

Chapter 3

LIFE QUESTIONS

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I SUSPECT THAT MY life has been much like everyone else's life in that it began much beyond my recall and continues in its own direction in spite of my best efforts to move it in the direction of fame, fortune, excitement, and/or adventure. To me it is an unremarkable life, a condition for which I am grateful. However, a normally eventful life such as mine does not contribute to very exciting or suspenseful story telling. Story telling is a tradition in my family. Both my father and paternal grandmother were excellent story tellers and my mother wanted to grow up to be Brenda Starr (a cartoon investigative reporter). From them all I learned that if the story isn't interesting enough to tell, then one probably shouldn't tell it. Nevertheless, the editors of the *Handbook* invited me to contribute a chapter, even though I warned them that it would be a sleep-inducing experience for the reader. I suppose they anticipate that many readers of the *Handbook* will be people with insomnia in need of a nonchemical cure.

In an effort to overcome my writer's block, I shared my dilemma with my colleague at Boston College, Susana Lowe, and she and her graduate assistants graciously volunteered to generate some questions about my life whose answers they thought would be of interest to readers. They generated 37 questions, many of which had several parts. I could not address all of them because of space limitations. Some of the questions I have already answered in an interview that I did for Robert Carter. However, there were several that I could not answer and so I have decided to use them as the focus of this chapter because the process of discovering answers to unanswered questions is generally what inspires me to live the life I do. I put the questions into four categories (identity, systemic barriers, professional concerns, and future plans) and chose at least one of the questions from each category as my focus.

IDENTITY

How do you think colleagues or students see you? Are you loved, feared, respected, elusive . . . ? Do you feel people's perceptions are accurate? In what ways are you stereotyped at work? What would be an accurate way to describe who you are?

Sometimes, I think it would be fun if a genie granted me three wishes. I would use one of them to see myself through someone else's eyes since on the far too frequent occasions when someone feels obliged to share her or his perceptions of me with me, I am genuinely surprised and sometimes offended. I know that invariably my friends give me the nickname "Lady," and I don't know why. My niece says that I will never perfect the "grunge look," even though I keep trying. I guess I'll have to try harder. My graduate students are continually surprised by my interests in basketball, track, figure skating, gymnastics, soap operas and romance novels, Buffy the Vampire Slayer (I prefer the TV version), and my artistic nature. What's so unusual? I seem to inspire Whoopi Goldberg dreams for some of my male colleagues and they and Whoopi reportedly have some hot times dealing with their unresolved Oedipal complexes. Need I say that I am offended by this? I don't look anything like Whoopi!

I am convinced that I am a mirror in which people see whatever characteristics they need me to have. However, I don't spend much time or psychic energy worrying about the contents of their projections. There is not much that I could do to change or control their perceptions anyway, and I wouldn't be able to move if I tried to live up or down to everyone's stereotypes or expectations of me. My general rule with respect to this aspect of me is "if the person doesn't feed, clothe, or love me, then I won't worry about how he or she sees me." My general rule for me is "do what feels right to me and if it works, great! If not, oh well."

If while you were growing up there were African American role models in every profession you could imagine, what do you think you would have become? What career?

I think that I am more collectivistic than not. However, this question makes me think that I am perhaps more individualistic than I think of myself as being. Insofar as I can recall, I have not made any important life decisions on the basis of the characteristics of the other people doing whatever it was. My family raised me to believe that I could do anything I wanted to do if I had the appropriate talent and money and could find ways around racism. So, I don't think that the presence of African American women role models in particular professions would have influenced my career decision making. On the other hand, if these women had been philanthropists who contributed money to my education and life support, then I might have pursued some of my other interests. For instance, if I had had access to more

money at the time, then I might have become a pediatrician. I like children and helping to relieve their pain. I also am fascinated by American history. So, if as an undergraduate I had thought I would be able to feed myself in the future, then I might have become a historical novelist. In any case, I did not have enough money to follow either of these paths, and so I assume that I have become what I was meant to become.

What saddens you most when you reflect back on your formal education? Have things changed? If not, what do you want to see happen in education (K-12, college, graduate school)?

With perhaps the exception that it started too early in the morning, I have always loved school. Maybe that's why I am a professor. It's one of the few careers that allows one to get paid for staying in school. I am a product of state schools from kindergarten through graduate school. So, what I know that qualifies as formal education I learned primarily in these settings. Consequently, I am an advocate for strong support of public educational institutions. At the risk of sounding trite, I think they offer the best chance of equalizing opportunity for people regardless of demographic characteristics.

If anything saddens me, it is that the Rockefellers, Fords, or Kennedys didn't send their children to public schools in the Midwest. I might have acquired more connections. Also, there were no ALANA (African, Latino, Asian, or Native American) men in the colleges or grad schools that I attended. This saddened me a lot! Other than me, there were no ALANA women either, but my goals at the time would have been better satisfied by men.

Some things have changed in the educational system, not necessarily for the better, but other things have not changed. At the pre-college level in urban areas, I think the educational process has become less inspired and inspiring than it was in my day. I am troubled that standardized test scores have become the primary criteria by which children's acquired learning and the quality of the instruction they receive are evaluated. Consequently, teachers are forced to teach the test material. Learning how to take (primarily) multiple-choice tests is boring and should not be the primary focus of pre-college education. By the time they reach college, students (regardless of race) educated under this teach-the-test system cannot write or think in sentences. If this had been my educational experience, then I do not think that I would have acquired my love for learning new things.

Unfortunately, the demographics of future psychologists in colleges and graduate schools also have not changed. There tend to be few ALANA women and even fewer ALANA men in such settings. Even so, women are much less likely to enter academic positions than their male counterparts. I suspect that this is because ALANA women do not receive much encouragement or mentoring toward pursuing academic careers. I know I didn't.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Are students sometimes disrespectful toward you because of your socioracial status and because you're a woman? If so, how does it feel?

I imagine. Students grow up in the same racist and sexist environments as everyone else. So, it would be unusual for them to have escaped that socialization unscathed. It depends on what role I'm in and how the disrespect is manifested. There is everyday disrespect, such as questioning my credentials for doing whatever I happen to be doing at the time, or referring to me as "Mrs. Helms" or "Janet" instead of "Dr. Helms" in formal settings, or letting me know that someone else they know teaches whatever I might be teaching much better than I can. By now, these are ho-hum experiences and I am bored by them. Depending on what mood and role I am in, I may either ignore it or correct the person. I am more likely to correct the person if I anticipate that we will have ongoing interactions.

I hear that the most creative student-generated racism and sexism happens behind my back, which, of course, suits me fine. I suppose that if it happened face-to-face it would make me angry, since the secondhand accounts do. However, I do not respect cowards very much, and my task now is to persuade "friendly" students or colleagues not to share with me racism that their colleagues were too cowardly to share themselves. I would much rather hear about what they have done to cure the racism.

Could you tell a story about a time when you encountered discrimination at the workplace or in your personal life? How did it affect you? Did it influence or inform the work that you do?

Most incidences of discrimination are micro-inequities—that is, little things that people do that in and of themselves are not very meaningful but gradually build up to a point where I want to get away from people. The problem with micro-inequities is that they pass quickly and, even if they didn't, there is often not much I could do about them. There are, of course, the all-too-familiar inequities such as White women grabbing their purses when they enter an elevator that I am in or cab drivers refusing to stop for me. Then there are the inequities that probably occur because I am a Black woman rather than a man and, consequently, am not perceived as being very physically intimidating. I will share with you a couple of these, but then I will share with you a larger event that I thought I handled quite well, if I do say so myself.

I think that I am invisible to White strangers (unless they need help). I have a lot of travel micro-inequities that I could share, but I will just give you one example to illustrate my point. Flight attendants do not assist with carry-on luggage anymore, regardless of the race, age, or gender of the person. Like everyone else, I have to make room for my own bag when I travel. I was returning home from a lecture tour on a jam-packed flight, and there

was no obvious room for my carry-on in the overhead compartment above my seat. So, I rearranged and moved several heavy bags so that there would be room for my bag. I turned around to pick up my bag, and while my back was turned a White man put his bag in my space and went back to his seat. He did not say anything to me or even acknowledge that he had seen me with my bag in midair enroute to the space that his bag now occupied. As I was trying to decide whether there was a law against accidentally dropping one's bag on someone's head four rows up, the flight attendant rescued the man's head by finding another space in the back of the plane where I could store my bag.

Not only am I invisible, but White people in service positions also cannot hear me, especially if I am in the midst of other (perceived) White people. This story illustrates this condition. After one of her theatrical performances, I was having a second lunch with my actress niece, her brother, sister, and father, and one of her White college friends and her mother. Her father is White and she attends a predominantly White college in a predominantly White town. So, I suppose it appeared to an outside observer that I was the only person of color at the table. Since I had already eaten once, I only wanted dessert. The waitress took everyone's order in sequence and when she got to me I ordered a dessert and hot tea and requested that she bring my order when she brought everyone else's meal. Needless to say, she brought everyone's meal but nothing for me. My brother-in-law, who is oblivious to racism, and I engaged in a conversation that went something like this:

Him: She didn't bring your order.

Me: She didn't hear me because I'm the Black person at the table.

Him: You're just being too sensitive. She probably thought that you wanted to wait until we were ready for dessert, too.

Me: Bet?

Him: Sure. What's the bet?

Me: You ask her about my order and if she says something that indicates that she didn't hear my order, then you pay for my meals for the rest of this trip. If she says she was waiting until later, then I'll pay for your meals.

Him: It's a bet. Waitress? My sister-in-law (pointing to me) didn't get her order.

Waitress: What order? She wasn't here when I took the orders.

I have experienced many variants of this example. Consequently, I will often cue that I am speaking by placing a finger near my lips and waiting for the intended listener to focus on me. I learned the cued-speech skill while working with children with autism in graduate school. I never know when something I learned earlier will come in handy in a new situation.

My favorite example involves something that happened at work. The department chair at an institution where I was a faculty member announced that I was planning to develop a center to study race and culture.

Over the weekend, someone placed an anonymous unstamped postcard in my mailbox. On one side of the card was a picture of African hunters in (presumably) traditional tribal garb (e.g., animal skins, bones through their noses and ears, and white face paint streaks on their dark skins). On the other side of the card, in very poor handwriting, the anonymous writer had written "You must have dropped this when you were looking through your family album."

I wanted to express my gratitude to the gift-giver, but I obviously had no way of identifying him or her. So, I made a poster consisting of both sides of the postcard and my own expression of gratitude: "To my anonymous benefactor, thank you for sending me the beautiful postcard. I hope that our mutual ancestors are as proud of you as you obviously are of them." I hung the poster in the mail room so that the anonymous faculty member or graduate student who placed it in my mailbox would have an opportunity to see it. In retrospect, I suspect that my intervention may have been too intellectually advanced for the intended recipient, but fighting back made me feel good at the time.

There is a reciprocal relationship between my life and my work. My life sometimes reveals to me fights that still need to be won, and my work helps me understand people sufficiently enough to allow me to remain in the battle.

PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

How did you know you wanted to be a professor?

I didn't. I still don't. Being a professor is something that I am trying out until I decide what I really want to do when I grow up.

How would you characterize the state of counseling psychology with regard to multiculturalism? Are multiculturalists taken seriously or tokenized? Any thoughts?

As I say as often as possible, I do not really know what counseling psychologists (or anyone else) mean by "multiculturalism." If it were up to me, I would discard the term because it is essentially meaningless. I do not think that it is particularly useful for guiding research, theory, practice, or conversation because everyone seems to mean something or someone different when they are using the term. I believe that counseling psychology was and continues to be a major force with respect to focusing attention on practical issues of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability status. However, there is still much to be done in each of these domains at both the individual and the systemic level.

Whether "multiculturalists" are taken seriously seems to depend on their area of focus. Based on my experience, I think the field and society generally are much more receptive to the domains of gender, physical ability

status, and (sometimes) sexual orientation than they are to race and culture. At the last Multi-Cultural Summit, I was aware, for instance, of how much easier it was for participants to assail a participant for his regressive viewpoints on sexual orientation than they are for them to talk about race and racism at all.

What do you find most significant about the work you do?

I don't really know how to define "significant" in this context. I enjoy much of what I do, particularly if I discover that it has had a positive impact on someone. Enjoyment is significant to me. However, if "significant" means whether my work has promoted world peace or solved a major societal mental health problem, probably not. But I am still working on it.

FUTURE PLANS

If you were to write a pop psychology book, what would it be called, for whom would it be written (i.e., what audience), and what would it accomplish?

I would call it "A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your Life." It would be a self-help book intended primarily to help White people think about how racist socialization has influenced their mental health and to offer them strategies for overcoming that socialization, if they so desire. It would be for ALANAs (i.e., African, Latino and Latina, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Native Americans). Often, ALANAs are called on to explain to White people how racism affects them, as though it is a foreign concept to Whites. Moreover, such requests often occur under circumstances in which the ALANA person has little power. The book, if it existed, would be the way for them to communicate the message without being the messenger. They could give the White requestor a copy of the book. It would become a best-seller, and I would be extolled far and wide as being the greatest race psychologist since Malcolm X.

RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

- Helms, J. E. (1992). *A race is a nice thing to have: A guide to being a White person or understanding the White persons in your life*. Topeka, KS: Content Communications.
- Helms, J. E. (1992). Why is there no study of cultural equivalence in cognitive ability testing? *American Psychologist*, 47, 1083-1101.
- Helms, J. E. (1996). Toward a methodology for measuring and assessing racial identity as distinguished from ethnic identity. In G. R. Sodowsky & J. C. Impara (Eds.), *Multicultural assessment in counseling and clinical psychology* (pp. 143-192). Lincoln, NE: Buros Institute.
- Helms, J. E. (1999). Another meta-analysis of the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, 32, 122-137.

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