

In My Skin

By Justice Stevens

Justice Stevens was adopted transracially with his sister. He shares his thoughts below about how the transracial placement affected him and what his parents did—and do—that help.

When I was eight I was transracially adopted. My parents are white and I'm Black. We lived in a small white suburban town. The number of Black kids in the town you could count on two hands. I didn't realize or pay attention to the fact that I was Black unless I was faced with racism, which came not just from kids, but adults as well. The racism I faced from adults (teachers, bus drivers) was when I went to them for help when kids called me the "N" word, and it was made clear that it wasn't an important issue to them.

It confused me to not know why the adults didn't take a stand against the racism I faced. It was painful as well. One thing always stuck with me, and that's when I was faced with racism, my parents stood against people who looked like them to protect me. It was important for me to see that as a child. I needed to know that my parents felt my pain, even though they would never be in my shoes. I needed to know that my feelings were validated, and that what I was facing was wrong.

Growing up I had prominent Black role models. One was my mom's co-worker named Celeste. I loved Celeste's energy and fashion style. She would do my and my sister's hair. My mom drove us to Boston to Celeste's house so she could braid our hair in the latest styles. To drive all the way to Boston, for us to have our hair done by Celeste was important to me! No offense to my mom, but I wasn't nervous any time Celeste did my hair. I thought, "She's Black, so she'll know exactly what to do to my hair!" I remember Celeste talking about the newest trends, movies, and music. I paid attention to how her decor was in her house, what type of shows or movies she watched, how she parented her son. Celeste was so cool in my eyes because in my mind that's who I was going to be when I was older, so I felt I had to pay attention to how she was. I felt I had to mimic her.

Another role model was my mom's friend Harriet, who was raising her granddaughter. Harriet had lived through the civil rights movement and experienced segregation. I always enjoyed listening to her stories. My mom always says that Harriet is her mom, and Harriet treated my mom like a daughter. They could talk about the struggles Harriet faced, even though my mom is white.

It's important that my parents embraced Black friends, and had Black friends who turned into family. It was important to see my white mom listen attentively, and have painful conversations with people like Harriet when they spoke about the injustice they faced. It was also important to see my mom have the conversations with Black people about their triumphs like when Harriet spoke about being involved in civil rights—being on the forefront for change and equality for African Americans.

My parents always had pictures of African Americans in the house and paintings by African Americans, even to this day even though my siblings and I haven't lived at home for many years. They brought our culture into the home.

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I think it's very important to also touch on how the birth kids or siblings of a different race can be affected by transracial adoption. When I was 14, my biological sister Tanya (14); my brother Max, who was 13 and is my parents' birth son; and my younger brother Melvin, who was 7 at the time and is Black all went to a camp in Roxbury, near Boston. Most of the campers were African American. I thought this was going to be fun, but I didn't have a good experience. Tanya and I were treated different—as if we weren't cool enough. The kids judged us for not knowing our culture. Max was embraced because it was expected that he didn't know "how to be Black." Melvin started to change how he talked, and started to use more slang. I started to resent Max because in my eyes he was more Black than me even though he was white—he listened to rap music and was into urban culture, and I couldn't handle it. I felt that it was so easy for him to be part of something I tried so hard to be part of that was a part of me.

But Max always stuck up for us. He was the cool white boy so when he stuck up for us, the kids backed down pretty quickly. It was automatic that Max stuck up for us because we were his siblings. Max lived in New Orleans for many years in a predominately Black neighborhood. He gravitates towards the African American community, that's where he feels he belongs. As an adult I embrace it, I'm proud of him. I love that he loves my culture, and I'm prouder that he also speaks out against the injustice we face. He had gone against people he's known his whole life to defend the African American community. I'm proud that he's my brother.

With the police brutality going on in the world, I am proud to say "Black lives matter" and to stand with my people. I'm prouder that my parents do also. They stand up to injustice, even if they have to take on people they've known for a long time. This is important for me to see and will always be important to me. My parents aren't afraid to stand up and stand by the side of African Americans and our struggles. They know that it's a real issue we face, I face, my Black siblings face every day. My parents say that white privilege exists. They don't water down what the people who look like them do to me or people who look like me.

My advice for transracial adoptive parents is to always stand up for what is right because your kids will be watching and they won't forget a single thing. Don't ever say you understand what it's like or what it must be like because you don't and you can't. Be by their side while they struggle with their identity and long for acceptance because it will happen. Listen to them—both what they say and what they are showing you through their actions. It will be ugly, scary even, but don't give up. Stay on the journey with them, let them know that you're there every step of the way. Some things you can guide, others you can't, and you have to be okay with that. It's critical that you allow them to express who they feel they are, or what makes them feel in touch with their roots, even if it makes you uncomfortable. It's going to be overwhelming at times, but you will all come out the other side enlightened.

You all will learn from each other. There will be a light at the end of the tunnel. It will all be worth it.

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