The Real Me

Category: Stories
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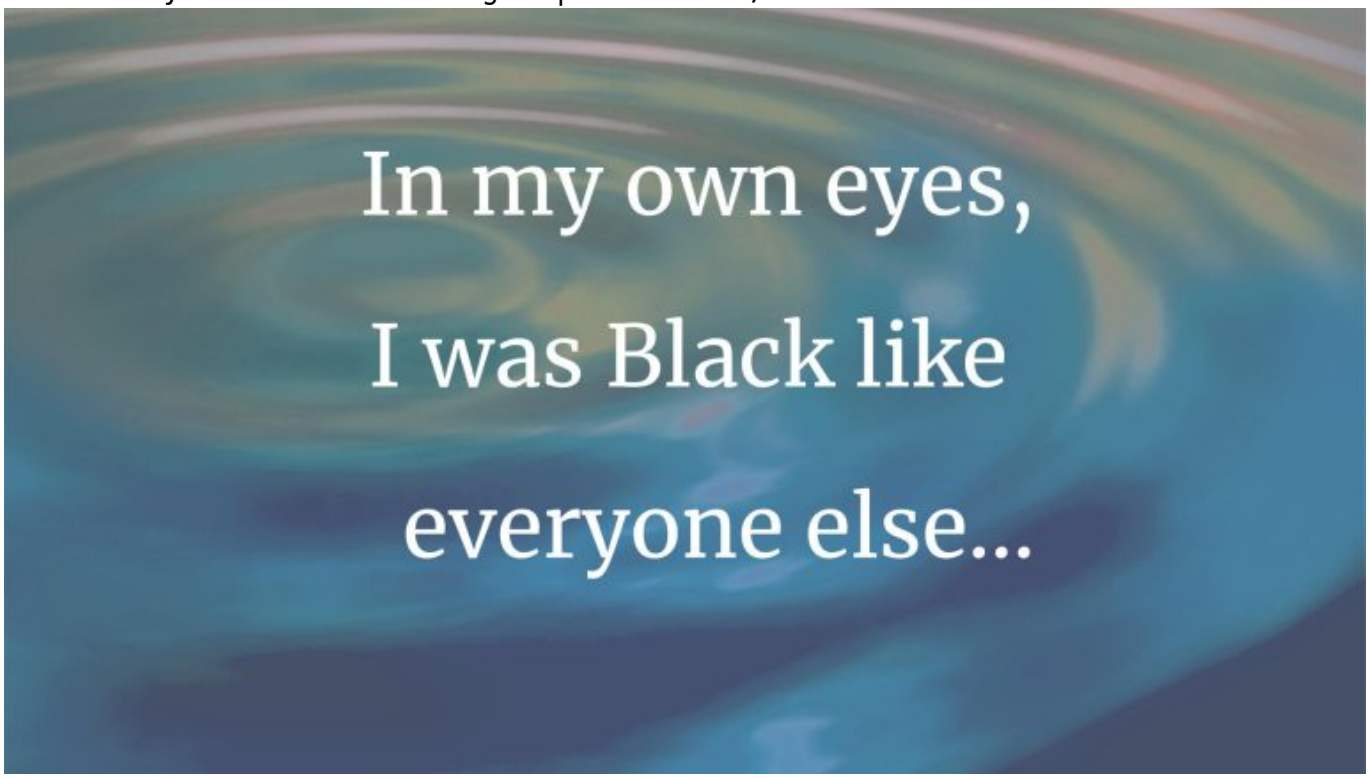

Editor's Note: This piece was a finalist in the Pulse *writing contest, "On Being Different."*

"What are you?"

It's impossible to count the number of times I've been asked this question, directly or indirectly.

When my family moved to Milwaukee from the South, I was twelve.

One day soon after, I was digging in my locker at Audubon Middle School when a girl named Tammy walked up to me.

"What are you?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" I asked back.

"You know—what, uh, nationality are you?"

"I'm Black."

Tammy folded her arms and said, "You ain't Black! You mixed or something. But you ain't Black!"

I don't remember what followed, but I do remember feeling that I didn't belong. Not only was I in a new school and a new state, but apparently the way I *looked* was new, too.

I never told my mother what happened that day. I never told anyone. Tammy's words repeated over and over in my mind, like a song stuck on "Play." This was the beginning of a long journey of wondering why people questioned what I was.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the first time that people had seen something different about me. As a six-year-old, I'd enjoyed going to the bank with my mother. A free lollipop every time! I'd sit in the back seat, playing with my doll. My mother would pull up to the drive-through, then tell me to come sit on her lap.

Why does she want me to sit on her lap? I'd think. *I'm not a baby.*

I would climb over the seat and do as I was told, not daring to question her orders.

"They're always breaking their necks to see you," she'd say occasionally. "I'm going to give them a good look."

I would watch the white bank tellers crane their necks to see me. I remember feeling something that I had no name for at the time, but eventually identified: a sense that I was different.

As I grew older, I realized that there was something about how I looked that people felt a need to question.

In my own eyes, I was Black like everyone else in my family. Looking in the mirror, I saw a brown-skinned girl staring back. My mother was my biological mother, and she was Black, and my father (at least, the man I was told was my father) was Black too. What was so different about me?

Was it my hair, which stayed straight even when it was wet? Was it my eyes, which were blue at birth, and later green? Or was it my skin, which was light, bright, almost white? Growing up, these questions haunted me.

After high school, I took my scholarship money and headed to the University of California-Irvine as a premed major. I'd never been there and didn't know anyone.

I'm getting out of Milwaukee and away from the questions, I thought.

In the dorms, one of my suitemates, Tanesha, was Black.

"What are you?" she asked, about a week after we'd met.

"I'm Black," I responded.

She and I got along at first. It was as if we shared a secret bond, being among the college's very few Black students. We'd talk and laugh about our younger days, when we had to be home before the streetlights came on, and how, if we got a whipping (pronounced "whuppin' "), we had to go and get our own switch (twig). If it was too little, our mothers would get one much thicker, so it was best to choose a size in between.

But when Tanesha saw me hang out with our white suitemates, things changed. Suddenly she had very little time for me, saying she had to study or go to events at the Black Student Union. She also looked at me differently; at times she seemed to look right through me.

My white suitemates tolerated me because, in their words, I had a “permanent tan.” But one day, as I was polishing my toenails, my white suitemate Amy said, “Only loose girls polish their toenails.”

I didn’t say anything. I just kept polishing, thinking, *Tanesha polishes her toenails, too.*

I felt like a marble in a pinball machine. When I bounced to Tanesha, I related to the music she listened to, the TV shows she watched and the food she ate. But I didn’t look like her. She commented on how I washed my hair every day and teased me because I couldn’t dance.

“It’s your white side coming out,” she said laughingly.

Feeling hurt and confused, I’d bounce to Amy and my other white suitemates. I fit in with them for the very reasons I didn’t fit with Tanesha—but, in reality, I didn’t fit with either.

I recall hearing Amy and my other white suitemates talking about Black people liking fried chicken and watermelon.

“*I* don’t like watermelon,” I said. They just looked at me and kept talking.

After that first year I left UC-Irvine, returned to Milwaukee and enrolled at Marquette University. I had already switched my major from premed to psychology, telling myself that physics and chemistry were too difficult. A psychology class I’d taken had introduced me to the study of the human mind and human behavior. At the time, I didn’t realize how powerful and pervasive were my feelings of not fitting in, and the questions about my identity. They were so powerful and pervasive, in fact, that they changed the trajectory of my career. I went on to complete a psychology degree at Marquette.

After graduating, I started as a research assistant with the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), and almost thirty years later I’m still here, now as a research-program manager. Most of my work focuses on behavioral and community-based research. I find this area of study very rewarding: It allows me to straddle both cultures while making a difference through research.

At the start of my career, my responsibility was to recruit study participants at risk of contracting HIV. Our study population was mainly underserved people of color. I found the recruitment process interesting and easy: Even when the potential subjects didn’t trust MCW or medical researchers, they trusted *me.*

I remember calling a participant to remind her of an interview, and hearing the man who’d answered the phone tell her that “a white lady” was on the line; I stifled a giggle.

Later, after meeting me, the participant said, “Wait until I tell my brother. You aren’t white; you just mixed.”

I just smiled.

I was very protective of my participants, because I know how it feels to come to a place where not many people look like you. My office was located on the east side of Milwaukee, and many of our participants had never been to that side of town. Taking the bus was a complicated nightmare, and people often got lost. I told them to call my cell as soon as they got off the bus; I’d stand in front of the building, even in winter, waving to make sure that they saw me.

As my career progressed, I started to wonder why I’d been assigned to recruit and interact with this particular population. Was it because of my skills, because I looked similar to them, or perhaps both?

Over time, I’ve become an acknowledged liaison between my institution and the community. I enjoy using my abilities to build rapport, instill mutual trust and teach the research assistants, coordinators and investigators how to work transparently with the community.

My career has been much like my life—a journey marked by asking and answering questions. People still question what I am, but now I have a satisfying answer: I’m a human being who’s learned to embrace being different.