## **Thinking About Culture Camp**

## by Julie Randolph

Many transracial adoptive parents – especially those who've adopted internationally -- think about whether or not they should be sending their child to a "culture camp." Culture camps are generally short residential camps for adopted children, and sometimes their families, whose activities are centered around the culture associated with a particular country that the child was adopted from. Their goal is to help familiarize the adopted child and his or her family with the child's ethnic origins, and give the child an experience of being in a place filled with kids "just like them." While these camps do offer an important experience to many children and their families, they sidestep the teaching of an essential lesson – what does it mean to be a person of color in the United States? How do people of color in the US navigate the minefield of race and racism? Transracial adoptive parents who rely solely on a yearly "culture camp" experience to guide their child on issues of race are missing a vital piece in their child's upbringing.

White adoptive parents raising children of color face some complicated issues, rooted in the basic question of "Am I a good enough parent for my child?" That question, after all, has always been at the heart of the discussion about transracial adoption – can white parents truly give children of color what they need? The terms of the debate and the level of hostility involved may have shifted and changed over the decades, but the core of the dilemma remains the same.

There was a time in the history of the discussion about transracial adoption that the phrase "all a child needs is love" held currency. White folks in the world of adoption dealt with the issues of race by aspiring to be color-blind. The worst sin was treating someone badly because of his or her race; the next worse sin was acknowledging that that person had any such thing as a "race" at all. "I don't see black and white. I just see my child" was a standard way white adoptive parents made the argument that race should be irrelevant in parenting. In reality, what these parents were doing was not treating their children as if they had "no color", but treating them as if they were white. White was the norm, these parents did not want to see their children as outside of the norm (i.e., as people of color), so they ignored their child's actual racial identity, and instead simply passed on their own culture.

But the strategy of pretending that the child of color is "no different" than his or her white adoptive parents or than the white

people in his or her home community is steadily falling out of favor. And it is the people who were raised with that strategy who are principally responsible for the change. There are many, many vocal and articulate adults of color who were raised in transracial adoptive families who are now testifying that "color-blindness" simply didn't work for them. In fact, the pretense resulted in their reaching adulthood with a fragmented sense of racial identity, and a feeling of being outsiders within both adoptive and birth cultures (we review the book Outsiders Within, a collections of writings by adult transracial adoptees in this issue). And it left them to deal with racism on their own, with almost no adult guidance.

So, adoptive parents are realizing and adoption professionals are acknowledging that race matters. The current advice is that instead of ignoring race, white parents should teach their adopted children of color about their heritage. This is usually done in terms of "culture," meaning the customs and artifacts that distinguish the child of color's ethnic heritage from his or her parents'. So, "culture camps" or "heritage camps" were created.

These camps expose children to their culture by offering classes in the language, the music and the cooking of the child's country of origin, by selling dolls, traditional clothing, musical instruments and other crafts from the child's culture, and providing them and their families with food from the child's country of origin.

For a transracial adoptive parent who is trying to be as thoughtful and conscious as possible, there are many things to be concerned about: does my child feel comfortable in her own skin? Is she accepted by her peers at school? Have I done enough to help her feel proud of who she is? Does she have friends of color? Where are role models for her? What else should I be doing? Where can I go to find out? Culture or heritage camp seems like an excellent place to start. Parents and their children can spend anywhere from a weekend to a week absorbing information about the child's heritage, talking about adoption, and being with other families that look much like theirs. For many adopted kids, heritage camps are a respite from a life of being the odd one out, both in their families and in their communities.

But, those questions about the child's individual identity or membership in a particular culture are part of only one aspect of parenting a child of color – helping her build a healthy sense of self. The other aspect of parenting a child of color -- how to deal with racism in society - raises even more questions. Is my child being sent for remedial work at school because she's black? How do I figure that out? If it's true, how do I deal with it? How do I let her know that she is being discriminated against without discouraging her? How do I teach her to handle things like this in the future? For white parents who have never really had to confront racism, the questions seem overwhelming. In fact, many white adoptive parents begin their journey into racial awareness from the premise and the hope that racism will not be a part of their child's life. They believe either that it doesn't really exist in our society anymore (at least not as it did in the pre-Civil Rights era) or they believe that their choice of neighborhood, school, friends, will ensure that their child will never face it head on. Recognizing the existence of racism and acknowledging that it affects the child in his or her day-to-day life is an enormous hurdle that every white parent must cross to be the best parent to a child of color. Developing the psychological strength to deal with it, and then becoming practiced in assessing how each incident should be handled is the work of a lifetime.

Culture camps, too often, do not address the question of institutional racism head on. In some instances the culture camps reinforce it. For example, there is a culture camp for children adopted from Latin America. The Latin American continent is huge, and it is home to many diverse cultures. Bringing children born in Guatemala to a camp where they eat Peruvian food and learn Mexican dance, and then telling those children that they are learning about and celebrating "their" culture is simply false. They are perhaps learning that their difference as people of color is something to celebrate, but they are learning precious little about their own background. And the underlying message is that Latinos are all alike. Learn about Peruvian food, and you understand Guatemalan culture. Similar criticisms can be leveled at African heritage camps that are geared to African American children born in the US, children adopted from Ethiopia and children adopted from Haiti. It doesn't do these kids a service to act as if they are all the same, and as if teaching a few facts about ancient African civilizations is passing on a racial identity. It is as if a tourist from China said "I'd like to learn what it is to be a white American" and they were told they could accomplish that by spending a weekend with other white Americans eating meatloaf, mashed potatoes and apple pie and learning Appalachian folk songs.

The difference between the Chinese tourist in that example and the kids at culture camp is that the kids get an enormous benefit from these camps just from being around kids like them and feeling like part of a larger community instead of like outsiders. Culture camp gives them a respite from their daily lives at home, a feeling of being at the center of things instead of at the margins. "Who I am is important. My culture is important. My family is like other families." But the camps give children and parents almost no tools for dealing with the racism in the world in which they live, and no framework for understanding institutional racism nor do they offer a bridge to a home community of American people of color who share the child's experience in the world. It is helpful to an African American child to understand that African cultures are rich, fascinating and worth celebrating. It is also essential for them to understand the full depth and breadth of what African Americans have contributed to our culture, and to

understand the strength with which they've faced centuries of discrimination in the US. It is fun, and empowering for Chinese girls to dress in the beautiful clothing of China and learn the wonders of China's complex cuisine. But they, too, need to understand that the Chinese have been in America for generations, and that the persistent stereotype of "foreign and exotic" has a long tradition in how white Americans see Asian Americans. The kids – and their families – need to learn that racism is not simply a personal slight to be dealt with by the child being "strong in her identity," but an institutional wrong that can and should be addressed by American society as a whole. It is vital to understand how that racism manifests itself today, and to give the child AND her family some tools and strategies for addressing it. Ignoring its existence (as we've learned from the "color-blind" strategy) simply doesn't help.

Because of these considerations our goal at Pact Family Camp is to address race and racism head on. In general, the program at Pact Camp explores three main themes: adoption, race and parenting. We have sidestepped altogether the task of "teaching culture" to transracially adopted kids and their families because in our view, learning about a particular culture means being an active participant in that culture. After all, culture is the way a particular group of people lives, not simply a collection of facts and activities. Rather than pass on to kids information about Africa, we seek to teach their parents how to help their children participate in African American culture every day. Where do you find mentors? How can you ensure your kid finds African American friends? Where can your family find activities that are an entry into the local African American community? And we have explicit discussions about race and racism, with both the parents and the kids. Discussions about race with the parents usually include a discussion of white privilege. How is it that the parents can organize their lives so that they are always in the majority, while their children carry the status of outsider and the burden of always being in the minority? An example of Pact's approach is demonstrated in the story told very proudly by a white mother of an afternoon in the sandbox at a local park. Her daughter was being taunted by the other kids in the sandbox (all of whom were white) about being Asian. The child was able to put out her hand, and very strongly and clearly tell the other kids to "stop". The parents in the audience applauded at the strength displayed by the child in standing up to racist taunts. But later on during the Camp a transracially adopted adult of color reflected on the story and asked ,"Why was that child in that sandbox at all? Why wasn't she at a park where there were enough other kids of color so that being a child of Asian descent didn't make her a target? Why wasn't she in a place where it is normal to see kids of different races playing together?" In other words, why is it the child's job to develop the strength needed to be the sole representative of her race in her life? Shouldn't it be her parents' job to cross racial barriers and to participate in a truly diverse community that accepts and welcomes the child as one of its own? These are the kinds of questions explored at Pact Camp.

For a white parent, raising a child of color in the best way possible means stepping back and looking at the whole picture when asking "What does my child need?" Culture camp may fill in part of what a child needs, but there is much more that can and must be done.