When I Discovered I Was Black

July 28, 2011 By Aundaray Guess

My early days of being a child were filled with memories of me running in the field barefoot as we chased fireflies with a ready mason jar. Or swinging on the swing as high as you can trying your best to give God a high five. Better yet, standing in the cool waters of the creek ready to capture tadpoles as they swam past you. That was life for me as a kid growing up in the country of Oklahoma. It was such a different life of no worries, no stress, no having to go into work. It was all about being a kid and enjoying all the things the world had to offer you.

I never saw myself as a black kid. In fact I never associated any color to myself. In my mind I was just me, Aundaray. The concept of race had yet to come and make a visit.

If I had to think of anything associated to race or better yet my first experience, it was when I was at a stop sign with a car waiting for me to cross. I started to pass and as I did the car jerked as if to hit me. I looked at the driver and in my innocence thinking he slipped accidentally on the brake. Yet he wore a smile. Was that smiling an acknowledgement of his action? He waved me to continue and as I did it happened again. He jerked the car as if to hit me. His smile was replaced by a laugh as he peeled off.

Even though he was white, I didn't reason his race into his actions. In my child way of thinking I just thought he was just being mean.

I learned I was black when our family moved to Minnesota when I was 10.

This was during the 70's and Minnesota then was 99.1% white and where I came from I saw people who looked like me as opposed to Minnesota where it seemed I was the 'other'

I slowly started to learn of race when I was in grade school at Phalen Lake. I can honestly say I was the only black kid at the time in the whole building. Yet still I thought I was the same as everyone else until one day when we were in the hallway lined up, instead of holding my pencil in my hand I placed it in my afro.

At that time, Michael Jackson had his cartoon show and I wanted to have a big afro like he did. I don't think the kids at Phalen Lake looked at the same show because the minute I stuck the pencil in my afro, panic spread around me. The kids were looking at me terrified, amazed, scared and confused as they thought I was sticking a pencil into my head.

They formed around me and asked me to do it again. Like the man in the car, I did what they suggested and I'll never forget the screams of wonderment and even a scream of fear as this one girl shot down the hall getting as far from me as she could.

Even then I didn't think of race, but I started to learn about difference.

There’s a point when young black kids move from the cute, “I want to pinch your cheek’ phase to the ”I see you as a threat’ point of their life. It’s a subtle shift that is not the same for everyone.

It was clear I made that transition when I started to be called ’nigger’ as a carload of people drove by. Or when I walked down the street and being blinded by the lights of the cops flashlight as it shone directly on me as they slowly drove by. Or when I started to get pulled over numerous times for headlights that seemed to work even though the cops swore it wasn’t a minute ago, or to have people clutched in the corner of the elevator as they rode down with me.

I was no longer living in a colorless world but one of color.

I started to see color. I was indoctrinated into the institution of what we call racism.

Now let’s add HIV onto the plate and there’s even room on the side for gay. Yet these are secondary because I don’t have the luxury of walking out of my door identifying what’s on the side of my plate. When I walk out the door I’m always identified by the color of my skin.

Some people of color may not always protect themselves during sex as they feel no value in what has systematically devalued them.

In this fight to reduce HIV the subject of race has to be included in any treatment whether its seeking help in a person’s treatment of drugs, depression or any other factors that has lead them seeking social services.

People cannot be colorblind.

Now that I know about race my biggest pet peeve is when people say they don’t see color. Now that I’ve been labeled with this color I recognize its history, the culture that comes with it, the pain and struggles that extend from it and the contributions that are often quieted. If I had my choice I would want to live in a colorless society yet my eyes were forced open. Now that I know that I’m black I know that if you don’t see color, you don’t see me.

Maybe that’s the problem.

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