes of economic disadvantage, not ethnic identity. Like all parents the parents of color who I know want the best for their children—good educations, safe environments, healthy pastimes—and they are pursuing these goals to the extent that their financial circumstances allow.

My family is currently living in what is politely called a "transitional" neighborhood. I am happy that my daughter gets to see people of color on her street every day, but less thrilled about the shootings that have been taking place just a few blocks away. We moved here because it was what we could afford, but we wouldn't mind moving to an area with a lower crime rate. When Michael's parents "moved up" many years ago, they found a neighborhood that was almost

exclusively occupied by middle to upper middle class African Americans. There is not such a readily identifiable enclave in our area. The middle class African Americans I meet are scattered throughout the region. They have gone where they can find acceptable houses, schools, and services, and rely on networks of family, friends, and colleagues, not just neighbors, to provide community. I imagine our family is on the same path.

My daughter, through her father, his family, and friends, is regularly exposed to people of color who are inspiring role models. (but not through you and your network? Im sure you have women or men of color friends?) I am glad she has a world full of aunts, cousins, and honorary "aunties" who will help her learn how to be a brown (?) mixed race? Mixed race Black and brown?) woman in America. I am glad they share many of my core values. Education is equally important to me and my in-laws; on the other hand, religion is not. We don't see eye-to-eye on everything, but we have found enough common ground to build loving and respectful relationships with one another. I hope other white parents raising children of color can find similar situations, even if they don't have my advantage of "marrying in" to a diverse and like-minded community.

It is not my intent to provide a way for white parents to rationalize away the obvious problems with living with their black (or white, for that matter!) children in all-white neighborhoods or sending them to predominantly white schools. I am saying that the parents of color I know hold their children to extremely high standards, expect their children's friends to be equally upstanding, and are doing everything in their power to ensure that their children are well-rounded, well-educated, healthy, and safe. I would be letting my child down if I did any less.

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