First published in Pact's Point of View © 1996 Do not reprint without permission.

Building Racial Identity When Family Members Don't Support A Child's Racial Identity by Gail Steinberg

My grandmother was neither a sweet nor kindly woman, particularly in her later years, though she put on a good act for the world. Underneath her feisty, good-natured facade, Bubbie was proud, fiercely protective of her own, and deeply suspicious of anyone or anything new to her. Seen in the context of her upbringing — as a Jew in a small village in Poland where people were either "Yids or goyim, with us or the enemy," losing her family to the pogroms and later the camps, emigrating to a new world where she had a difficult time finding her way — both her fears and her defenses made sense. Neither of these made her easy to live with, however, nor an ideal candidate for the role of great grandmother to a transracially-adopted family, when, through no choice of her own, we dealt her in.

For example, Bubbie was visiting the day the census-taker came to our house. She opened the door — so he was hers.

"How many people live here?" he began. Poor guy, he had no idea he'd just engaged a lady who would no more give him answers than fly to the moon. I listened from behind the kitchen door, feeding the baby, laughing to myself.

"How many people?... How many people would live in this house, let me think," Bubbie dangled the words on the end of her tongue, such a delicious moment...stretching time out like the tissue-thin strudel dough she'd just been rolling out with her treasured rolling pin, the only object she had left that had been her mother's. "Okay, Mister. I got it," she flirted after suitable time had passed; at least five minutes. "The correct answer is six. I think there is six behind this door. Am I right?So give to me my prize!"

"Ages and genders?" he asked.

Speaking just softly enough that he had to lean toward her to hear, she counted us off one by one on her fingers. "What?... You come here, you don't know this is Gail's house? You don't know my daughter Rose? the mother from Gail?.... No, Rose doesn't live in this house, she lives by her mother-in-law in Brooklyn. Could you imagine? Such a daughter, she couldn't even visit I had a cold.... What? you only care who lives in this house? You don't know yet?.... I already told you, here there's Rose's daughter, and also she has her husband, a very sweet man, you don't need to know his name? and four children they

have, very nice children. Me, you shouldn't count. Don't write from me anything. I'm a visitor. I live far away."

"Oh," said he, tapping his foot. "And is the family Asian, Hispanic, African American, Native American, White, or Other, Madam?"

"White," Bubbie whispered and I stopped laughing.

Listening from my hiding place, it came to me once again the impact of the statement: "You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family."

"Bubbie" I said, when she finally let him go, "We're not all White. You know that. Our kids are Asian, biracial, White, African American.... Why did you tell him wrong?"

She thought about five minutes before answering. The silence made me squirm. "What should be wrong? How they look like on the outside is nothing. You is the Mama. I am the Bubbie. On the inside, they is the same like us. Don't make trouble. White is right."

I sighed deeply.... I had no words to say everything I wanted to say. "No, Bubbie," I finally managed.... "And what could the children think if they'd heard you?"

Bubbie died eight years ago. She loved my children, though she never understood adoption. She would have given each her last breath if they'd needed it, but she never understood how the atrocious racial slurs she made in a seemingly innocent way affected us, never imagined how they would sound to us. Her bewilderment when we complained felt genuine. Let's face it — she never saw the world from anything beyond her original prejudices. Did her ignorance hurt my children as they were growing up? What can parents do when, because of preconceived ideas about family, race, or adoption, extended family members are not able to see a child for who he or she really is? What can parents do when grandparents or great-grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins carry attitudes that are negative and can't help their children to develop the self-esteem they need?

The problem is a double-bind, difficult to approach. As parents, our priority must be our children, not our extended

family members. Only the parent can take care of the child. Every child deserves to be safe from racism in the haven of the family. Bubbie is prejudiced, and Bubbie is a member of the family. Is this an opportunity for the demonstration of unconditional love, teaching our kids that we don't like Bubbie's ways or ideas, but we still love her? Or do we have to separate from Bubbie because ongoing contact between her and our children may be toxic? This is a Catch—22, not readily solved, with lasting messages, no matter what form of resolution it takes.

But there's one approach that will not work for sure. We can't ignore the problem. If contact with extended family involves prejudice or adoptism, children are confronted with attitudes we can't ignore. It's as if we're trying to bake some bread — but somebody takes away the yeast.

What can we do? The larger goal is to support your child and to hold the extended family together, which in a family built by adoption is a more sensitive issue than in a family connected by birth. The last thing our children need to experience is further loss of caring adults from within the family circle. We also have to recognize the truth. We can't change our relatives. We can't limit our life choices, or our children's, based on others' limitations. What we can do is change the ways we respond to people in the family who behave inappropriately in regard to race or adoption. Here are some particularly useful suggestions excerpted from Raising the Rainbow Generation by Drs. Darlene Powell Hopson and Derek S. Hopson.

• Challenge any offensive remarks immediately, not by yelling or starting a family feud, but by gently asking simple questions. "What do you mean by that? Why did you say that? Why do you feel that way?" This approach gives your Bubbie a chance to describe how her views were formed, what influenced her. You can then point out that those views are no longer acceptable in today's society, or say you want to find out the facts, and invite your child to explore the facts with you. Emphasis is not on challenging the relative as a person, but on the fact that your attitudes are different and you would like to discuss the issue again when you've gathered more information. This approach makes clear to your child that you have serious doubts about the family member's attitudes and that you will make the effort to find out the truth.

- Prepare your children in advance for attitudes your relative may express. Let them know what attitudes you think the relative holds and where you think they came from. Explaining why and how they were formed teaches your child an understanding of other points of view, even those don't agree with; by extension, it teaches tolerance. State clearly that you don't agree. Give your child permission to challenge the remarks in an appropriate manner.
- Sit down with your child and talk about differing racial attitudes the first moment you are alone together after the remarks are made. Clearly state your objections. Stress that you still love your relative, but that you believe her attitudes about race are all wrong. Encourage your child to talk to you any time if s/he hears similar remarks elsewhere.
- Don't let Bubbie say it. Interrupt her midstream and say, "I
 won't let things like that be said in my home" She may be
 speaking out of conversational habit, because no one ever
 made clear that such remarks were unacceptable.
- Most importantly: Know that you can do this. This issue is worth the friction it may create with a loved one. The healthy growth of your child is at stake. Maybe such relatives will respect your stand. Maybe they will consider a new idea; maybe they will be unable to do so. Differences can exist between you and loved ones, which over time may be resolved. The bottom line is that in not saying or doing anything, you condone what was said or done. Silence should not be an option in your home.

How did my children feel about their Bubbie? They knew her as a person who held on to a very different vision of the world from theirs, one we did not agree with but that we couldn't change in her, and they loved her even when she said bad things. And sometimes she hurt their feelings, but they saw that she hurt everybody's feelings, not just theirs; that's just the way she was. There was some comfort in that, I like to think. And some comfort in the model that just because she didn't behave right, we wouldn't turn our backs on her — because we are family. That's what family is about, to love each other in spite of the stupid things we may say and do. Family is forever.