

Skin to Skin We Can Live Together July 19, 2009

When I was in seventh grade, I was friendly with a girl named Barbara. In those days, we all used the term "black." Today, we refer to her as African American. One day Barbara said to me, "There are 13 black kids in this ENTIRE school." The school was our junior high with 3 grades and 200 kids in each grade. So, out of 600 kids there were 13 black kids. I *naively* said to her, "Barbara, how do you know that?"

She very *wisely* said to me, "If you were one of those 13, you would know *exactly* how many kids there are."

I said, "Barbara, you got a point there."

Living together skin to skin offers us the promise of living together with greater understanding and more richly and creatively. What gets under your skin? How do you live in your skin? Skin deep. It makes my skin crawl. We use skin as an analogy to describe so many things... and in polite company we rarely talk about the skin literally.

I am sharing some of my experiences with feeling different and trying to understand others experiences of feeling different. What does "feeling different" mean? It means feeling separate and apart from. I believe as humans we yearn to be part of something other than ourselves...whether it is part of a group, family or just feeling we are part of a vastness much bigger than ourselves, such as the universe.

Sometimes when we feel different, it feels good, we stand out. We get noticed or recognized in ways we want to. Other times, it doesn't feel good because we are estranged, separate from others. "Different" means better or less than. It has been "scientifically proven" – whatever that means – that we all have a need to feel that we belong somewhere or with someone. The most immediate way we can experience feeling different is by our race or gender.

I also remember being impacted by a book I read at this time called Black like ME.... A white man colored – actually dyed - his skin and pretended he was black. He discovered he was treated differently. This was still an intellectual understanding and curiosity for me.

A few years prior to this when I was about 10 my Dad's car got stuck in an embankment in the snow in a residential area a couple miles

from our house... the wheels spun in the snow but the car did not budge. Dad looked up to see a very dark African American man coming toward him. He was over six feet tall and probably at least 250 pounds. Dad said he had a moment. This man had just walked through the trees off the highway. The man's car died and he needed help. He pushed my dad's car out onto the road... Dad brought him and his family home for a couple of hours while his car got repaired at a local shop. The man had at least 4 or 5 kids younger than me. To be honest, I have no recollection of a black family in my home up to this point. I remember just being curious and looking at the children as they ate the soup my mother made them. Today, I feel ashamed to admit this but the fact is, as Barbara pointed out, I grew up in a largely white community.

A couple months ago I interviewed my Dad about his life. One of his earliest memories was when he was in grade school in Philadelphia. He was about 8 years old and he would go home for lunch everyday. One day his Mother said he could bring a friend home whenever he wanted to. So the next day he brought home a black boy. This was in the late 1930s and he went to an integrated school. As my father says, "mother was a perfect lady at lunch. That night we had a family meeting and she said, 'You are not to bring that boy home again.'"

"Why?"

"We don't socialize with those types."

"Why?"

"They are different from us."

"How?"

"They are just different?"

"Well different how?"

"I can't explain it but they are just different, that's all."

I asked my father what he thought or felt about what she said at that time.

He said, "I thought she was stupid." I then asked him what he liked about his friend.

"He was funny and everyone else was boring."

His skin color was a non-issue for my dad. It didn't enter into his equation until he was confronted by his mother.

When Barbara said, "if you were one of them, you'd know." It made perfect logical sense to me. At that point in my life there were certainly significant ways I felt different than those around me, but not at a skin level, which seems so charged and deep.

I did not fully KNOW or UNDERSTAND what Barbara really meant until 10 years later just before my 23rd birthday, I found myself on a plane headed for Kingston, Jamaica, the West Indies. Right after graduating, I signed up for a one year volunteer program sponsored by my college – Boston College. I was to teach school to poor inner city children in Kingston and develop self-help programs.

I went there with 11 other volunteers and five of them were on the same flight as me scattered throughout the plane. As I settled into my seat on the airplane, I looked around and in that moment, I said to myself, “oh we are not in Kansas anymore.” I really understood what Barbara meant all those years ago. I was one of five all “white” people on the plane. I now knew what it was like to be a minority. I say “all white” as one of things I loved about Jamaica is there were many shades of color skin...and the culture reflects this richness with it’s descriptions of different skin tones – golden bronze, chestnut, dark chocolate. Whereas in the States, it seems there is a one dimensional term: black.

As I settled into my Island existence, I walked a mile to and from the school I taught at everyday ...and I often had my walk interrupted by Jamaican males shouting at me on the street “Hey Whit-ey womon....” So literally, I was reminded everyday that I was different.

There is also one term for Caucasian which is white. I never understood this term either as I don’t know anyone who has truly white skin. Maybe peach, pink, tan, beige, but not white like a sheet of paper.

I became acutely aware, and uncomfortable with the fact that many Jamaicans intimated in subtle and not so subtle ways that I was better because I was white, American and a teacher. First, I couldn’t help my skin color or nation of origin. Second I wasn’t even a trained teacher! My humble idea of teaching was to give back a little of what I had been given – an education – and the opportunity to work my butt off for it. I only had a degree in English, was raised catholic and went to a Jesuit school – so how did this qualify me to TEACH English AND Religion? It was quite curious what the assumptions about me were just because of my skin color and where I was from.

Another ten years later, I found myself at a health care company working in the area of human resources developing people’s skills and abilities. One of my first assignments was asked to create a diversity program helping people understand and manage their differences –

what's called primary – those we can see like race and gender – and secondary – those we learn upon getting to know someone like their education and experiences that shaped them. The company was looking to expand into the New York City metropolitan area which has one of the densest and most ethnically and culturally diverse markets in the world. Because the company was 85% female and most of them white, it was thought that if we couldn't look more like our customers, we should at least try to understand them better and become aware of our assumptions and biases. This was a curious notion to me.

Ten years after this, I was at IBM working in the area of developing leadership skills for senior executives. IBM, like another previous employer, GE had special focus on women and minority leaders to give them extra support and visibility. I had a colleague who was a blond haired, blue eyed female who categorized herself Chinese since her family grew up in China. Interesting. While at IBM at times I was asked to work with different diversity groups to plan and facilitate development programs or learning forums. The names of these groups were: black executive Forum, multicultural women's symposium, Hispanic executive forum. Is the term "black" these days politically incorrect? Those within the Hispanic community talked about what it means to be Hispanic – some said, "there are so many differences amongst us, why is this label 'Hispanic' given to us when it represents those of us from Cuba, Costa Rica, or Mexico – very different cultures!" I was also asked to work on a study that looked at how well our leadership model considered any potential differences associated with these diverse groups. It was an African American male who commissioned this piece of work. I questioned – aren't leadership skills similar regardless of the differences with how someone looks?

Five years after my IBM experience, so thirty five years after my conversation with Barbara.... We as a country elect the first African American president. I found it curious that Caucasians consider him black. African Americans consider him too white. Obama has said he realized one day that he needed a race... other than the human race I guess. This reminds me of my experience in Jamaica. They have a whole class system based on shade of skin color. I was approached by Jamaican males asking me to be their baby mother – translated have their baby - so they could have children of lighter skin. Again, I was uncomfortable as the message was white is better.

Growing up, I went to public schools in an affluent town and while there may have been times I felt not as supported or included because I was a girl, I did not know what it was like to be minority because of

the color of skin. My daughter, who is now entering the 7th grade – the age I was when I had my talk with Barbara - attends a private school in a city but she has more socioeconomic diversity than I had or that she would have at our town's public school. For her first four years there, my blonde, blue-eyed, pale skinned daughter was a minority.... Now the demographics are changing a bit... but how did that affect her? I am sure in a myriad of ways. One of her best friends, African American girl keeps trying to straighten her hair. My daughter says, we all love her hair and don't understand why she does that.

The first things we notice about someone – first what color is their skin and second are they male or female? Then we make all sorts of assumptions. Then we get to know the next layer of difference or similarity to us... how much education they have, their communication style, talents, unique gifts, can they read? Then we make another layer or level of assumptions about who they are and we judge it by our assumptions or our own barometer – how similar or different from ME are they?

How do we hold ourselves up as better or less than others because of our differences? Even if we consider ourselves educated, liberal or enlightened and earnestly try to be inclusive, we all have our prejudices, preferences or blindspots. I invite you to consider how you keep yourself honest and in-check with being inclusive? And some would say we have gone overboard in being "PC"- politically correct. And yet, there is this growing global consciousness about "no human left behind." Somehow, we won't evolve as a planet unless we go with our neighbor – in trying to understand and appreciate them - or we bring our neighbor along with us.

We are so afraid of offending someone that we sanitize and make everything all vanilla to strike at the mean. What happens when you get average? You get average. No grist for the mill. No pizzazz. Nothing stands out. No color.

There are ways in which we are all similar and ways in which are different. Is that so bad? Be honest, there are people you would rather not include – because you hate people who dominate conversations, who can't spell, or who are sports fanatics or whatever your biases and prejudices are. For me, I hate gender stereotypes...and I have to admit, the older I get, the more I see why there are some generalities...whether it is about men not asking for directions, men being physically stronger than women, or women being better at

multi-tasking. Ah I know I have just hit a chord with some of you who are now making a judgment about me or what I just said!

We are hard wired to categorize incoming data. So, I use the metaphor of skin because it is the most obvious and politically-charged difference we experience with one another.... This difference and religious differences are the reasons why most of the world's wars were fought...

In the last ten days I have come across a host of different stories in the media that address race and gender issues. The first, was an article on AOL titled: "Banned Because Of Complexion." I thought – what? Someone couldn't associate due to bad acne? If this was the case, I would have been kicked out of many a function. The subtitle was: "Private Pool Bans Minority Campers." This is a case of a private swim club in Philadelphia that asked a group of minority children not to return because some members complained about their race. The story was somewhat vague and the club is under investigation. I guess I am naïve as I was shocked that such a blatant case of discrimination could occur today.

On the flipside, the New York Times the next day ran an article, "Interracial Roommates Can Reduce Prejudice." This article highlighted findings by universities. Many said the interracial roommates were problematic...but at Ohio State, where housing was tight, the roommates were told to work it out. "The most interesting thing we found was that if the relationship managed to continue for just 10 weeks, we could see an improvement in racial attitudes." Ten weeks to get used to any roommate, because we all have our differences, is not a lot of time and just makes logical sense to me.

Skin matters and it doesn't matter. I can say, we all experience questions, searching and sufferings as part of the human condition – so we have the human experience in common. And yet, if I grew up as a black female in the south, by that very nature, my experience of life IS going to be different than a white male in the north...or a black male in Africa than a black male in England or a white female in Kenya.... WE say it shouldn't matter...and yet, our packaging does make a difference.

I remember being in a diversity class in graduate school over ten years ago and feeling my buttons being pushed when Jackie, an angry young African American woman in the class was speaking of her experience of not being given as much chance in life because she was black. I

remember being very annoyed at how she dominated the class because of her issue when we should be looking at it more globally. I also remember wondering how she could say she was disadvantaged when she was part of diversity development programs, had mentors...she received more support and help than I did!

Although on the surface, it looked like I was given every advantage in life. I grew up in an affluent upper-middle class town, I was white and was cultured in a community and family that valued education, the arts and culture. Yet, did she know that, while my classmates were driving porches to school, I was hitchhiking, and my family was on food stamps? We had every utility shut off at one point because my father lost his job. My mother reminded me recently that we spent one Christmas without heat because we had no oil so we broke up a chair in the garage to use for firewood. I had to pay for 90% of my college because my parents couldn't afford it. I wasn't one of those who got scholarships – instead I worked three jobs, took five years to finish and another 15 to pay off my student loans.

Yet when I went to college people made assumptions about my “privileged” background once they heard about my hometown. I can't say this didn't help me. And yes, I did benefit from a fantastic educational system. And I was conditioned by my town, school and family to have internalized a high value for education which motivated me to work really hard to obtain a college degree, and subsequently graduate degrees. And I wonder that if I was walking around my hometown now with Jackie, would people make assumptions about who we each are based on our race?

My point is, we can make generalizations about each other because of our skin color, our gender, our class... but we often don't know each other's stories and how those outer appearances effected or impacted us – or what we created with the circumstances we were given or found ourselves in, in life.

The most widely observed news story related to race and gender this week could be the questioning of the Supreme Court justice nominee Sonia Sotomayor.

Upon being examined as to whether or not she will allow her race and gender to effect her ability to rule judiciously, Ms. Sotomayor said, “Life experiences have to influence you. We're not robots who listen to evidence and don't have feelings. We have to recognize those feelings, and put them aside.”

I'm not looking to get into a political discussion but to point out, how heated the issue of race and gender still is – whether it is addressed directly or indirectly. I read a lot of critiques and opinions by Professors at Harvard, Yale and Columbia Law Schools and other so called experts, on the issues and how the proceedings are playing out.

Alan Dershowitz a Professor at Harvard Law School, said “Senators pretend to be outraged that a judge might be influenced by her background; and a nominee pretends she misspoke...Every practicing lawyer knows that these external factors matter — and matter a great deal. ...It is precisely because these factors matter so much that it is important to have individuals from different backgrounds on the Supreme Court.”

Basically the consensus is – most of the focus is on the fact that she is a woman and a Puerto Rican – it matters, to have diversity representation – and it doesn't matter – because ultimately what matters is, in the words of Cristina Rodríguez, a professor at N.Y.U. Law School and a former clerk to Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, “her critical evaluation of her long record as a judge and to eliciting her judicial philosophy and views on the issues the Court will face in coming years.”

Lani Guinier, a professor at Harvard Law School said “Biography has always mattered in the nomination process. And yes, it may 'affect the facts that judges choose to see.' Indeed, cognitive psychology and history predict that every justice acts from a perspective. There are contradictions here and it is the Senate's duty not to gloss over them. These court nomination battles should focus on justice, not race and gender and empathy.”

So, I say race and gender matter. They really matter. And they don't always matter. And the other aspects of ourselves matter. They really matter. And they don't always matter.

It reminds me of the old Indian adage that goes something like, you can't really understand your neighbor until you have walked a mile in her moccasins. Okay artist license a bit!

President Obama addressed the N.A.A.C.P. convention on the organization's 100th anniversary in New York on Thursday, and “directing his remarks to ‘all the other Barack Obamas out there who might one day grow up to be president. ‘...No one has written your destiny for you...Your destiny is in your hands, and don't you forget

that. That's what we have to teach all of our children! No excuses! No excuses!"

We may think we are open minded and liberal but just because of life experience, we may be blind or insensitive to aspects of other's reality that matter for themselves or our society. Ultimately, I say it only matters if it keeps us from being better individuals or better as a society or organization.

The key is being clear and aligned on what we mean by better. I don't think it means we sanitize the differences so they don't matter – but pushing and challenging each other to learn more and foster greater understanding and connection amongst our differences and because of our differences. Differences are what fuel us to find creative ideas or solutions. The truth is, Jackie irked me because there was truth in what she said. And I irked her, because there was truth in what I said. And Barbara's one sentence sent me on a lifetime of awareness that kept me coming back to her observation every five to ten years when I was struck by something that helped continue to illuminate that one insight for me. Barbara was such a gift for me. I had my 30 year high school reunion last weekend and I was disappointed to not find Barbara there.

How much do we associate, socialize and really try to get to know those who are different than us? Or do we have the same experiences and seek validation for our ways of being or living? How often are you out of your comfort zone? Some of you say – life is hard enough, I want to be in my comfort zone as much as I can. And yet, how else can you grow?

Have you ever found yourself in a room full of people where you counted those who are like you and those who are different – whether it was your gender, race or another aspect? What orientations to gender and racial differences were you raised with and how have you lived? What have or will you pass on to your children?

So, this is about my story and not about my story. How do we rise above our stories.... To be more and learn more than how we or others have defined us?

In the words of Obama, "No excuses. No Excuses."