

Legacy of an Interracial Marriage in 1942

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My father was African- and Native-American, with a Christian background, and my mother was European-American, with a Russian Jewish background. He was twenty-seven years her senior. They met and in New York City, and the location is the only reason they were not killed or jailed because interracial marriages were illegal.

I'm the second of five children, the darkest in color and the only one who married an African-American man. Truly, our family gatherings are "colorful." I remember being one of two Black students graduating from high school, and, despite having a superior academic record, my counselor offered me non-college options after high school. I graduated from college and graduate school, earning an ED. D. in Educational Administration & Supervision.

At the time of my marriage in 1967, the phrase "*Black is Beautiful*" was the fashion, and "*Black Power*" was the political call to action. My future in-laws asked why my future husband wanted to marry a "half-breed," while many African-American female peers in college said, "*You can pass, so leave our men alone!*" When I shopped alone, no personnel followed me or made me check my belongings at the courtesy desk. However, the opposite was true the moment my husband and I shopped at the same places. The "Jim Crow" face was hoodless now, but it still boldly

claimed in unspoken language that all minority persons were unwelcomed in their neighborhoods, their stores, and their school systems.

For my entire life, not one month has gone by without a stranger bluntly, sometimes impolitely asking me, *“So where are you from? I mean what’s your nationality?”* People’s comfort level depends on knowing into which racial “box” in their brains they can put me. That’s why they push against my generic comments about being an “American” or a “Child of God.” Those category responses give insufficient comfort to the questioner.

Working towards healing emanates from me because God has said, *“to whom much is given, much is required.”* I turn a cheek, give an explanation or clarification, and most times respond to ridiculous questions with compassion because I realize that the only way to change a mind is to change a heart. I remember a time when my immediate supervisor gave me a birthday card, in which he wrote, *“If you have a sister or a Sister, I’d like to entertain the symbolic creation of a giant Oreo cookie.”* The comment was both racist and sexist, and worthy of formal challenge. During the legal proceedings that followed, a local reporter said with emotion in her voice, *“My God, he wanted to do it with you and a Nun?”* I had experienced my monthly quota of offenses from ignorant people, so I calmly explained the meaning of a “Sister” within the African-American community.

I could write a novel of similar stories, all of which could have become angry encounters. But I know firsthand that if you want to change someone’s heart, you need a healthy sense of humor to guide your tongue so that you inform the uninformed without taking every comment personally. I can do nothing to change

the attitude of persons who are racist to their core, but if I approach them with an open mind, or more likely respond to them with kindness and patience, then I've opened a door for the kind of candid dialogue that promotes racial healing.