

## Love is the Answer - What is your Question?

There are just some topics that I have, for the most part, refused to talk or write or reflect about. And when I do, it's often to myself or with people that I feel safe enough to be very vulnerable and potentially naive with. Race is one of those topics.

Yesterday, the very real and living "issue" of race revealed itself to me in 4 different instances; enough times to not be ignored any longer.

The first was a very casual and brief exchange about a controversy involving our local Dr. Seuss museum. One of the murals in the museum has a picture of an Asian man wearing traditional Chinese clothing including a head cap, and holding chopsticks. Apparently someone was offended by the way the picture represented Chinese people. And then someone wrote an article about it. I hadn't read it, but a friend brought it up and the group we were in started talking about it. Basically, we all agreed that the mural was only a copy of Dr. Seuss' original art work and representative of the time he lived in. That was, to us, the whole point of the museum. A Latina in the group said that as a minority she felt the same way. "We can't erase history and pretend it didn't happen.

That solves nothing. What we can do is have conversations." Everyone agreed. I brought up the point that it was probably a white person who was offended by the artwork. Everyone agreed that that was probably the case. The consensus was that people are too sensitive when it comes to these types of things and we can't just erase prejudice or past realities, but we can bring them up, ask questions, and have peaceful conversations with a goal of understanding the whole picture and everyone's perspective.

The second was an NEPR headline on the radio about a local high school student who presented a

poem she had written at an assembly. The poem spoke about her experience as a Latina and declared how white people played a part in prejudice and racism. People were offended. Outrage ensued via social media comments and public outcry. The school responded by saying that they should have reviewed the content of the poem before hand. The mayor responded by defending the student's rights to free speech and encouraging people to respect each other's perspectives and experiences. To me: DUH white people have been the main cause of prejudice and minority oppression. Just duh. That is history. That is how it was. It doesn't mean that is how it always IS. Or that every white person is racist and oppressive, but that is how some people take it. Very personally and individually.

The third instance where race was very apparent to me, and so was my discomfort with acknowledging it, was in a simple exchange with a friend from instance number one. I was asking her if she knew one of the moms from the Kung Fu class our children were in. She mentioned a few moms who were not who I was referring to. I realized she may have seen the woman's husband who often brings the kids to class. I tried, in my head, to figure out how to describe him without saying "he's black." But I couldn't. That was his most apparent characteristic. And it was what made him stand out and identifiable. I felt slightly ashamed about not being able to think of anything else, but then annoyed that I felt ashamed about something that JUST WAS. At first I wanted to say "he's African American," but then I thought that wasn't accurate because maybe he wasn't actually African. He could be Jamaican. Or from Trinidad. Or somewhere else. So I just said, "he's black" with a low and timid voice. I knew my friend wouldn't judge me, but it was the wheels spinning in my head, and the fluctuation of emotions I felt that made me acutely aware of the situation. I was over thinking something that was very obvious and physical and visible and objective. He is black. That's it. That's not a remark about his character. Or his personality. Or his being-ness as a human. He is of a darker color than I am, and that she is. And even if she was black, I could have said "he's black". Because he's black.

The fourth situation was more direct and intense and real than any of the others. My husband came home from a trip to the gas station last night and told me, " I almost got into a fight with 4 guys." He was at the gas station, pumping gas into his work van when 4 guys came out of the store and started shouting at him, calling him names, threatening him as they walked to their car. "We should kick your ass." I can't remember if he told me the comments were race related or not, but I asked intuitively, "were they black?" I was trying to get a better, more detailed picture of the scene. I was trying to wrap my brain around it. I was trying to understand why anyone would do that. I couldn't. My husband is a very unassuming man. He's very confident in himself, but not arrogant. He was in his work van, in his work clothes, so he wouldn't have intentionally started anything with anyone, nor would he have if he weren't in his work garb. It made no sense. "What

did you do?" I asked. "Did you just stand there like 'what the hell?'" I asked.

"Yeah, basically." His face revealed nothing about how he was feeling about the situation. He was already in a "the world sucks" kind of mood. All he said was, "The world is fucked up, Jess."

"Were you scared? Be honest."

"No."

"Do you feel like crying? I would be crying right now if that were me," I said, picturing myself curled up in a ball.

"Well yeah, you cry over double rainbows," he joked.

"Okay, double rainbows are NOT the same as this." I said seriously.

As I reflected on this, I couldn't be mad at those 4 guys. They were obviously projecting onto my husband something that they were having a hard time dealing with. Something maybe they have dealt with for a very long time. Maybe their entire lives. And they were fed up to the point of accosting and abusing someone with the same skin color as the people they blame for their own victimization. And it's all sad. I'm sad for them. I'm sad my husband had to go through that.

I'm sad people of color and "minorities" have to deal with this shit all time. And it's not just from white people. They have to deal with it from people with their own skin color, or race, or ethnicity, too.

I am not white. But I have had the privilege of being white. Because I look white. And I live in a white American culture. But this has not been comfortable for me either. I am half Puerto Rican and really the only way you could tell that is by my hair and my maiden name. Most of the time people think I am of Irish or Greek decent. The truth is I feel like neither white nor Puerto Rican. I may feel more comfortable with white people because I look more like them and "act" more like them. I fit in better. But the truth is that I feel much more at home with Puerto Ricans. Because half of my family is Puerto Rican, and they were always the people I felt the closest to. And they loved me. And they accepted me. The only time I felt "other than" was when a cousin (by marriage) said, "you have good taste for a gringa" when I was 12 years old. That was the first time I felt uncomfortable with that part of my being around that side of my family. Even not fully understanding the language didn't make me feel like an outsider because they always tried to translate or teach me. But this particular person has always made me feel a little bit different from her and them because I was half white. I know that now, looking back.

So I understand that my particular and individual experience is my own. I understand that not everyone has the privilege of "choosing" where they will fit in. The privilege is choosing which race one will identify with seems to be the privilege of the light skinned multi-racial individual. And sometimes, she doesn't have to choose. She just gets to be wherever she is, and blend in. At least when it's a co-ed situation, because when you put her in a situation of only women things are different. But that's another discussion for another day.

So, this all makes me feel sad. And confused. And angry. And shameful. And it makes me want to try to understand. But the truth is that I don't. I don't understand why one person could ever feel better than another. Whether it's skin color, gender, age, or whatever. It never did make sense.

Learning about slavery was fascinating to me because it was so foreign to my understanding of the world. I didn't understand how people could do these things to other people. I imagined myself being like Harriet Tubman, or Abraham Lincoln, or some white girl whose father owned slaves who spoke out and tried to stop the insanity. Because to me, it was insanity. And we can't teach this as history, because the sad truth is that it is not history. Slavery and oppression and hate and abuse is still happening all over the world. And I still don't understand it. And maybe other people don't either. But they have experienced it so much to the point that they can't take it anymore. I have only heard about it from others, and experienced micro-levels of it where I could shrug it off as a misunderstanding, or "the other person's issue", but that only gives it space to continue until it "actually affects me." But it does affect me. And it affects you. It affects all of us.

What I want to know now is WHAT DO I DO? I can tell my kids these stories, and tell them why it is wrong, but they already know it is wrong.

"Why do people think black people are bad?"

"Why do people think it is wrong to be black?"

" Why is it better to be white than black?"

It doesn't make any sense to them. Just like it didn't make any sense to me and still doesn't. I could tell them: "Well, the Caucasian "race" rose up in power and were afraid of people who were different from them so they built armies and weapons to protect themselves and basically eliminate anything different from them. And they did this to the point where we are today. And that mindset still exists. And we are doing our best to change that way of thinking and being which is now at this point encoded deeply within our DNA." And that would be part of the truth.

But that shit makes my head hurt because then I want to try to understand why those first "white people" felt they needed to kill and dominate everything around them instead of understand and befriend them. And if they couldn't do that, keep to themselves.

For me, it doesn't have to go that far. Choose love. Choose peace. Choose unity. And maybe that's simplistic. And naive. It probably, most likely, is too simplistic and naive. But that is the **ONLY** thing that makes sense to me. Teach about slavery. Teach about Martin Luther King, Jr. and civil rights and Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks. Teach about the Japanese Internment Camps. Teach about Hitler and the Holocaust. But don't leave it in history. That stuff is still happening. And it's happening in the United States. It's happening in Korea. It's happening in Europe. Teach the present reality of this shit because it's happening **NOW**. It's easier to feel better about slavery and oppression and prejudice and racism when you believe it no longer exists. The ultimate disservice we are doing to ourselves is by teaching that this is history. It's not. It's **THE** story. It's time to realize this and start acting as if **THIS** is our present work - to dismantle oppression and hate and prejudice and disharmony **IN THE PRESENT**, on **ALL** levels.

And yes, it's important to talk about race. But it's easy to talk about race. It's easy because, like my example on trying to figure out how to describe someone who was black as black, it's the most visibly apparent distinction. How people look and the difference in physicality is the first thing we notice, and the most easily identifiable. But it is not the **ONLY** thing. Nor is that the **BEST** characteristic upon which to group a mass of people. To group people based on one characteristic that has little to do with their actual character or the type of person they are, is a huge disservice to **EVERYONE**. So, yes, it is important to talk about race because that is the way we have grouped people for eons. **THAT** can be a history. But that is a choice. Our choice. In the present. And it has to be a choice **EVERYONE** makes **NOW** in order for it be history. Little by little. Small choices every day, multiple times a day to **NOT** judge someone based on the color of their skin, or the slant of their eyes, or the style of clothes they wear. Conscious, internal, very **INTENTIONAL** and individual choices, en mass, then become collective choices. And that is where change occurs.

So what do we do?

We make choices everyday, in every moment, towards peace, love and unity.

Let sadness, and anger, and frustration guide you towards the choice closer to love and peace. Learn to channel your experiences into the world in ways that CREATE the world you want to see, not to perpetuate the world you are angry, sad, frustrated about.

LOVE your children. In every moment, choose to show them how peace exists and how love exists in this world.

Do not suppress your feelings. Do not downgrade or demean or diminish your experiences because they aren't "as bad" as other people's experiences. That only tells your inner self to "shut up and be quiet." "You are unworthy. Not good enough. Your story isn't bad enough, so just deal with it. Eat it. Suck it up." Don't do that. Find someone who can hold space for you to express your wounds, however shallow you think they are, because a wound is a wound, and YOU are your own triage nurse.

LOVE YOURSELF. Seriously. If we all loved ourselves, and allowed each other to love ourselves, where would there be room for hatred? Think about it.

Simplistic? Maybe. Naive? I don't think so. Have we all tried it yet? Or have we written off these "simplistic" ideas because they are too "touchy-feely" and simple and not enough "work"? If you try to do any of those for more than 24 hours, you'd see that it is actually the most challenging and yet fulfilling "work" you can do. And that is because we have been taught the complete opposite for the longest time. So it is a reprogramming. It is a paradigm transformation.

Love is the answer. Simplistic, maybe, but it's the truest truth there has ever been or ever will be.