

It Takes A Whole Village

(Notes on Multi-Racial Adoptions)

By: Bobby E. Herman

A black social worker visits a multi-cultural support group composed predominantly of Anglo parents who have adopted African American children and learns a lot about himself.

Recently I had an opportunity to explore some of my own values and feelings regarding white families who adopt minority children. I have generally distrusted and viewed this group of people as irresponsible. As an African American male with a strong cultural identity, I have been particularly opposed to white families adopting African American children.

The opportunity to meet some adoptive families came when I was invited to a multicultural family group meeting by a friend and colleague who had adopted an African American female child years ago. We had previously debated the possible impact that a white upbringing would have on her ability to develop an adequate cultural identity, self-esteem, and effective coping skills in a racist society.

While I knew my friend and his wife possessed unquestionable personal, moral, and social integrity, I believed they represented an exception rather than the rule. Thus, I was certain that most of the people I would encounter at the meeting would be stereotypical, middle-class whites, with a condescending attitude who had thought very little of the children's best interests. For that reason, I agreed to attend the meeting feeling confident that my beliefs would be validated.

I truly believed that I did not practice discriminatory behavior, or adhere to prejudicial principles. My list of personal friends and associates includes members from a wide diversity of groups: gays, lesbians, mentally disabled, nearly all ethnic and racial groups, most religious groups, and even a couple of Republicans. Regarding members of these groups, I could not identify any discomforting or negative feelings. I rated myself very high on the cultural competence scale.

Yet I had strong and adverse feelings toward couples who had adopted black

children. I firmly believed that transracial adoptions limited, if not prevented, a child's ability to develop a healthy self-identity and appropriate social skills, including coping skills in the face of racism and discrimination.

Furthermore, I had accepted the policy position of the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW). Their policy position advocated strong opposition to transracial adoption. In fact, they had characterized the practice as a form of cultural genocide.

The group meeting I had attended took place on October 28, 1995. Before attending the meeting, I was given a brief explanation of the group's goals and functions. This particular group (possibly the only one of its kind in the state of Colorado) had been in existence for six years. It meets on the fourth Saturday of each month. The purpose of the group is to provide support for the individual members as they endeavor to maintain healthy cross-cultural families. At the meetings, members generally share experiences of discrimination and racism. They also discuss a variety of ways to cope with racism and improve their cultural competence. On occasion, members prepare "expectant" parents for the bureaucratic and social difficulties that are often encountered when adopting a child of a different ethnic origin.

Immediately after arriving at the home of the host, it appeared to me that my worst fears would be realized. As my friend and I entered the home, I was introduced to six or seven adults who were engaged in various conversations around the room. Everyone seemed friendly and I was invited to have a seat wherever I could find one. However, no one made a serious effort to engage me in conversation and I knew my presence made them feel uncomfortable. This was not a good sign. If an African American adult made them feel uncomfortable, it was only a matter of degree concerning their feelings about African American children.

As I sat silently, I took the opportunity to assess the participants. There were children everywhere; at least 15. They were mostly black, though various ethnic groups were represented, including European American, ranging in age from five months to 10 years old.

For some unknown reason, nearly all of the adopted children were female; only four of the children were male. Among the 15 or so adults, they were all white, with the exception of one Hispanic male.

Eventually, the host sat in the chair adjacent to mine and we started up a conversation. Since I was interested in learning about the ideologies of the group

and its rationale, I directed the conversation toward these topics.

As we talked it happened: A five- to six-month-old African American child had been sleeping on the floor directly in front of us. The child began to awaken and had started to stir. At the same time, a 10-year old white male child was passing through and he noticed the younger child as she began to awaken. Immediately, the youngster dropped to the floor and began to lavish the baby's body with playful kisses while engaging the baby in baby-talk. It was extremely clear that the older child was not, in the least bit, conscious of the difference in race. Of course, the baby was just as unconcerned about the issue.

Being a bit skeptical, I asked the host about the relationship between the baby and the older child. He informed me that there was no familial relationship between the two and he did not think they had ever met before because the baby had just recently been born and adopted in May.

As I continued to watch this interaction, a very important benefit of living in a multiracial family occurred to me: The children had learned to relate to each other as human-beings. Race was not an operative concept. Now, I began to become very mindful of the nature of the interactions between the children themselves and as they related to the white adults.

Caption: Most of the children and their families were members of ethnically diverse churches and groups. And they lived in areas that exposed the children to others of the same race.

Without exception, there did not seem to be any racial strain or obstruction. Obviously, the exclusion of racial focus in their social conditioning could only be characterized as a valuable asset both individually and to society. Thus, the practice of transracial adoption could not be categorically identified as unhealthy.

On the other hand, even though I was willing to concede the benefits of transracial adoption between the children, I remained cautious about extending this mind-set to the adults. Thus my interview with the host became more pointed.

By this time, several other adults had joined in our conversation and I was provided with a lot of wonderful information from several different families. The host pointed out some of the pictures on the wall, which were mostly Afro-centric. There were also plenty of African American and African artifacts decorating the room. And, a large number of books on the shelf were written by African Americans, addressing the African American experience.

Clearly, the adopted children in this household were not being indoctrinated with middle-class, white values. The others also attempted to provide a culturally relevant environment and experience for their adopted children.

An hour-and-a-half had passed since we arrived and we were told that lunch was ready. Since this month's theme was Indian food (as in India), the meal consisted of a potpourri of Indian entrees. Each month the group focused on a different culture and ethnic meal to enhance their cultural competence, forcing them to learn something about the traditions of a variety of cultures; even if it was only a recipe.

Learning about this group norm, I was greatly impressed. In many ways, it indicated that the members of this particular group were becoming cross-cultural "experts." And since their children were also included in the monthly meetings, they were genuinely privileged to be participating in an ongoing cultural and educational experience in diversity.

Earlier I had been handed a newsletter that was sent out to each member each month. It contained a plethora of information on experiences that could enhance one's cultural competence. One section of the newsletter suggested activities, including a Greek Festival; a Scandinavian Festival; a multicultural concert, featuring Asian, Celtic, Afro-Caribbean, and Mexican music; a Black Arts Festival; an Asian Festival; a Scottish Festival; Oktoberfest; a Fiesta celebrating Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821; and a Renaissance Festival. The newsletter also suggested books to read.

While we were eating lunch, a couple who had adopted an Hispanic child related an experience they had while attending church. One of the mother's friends had questioned her about the wisdom of adopting an Hispanic child and then inquired as to whether she and her husband had been unqualified to get a "better" child! This story triggered a great deal of group discussion and the telling of many similar and even worse stories.

As I listened, I began to feel some shame for myself and many others who shared my views. Many of the instances of racism were perpetuated by African Americans who also objected to transracial adoption. In one scenario, a white mother had taken her daughter to a black hairstylist who told the young black girl that her mother would never be able to take care of the girl's hair.

In nearly every case, the experience of discrimination and racism occurred in the presence of the children. Sometimes the comments and actions were even

directed specifically at the children. In each case, members shared their feelings, frustrations, coping skills, and offered useful feedback.

In this manner, the group's members and children developed and discussed a variety of coping skills for living in a racist society. Again, I had found myself in error. Not only were the children learning adequate coping skills in the face of discrimination and racism, but their skills had to be much more sophisticated because they were being discriminated against by all races, including their own.

If there is any truth to the maxim that strength is gained through adversity, then these families surely must be the strongest amongst us.

Not all of the group discussion involved tales of rejection and oppression. There were also stories of happiness and pride. Most of the children and their families were members of ethnically diverse churches and groups. And they lived in areas that exposed the children to others of the same race and, in the few cases where this was not a possibility, the children were sent to schools with racially diverse student populations. Thus, once again the group members demonstrated commitment and aggressive efforts to insure the healthy development of the children.

I could go on about the impressive actions of this group and its members indefinitely. I was overwhelmed with delight. I realized that my earlier assessment was merely a projection of my negativity.

In conclusion, I must say that I learned a lot about myself. I had thought I was being objective and reasonable concerning my negative attitude toward transracial adoptions, however, now I know that I was being prejudicial and unfair.

I am 44 years old and by no means am I gullible. I have had enough experience with white America to know when I am being conned. What I learned and experienced in that home on October 28, 1995, was authentic and transformative. I learned about diversity in a way I never knew. My life has been enriched from having participated in this experience and I can only hope that those who might continue to share my previous beliefs will someday be permitted to "see the light."

While I do believe that the multicultural group here in Denver is unique and very innovative, I am convinced they have developed a model that transcends the boundaries of all previous discussion on this topic. If this model can be shared and implemented in as many places as possible, the world can only be a better

place because of it. As responsible social workers committed to improving the quality of life for all Americans, as well as Black Americans, I respectfully suggest that we facilitate the efforts of groups like Denver's multicultural family support group. We have knowledge and resources that could be very useful in enhancing their cultural competence and thereby enriching the lives of our children. Remember, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

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