



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Different IS Normal

by JilChristina Vest

I have come to realize that there is actually nothing more ordinary in this world than being different. Every person is distinct, every religion, language, family, they all vary. Every human, every moment, every breath...different. Yet, at the end of the day, the majority of us have come to believe that the word different is a synonym for wrong and an antonym for normal.

When in fact it would more accurate, in my mixed blood opinion, to say that different is actually a synonym for normal.

I grew up in Chicago and Battle Creek, Michigan. It's about a four-hour drive between the two, the 1-94 hugging Lake Michigan on the left, passing through the foul smells of Gary, Indiana on the right. We took this trip regularly and it could easily take half the day, unless my grandfather was driving. If my grandfather was behind the wheel, you could blink your eyes and be across state line. Which might help you understand why we always wanted him behind the wheel whenever we made the drive from our house in Chicago to my grandparents' house in Battle Creek. There we would be, my two sisters and me, upside-down in the back seat of his orange Coup de Ville Cadillac, zooming at high speeds up and down the Interstate. No seat belts, no car seats, or air bags, so yes, we were indeed upside-down, feet pointed towards the roof, heads dangling where our feet should be, engaged in very serious conversations with Ground Control. Checking the weather, fuel levels and getting clearance for take-off. See, our grandfather would drive so fast that as he accelerated, it was as if we were being launched into space...4, 3, 2, 1! We would orbit the planet in those three hours, eventually touching down on Irving Park Drive, a beautiful, circular street in the Black middle class section of Battle Creek, replete with manicured lawns and shiny Cadillacs. When we arrived at my grandparents' house, and disembarked from our rocket ship, their friends and neighbors would come out to greet us, pinch our cheeks, tussle our hair and gasp in disbelief at how much we had grown since they saw us last, even if only two weeks had passed. I remember loving that feeling, the feeling of being recognized and being missed, being known. It is one of the fondest memories of my childhood. The people that lived up and down the block from my grandparents' house, they weren't my relatives, but they were, without a doubt, my family.

I never really knew my white grandparents and I most certainly never met their neighbors. I could say it was because they didn't live near Chicago or Battle Creek, but the real reason I didn't know them is because they didn't want to know me. Rumor has it that when my mother married my father, her parents moved as far west as possible "without crossing water." I'm pretty sure it's true because for as long as I can remember my mother's side of the family lived in California...a faraway place that in my child's mind was filled with white people, beaches and bikinis.

I remember the first time I met my mother's mother. I was maybe four or five years old and me, my sisters and mother were knocking on a door. We were in California, and it was very late at night. Because apparently we never would have been invited, my mother decided to surprise her parents. And yes, sir! They were surprised!

I remember standing there, on that California stoop, looking up at the woman who responded to our knock, a woman who I quickly realized had no intention of inviting us into her home. And to me, gave no real indication of even knowing who we were. It didn't make any sense. Because, to me, even if she had never met me before, does a grandmother need to know her granddaughter before she loves her? How could my grandma not want me in her house? How could this woman not like me? It was so confusing. Because at four or five, my only understanding of grandparents came from the couple that lived in Battle Creek, drove fast on the expressway, fed us ice cream and peanut brittle after lunch and washed our feet before we got into bed each night. So, even though I had been told that this trip was to visit our grandparents, I wasn't exactly sure what was going on or who this woman was.

I stared unblinking at Eleanor Davis, a petite woman barely half the size of my mother. Her hair was shoulder length and stark-whiter than white, like she'd been scared half to death earlier that week or something. Her voice was raspy, her gestures sharp and her tone was mean and unwelcoming. As I looked up at her I was sure she was a ghost. I thought, Where has our mother brought us? And, oh dear, when do we get to leave?

I can see my face now, standing at that door. I know it had a look of sadness and disbelief on it. And although I didn't truly understand her dislike for me until much later in life, that look on my four-year-old face, that feeling in my four-year-old body, of not being good enough for my grandmother's love, stayed with me, some, to this day.

I have no idea how long we were on that stoop or what was said, but somehow, after much discussion about how we had come all this way... and that it was Christmas... the woman eventually let us in her house. But not before making it perfectly clear that we could not stay the night. I remember my grandfather coming out of the kitchen. As he towered over all of us, a menacing six foot five, his welcome was a wordless echo of the lady who met us at the door. That night and any other time that I saw my mother's father, he just stared at us, disapprovingly, and in silence. He terrified me. And as I grew older, each time I saw him, the discomfort he felt at being in my presence was palatable.

Where we slept or how long we stayed once she let us in the house, I don't know. But I am quite certain that we left under the cover of darkness and before any of her neighbors could see. This woman, her husband, my two uncles and aunt, they were my relatives, but I learned very early in life that that wasn't necessarily the same as family.

I'm forty-one now and although so many years have passed, countless other memories continue to flash in my mind's eye. I know now how those very early experiences influenced me and became a big part of the lens through which I see the world and the people in it. The memory of growing up knowing something wasn't quite right with my mother's parents not wanting us in their house, while simultaneously having the memory of feeling unconditional acceptance from my father's parents. The memory of when I realized that my family and I were not "normal" and that no, actually, not everyone's mother is a different color than they are... I was forced to question my identity and my place at a very early age, without ever being given the language to do so effectively.

It wasn't that it was hard growing up being constantly reminded that I was unusual, what was hard was knowing I was, being okay with it myself, but being taught very clearly and sometimes painfully, that being unusual was wrong. Therefore implying that I was somehow wrong. Because there were no words being spoken to help me make sense of what was going on in and around our family, all I had to go on were things like my racist grandparents, the children on the school yard, the pictures in the story books, the looks of disbelief and intrusive questions from strangers on the street.

So eventually I did start to feel odd, out of place. Because it was true, most families were all one color and mine was not. I began to feel more and more strange the more I was spoken of as half this and half that, because wasn't everyone else all one thing or wholly another? How could my identity, the way I saw myself when I looked in mirror, be built on other people's relentless need to define me, box me, "other" me, their irrational pursuit to make sense of my difference? Was my difference, how I identified myself or the box I chose to check... theirs to make sense of?

After traveling the world, getting three degrees and surviving another three decades, I have found my answer. What would our society look like if we taught children that difference is normal? If my mother's mother had been taught that, wouldn't she have scooped me up into her arms instead of putting me out into the night? If my classmates had been taught that, wouldn't they have been more likely to accept me as being enough, instead of throwing rocks at me for not being enough of one thing, or too much of another? If my teachers had

been taught that, wouldn't they have more freely called out Ji/ie, your mommy's here! instead of staring at my mother and saying I'm sorry, you're here to pick you who? Or if I had been taught that as a child, wouldn't I have been able to better negotiate all of those situations? Yes. The answer to all of those questions is: Yes. Yes.

So for the past several years, I have been working hard to make sure that more of us are encouraged to embrace and honor our differences as much as, if not more than, we look for and recognize our similarities. And until most recently, I had this conversation with anyone and everyone, but without a shared experience, it often fell on deaf ears. To ease the discomfort provoked by my story, people would react with a shallow compliment like, Wow, aren't you lucky, you have the best of both worlds. Sometimes they would belittle my experience and worldview by saying I was nothing but another tragic mulatto. Or, my all time favorite ... I don't see what your problem is, Jil. I don't see your color, I just see You. Umm, is that supposed to be a compliment? To disappear such a large part of my identity? To disappear that which you have used to identify me all my life? And exactly how can the color of my skin be invisible? And why would that ever be seen as a good thing?

In my worked with mixed race families, I am able to talk to children and parents about how important it is to have identity language and how important it is for that language to be fluid, not stagnant, for it to be self-motivated not other-generated.

I am confident that if we can teach children that the only box they should ever fit in is the box they create for themselves, a box that they will naturally climb in and out of at will, perhaps changing the label on the outside each and every time, then we will all learn to spend less time identifying others and instead create new and ever-changing language to identify ourselves, to better solidify and validate our place in this world.

I know this because I wanted that language as a child. I needed that language. Just as every child needs a bag full of words to name their identity, a bucket of fluid vocabulary that describes difference, conversations and explanations that they can play with, try on and apply in any number of situations. Because maybe if I had realized sooner that every person is as different as every sunset or sunrise, each one just as beautiful and distinct, maybe that sadness from the first time I met the lady with the stark white hair and the seven-foot man wouldn't still be with me, more than thirty-five years later.

Jilchristina will be joining families at Pact Camp 2008 to work with children to create an Identity Collage. She is the director of FUSION Camp (run under the auspices of IPRIDE (Interracial and Intercultural Pride), a two-week summer day camp open to youth ages 7-12 with a particular focus on children who come from more than one cultural and/or racial community experience.