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# Read: Finding Words to Talk about Race (1700 Words)

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I am the daughter of an Ecuadorian immigrant mother and a father from a Southern white ranching family. I was born in East Texas, in a town where people frequently called my mom "wetback" and "taco-bender" to her face. In an attempt to protect her children from this verbal brutality, my mother did not teach us to speak Spanish. She wanted us to quietly blend in, to be as unnoticeable as possible.

When I was 2, we moved to a more quietly intolerant college town in the central part of the state, where black, white and brown were equally fractioned. My brother and I were assumed by most to either be plain ol' white or part Chicano. In middle school, a fellow classmate spit the word "Mexican" at me as if it were an insult, and so I took it as one. In high school, I had one ear listening to Selena, the other tuned to Kurt Cobain.

I had no language to talk about these divides of difference. "Race" meant white or black. "Ethnicity" meant ... well, most people weren't exactly sure what it meant, but ethnic food was anything spicy and ethnic clothes were folksy costumes. To actually discuss prejudice or discrimination, its causes and consequences and daily realities – that was as distasteful as talking about sex at the dinner table. Even when James Byrd, Jr., was murdered in Jasper, Texas -- he was chained by his ankles and dragged behind a pickup truck -- and the murderers were tried and convicted in my hometown, people didn't talk about it.

And there, right in the center of middle-class Middle America, is the root of this nation's difficulty in talking about race and ethnicity. My mother's generation was bullied into fitting in. In a post-civil rights world, my generation grew up obeying a polite colorblindness, a denial of difference. For decades, we quietly ignored race, which meant we ignored discrimination, and we shrank from talking about racial or ethnic tensions. Today, primarily because of Hurricane Katrina, Americans have finally acknowledged that, actually, we do have to talk about race. We're just having trouble finding the right words.

What's needed are a million personal conversations between ordinary Americans. The complexities and nuances of color and culture, the disparities of wealth and education are best understood by learning the stories of each others' lives. Ordinary people are the true experts in cross-racial, cross-ethnic dialogue, if only we would start talking.

Whenever I begin to be lulled into the tranquil idea that maybe, just maybe, race and ethnicity don't matter, something happens to remind me of the power of these things to be either connectors or dividers.

A couple years ago, I was working on an article about the families of murder victims and had been invited to attend a support group for grieving parents. At the end of the meeting, I sat quietly reading some of the group's materials.

An old Mexican man came up to me and asked, "Your name is *Maria Luisa*? Are you Hispanic?"

This man's son had recently been murdered. He looked into my eyes -- he, the subject, me, the reporter -- and tried to decide whether to trust me with his story of grief.

"Yes, but my father is white," I answered.

"Well," he said, pausing to touch my pale hand. "Make sure to tell people your name is Maria." Then, he began his story.

He didn't want to know my credentials as a journalist, only my ethnicity. He told me about the agony of watching his crack-addicted son go down a dangerous path. He told me about the miserable end to a three-day search, when his son's lifeless body was found in a dumpster. He spilled family secrets because he assumed that since we were both Latino, we shared the same values.

It is significant that a name, skin tone or accent has so much emotional hold over us. Had my name been Amanda or Tiffany, the old man may never have greeted me. Actually, my name is different, and is pronounced differently, depending on who I'm talking to.

Friends and family call me Luisa. When asked why I use only one half of my first name, I explain that most women in my extended family are named Maria something-or-other, so we Marias go by nicknames or shortened versions of our full names. I'm not sure if this is entirely true, but most of the non-Latino people I meet demand an explanation, so I made one up for them.

When I introduce myself to Latino folks, I am *Maria Luisa*, the namesake of my maternal great-grandmother and the most obvious symbol of my Hispanic heritage. Like reminiscing about biscuits and gravy with fellow Southerners, most of the time I consider this variation on my introduction as a way to connect with Latinos. But sometimes, I feel like I'm pimping out my pseudo-Hispanic identity, like wearing a low-cut blouse in an attempt to get a special discount. Am I a cultural con artist, a disingenuous fake? What does it really mean to be Hispanic if my skin is white and my language is English?

Throughout my teens, I wondered about this. I hesitated to identify myself as a minority. I didn't feel like a "minority," nor did I know what that was supposed to feel like. But when I filled out forms for financial aid and college scholarships, being a minority took on a positive connotation. "Different" morphed into "diverse." The mother who had refused to teach us Spanish as children encouraged us to make sure we checked the "Hispanic" designation as college students. In college, I dabbled in trying to feel like a minority. I went to a Hispanic sorority party. I briefly joined an organization promoting racial equality. I attended a church group that promoted interracial marriage and ending racism as a spiritual goal.

Openly talking about race puts us at risk of being sucked into a quicksand of accusations and defensive anger. We fear the reactions to our words, cringe at the thought of being labeled. Depending on which side of the color line we stand on, we are afraid to offend, or we're afraid to be singled out. We don't want to be forced to act as a representative for all people of color or be questioned about the authenticity of belonging to a certain tribe.

And what words should we use when we do talk about race? Blacks may be unsure whether they should say "Latino" or "Hispanic." Whites may not know if it's PC to talk about Ebonics. A Christian once advised me not to call Jewish people "Jews" because, he said, the word was an epithet. And so conversations are stopped before they even begin.

The discomfort that goes hand in hand with discussions about race has halted conversations within my own bi-ethnic family.

My parents divorced long ago. My father remarried, to a woman who was both white and blonde. They wanted more children but were unable to conceive. Finally, two years ago, they adopted three Mexican-American siblings who had been in foster care. My left-leaning, hippie-esque father and I have never once had a conversation about race or ethnicity; the adoption of three little brown children didn't change that sad fact.

Secretly, I was thrilled at the addition of more Latin blood into the family. I daydreamed of bonding over our shared ethnicity. I would watch *Dora the Explorer* with them and show them how to dance the meringue. Like the old Mexican man, I assumed we would share similar values and interests because we shared a Latin American heritage.

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My fantasies were halted when my father announced that, at the adoption ceremony, their names would be changed. Their "Mexican-sounding" names would be simplified into shorter, "white" names. Ostensibly, this was a protective measure to prevent the children from being teased. I wanted to scream at my dad; I felt this was a mistake worse than my mom abandoning Spanish. It was denying more than language -- it was denying their very identities. These three sweet-natured brown-eyed, brown-skinned children were being raised in a state that was about one-third Hispanic, yet their new parents' first lesson was that being Latino was strange and should be hidden. I couldn't understand why my father would do this. Two months ago, I got my answer.

After years of poor health, my dad's mother passed away. After the funeral, I caught up with my paternal relatives, who I hadn't seen in years. My mother had kept her distance from them during my childhood, and I had been repeatedly warned to stay away from one particular uncle. (Later I learned he was one of the individuals who referred to my mom as a "wetback.") It was this uncle who approached me.

"You know, your dad's problems started with those kids," he said.

I was silent.

"Those Mexican kids, you know. I told him he needed to change their names. It's just a fact of life that old white guys like me will mess with them."

He was apparently oblivious that he was talking to his niece, *Maria Luisa*. He might as well have said my father's problems started with my mother, or with me. What he did say was, "The world is full of old white guys like me."

It took a minute for the meaning of his words to sink in. By the time I found my tongue again, he was gone.

My uncle is right. There are a lot of old white guys like him. The world is full of people who unthinkingly buy into racism and prejudice. And the world is full of people who are afraid of those white guys and afraid of talking about the jumbled mess of race and racism. Because talking about our prejudices, our color, our deeply felt experiences, means exposing ourselves and our families. Conversations about race and ethnicity are conversations about sex, hate, love, ignorance, history, guilt, shame and anger. It's embarrassing, uncomfortable and emotionally draining.

Given the choice, we'd rather not talk about it. But given the state of things, we should try.

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