

FORUM

Powerful lessons about race



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

"Hope is believing in spite of the evidence... and watching the evidence change."

— Jim Wallis, Sojourners/Call to Renewal

"Where do all them black people come from," asked the 4-year-old white child.

The question caught my wife and the boy's father by surprise.

It was an innocent question that probably stems from a lack of exposure to different cultures. It's the type of question students might ask after years of attending predominantly one-race schools with little contact with people other than their own race.

The young child had seen one black woman after another come into the doctor's office and could not contain himself any longer. That's when he erupted like a volcano and blurted out the question.

It was an awkward situation. His father — uncomfortable and turning a deep shade of red — felt the need to explain.

"They have a right to be here," he said somewhat embarrassed.

My wife, the black face that prompted the outburst, sat quietly and observed.

You never know what children will say or when they will cause you to squirm a little.

Children's questions often lead to learning opportunities like the one a friend almost missed recently.

It started with a conversation about race with her daughter during a routine trip to the grocery store.

"Mom, why do all brown people have hair alike?" her daughter asked quietly.

The mother's initial response was to look around to see if anyone was listening.

She didn't want to offend anyone.

She answered quickly and tried to continue shopping.

"God made them that way," she said and tried to change the subject. "Where is the Swiss cheese?"

But her daughter would have none of that. She kept the heat on.

"Mom, brown people are so much prettier than white people," the daughter said. "Why do white and brown people fight with each other?"

"Let's not talk about it here," she said.

mother said.

Then she started to give what she described as the ingrained white response she had heard most of her life.

It was a response she had never questioned: "That's because black people think that white people can't be trusted. They just don't know us."

But something wouldn't let her say it.

Instead of blaming, she explained the "evil" white people sometimes possess.

"The evil," she said, "of trying to overpower, to be dominant, to make themselves better by making others hurt by robbing their dignity."

After she said it she felt a million times better. It was the truth, though it was the hardest sentence she'd ever said.

"An 8-year-old is pretty open," she told me later. "In my opinion, how we respond to those simple (yet deep) questions make the difference for the long-term view of the world. I just hope I give her the right direction and give her a bunch of stuff to set her up to sort out later on."

"Mom, do I have to be like white people?" the daughter asked.

"No, baby, you can be so much better. You already are," the mother replied.

That's when an angel appeared.

As the two were walking out of the store they saw an older black lady struggling with grocery bags. The mother and daughter had seen her several times during their conversation in the aisles of the store.

The daughter approached the older woman to offer help. The black woman smiled as mother and daughter helped her with the bags. They also walked with the woman to her car.

Exchanging good-byes, the older black woman gave them both something to think about.

"I overheard your conversation with your mom in the store about my people," she said. "You are a very special young woman. Trust and follow your heart. You aren't like most white people."

The daughter went away from the encounter feeling happy.

The mother learned a powerful lesson.

"I never saw the real flaw in my thinking," she would say later.

All because a child and a stranger weren't content to let business go on as usual.

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If we'd all just listened to Mom

Yolanda Young

Guest Columnist

My good friend Gus Johnson listened to his mother and landed the career of a lifetime.

He was supposed to be on his way to law school with the rest of the suckers at Howard University, but a conversation with his mother changed all that the summer before his senior year.

Gus said, "I was participating in the Boys Club's mentoring program. I spent a day with a lawyer, and at the end of the day, I knew I didn't want to be a lawyer."

After confiding this to his mother, she offered some words of wisdom that have stayed with Gus to this day:

"My mom said, 'Son, whatever you do, make sure it's something that you jump out of the bed in the morning to do, and if you had to, you'd do it for free.' That was the defining moment of my life because

it got me thinking in an entirely different way."

Instead of filling his days with the horrors of law firm billable hours, Gus gets to live out an extension of his childhood. As a sports commentator and play-by-play announcer for CBS Sports, Johnson's days are filled with the excitement and euphoria that could only come from watching NFL Football, March Madness or the Olympics.

Gus always loved sports.

On his high school basketball team jersey, he wore hometown great Isiah Thomas' number 11.

"My dad (Augustine Johnson) used to lay the floor at Cobo Hall for the Detroit Pistons. He was a facilities worker, so I got a chance when I was a kid to go down there."

As an all-state baseball player at University of Detroit Jesuit High School, Gus dreamed of being Lou Whitaker, the great second baseman for the Detroit Tigers, and was still hopeful of a career as a professional athlete when he entered Howard University on a full athletic scholarship. Those hopes were quickly dashed.

"My problem was that I was the slowest black man on earth."

Gus knew that he needed a fall back and just assumed that it would be in politics or law, but after that conversation with his mother, Gus went back to Howard on a mission: To find that thing he'd do for free. He interned at Howard University's radio and television stations and after numerous dead ends, got his break with KXXZ in Waco, Texas.

Gus counts the Olympics and meeting Bryant Gumbel as the biggest things to happen to him so far.

"To see this collection of athletes that aren't getting paid, competing in these obscure sports in the Winter Olympics; to see the passion and love they have for what they're doing, not only because it's their sport but also because they're representing their country; to see the drama that unfolds and to be a part of that and be the voice that broadcasts those stories was the highlight of not only my career, but my life."

Gus can't help but smile recalling his first meeting with Gumbel while reflecting on a childhood memory of

him. "I'd never met him before. We took a picture together. He showed me pictures of his kids. I was shaking because he was the first black person I saw on television (commentating). It was 1979 when Magic Johnson played against Larry Bird — Indiana State against Michigan State in the national championship game."

The first time I noticed him he was "a young, black announcer who came on and served as the pregame host for NBC sports. It was Bryant Gumbel, and I was 12 years old. My mother came by and stopped in front of the TV and said, 'Hey, son, maybe one day you can be like him.' I've got a picture on my refrigerator right now of me and Bryant."

Yolanda Young is a syndicated columnist and attorney living in Washington, D.C. A graduate of Captain Shreve High School, Howard University and Georgetown University Law Center, she is currently compiling her memoirs on growing up in Shreveport, La. She can be reached at yolanda_young@yahoo.com.

Children are living life without standards

Daryl and Estraletta Green

Guest Columnist

Little Dante gets everything he wants.

The 5-year-old even calls his parents by their first names. When he shouts profane words at his friends, his parents smile at his behavior. Little Dante is out of control. His teachers can't control him; his classmates dislike him; and his parents fear him. When in the grocery store, Dante's mother tells him to stop. Dante hits her with his fist. A senior citizen looks on in amazement. Dante's mother says, "I don't know what to do. He's an uncontrollable kid. What should I do?"

The senior smiles politely at the mother as Dante steps on his moth-

er's foot. Who's in control? Where are the parents?

Parents must start parenting if America is to regain its children. The Columbine and Heritage school shootings have proven that extreme violence can happen anywhere. This is a scary situation to any sane person. The killer could be the child next door or in your own home.

According to one study, many of these violent children do not come from abusive, neglectful parents. Some kids live their lives as if there are no consequences for their actions. Some parents place no expectations on their children. These are the ingredients for an accident waiting to happen. The child sees the world as a great big opportunity for fun — the world revolves around his/her wishes. NOT!

For example, 15-year-old Kip from Oregon, who was accused of fatally shooting his parents and two

high school classmates, had a history of problems. His parents were public school teachers with two children, living in a forested subdivision. Kip was a hot-tempered boy with a fetish for bombs, guns and killing. His parents tried to control his inner demons with Ritalin and counseling, but they finally gave in and bought their son a semiautomatic rifle. It was a heavy price to pay for their son's approval.

Who sets the standards? According to recent research, children of professionals today are less likely than similar children 25 years ago to reach as high on the economic ladder as their parents. Society really doesn't expect much from this generation.

I am constantly reminded of the little regard some children have for authority. Just look around your neighborhood and school. What has gone wrong? Our generation has abandoned the traditions of our

parents in an effort to be different. We trusted our hearts and listened to the family experts.

How does this lack of respect begin? It starts out quite innocently. A parent smiles at a little profanity from their toddler. Isn't that cute! Most people want to transfer blame — the media, uncaring parents, peer pressure, violent children, or the lack of strong gun laws. The media teach our children that they can have it all without any sacrifice.

To say that our children can escape this mad propaganda is not true. We must set the standards. We can't expect our children to act morally if their examples are immoral, hateful and unforgiving. Parenting is a hands-on, full-time duty. Parents from the past were uncompromising in their determination in expecting a lot out of their children.

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