



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

*First published in Pact's Point of View © 1997
Do not distribute commercially without permission.*

Adopted Person Profile: Race and My Family

by Liza Steinberg

It was just last summer that I really came to understand how many things my extended family members and I experience differently from one another. My childhood expectations were the same as any kid's. I wanted my extended family to love me, to be happy to see me at family occasions, and to let me have the cookies when mom and dad wouldn't. As I have grown up, I have developed, as we all do, more realistic expectations of myself and my family.

My mom's side of the family lives in Chicago, my dad's side in New York. I live in California. We see each other one to three times a year. Before I go any further, let me tell you that I was adopted at birth, transracially. All of my extended family is White and I am Black. Last summer, my aunt and I got into a discussion about a particular celebrity's double-murder court trial (you know... what's his name?). So, we were discussing the trial and I brought up the racial issue. Immediately, my aunt asked, "Why would you think race is part of this?" I tried to explain my point of view. I was shocked when I suddenly understood what I had never understood in my entire life: my aunt, who loves me with all of her heart, found it impossible to see that my experience and views of the world differed from hers because we are different races. She seemed to be shocked that I viewed the world as a person of color. She seemed surprised at what I was saying. She seemed not to understand why I was getting so distressed. Most of all, she seemed not to understand why the trial mattered so much to me.

Why did this conversation matter so much to me? It was about two things. The first was about her inability to understand that if an African American person and a Caucasian person are involved, race is a component that matters. The other was her inability to realize that my opinion was shaped by my

experiences as an African American woman.

Since that conversation last summer, I have spent a lot of time thinking about my frustration about it. In my opinion, people of color are always conscious of race. White people may not be. People of color see things from a perspective shaped by their experiences; White people do as well. The important thing to understand here is that the two are always different. In this society, it is not possible for them not to be. This difference is not a bad thing, when all points of view have equal value. A variety of view points enriches our lives by creating diversity. But this difference IS a bad thing when we don't understand that "our" point of view is not the only one. When we're in the majority, it is easier to fool ourselves into believing that our thoughts are universal. When we are in the minority, we are more aware of being different and are bound to be more sensitive about being heard and having our views valued. The gulf between White and Black consciousness was being played out in my own White family. I felt my views were not granted equal value. I know that this inequality was not my aunt's intention, but it is what happened. My aunt thought that we would see things the same because we are family and share a family history. What she couldn't get was the part that was different: my race. She couldn't see me as a member of both my race and my family. It had to be either/or.

As a result, I've learned that if I expect my family to be able to include my racial experiences as part of who I am, I need to help them understand how important this is to me. When they don't recognize the place race holds, it feels like they are excluding the most basic part of me. I need them to be conscious of the ways race affects my life and to understand that if it affects my life, then it affects their lives also, because we are family.