

The Sound of the Whistle

A Response to “Identity in a Multicultural World: Who Am I?”

By Jennifer Martens

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Coach St. Thomas, standing tall and tanned with his newly dyed blonde locks and white visor situated himself at the opposite end of the chalk outlines from the group of young elementary students who were waiting impatiently in line. Coach raised one arm in the air to signal the next racers to take their places at the start. I waited to see his arm fall to his side as I squatted into a running position. As I stood nervously, he placed his silver whistle up to his lips and suddenly a bright ray of sunshine reflected sharply into my eyes. I could no longer see Coach standing in the field, so I listened intently for the sound of the whistle. At the sound of the high shrill, my feet pedaled below me and the dry grass cracked and broke as I propelled myself toward the finish line of the 50 yard dash, but it was already too late. My very athletic schoolmate had crossed the white chalky finish line at least three seconds before me.

I still remember how fast she could run. Mercedes, the only black girl in my sixth grade elementary school, leapt over hurdles like they were mere cracks in the sand below her red tennis shoes, achieved physical performance records for the school, and always stood out among the crowd of whites and Hispanics. Words I heard my family speak as a child come back to me now, words that referred to her as the “token black person” for the school.

Now, I would probably be the “token white person” at the same school. Blacks may not be prevalent in the school system I attended, but the Hispanic population has increased as I noted from online statistics given on the school’s website. Even then, twenty years ago, half of my friends were Hispanics, while I, a white girl, looked like I arrived from the North Pole instead of a golden-skinned blonde that many Sonora Desert Caucasian females turned themselves into. I

may not have stood out at the time, but I always stood lost amid the Latino culture. Looking back, I realized I grew up grouping all of the Hispanics I spoke with or saw into one giant group. I wonder now if they placed me in one huge group labeled “Whites.”

In my last year at that elementary school, it was required that everyone in our grade volunteer at a nursing home. I came back from the two-mile school bus ride that drove us between the home and my elementary school bursting to talk to my friends in other classes about my experience. To my embarrassment, I told one of my good Latino friends that she would like going to the nursing home because there was a lady there who only spoke Spanish.

“Is she from Spain or something?” she questioned, looking for the significance of my words.

“No.....I don’t think so.” I didn’t think I was being racist, either.

Comments of my childhood continue to flood my mind and I gulp with the shame that rises from my soul. I remember telling the same girl some of the cruel things that my brother said at home when he spoke of Mexicans. My friend never responded; we just kept playing on the large orange playground equipment until we heard the recess whistle. Year after year, my friend continued to invite me to her house for her birthday parties and I always went, wondering what her family was talking about in a language so different from mine that sprung forth from mouths that formed the same gestures and evoked the same emotions as my own.

After I moved to Indiana, I realized I lived among even greater diversity than in Arizona. Unfortunately, I secretly still wonder if the black girl who enters the room can run as fast as Mercedes did in sixth grade. When I enter a Mexican restaurant, I wonder who’s teaching the servers to speak English, not realizing that they might have always spoken English, just as I might have always spoken Spanish. But those are the questions brought to mind by my

childhood, the reminders of the way I acted previously and my reasons for combating such judgmental ideas in the present. I realize now that the same people may wonder how bad I am at sports or if I speak any language other than white American English based solely on my skin color. They may look at the way I dress and come to quick conclusions about my religious beliefs or my economic situation. Now, I realize that they may look at my children and wonder the same things about them.

Do I want such formulated judgments imposed on my children? Or do I want my children to be seen for who they are rather than the package they are wrapped in? They come from a white mother whose ancestors lived in this country since before the Declaration of Independence was written and a white father whose parents immigrated from Canada only decades ago. These facts helped to form my children, but they tell nothing of the spirit that lies within their hearts. I want them to be seen for their achievements and their intelligence, their humor and their hope, because that is how I want to be seen. I am the hope that was found after loosing loved ones to cancer. I am the humor that was found when the bank account was empty but the mailbox of bills was full. I am the intelligence that persevered through college while caring for two small children. I am the achievement of determination to overcome the prejudice views of my past. I am not just white or Christian or female, just as others are not just black, Muslim, or male.

I've always believed what is on the inside is reflected on the outside, but sometimes prejudgments are so dominant in the mind that they, too, are aimed at and reflected off of the outside of a person, causing blindness to the person who is viewing them. In order to regain your sight, you must listen for the whistle and ignore the blinding views. If you do so, eventually you will reach the white chalky finish line.