



pact's

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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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The Making of a Scholar

by Vera Landry

This past Martin Luther King Day, Pat and I took our two boys to San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora. We looked at photographs and charts detailing how the foods of Africa had migrated to cultures across the world. Oliver and Eric played with an interactive exhibit about the African roots of different styles of music. In a small screening room, we watched a short documentary about Howard Thurman, an influential thinker in the Civil Rights movement. The film included the familiar footage (familiar to me, if not yet my sons) of non-violent civil rights demonstrators being beaten back and hosed down by Southern law enforcement. The image most striking to me, and judging from the look on his face, to my older son Oliver, was the footage of a slowly circling picket line of young black men in suits and hats, with placards around their necks that read "I Am a Man."

On the way to school the following Wednesday morning, I reminded Oliver that he had Mad Science after school, an enrichment class I'd chosen for him.

"Why'd you sign me up for that?," Oliver protested, stopping in his tracks. "There are only white kids in that class. I don't want to be the only black kid. I'm not going. Science is for white kids."

"Oliver," I said gently, "Science is for anyone who wants to learn it." I paused, seeing "you can't make me" written all over his face, and tried a different tack. "Remember that movie we saw at the museum? Remember the men in suits and hats walking around with the signs saying 'I Am a Man?' Those men you saw in that movie were marching for themselves and for you. They fought for your place in that science class, and you belong there. Science isn't just for white kids. It's for you too."

He softened. "It better be a good class."

I felt like I'd won a small victory.

Oliver's third-grade class had nineteen kids: the same number, give or take a few, as every other third grade in the Berkeley

Unified School District. The class composition was also about the same: a wide distribution of skills and scholarly motivation, and a pretty even mix of kids of different races. It had eight African American students, five white students, two Asian American kids, two biracial kids of Asian and white heritage, one Chicano child, and one girl who just moved to the United States from Yemen.

I'd already heard from the teachers that Oliver's class was a "difficult" one compared to the other third-grade classes—lots of kids behaving badly, talking out of turn, needing reminders to pay attention, talking back to the teacher, practically begging to be corralled. This particular third-grade cohort had been a "challenging" group ever since they'd entered as kindergarteners, the teachers told me, and each year it had been hard for the school to divide them up in a pattern conducive to creating smoothly running classes. This year's assignments didn't seem to have worked out well, for Oliver's class at least. His teacher, Mr. Simon, welcomed parent volunteers, admitting he needed the help.

On this morning, the class was involved in an activity called "literacy centers." Mr. Simon assigned me the job of working at the writing center, where the students had to write a letter to the drama teacher explaining the meaning of their class play.

I worked first with a group of three kids. The first didn't know how to put a sentence together and didn't seem to care whether she ever learned to. She hung over her neighbor's shoulder, asking her what she was writing. She whined over and over, loudly, "I don't know what we're doing," demanding that the other two tell her what to write. She put her head down on the table and sprawled her arms across it, crowding the boy across from her. When I asked her to sit up, she scowled. "I'm thinking," she said.

The second girl was smart. She immediately understood the task, and in response to my question rattled off a quick, clear summary of what she was supposed to do. She then spent the next twenty minutes having to be coaxed, chided, and

urged to write her ideas down. The third child, a boy, had more difficulty pulling the meaning of the play out of the facts of the story, but when he wasn't succumbing to distractions from the first girl, he tried. He had an acceptable letter written by the end of the session.

The morning's work continued that way, with me working my way through four different groups, each made up of kids with varying attitudes and abilities. There was a girl who did her work calmly and quickly, and within the allotted twenty minutes came up with a good description of the play, though she didn't have much to say about the point it was trying to make. Then there was my son. Oliver stared off into space, sighing and needed to be nudged to write anything. He kept saying, "What else do I have to write? Am I done?" As he returned to his desk, I felt frustrated. I knew he was capable of more.

The largest group, made up of nine kids, included six who were very self-directed and literate, as third-graders go. They worked with almost no guidance. I was grateful for the competence of those six, because the remaining three were a boy who threw balls of paper across the room, a girl who spoke very little English, and another boy who couldn't tell me what happens in the play, let alone its underlying meaning.

None of the eight black kids in the class, nor the sole Latino child, were in the group of students that performed well: not even Oliver, my very intelligent son, a boy whose state test results had ranked him above the ninetieth percentile in reading and math.

What I saw in the classroom numbed the feeling of victory I'd had earlier that morning, the feeling that I could soften, maybe erase, the effects that everyday racism has on my son. I saw that my son's teacher was not there for him as I wanted him to be. He simply couldn't be. He was there for a class of nineteen students of varying abilities, many with needs much bigger than Oliver's. It wouldn't be his job to unearth whatever it was that prevented Oliver from diving eagerly into his writing assignment, to take the time to draw Oliver out, and to help him creating a sparkling piece of work. There was too much else there for him to do.

I kept returning to the striking fact that not one of the star students in that class was black. When I later asked Mr. Simon about the racial composition of the groups, he became a bit flustered. "I grouped them by ability, not race," he said.

But the fact that not one of the black kids—who made up almost half of the class—was in that group did not seem to be a simple coincidence. What was going on?

There is a label for the differences in school performance between black and white kids: "the achievement gap." Ever since standardized testing began in the early part of the twentieth century, black kids have consistently done worse on achievement tests and other markers of school success than white kids. It's a phenomenon that exists nationwide, not just in the Berkeley schools. The gap narrowed after World War II and through the Civil Rights years, but since the late 1980s, it has been widening again.

Over the decades, scores of articles and books have been written in an attempt to understand the causes of the achievement gap. Conservative writer Charles Murray, in

his notorious and discredited 1994 book, *The Bell Curve*, raised the old canard of genetics, claiming black people just don't have the same abilities as whites. John Ogbu, an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, proposed that the legacy of slavery is at fault: blacks, as an "involuntary minority" in this country, adopt an "oppositional identity" to the dominant culture, setting themselves apart from American culture at large by rejecting the things it values, including academic achievement. Professor Ann Ferguson of Smith College points to the effects of institutional racism on the performance of black students—suggesting that the harsher discipline meted out to black boys, and lower expectations of African American students in general, produce lower performance. A *New York Times* article in November 2006 ("What it Takes to Make a Student," by Paul Tough) detailed how other scholars have focused on investigating exactly how socioeconomic status and parents' education skills can affect children's school performance. No one theory, it seems, is universally accepted.

Here in Berkeley—a place known for its progressive stance on just about every issue—the problem is no less pronounced than it is nationwide. Pat and I had initially been pleased that we were in the Berkeley school district: good test scores, a student community that was rich in diversity (family structure, economic status, race and ethnicity), creative teachers, a sensitivity to the social issues that kids bring to school. It sounded like just what we were looking for. But I began to hear disturbing things from other parents of color. The experience in the schools was not the same for black kids as it was for white ones, they said.

Particularly upsetting was a 2001 article in *Salon* by Meredith Maran. It described a tracking system at Berkeley High that crowds kids of color into the "low achievement track." Then I read Ann Ferguson's *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, which details how the racial attitudes of teachers and school administrators shape black boys' perceptions of themselves as students. As the title of the book suggests, many of the boys did not come to see themselves in a positive light. While Ferguson disguised the school she used for her case study in order to generalize it to any American urban school, a friend who is also an education professor told me that Ferguson's research had been done at a Berkeley public school.

But Oliver is only nine. Was it possible that he was caught up in the achievement gap already? Through kindergarten and first and second grade, he had done well. His teachers saw him as one of the bright students in the class. Second grade was the first year of achievement testing, and his scores were high. I had begun to think that he would be able to do just fine in school, despite the statistics. But this year, his first report card was the worst he'd brought home. His second-grade teacher had warned me that third grade was a demarcation point, an age when many kids decided to opt out of school. Nothing so dramatic as dropping out, but a more subtle event—settling on a self-image as someone who just doesn't do well at school. I worried that Oliver was beginning to lean in that direction.

When Oliver was in the first grade, he told me that his friend Sean accused him of "acting white." Oh no, I thought then. Not already. He's too young!

I kept my voice casual as I asked, "Why do you think he said that?"

"Because I was doing what the teacher told me. He said I shouldn't. Why is that acting white?"

I struggled to put the concept of "internalized racism" into words that made sense to a six-year-old. I wanted him to understand, right then, in that moment, that black does not equal bad.

"Sometimes people think that black people just don't know how to behave, that black people don't do the right thing," I started. "I don't agree. I know a lot of black people, a whole lot, who did what they were supposed to do in school. They listened to their teachers; they got good grades. You know them too. There's Coach Chad and his son Donnie, there's Auntie Emily, there's your Uncle Bill—actually all your aunts and uncles—there's Andrew . . ."

I tried to tell him about all the black people in his life, in his world, in history who tried their best and succeeded. I drowned him in the flow of a lecture.

Oliver's two best friends, both black boys, are not put off by his doing well in school. Robert is an athletic kid who also wants to go college. He sees it as a step to the NFL. He plans to get there by honing his athletic skills, not his academic talent. The other boy, Sam, is very bright; he was already reading when he entered kindergarten. Sam's mother tells me that he too struggles with being a smart kid, wants to just be one of the guys, doesn't want to be accused of "acting white."

Oliver, Robert, and Sam are friends in large part because they share a love of sports. Their guiding star is UC Berkeley tailback Marshawn Lynch. On the one hand, this is understandable. How many third-grade boys don't worship a sports star or two? But on the other hand, it's more complicated for black kids. These three boys and their larger group of friends at school take their cue for what it means to be a successful black man from the culture at large. Black men are valued as entertainers: ballplayers, rappers or soul singers, maybe actors. Being a student or a scholar—or even excelling at something other than entertainment—is not something the culture expects of black men.

American culture as a whole is not known for valuing intellectual achievement, of course. We are all obsessed with celebrity. But according to a 2000 study by scholars Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki, called *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, the problem is starker for African Americans. American culture, they propose, offers an extremely limited view of who black people are. The three most prevalent media images of African Americans are the athlete, the entertainer, and the criminal. Given those cultural cues, Oliver, Robert, and Sam are limited to two positive choices.

In fact, Oliver's personality and talents operate to push him toward the stereotype. He is a good athlete, better than almost of all the boys at school. Success at sports comes easily to him; classroom success requires work. And his social nature

makes him want to fit in with his friends. He is not a rugged individualist who relishes swimming upstream. If his friends buy into the prevailing cultural myth about black men being good entertainers and athletes—and mostly, they do (eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds are not generally known for their ability to engage in cultural deconstruction)—he's happy to go along.

The channeling of black boys onto that narrow life path starts very young. When Oliver was a baby, I was shocked at how many times some well-meaning person would look at the infant in my arms and say something like "So, you've got a basketball player there." They'd say it smiling, looking at me for confirmation. The first few times I heard it, I just smiled and took it in the spirit it was offered. An offhand remark, a conversational gambit, the male equivalent of "what a pretty little girl she is!" But as I heard it over and over and over again from complete strangers who knew nothing about my child other than what they saw when they looked at him, it began to make me bristle. The comment started coming far before he could walk, let alone demonstrate any athletic ability. He was not a particularly big baby. As far as I could see, there wasn't any reason that he should be assigned the life goal of "athlete" when he was less than a year old. But as he moved into toddlerhood, I'd heard it so many times that I'd developed a stock response: "No, he's going to be a Supreme Court justice." I don't remember anyone who knew quite what to make of that response.

As Oliver has grown older, I've done what I can to connect him to men whose lives are much richer than the stereotypes. Family men, business owners, teachers. I've been conscious to name what they do, and to point out the black men he knows—his grandfather, an uncle—who are engineers. And I make myself present at school so that I have some chance of understanding what images he is picking up there.

But at the end of this particular morning with the third-grade class, my regular volunteering over the past four years suddenly seemed a very small effort. My presence there in the classroom was a help, but not much. I had little real power over the culture outside of the classroom. Whatever would spur Oliver to excel in school in the face of evidence that "black boys don't" would need to come from him, from some internal motivation or self-confidence that would make it comfortable for him to stand out, apart from his friends. I had a visceral feeling of him moving away from me, out of my sphere of influence, away from my protection. He will be who he will be, have the experiences he will have, approach them with whatever enthusiasm or disdain he chooses, regardless of me. I can be there to witness, to whisper in his ear, to point things out, to cajole, but I can't do much more. He is beginning to define himself as a black student in world that only recently began to see black men as men, let alone as scholars. The process is already in motion.

Vera Landry is the African American adoptive parent of two school-age boys.