

If You're Color Blind, How Do You See Me?

by Kevin Hofmann

Kevin Hofmann was born to a white mother and an African American father in Detroit in 1967. He was adopted by a white couple who were already parents to three biological children.

At the age of eight, after living for five years in a black neighborhood, I said goodbye to the group of children whose skin looked like mine. My father received a promotion and as his title changed, so did our neighborhood. We moved three miles away, still within the city limits of Detroit, to a white neighborhood. In this new neighborhood, I was the only child of color. In my first contact with a group of the local white children, I hoped no one would notice that I was different. As a young boy, I wanted what most young boys want: to be just part of the group. Immediately, as one of the older boys was talking, he used the word "colored" to describe a man he was talking about. Right then I knew things would be different. This older boy, up to this point, had no need to filter his words or thoughts. As the word "colored" crossed over his bottom lip, the realization of what he said in the presence of a colored child showed on his face. He stopped mid-sentence, and looked right at me and said, "Oh...no offense." I quickly learned that in this new group, the words "no offense" were used to absolve you of any offensive behavior as long as you were mindful enough to utter them. In this new environment, I would learn some valuable rules in etiquette that I had never needed in my old neighborhood, where I was part of the majority.

What I also learned was that I was seen as different and would be treated as different. In this new atmosphere where even the air seemed out-of-the-ordinary, the pride I had developed in being black in my old black neighborhood became my armor. The insults and condescending remarks towards me, or towards people whose skin looked like mine, bounced off of me. I was proud to be black and that pride that was planted and watered in my previous neighborhood and by my black friends that I saw every day at school. They became my insulation against these new personal attacks.

In this time of confusion, as I tried to regain the confident footing I always had, I found comfort in those children who looked like me. At school I had a place to exhale. I could relax and inhale strength that came from those who had similar experiences. At lunch and at recess, over my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, I could share with my friends of color how I was being treated by my new friends and they would listen, and support, and confirm that what I was feeling and experiencing was real. It was what their parents warned them about. It was what they too felt and experienced when they were in a situation where they were the minority. It was in

those conversations with other black children that I learned those that treated us as "less than" were wrong. It was in those conversations that we bonded together. In those conversations, as we played on the swings and talked, I found strength in who I was as a black child.

At the age of eight, I began to understand the effects of race, racism, and prejudice as the black community saw it. I became a student of the black kids around me. I learned about the black culture through osmosis. I pulled it in from the children that surrounded me. In these unofficial tutoring sessions, I learned how to move through life as a child of color. In this color-filled environment, my training began. As I learned of the inequalities of society, I began to work the muscles that would help me not only survive but thrive. Through this experience, being a minority became something that I cherished and embraced rather than something that I despised.

Having consistent contact with children who reflected back to me a positive image of black people was life-changing. Learning the richness of a culture my parents weren't equipped to teach me gave me a peace in who I am that continues to this day. This peace—constructed from my connection with others like me—is what the majority of transracial adoptees who have never had this connection chase after obsessively.

It saddens me to realize a large majority of transracial adoptees are still being raised in all-white environments where being color-blind is embraced over being racially conscious. To be color-blind in a family that has children of color is to say you are making the choice to ignore a large part of who that child is.

Each year I learn more and more about who I am and what it means to be a black man in this society. This on-going evolution has been a peaceful journey. I look forward to finding out more about who I am, but I am not sure I would have the same excitement if I was raised in a vacuum that choose to look past me as a child of color in favor of chasing the idea of creating a color-blind society. It is vitally important that parents who adopt transracially be racially conscious. We must see the children of color in our lives and acknowledge who they are and the importance of the community that they came from. If we don't, it is still too easy for this world to convince them that they are indeed "less-than."

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