

Personal Story

By Theresa Lenear

If you were to ask me today who I am, my response would be longer than it would have been forty years ago, twenty years ago, ten years ago, five years ago, even two years ago. Included in the response are the different milestones within my life journey, which have helped to define and enhance the way that I see myself and how they relate to my own identity.

Who am I? I am of African descent and of the people native to this land. I am a heterosexual working class woman. I am the mother of six grown adult children (5 sons and 1 daughter) and the grandmother of seven beautiful grandchildren. I am divorced. I am an educator and a life long learner. I am a leader and I am comfortable now in that role and within the same breath, I can follow. I am an introvert but appear to be an extrovert because my success within the dominant culture requires it. I am an optimist and I believe that things come in full circle to begin anew. I am of the human race and simply put, I am.

My birth certificate says that I was born October 20, 1943, during World War II, in Bremerton, Washington to Robert and Beatrice Coleman. It would not be until the summer of 1982 that I would discover I am adopted. The word is that Robert Coleman was my biological father and I was the result of an indiscreet liaison.

My father, Robert Rufus Gabriel Coleman, came from a large family from Louisiana. As soon as he was able, according to his cousins, he left his in the country to pursue a life in the "big" city to find what ever it might bring. My father did not talk much about his experiences except for the fact that he was dishonorably discharged from the military service because he struck his commanding officer. The man had called by father "coon" and "boy" one time too many. My father was a quiet and gentle man with skills in so many different areas, a sort of "Jack of all trades."

My mother, Beatrice Lee (Chisolm) Coleman, was born on a reservation in Lewiston, Idaho and she too came from a very large family. Her family moved to Washington State and according to her, moved often. Subsequently, she lived in several small towns and communities east of the mountains until she and her family moved to

Puget Sound area. For the first five years of my mother's life, French was her first language; her father was from the French colonized Barbados Islands. My mother was an angry woman, coming from two worlds of which neither were acceptable within the dominant (White) society and suffered not only racism but also sexism and classism. During the war effort she, as did many other women, worked at the naval shipyards. I do not know how my parents met, that was never discussed at least in my sister's or my presence.

For both my parents, the prospects of moving to Alaska seemed full of potential, another fresh start – a new beginning. Alaska was a territory. Construction was booming with the building of the Alaskan Highway, the building of the railroad and with the discovery of gold, the likely possibility of striking it rich was a very strong incentive for many. So in 1945, mother and I left the Seattle area by ferry to follow my father to Alaska and as the Daily News Minor, a local newspaper printed, I was the first colored child in Fairbanks, Alaska.

In growing up in Fairbanks, Alaska, I was far removed from the usual life experiences one would enjoy and participate within a Black community. There was a strong presence of the military because of the so-called strategic position of Alaska as a first line of defense. The young men of color stationed at those military sites were housed in segregated quarters. Seemed ironic that they were seen capable enough to defend our country along side of their white counterparts but seen differently when it came to other issues of equity. There was not a Black community per se, but a community of men searching for their fortune and women cashing in on that fortune by selling their bodies for pleasure. More and more families were coming to Fairbanks to homestead the land in hopes of etching their future in this cold, vast land called "Seward's Folly." The majority of the population was Alaskan native people of several nations (e.g. Aleut, Eskimo – Athabaskan, Alutiiq, Yup'ik, Inupiat, N.W. coast Indians – Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian), who were living off the land as their ancestors had done for decades. The dominant culture's influence and the so called civilization that was imposed upon these native people were evident by the disease, the alcohol, the raping of the land's wealth, the missionary's diligence in saving these "poor savages'" souls from damnation and yes, the racism.

I went to a private Catholic school and was the only Black child in attendance until the seventh grade, then there was three of us, my sister Cheryl in the elementary grades, Suzanne...and myself from eighth grade through high school. I felt secure and comfortable in my

environment as a young child and did not think much about being different from my playmates as we all had brown skin from playing outside in the twenty-four hour sunny days of summer. I stored bits and pieces of thoughts, experiences, information and memories that helped to shape the world as I knew or thought I knew it to be. As a young adult, transformation again appeared at the door and carried me quickly through the portal, challenging whatever I thought I knew to be true. It was in high school when I discovered the embarrassment of how I was seen as through the lens of others. This occurred in the history classes during the brief, and I am emphasizing the word brief, time period of discussion about Africans, slavery, Negroes, and the Indians. These groups were portrayed as ignorant, lazy savages in need of saving from themselves.

Mother, in her infinite wisdom of knowing where the power lay, pushed my sister and I, to excel in academics, the arts, the ability to maintain a home, and to be perfect wives (please not that I did not say partners) to the men that we would marry. In particular, her hopes were that we would marry white men because of what they represent – the power and privilege they would bring to the union. Mother's self-hatred manifested itself in many ways.

I attended Seattle University in Seattle, Washington and really experienced obvious acts of racism from the white students and discrimination from the students of color. Experiencing racism was not new to me but the rejection and the isolation from the other people of color was a new and troubling experience. My sophomore year, I had a room mate from Uganda and I was so ecstatic. I talked about my aspirations of wanting to go to Africa of which in turn she informed me that we (Negroes) were not wanted in their country and that we did not belong there. That was the first real time that I felt truly disconnected and without roots. The question of who were we as Negroes, as a people, gripped at my soul. The name itself, Negro did not connect us, as a people, to a specific regional landmass but instead named us based upon skin color.

...There are times when I feel so tired from moving against the winds of life...The wind comes from every direction and can be as gentle as a summer night's breeze...can build to a gale force strength that can strip away at my dignity, my humanity, my spirituality, and my essence...

From:
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