


Chapter 10



EMBRACING MULTICULTURALISM

A Journey of Self-Discovery

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I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.

—Audre Lorde (1984, p. 40)

WRITING THIS CHAPTER has been a process, a journey of self-discovery from the moment I received the request. I have thought and reflected for months and have spoken with those who are dear to me about my feelings, my ideas, and especially about my questions. Never before have I written something that was so introspective and personal yet designed to be so public. This process of self-exploration has brought me to a new understanding of my personal history, my racial identity, as well as my personal and professional hopes and dreams.

I begin my story by talking about who I am and what I believe. From that context I can weave the different life experiences and realizations that have shaped who I am and who I will become. I began with the quote by Audre Lorde, who, although I never met her, has been a challenge and inspiration to me for the past 15 years. In my life I have strived to understand and appreciate myself and others. Sometimes, that process has demanded that I accept aspects of myself that I find uncomfortable and tell truths that I have wanted to avoid. Without such truth-telling, none of us can move forward toward valuing each other. I firmly believe that our lives and our futures are

forever interconnected. True progress within our profession, our academic communities, or the political system is not possible unless we believe and act as if our survivals are mutual.

To that end, I think it is important that I offer my personal definition of multiculturalism, for it is the basis of the work that I do. I believe multiculturalism is about creating a new world where all people, *because* of who they are (as differentiated from regardless of who they are), are welcomed, appreciated, and celebrated. It moves far beyond a simple "We Are the World" mentality to the challenges of difficult dialogues across differences. It means acknowledging our biases and striving to overcome our limitations. It focuses on raising our awareness of our cultural assumptions about ourselves and the world. Multiculturalism cannot exist if we are not willing to change our minds, our hearts, and our lives. We must build alliances with those who are different from us and not be tempted to surround ourselves in sameness. And finally, we must transform our worldview in order to move beyond our very real human and spiritual limitations.

In concrete terms, I view multiculturalism from both universal and race-based perspectives. I firmly believe that the full range of social identities that influence who we are (race, class, gender, sexual/affectional orientation, religion, language, abilities, and age) must be understood and incorporated into our understanding of multiculturalism. Because of the complexity of diversity, we all experience life from the perspective of those social identities (from either the dominant or target group point of view) whether we realize it or not. And those life experiences shape who we are and how we relate to others. The dominant worldview in this country is dualistic and reductionistic, so most of us primarily think of ourselves in terms of one or two identities; yet those self-perceptions do not take away the complexity of all that we are. However, in addition to these beliefs, I know in my heart that our country and all of us in it are in the midst of a long journey in which race, racial identity, and racism are central to how we view ourselves, each other, and the relationships and community that we are able to create. No matter how hard we try to believe otherwise, we have all internalized racial assumptions that create barriers in our relationships. And these barriers will not be overcome without deliberate self-evaluation and a personal commitment to building relationships with people who are different from us. We must face these challenges if we are to move forward individually and collectively. While some may find the universal and race-based definitions of multiculturalism contradictory, I see them naturally coexisting side by side as a symbol of the diunital (i.e., both/and) thinking that I believe is necessary to the creation of a psychology and a world that fully embrace multiculturalism.

So, how is it that I have come to believe these things? When I look back at my childhood and upbringing, in many ways I have often wondered how it is that I ended up here. I grew up in an all-White environment in a middle-

class family of economic and educational privilege in which I never had a personal relationship with a person who was racially different from me until I was 17 years old and involved in high school athletics. And even then, I was merely curious about their racial background and probably didn't give it much more thought than that. My parents rarely, if ever, mentioned or acknowledged race, much less any other kind of difference. When I look back at my childhood, I can probably count on two hands the number of times when I contemplated racial or any other differences. Yet despite little or no encouragement to explore multicultural issues for over half of my life, I now view myself as a professional who is focusing her life's work on multiculturalism and is committed to training others to work more effectively across all types of differences. Now I must be clear here. This is less of a professional choice and more of a personal commitment. You see, I also am a White woman who has been partnered for 12 years with an African American woman with whom I am raising two young biracial children. What I do professionally is merely an extension of what I struggle with on a daily basis. What really matters to me in both my personal and professional life is to being part of creating environments that are inclusive and affirming. I want to help build a world where my two biracial children who are growing up with two moms of different racial backgrounds consistently feel their family is fully accepted and valued.

How my own personal evolution has occurred is somewhat related to how I view multiculturalism. That is what I want to share with you. Not because I think it is the "right" way to do it or the only way to do it but, rather, because it is the process and journey itself (more than the results or outcome) that has mattered to me. This is my story as best as I can articulate it, and even as I write it I know it is probably inaccurate in some ways and definitely incomplete and unfinished. I will try my best to articulate my worldview, although I realize I am not always able to fully step outside myself and appreciate all that influences who I am.

When I look back, I now see that my journey toward multiculturalism began with my faith development. This is a new insight for me and is probably a reflection of where I am in my own spiritual journey. I was raised Catholic, and when I was young and attending catechism class, I believed with all my heart what I was taught: that we should all treat each other fairly and justly and look for godliness in everyone. In many ways, my belief in racial equality, feminism, and multiculturalism grew out of my belief in peace and justice. And those beliefs grew from my faith and covenant with God. My own sense of spirituality and faith has grown in so many directions and ways since I was a child. There have been many times in my life when I really did not participate in any type of faith community and other times, like when I was in graduate school, where I spent many waking hours exploring my spirituality. No matter where I was in that struggle, I always had an unwavering belief in the generosity of God and the capacity of the human

spirit. As a lesbian I have had to redefine my faith and my own relationship with God over the years, and while that has been a long journey, I have returned to where I began: a social-justice-based Catholicism that shapes my perceptions of the world, my view of others, and the core values in my life.

While my journey may have begun with my faith, it became politicized as I experienced feminism in the 1970s. I was a girl who wanted to be treated fairly, and my identity as a feminist began with my personal outrage at how differently male and female athletes were treated. Those beliefs were further strengthened in my 20s when I came out as a lesbian to myself and my family. I went through a period of lesbian and feminist immersion while in graduate school that allowed me to redefine myself and feel confident about who I was, despite what society and my parents thought. Living in that lesbian feminist world was crucial to my own sense of self and my ability to understand oppression, especially internalized oppression. It gave me an understanding as to why I had always felt different, like I didn't belong. When I came out and found a community, I thought I'd found an antidote to that feeling of not belonging. I was wrong.

At some point, I began to realize, quietly, inwardly that this lesbian world I was living in was almost completely White. And while many of us spoke out against racism passionately, there was limited racial diversity among us. I slowly began to reflect on earlier life events that had influenced my White identity. I remember how during my training as an undergraduate peer counselor I was told by a Black staff member that I would never understand what it meant to be Black and that would probably always affect my relationships with Blacks and other people of color. That upset me tremendously, and at the age of 20 I experienced the first major event that would forever alter my White racial identity and begin my journey to where I am today. I was determined to prove that person wrong and be a "good" White person. In terms of my racial identity at that point in my life, how I felt about my own race was partially determined by how people of color viewed me. Like many Whites, I operated from a liberal desire to do "right" and not perpetuate racism at any level. I didn't realize at the time that I was operating out of guilt, which made it difficult for me to form genuine relationships with people of color. However, that experience and the insight it gave me, along with several other important life events, forever imprinted on me the centrality of racism in understanding discrimination and oppression.

Fighting racism and understanding my own racial identity (even before I had the words or theory to understand what that meant) have been at the center of my multiculturalism since that significant life event. Initially, it was a cognitive and political understanding. I believed and tried to say all the right things. As a doctoral student I became involved politically in the anti-apartheid struggle on my campus. I passionately cared about the issue and committed my time and energy to the cause. For the first time, I became an activist and really believed that fighting racism was my struggle too.

Then one day in the midst of a conversation about race, a friend of mine who was Black asked me if I had ever spent significant time at an African American friend's home. As I answered no, I slowly realized the significance of my response. If I truly cared about these issues, why were my closest friends almost exclusively White? Why did I not have any deep friendships with people of color? That was a difficult self-realization, and it was in that moment that my entire journey changed as I realized I had the belief and the passion but I never had really changed my life. Despite what I said I believed and what I wanted in the world, I was still living in a predominantly White world with people who were mostly like me. And since that time, I have not been the same. I realized that I needed to learn to be authentic and take the interpersonal risks that were necessary to build deeper relationships with my friends who were people of color. Ever since that time I have continually chosen to put myself in professional and personal situations where I was challenged to grow in my understanding and commitment toward multiculturalism.

Another indelible life experience occurred while I was in graduate school at Ohio State University. I, along with several other doctoral students plus two faculty members, created a multicultural research team that changed the way I viewed myself and the world around me. We were a multiracial group of women who also encompassed differences of age, sexual orientation, class, and spirituality. What began as a research team quickly grew into a multicultural laboratory where we openly examined our beliefs, challenged each other, and tried to develop a new way of looking at psychology and identity development. There were both emotional and mind-bending conversations as well as individual and group conflict. This intense experience showed me how rich my life was when I was immersed in relationships and work where diversity was at the core and how few times in my life I had actually encountered such diversity.

Realizing my desire for more opportunities for immersion in culturally diverse environments caused me to reprioritize my life, which is why I chose to do my internship in Southern California where I knew even more multiracial experiences would be available. I brought with me an enthusiasm for multiculturalism and a willingness to fully examine myself, my beliefs, and my behaviors. As someone who grew up in Midwest suburbia, I had little personal understanding of Latino, Native American, or Asian experiences of the world. I chose to do my internship at UC Irvine because I knew it would take me to a place unlike any I had known. We had a diverse group of interns and staff, and there was much tension and conflict about diversity issues, especially race. I had to face conflict, often based in cultural differences, that made me uncomfortable and unsure of myself. I began to get comfortable with chaos and conflict (mine and others) being at the center of my own multicultural struggle. Like many Whites, speaking my mind felt risky. I learned to say what I felt and challenge others who viewed the world differently. I began to realize that cultural knowledge was far less

important than my way of being in the world. So, I began to focus less on content and more on my relationships. A fellow intern adopted me into her family, which was racially and culturally very different from me, and through that friendship I began to see what was in front of me all of the time. With her quiet words and examples, my friend showed me that all I had to do was be myself and be open to hearing the stories of others. Through those stories and relationships, she told me that I would learn all that I needed to know. When I look back now, some of these realizations seem so simple, and I wonder why it sometimes takes me a while to discover them. I already had important and genuine relationships with people of color that developed out of common values and respect for differences. Why did I continue to think that there was some answer out there that could give me more than that?

I left California and drove my car to the Midwest where I worked at the University of Iowa Counseling Center for four years. Despite the fact that I have lived in the Los Angeles area and then later New York City, the great irony is that I probably learned the most about race, racism, and oppression in Iowa City, Iowa. While there, I had the opportunity to affiliate with the Women's Resource and Advocacy Center and the most powerful group of women I have ever known. I joined a group called Women Against Racism. It was a multiracial group of women who were different across as many variables as you could imagine: class, sexual orientation, religion, language, ability, age, and, of course, race, ethnicity, and nationality. We met weekly for the purpose of "personal work," which was to challenge ourselves and each other about issues of difference and sameness. We also focused on educating others, offering local and national workshops. I arrived there a committed White lesbian who was still making sense of what it meant to be a White woman. I left there four years later more humble, more courageous, and more self-aware than I had ever been. I learned to take risks, to admit what I didn't know, and to form genuine and meaningful relationships with women who were different from me. I really learned how to be comfortable with the process of exploring, defining, and redefining who I am. That process has become quite familiar to me, and I have realized that the process is more important than what or who I know.

I also had the opportunity to put my multicultural values and knowledge into my professional life at a completely new level. For the first time, I really began to acknowledge that I had some expertise in the area of multiculturalism and was eager to share it with my colleagues. What is significant here is not that all of a sudden I became an expert, but I suddenly believed and valued my own insight, knowledge, and skills. So, I helped lead an organizational effort to infuse multiculturalism in a counseling center in a predominantly White institution. I believe that we were very successful in our efforts. And not necessarily by the standard outcome data like how many psychologists of color were there, or how many students of color we served. We were effective because everyone who worked there

fully engaged in the process of self-examination and organizational exploration to see how we could all more fully embrace multiculturalism. Our collaboration showed me how important and powerful the organizational and systemic aspects are in the struggle to create a multicultural world.

I left Iowa and moved to New York City where I lived for seven wonderful years surrounded by the full richness of diversity. I truly loved the vitality and humanness of that place. It was a place where I couldn't hide from the reality of poverty, racism, mistrust, and despair. I felt so alive and at times so overwhelmed by its enormity. And because I was so frequently surrounded by diversity, whether it be on the subway or on the streets, I came to realize a lot about myself and my own biases and assumptions, especially concerning race and social class. I learned that no matter how hard I had worked to eradicate racism within me I continued to be bombarded at times by my own stereotypes and assumptions about people.

I spent most of my 30s in New York City, and I became fully aware of my limits and grew into a fuller understanding of how I needed and wanted to live my life. I feel such fondness for New York City for very personal reasons. It was in that city that I made a public commitment to love and cherish my life partner. It was there that our two beautiful children were born full of promise and hope. And it was in the early mornings of sitting with my children watching the sun gloriously rise over the city outside my window that I redefined my passion about multiculturalism as being centered in my children and the future. At that moment, multiculturalism became even more personal because it was about my family and how I wanted to live my life.

When I think about it, my family is an illustration of who I am and how multiculturalism fits into my life. Twelve years ago when I met and fell in love with Raechele, my life partner, I had no idea how much our relationship would change my life. Since we first met, we have been aware of and often discussed our differences in terms of race, class, and family experiences. We have challenged each other through the questions we ask ourselves and each other. Despite our apparent differences, it is our similarities in values and dreams that drew us to each other and cement the bond between us. From the beginning, we knew we wanted children and we knew those children would be biracial so that they would look like and represent both of us. Our creation of family and community has been very deliberate and has only strengthened my belief that we are so blessed in our ability to redefine what family means. We had already broken all the rules, so why not start from scratch and create the type of family and community that we believe will most benefit and strengthen us and our children?

When we decided to have children, we chose a family name that was meaningful to us. Raechele and I hyphenate our birth names with our family name in all nonprofessional settings and have given that family name to our children. When we chose names for our children, we decided that one of their names would be one of our core values and their other name would be

after a person of color who embodied many of our beliefs. We had naming ceremonies for our children within the first 2 months of their lives to which we invited our community of family and friends to welcome our children into the world and to pledge support for their development as human beings. In everything we do, we try to center our values in faith, culture and community and live our life that way.

Yet those choices have not come without conflict with the outside world or between us. Initially, there were tensions with some of my family members, especially my parents, as they struggled to adjust to our family and the choices we made. And as we have made decisions about our future and how we want to live our lives, Raechelc and I have had to struggle with our sometimes differing points of view or suggested solutions to a given problem or concern. When we decided to leave New York City for a simpler, more affordable life in upstate New York, we had to struggle with some of the compromises such a move created. We have moved to a predominantly White community where it has been challenging to immerse our children in culturally diverse environments. While we have very similar values, we often approach the situations or dilemmas from different vantage points. I have come to realize very recently that much of my own racial identity is caught up in how I, as a White woman, parent my children of color and my ability to prepare them for living in a diverse world. This awareness is still unfolding for me and lately I've realized that my struggle is even more personal. It wasn't just about my children. I am also struggling with my own feelings about being back in a predominantly White environment and what I feel I am losing. I have found that I thrive when I can immerse myself in multicultural settings. I feel more in touch with myself, more alive. So many life choices are so complicated and conflicted with sometimes competing strengths and weaknesses. Every day, I strive to understand myself and the choices I make.

As I write all of this, it feels so personal, and yet I realize that it is important to me that I be comfortable with my struggle, regardless of how it looks from the outside. There is so much that I have come to believe that guides this journey for me. Multiculturalism is not who I am or what I believe. My multiculturalism is about how I live my life. Part of that is inevitable because I am involved in an interracial relationship and am coparenting two children of color. Yet it is so much more than that. It is how I spend my money, what food I eat, what types of music I listen to and entertainment I participate in, who my friends are, and how I spend my time. In some of those areas of my life, I am doing well. In other areas, I am not doing so great. So I am constantly struggling to understand myself and my choices. I am striving to live my life as I believe.

In some ways, that is why my view about multiculturalism in general and in my life has come full circle. For me, multiculturalism is about faith and humanity and community and family. If I can strive to evolve in my understanding of myself as a cultural being, a racial being, and all of the other

parts of who I am, and if I can be successful in living my life as a congruent and genuine human being where my actions and choices match my values, then I believe I can help make a difference in the world. I can be part of the solution and not part of the problem. While much of what I have written here highlights the challenges of multiculturalism, in some ways it seems so simple. Multiculturalism is about understanding ourselves and others who are different from us. To me, multiculturalism is, at its core, about people and relationships. And all relationships are about discovering our commonalities, our cultural differences, and our personal uniquenesses. Balancing those three aspects of all human interactions is often confusing, frustrating, and scary. It is sort of like this marvelous Pat Parker poem titled "For the White person who wants to be my friend." She said, "The first thing you must do is forget that I am Black. The second thing you must do is never forget I am Black." It is like rubbing your head and patting your stomach at the same time. You think you cannot do both at the same time, so you end up focusing on one instead. I think it is like those figure-ground optical illusions where you know there are two ways to look at the picture and until you free your mind to see both ways you are stuck. But once you realize and remember that both exist simultaneously, you have achieved a new way of viewing the world and hopefully yourself.

As I bring this oral history to a close, I can't help but wonder if I told the story I wanted to tell. Looking back I know I didn't talk enough about racism and oppression and how fighting it daily in ourselves, others, and society as a whole must be at the center of multiculturalism. But somehow that seemed more political and less personal and I was striving to reveal my personal struggle. I also know that multiculturalism is so much more than trying to be a good person or figuring out how we can all get along; yet without those important foundations, how can we take on the structural oppression that threatens to overwhelm us?

Simply put, multiculturalism is about people, especially the many friends, mentors, and teachers in my own journey. So many are personal friends, some have been teachers or supervisors, and some I have never met but found their written words to have great personal significance. Each has taught me so much about myself, other people, and the world around us. In telling my story, I honor each of them for the many gifts they have given me.

Combating racism and oppression and working to build a psychology profession that embraces multiculturalism is not a choice for me. It is as natural and as important as breathing. I think writing this chapter has helped me realize that, given who I am, it is inevitable that this is where I am in my life. This chapter has shown me that I no longer need to wonder why I ended up in the midst of this important issue. I am home, and this is where I belong. As Malcolm X said in his *Autobiography* (1964/1966), "I'm for truth no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who is for or against it. I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole."

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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