

## 50 YEARS OF *LOVING*: WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING COLORBLIND?

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When I was a little girl, as far as I was concerned everybody looked like me. Jesus was white, so was Santa and every single one of my classmates. My mom was white, so was my dad, so was my whole family and anyone I saw in our tiny, rural Missouri town. Our exposure to other races was on television and most of the time I was not allowed to watch any of that programming—specifically what my dad referred to as “thugs” on the news or the late night comedy show, *In Living Color*. Even the closest stores did not carry ethnic baby dolls and my books were filled with white faces. I was completely colorblind at that point in time. Closed off from exploring not only other races, but also cultures that were different than rural, white America.

That changed on a shopping trip to the big city (Kansas City) when I was four years old. My parents made this hour and a half trip to the JCPenney outlet mall a couple of times each year. While mom and dad hunted for bargains, my sister and I would weave in, out, and under the clothing racks until our mother called us over to stretch a shirt across our bellies to measure.

It was during that shopping trip that I remember very clearly my first experience interacting with a black person. And it did not go well.

A young, black man with his white partner by his side pushed a stroller with their beautiful biracial baby around the jewelry counter. They stopped to browse and my sister and I, perched under a clothing rack, watched them. I noticed he was different than everyone and pointed it out to my sister. She was a year older than I and a bit of a know-it-all so she told me “they like to be called niggers.” Armed with a fancy new term and excited to use it, I wiggled out from under the rack and walked up to the family. “Hi nigger,” I said, as politely as I could.

Things did not go how I had planned. I thought they would be impressed that I knew this fancy new word. Instead, the situation

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quickly became chaotic and scary. As my dad dragged me toward the exit I watched my mother. Her back was pressed against a wall of jeans, and the tall, now scary black man pointed his finger toward her face.

Dad and I sat in the car while mom fended for herself in the outlet mall. I tried to piece together what had happened and what would still happen as best as my four-year-old mind could. All I really knew was that I was in trouble because I used a word that was not nice. It was a swear word.

I do not know where my sister picked up on the bad bit of terminology, especially because the “n word” was not used in our household. Growing up in a town full of ignorant racists I am not surprised that is what she thought. I do not blame her either. But we still had much to learn. For us, it was a good first lesson in diversity.

My mother probably would not agree. It is not a memory we really share over dinner with houseguests. It was a shameful experience. The man came up behind her with a mouth full of dirty words and completely caught her off guard. She apologized profusely and instead of feeling fearful, she felt compassion for him. She too had very little experience with black people so she explained as best she could that we lived far in the country and never interacted with black people. In fact, that was probably the closest I had ever been to a black person. Her cheeks burned as she tried to explain we really are not horrible people who burn wooden crosses and dangle nooses from tree limbs. She assured him that she does not even use that kind of language and certainly did not teach it to me; she did not even know we knew it.

I am thirty-two years old now and I will never forget that day. As we pulled away from the outlet mall, I stared out the car window, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. I did not mean to use a nasty word or to hurt that poor man’s feelings or to put my mom in that situation. I was not scared that he was different; I wanted to be nice and accepting. I just did not know the right way. From that day on, “nigger” became one of those words I tucked away in my mind never to be used in front of my parents again. Now when I heard it, I recognized it. I started piecing instances together when I heard a family member or a schoolmate say it. It was a bad name for a black person. I did not know where it came from. I did not know why black people hated to hear it from white people. In fact, I knew black people called each other it so, to me, it was just a confusing term.

Throughout school we never really learned about *all* of black history. We discussed slavery, and if we talked about the Civil Rights movement I do not really remember it. I did not care. I was white,

after all. It did not have a lot to do with my friends or me, and our teachers (many of whom grew up in the same or similar surrounding communities) did not make the effort to help us relate to someone being persecuted because of his or her skin color. We talked about agriculture and science, math and WWII, we would talk about God before we discussed racism.

In junior high school, we had one biracial student move to town. I spent time with him, along with just a handful of my friends. He was a lot like us on the inside, but on the outside he was clearly different. I remember we would ask him about his skin color and what it was like to be black and what his family was like. It was as if we truly believed he would be different because his skin had a bit more melanin. I was completely enamored by his uniqueness. Not everyone was. Within weeks he found a noose dangling in his locker and his family moved away. We never had another “different” person attend our school, except for a half filipine, half white family that had deep family roots in the community, and out of all the sports teams we played, there was one black athlete. The only steady exposure to African American culture in my life was through music—Color Me Badd, Boys II Men, and All-4-One—to name a few.

It was not until college that I found myself interacting with many cultures. People of all races were in my classes, in the cafeteria, in my study groups, on the sports teams, in the bars, everywhere.

A year or so into college I took a job at Dairy Queen. It was there that I met KeOnna. To be honest, I was very nervous to work with her. I was under the impression that all black women were loud, mouthy, and angry. I kept my distance but as a manager, she was often tasked with teaching me how to do things (like perfecting the famous Dairy Queen cone curl). The longer I worked with KeOnna the closer we became. Before I knew it, KeOnna was more than a co-worker, she was a friend. A really good friend. We swapped secrets, talked about boys, crashed at each other’s apartments, and she took the time to answer my silly questions about African American culture. Then one time she asked me to come home with her and meet her family.

I do not want to admit what I expected and the reality was nothing like I had imagined. Her mom is kind and funny and welcoming. Sure, she made the best mac and cheese and collard greens I had ever had, but that was the only time during that visit that they fit the stereotype I had been taught. Her family was “normal.” Her mom not only had a full-time job, she also owned a motorcycle club. No one was in jail. There were not drugs and guns everywhere. And it was for the most part, a lot like my family. There were pictures on the wall full of

black faces and even her mom's knick-knack collections were black figurines. I did not even know these types of things existed. I loved her family. Sure, I felt a little out of place as a very white, very uncultured girl from the middle of nowhere, but they welcomed me. We broke bread. We talked, laughed, and we were just people.

It was this experience that changed my perspective. I remember taking time after that to open my eyes and my mind. I was more aware of the black people I saw on television and in our community. There were very successful black politicians, wealthy black families, and black entrepreneurs and inventors. It sounds a little silly now but I never took the time to truly see successful black people.

It saddens me that it took more than twenty years to realize we are all the same. Before that, "nigger" was just a bad word, black people could not keep a job, and because I was white, I just assumed I was destined to do greater things than people who were not white. Boy was I wrong.

In 2012, KeOnna graduated from Creighton University with a Clinical Doctorate Degree in Occupational Therapy. She became the first in her family to graduate college, added a doctorate, and now works in an Omaha hospital as an occupational therapist.

I think part of the reason KeOnna and I got along so well is because we had similar taste in men. I had for many years been attracted to black men and she was my safe zone. I could be myself around her and ask her lots of questions with no judgment. Questions like: What does this slang term mean? Why do you put grease in your hair? If I say this, does that sound racist?

I dated black men quietly. I did not know how my family would react or my friends back home so I did not say anything until I needed to. The only family member I felt comfortable enough to expose my secret to was my sister (yes, that same one!).

She had her own stories of intermingling with other cultures in college and by this time we had both relocated to Lincoln. While Lincoln is not a thriving metropolis, it is no stranger to diversity. After I had dated a series of black men and brought them along to dinner, she was used to it. The time finally came to open up to the rest of the family when I met Sam.

I really liked Sam and so did my sister. He was unlike any man I had ever met. He was polite, well educated, and very thoughtful. I was able to build trust with him and before long we were ready to get married.

The fact that he is black was not a complete surprise to my parents. I had been dropping subtle hints for several years that I had a preference for black men. But, at that time, a mixed *marriage* was not

something they really wanted for me and there was some resistance. My parents were not racist. They were ignorant and still living in that same tiny, predominantly white town where they had limited exposure to other cultures.

Getting married for us was not nearly the struggle it was for reluctant Civil Rights heroes Richard and Mildred Loving. The Lovings were a 1960's interracial couple whose love defied all odds when they fought the legal system for the right to be married. At that time, there were still twenty-four states where interracial marriage was illegal. With the backing of the American Civil Liberties Union, the Lovings were able to convince the United States Supreme Court to strike down any remaining segregation laws, including their freedom to be married. While we did not have to make a case to the United States Supreme Court, we did have some obstacles.

My husband is Nigerian and we decided to get married eight months after we met. As if navigating the sea of immigration paperwork was not difficult enough, the biggest battle was gaining acceptance from my family. It was heartbreaking but my parents did not attend our ceremony. Regardless, it was a beautiful, intimate event. I had my sister and brother-in-law by my side, he had his brother and uncle by his side, and though it was not the wedding I had dreamed about, it has become one of my favorite memories. On Loving Day, June 12, 2012, we were married. I chose Loving Day because it represented how far we have come as a nation and that I could choose to marry *this* man, whatever his color, wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted; and "wherever" happened to be the former Federal Courtroom at the Grand Manse in Lincoln, Nebraska.

My parents have since changed their mind and my family loves Sam. I would not say our union was a courageous act—my dad might call it rebellious—but whatever it was, marrying who I wanted was worth the risk and it was the experience my parents, family, and some friends needed to open their eyes to a whole new world.

Now family dinners include a mix of American and Nigerian dishes. The faces in the pictures on my wall are pink, chocolate, and cinnamon and books in our library are about many different cultures and people.

Hearing the story of the Lovings, as well as the stories of other Civil Rights activists, and meeting "different" people has profoundly impacted my life and helps us "outsiders" to understand what it is like to be viewed as less for something you cannot control. In my experience, so many of those stories were not shared with me until I took it upon myself to try to relate and put myself into the shoes of those who were persecuted for something so silly as skin color.

I have now stood in the shadows of Martin Luther King, Jr.: where he was born, where he preached, in his home that was bombed in Montgomery, where he was murdered, and where his body rests. I visited the site where Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat. I talked to a man outside Brown Chapel in Selma who marched to the Edmund Pettus Bridge along with 600 other people to quietly protest racial injustice in 1965. I met Rev. Robert Graetz and his wife Jean, a white couple who were sent from the west coast to the south in 1955 to pastor an all black church. Graetz was appalled by the extreme racist behaviors in the south and became a friend of and activist for Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. I have seen the home of white Judge Seybourn Lane, who voted against special seating for white bus riders and helped to end the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I have walked through Kelly Ingram Park (across from the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church) where many African American lives were lost at the hands of ignorant, racist people.

Each experience opened my eyes and touched my heart and the more I learned and saw, the easier it was for me to empathize. These stories need to be shared with not just the black people who relate to them, but especially to other races and cultures in our nation who cannot: White people who hate black people; White people who do not understand black history; even people from other countries who do not share our history. Despite the color of my husband's skin, our black history is not his black history. He grew up in a world where most people looked like him. When my husband and I walk by an old white man with lips pursed to say something nasty or we see a woman clutch her bag extra tight when we pass, he is nearly oblivious. And, in today's world, that is dangerous. As a black man living and working in America he needs to know and understand and not be naive. Naive like I was and like so many still are.

I believe it is important to teach America to NOT be colorblind. Instead, we should see all colors. To embrace each race for the history and culture that has formed the world we live in. To have friends and family who are different so that when they are hated for it, we can empathize and educate and stand up to the ignorant, the racist, and the hateful and try to help them see that we are all really just people.

When I share our wedding story and the significance of Loving Day, one of the first reactions is, "Wow, I didn't know that." Many cannot even fathom that there was a time, 50 years ago, that two people could not get married because they did not look the same.

*Loving v. Virginia*<sup>1</sup> serves as a landmark in the journey for Civil Rights that many in our country are too ashamed to own up to. Much of what happens in the shadows is now being exposed. Our nation is experiencing a revival of sorts—a rude awakening that there is still a clear divide in accepting people who are different.

Sam has made me a better person. He has taught me patience, how to be caring, and how to relax. He has shown me love like no other and he listens like I aspire to. But most importantly, he has been a blessing to my entire family. He has changed the way we all see different cultures, especially black people. In August 2017, Sam and I will welcome our first child and my parents are ecstatic. They are excited to see our family grow, excited to love and nurture another beautiful child, and especially excited because they are confident Sam will be a wonderful father, black skin or not. He has crushed the stereotype of what a “black man” represented to them. He is now a son-in-law, a brother, a grandson, a nephew, my partner, our future, a hard worker, funny, Godly, and a provider. He is finally just one of us.

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1. 388 U.S. 1 (1967).