

Witness

Category: Race

written by Elizabeth Chuang | July 31, 2016

I am the product of a couple hundred years of Western European immigration to the northeastern United States. My parents were left-leaning but square churchgoers who were inspired by the Civil Rights movement and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in particular. My father began a career as a Methodist minister. However, being a rather cerebral introvert, he soon realized the ministry suited him poorly. When he left the profession suddenly, we landed in Poughkeepsie, New York, where he was able to secure work through IBM.

In a few years, we were financially back on our feet. But, much to the horror of friends and family, my mother insisted that we remain in the Poughkeepsie schools. About 70 percent of the children in the district were African-American. She rightly saw the rampant *de facto* segregation and, due to a combination of her political idealism and plain stubbornness, kept us where we were. The fact that this was viewed as a radical act in my parents' social circle speaks volumes about race in America.

Growing up white in a black school meant that I witnessed the tremendous violence—emotional, mental and physical—that is visited upon African-Americans. One of my brother's classmates was shot and killed by the police at age 14, while breaking into the high school, unarmed, on a dare. Gang violence maimed or killed some of my classmates. A dear friend from elementary school had her first baby when we were 13. Only later in life did I understand that her pregnancy was the result of statutory rape. Nevertheless, the blame for her situation was placed by the adults in my life on black female sexual precociousness and promiscuity. I watched one black classmate take on the elite honors students in a school debate and wipe the floor with us intellectually, but still not be considered college material. I could go on and on.

I am vulnerable to the particular kind of mental insecurity that comes from constantly having to explain a reality that others refuse to acknowledge. I remember feeling a slight panic rise in my throat while sitting in a classroom at Vassar, realizing that we were discussing racism in a room filled solely with Caucasians. I came to practice medicine in the Bronx ostensibly so that I can serve this community and work toward social justice, but mostly because I feel slightly crazy anywhere else. I struggle to raise my voice without drowning others' voices. I struggle to balance my professional identity with my drive for political activism. I am here for the long haul. I will not ever tire of this struggle.

Elizabeth Chuang

New Rochelle, New York