

Race in America
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Let me tell you how things have changed in the last 15 years, which is the exact lifetime of my beloved son.

I stood in the room where he was born, clasping the hand of the woman who gave him life. The difference between this woman and me was that she was poor and had dropped out of high school; and on her own she was raising two children under the age of five. Months before Kevin was born, she had gone to an adoption agency and decided that he would be *my baby*.

So she gave birth to my baby, and in a poignant turning of the wheel I let go of her hand when the doctor handed me newborn Kevin, and the friend who was standing by took Kevin's birthmother by both hands and stood so that her body blocked the sight of *our* son in *my* arms.

I think everyone wept.

When the time came to fill out the birth certificate my son was given his name, chosen by both of us and with advice from Kevin's big sister Jamie: Kevin Jeffrey Brooks.

The nurse asked which box to check for "race."

She had to ask because it wasn't possible to tell by looking. Both his birthmother and I are white. On the day of his birth and for a long time thereafter Kevin was pink. OK, maybe it was more of a *mauve*. His black hair looked painted on, like one of my dear friends who combs his few remaining strands sideways across his bald pate. The hospital issued him a blue knit cap and he scrunched up his eyes and nose. My daughter Jamie, who at the time was nine years old, never lets me forget that I said, "He looks like a Smurf."

The hospital's form did not have a check-off box for "Smurf."

When I sat with Kevin in my arms and fed him for the first time there was a clear moment when love locked its jaws around me and bonded me to him forever. A few hours later I handed him to Jamie and the same thing happened to her. She looked up at me in amazement. "I love him," she said, "I love him." My mother came to Minnesota to be with us and she, too, felt that fierce protective love that human beings are blessed to know for their young.

After the first few days of tears and laughter, Jamie was back in school and my mother and I were lunching in a civilized way: I was introducing her to the concept of a "pannini" in a quiet little restaurant. Seated near us were three ladies of a certain age—white ladies—

who began discussing Kevin without regard to our presence. They were, quite audibly, trying to decide what race he was.

This is the country I live in—a country where race matters.

I used to live in a white country, where there was one way to treat people and it was impolite to use certain terms for people of “other” races, and very important to judge people by their actions and not by the color of their skin or by their religion or by their national origin. These things were clear to me, and I was sure I was a fair, unprejudiced human being.

I’d already had a bit of a wake-up call in the early years of my daughter’s life. A cute little Korean girl, buoyed up by stereotypes about intelligent, non-threatening Asian women, was in many ways the *beneficiary* of racist assumptions. But I’d learned a little nonetheless, because she was also the target of hateful name-calling and exclusion by some little girls and far too many adults.

Knowing a bit about how race matters, and following an earnest discussion in advance with Kevin’s birthmother, she and I had agreed that when the time came to check the box on the birth certificate we would say that Kevin’s race was Black. It would be, we thought, the reality of how people perceived him even if his skin and features appeared predominately white (as they did at his birth).

So we had to *decide* what race he was. Scientists are clear now that race is not a biological fact. It is a “social construct,” what people and society make of certain combinations of skin color, hair type, and facial features. The genetic differences that make Kevin look “African” and Jamie look “Asian” and me look “White European” are so incredibly minor as to be insignificant. They determine nothing, except how people treat us.

Some people talk about God as omniscient, able to see and know everything. As the parent of two children of color, I’ve had a tiny glimpse of what that might be like. Because I’m white, other white people often assume I have no connection with my children—and so I see how other white people treat them when they are out and about and apparently on their own.

If it’s true that God sees everything, then I suppose God weeps with me; because white people in America today don’t treat my brown children very well.

Over the 15 years of my son’s lifetime, I have experienced a paradigm shift about race in America. The change has been in my *own* paradigm of race: what “race” is—socially constructed; yet “race” is nevertheless “real” in its influence on assumptions, relationships, and opportunity. I will not list the offensive and horrifying comments and assumptions to which my children have been subjected as I, anonymous and omniscient, watched from too far a distance to stop events as they happened. Occasionally I *have* been able to intervene, and have seen the (almost as horrifying) complete reversal of attitude as the white person

adjusts to the fact of my connection with my children. Occasionally my intervention has simply turned the white person's offensive conduct in my direction.

The other important way that my life has changed in the last 15 years is my relationships with people of color. Although it has not been universally positive, my experience has been that people of color see me as an ally. At first I noticed the instantaneous and unexpected broad smile as people, particularly people of apparent African heritage, took in the relationship between my children and me. On the whole these encounters were quite different from those of my "omniscient" experiences with white people, because people of color were (and are) quick to perceive our relationship.

Even now, as Kevin with his brown skin and dreadlocks towers above me wearing baggy pants and radiating self-conscious cool (and thankfully he wears a belt that holds those pants up), whites are likely to think that I'm his social worker, while blacks are likely to come up to me and talk about how fast children grow.

And all of this is in *America*. In other countries there are other reactions, but on the whole white people in other countries are more welcoming to my brown children and less surprised by their relationship to me.

It is impossible to think about my own paradigm shift over the last 15 years without also noting the change in American society. A black man is running for president against a white woman and a white man. No longer can the three leading contenders stand together on a debate platform and look alike. Each is distinct, each radiating his or her own racial heritage—and what that heritage says to me about their perceptions of society and their sense of social position.

I recognize that I have, over a decade-and-a-half, traded in one racial paradigm for another. I now can perceive, as I never could before, when white people make unconscious assumptions based on race. I now can perceive the socially conditioned reactions most white people have to people of color. And to some extent, and perhaps with some misplaced pride, I've come to share some of the perceptions black and brown people have about white people.

When my Asian-American daughter was in high school she talked about feeling as if some of the other girls in her school wore signs on their foreheads saying "Mean White Girl." For white people who have not had the experiences that a black or brown person has growing up in America, or who have not had the experience of *parenting* children of color, Jamie's frustration and anger—and her perceptions—may seem open to question. White people who haven't shared her experiences might say, "Oh, it's *not* because of your *race*."

All I can say is that when something happens over and over we all eventually see a pattern of cause and effect. My children, like all people of color in America, and I, like all *parents* of children of color, have been in a position to see repeatedly how white people treat others who are not white.

It breaks my heart.

Let me be clear. My heart breaks no longer for my children, who are wise and strong and growing wiser and stronger every day. My heart breaks for *America*.

My children are bridges between white and dark America, because they have lived in both worlds. They have known “white privilege” as something their mother exercises on their behalf—something they have come to claim as their birthright. And they have experienced oppression as can only be experienced by a person of color in America today. These my children are the citizens of America’s future, who will speak out clearly and with passion and intelligence about the kind of country America could and *should* be.

My heart breaks for America: the America I came to love through my love for the Constitution and its brave predecessor the Declaration of Independence; the America I came to love through Emerson’s essays and Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing.”

When I was my son’s age, and reading those great writers, I also read John Griffin’s *Black Like Me*. For the first time I began asking questions about race in America. I am sad to report that in my insulated white enclave, my reaction to that book and its revelations of black oppression during my lifetime was that *it must be true because it was written by a white man*.

At that time, you see, in my white country, I was *unable*—as too many whites still are—I was *unable* to accept the perceptions of black America as a true reflection of reality. I had not yet read Langston Hughes. Insulated, sheltered, I was unable to believe, or even to take in, that black Americans experience oppression—until I heard from a white person that they do.

My heart breaks for America.

There is not a day that goes by that does not include some racially inflicted bump or bruise for these two children I love. So each day I am reminded, in that omniscience that I did not seek and did not anticipate, that white Americans continue to be largely clueless about their own racial reflexes.

All the same, I am hopeful—more hopeful now than I’ve been since my world tilted on its axis 15 years ago when I overheard three white women casually discussing the indeterminate race of my baby as if it were something of concern to them.

I am hopeful, because for a variety of reasons America has begun a long overdue conversation about race.

Young people of color, like my children, along with their friends of a multiplicity of racial and ethnic backgrounds (including some previously lumped together as “white”), have

entered the discussion of race in America with a sense of entitlement and authority. This new generation of American citizens is de-constructing and re-constructing our society's perception of race.

They are learning in school that all people in the world originated in Africa and are descendants of one tribe of the three original tribes of emerging humanity. There is more genetic diversity within Africa than there is in the rest of the world, because only that one African tribe spread out to inhabit the planet.

My children and their friends are learning in school about the mathematical and scientific discoveries of ancient civilizations of dark-skinned people. They are learning about the oppression of Empires past instead of absorbing the outdated lesson that conquering and "civilizing" the world is the "White Man's Burden." This new generation learns in world history about Gandhi's peaceful protests that freed India from British rule; about Nelson Mandela and the peaceful transition to self-determination and democracy in South Africa.

They are learning about the progress of the idea of democracy, and how the construction of "liberty" in 1776 excluded slaves, women, and native Americans, but now all are full citizens entitled to vote. My children and their friends study the sermons of Martin Luther King and the speeches of Malcolm X. Their literature courses include Langston Hughes and they know that he, too, sings America.

The world has changed slowly, slowly, but it *has* changed; also changing is America's blindness to how much what we call "race" matters in the lives of Americans today.

So I do have hope.

As for my children—my children, bless them, have something better than hope. They have *power*—the power that comes from knowing they have the right to full participation in America. I have hope, but they have the energy and the will to claim their rightful place.

And all of us—we the people—who "sing America": we are the ones who will take the dream of America and make it real.

I hear America singing.