

The Challenges of Being Biracial

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Excerpt from A Climate of Harmony and Hostility: Identity Development for Indipinas (2000)

I am a biracial woman whose father was a Pilipino immigrant from the island of Luzon in the Philippines and whose mother is an Indigenous woman from the Squamish Nation located in North Vancouver, British Columbia. (...I will be using the term "Indipina," which describes a woman who is both Pilipina and Native American. To my knowledge, this term was coined by Bernie Whitebear, Executive Director of United Indians of All Tribes Foundations, Seattle, WA in the mid-1970's.) As a child, I lived in a home where Indigenous women played an essential role in my upbringing. As far back as I can recall, my great grandmother has always been the greatest matriarch. For me, she was the truest example of strength, wisdom and grace. Her aging, soft skin will always be a part of my fingers' memories.

My "Ta-ah" (Squamish word for "grandmother") was the most influential person in my life. She was my teacher, my mentor, and my role model. Even though she spoke very little English, I always knew the lessons she was teaching me. It was through her strength and wisdom that I proclaim my identity and my right to call myself a Squamish woman. Ta-ah teachings were done in a gentle, but firm manner. She often made a "hmmmm" sound that ended with a gentle glottal stop; and depending on its pitch, I knew if it was a reassuring or disapproving sound. She taught me about what it means to live in a house with many others and serve those around me. She taught me about respect, patience, humility, quietness, and trust.

As children, we were always allowed to share the thoughts of the adult world. The melody of the voices and the rhythm of the laughter still ring through my head, as I hear grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and cousins enjoying their women's time together. Their conversations offered insight into an adult world that was not kept hidden from me. As an adult, these memories frame my worldview.

I have always felt that the activities that happened in these formative years were significant in my development as a leader, especially as a leader who has been able to work effectively in Indigenous communities. The role modeling and mentoring of strong, Indigenous women taught me how to listen, how to see, how to interpret my world, and how to be effective within

it. Because this was my experience, it framed a perspective that I thought I shared with other women who were like me because we shared common racial and ethnic profiles of being both Pilipino and Indigenous.

In 1998 my perception changed when I attended a community gathering on Bainbridge Island. We gathered together to celebrate the 50th birthday of one of the successful women leaders from our community. ("Community" is defined as being from the Pilipino and/or Indigenous communities.) Most of those who attended the celebration were from the Pacific Northwest, with many of us having cultural ties to Bainbridge Island. We came from families whose primary home cultures came from the Philippines and the "reserve" lifestyles found in Canada's First Nations' communities. ("Reserves" in Canada are similar to "reservations" in the United States.) When I attend events like this birthday celebration, I am reminded of those times I spent as a child, hearing those old melodies and sensing those same rhythms.

I recall having a sense of pride about who we, as Indipinos, were and what we had achieved as a collective group. Many of the women were leaders in their homes and in our communities. However, as I sat and absorbed the comfort of this environment, I was struck by a stark reality that made me different from some of these women. At least fifteen of the women in attendance had grown up with the absence of their mothers and grandmothers for most of their formative years.

They grew up in homes where they were raised by single, Pilipino immigrant fathers who had never remarried, after the loss of their wives through death or divorce. I grew up in a household with two parents and had many women role models. Our collective early childhood experiences were very different. Yet, we became leaders and role models in our families and in our communities. Since I became conscious of this disparity, I became curious to find the central theme that guided us on the same path that led us all to work for self-determination and social justice for our people.

My Childhood Story -My introductory paragraph portrays a childhood filled with only love and laughter. It was, but that is not all that defined it. A brief summary of my story also must include the faces of the unemployed, the poor, the incarcerated, the abusers and the sufferers of alcohol, drug and domestic abuse. My story is also shaped by these realities.

I grew up in a contradictory world. In one hand, I held the loving strength drawn from family; and, in the other hand, I held the shame and anger for witnessing our self-destructive behaviors. It was difficult to

navigate through the maze of contradictions that wound its way through happiness, but could be abruptly changed by pain.

My life was no different than many of the other children of friends and relatives who I interacted with as a young child. We navigated through similar mazes and together we were able to grow up during our early years with the support of one another. Because it was a way of life we shared, our contradictions were not readily apparent to us.

The homes and the livelihoods of our families were located on large strawberry and raspberry farms, isolated from the mainstream White community that surrounded us. When it became necessary to attend public school, our sense of security changed. I have vivid memories of the first days of kindergarten. I had never been with so many White children and adults.

I remember feeling somewhat curious and uneasy about my new situation. In this world, I observed that children talked and interacted with each other and with adults differently. For example, as children, we were always taught to sit and listen quietly in the presence of adults, especially while they were speaking. Children in school did not appear to live by those same ground rules. I can still remember the boy who stood up and openly defied our kindergarten teacher. Not only was that shocking, but the teacher simply laughed at his actions. If I had done this at home, I would have received more than one disapproving look from the adults in the room. It probably would have warranted a swat on the bottom or, at least, a disapproving "hmmmm" from my great grandmother. I spent many days listening and watching, trying to understand my new environment and to find my place in it.

As I watched and observed others in the classroom, I noticed other differences. For many days before my first day of school, my mother would remind me not to tell anyone that I got my clothes at the "mission," which was our word for the thrift store. When I saw many of the other children, I began to understand the meaning of her instructions-their clothes looked so "clean." Clothes were the beginning of self-consciousness. I recall one morning, as my mother helped me put on a pair of jean coveralls, noticing the many patches on the knees. As she was buckling the strap, I remember asking her, "How come all my clothes are old?" Her response to me was, "It doesn't matter how old your clothes are, as long as they are clean." But deep down inside, it mattered to me.

During the first year of school, I became very self-conscious how I looked. Not only was I embarrassed about my clothes, but I also remember

wearing long-sleeved shirts when I played in the sun because I did not want my skin to get darker. My self-consciousness eventually turned to shame. I struggled to find my place in the new world of school. It was from these early beginnings that I began to construct and shape meaning for myself---a meaning that rejected those things that made me different in this new White world.

I spent years alienating myself from my home culture and embraced many of the elements of culture that children at school demonstrated. I soon could demonstrate all of the cultural norms and the rules that we had to live by. I became so good at my imitation that I could have taught mainstream children what "being White" was all about.

My Search for Authentic Voice -It was not until I went to college that I began to question who I had become. As I entered into adulthood, identity issues again began to change for me. During civil rights movement of the early 1970's, I, like many others, was challenged to access my true identity and find meaning for myself. I began to peel away the layers of "successful" assimilation. In the process I realized I had to denounce some of the lessons that were taught to me by some very important people---my father, my mother, and, even, my Ta-ah. I found that within their many lessons were embedded assimilationist and prejudiced ideologies.

As I penetrated each layer, I felt excitement, immense anger and passion for the truth about my identity. My journey through these racial development years provided significant learning opportunities for me. I was not alone in my search. The movement of the 1970's provided a community of others experiencing the same cognitive dissonance I was. We supported one another in our struggle to reclaim our own voices.

My racial identification search began when I attended the First Annual Far West Pilipino Conference in Seattle in 1971. I remember high school classmates asking on another, "What's she doing here?" I asked myself the same question. Connecting with my Asian roots was stressful. Trust was a big issue. What was my authentic voice? I was very angry, caught between two selves, between two unintegrated worlds. When I finally began to understand and respect my father's perspective, I realized I was coming back home to a genuine cultural renewal.

Once I grew more comfortable as a Pilipina American, I began to struggle with my identity as an Indigenous woman. At this point, I made emotional connections within the Native American movement that created direct ties with my Indigenous ancestors, and reconnected with other lessons I had learned from my Ta-hah---lessons that connected with cultural

values and maintenance of cultural integrity. She had taught me about respect, patience, humility, and trust; but, at the same time, shared her own prejudice against Pilipinos. She reinforced the fact that we should learn how to speak good English, while she struggled with her own.

Learning the history of Indigenous people was very painful for me because it forced me to understand the colonization process that was imposed on Indigenous people by some of the institutions that I felt very connected with. I learned the role the government and the Catholic Church played in the loss of traditional Indigenous cultures. This information clashed with what I believed in as a child. In elementary school, I proudly said the "Pledge of Allegiance" every morning, believing its every word. I believed "liberty and justice for all" included me. I went to catechism and attended Catholic mass every Sunday, believing that it was the omnipotent church that it taught me it was. These contradictions were overwhelming. What I had been taught did not match what I was learning. Sadly, by understanding the impact of colonization on Indigenous people, I also understood more about why there were so many alcoholics and abusers in my family.

Contributing to the Future of Our Children – As a result of my journey in search for authentic voice and as a biracial woman, who has worked with Native American communities for over twenty-five years, I have learned some important lessons. However, my story is not unique. Others who share similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, share a similar story...

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