The Brown Bag Race ~ Carrie Powell

Carrie Powell wrote her paper “The Brown Bag Race” for Dr. Sloan’s College English I (ENG 10001) course. Students were asked to write a paper using a rhetorical focus on analysis of the idea of a person’s “race.”

“I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless” (Hurston, 30-33.) Those few lines from Zora Neale Hurston’s “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” have lingered in my mind during my delve into race. We are all the same container; hands, feet, minds, hearts. Inside, we are just as similar in the notion that we each hold things that are of no value to others but have absolute relevance in making up who we are. Race is finicky in its requirements to run with the pack. It tries to sort us into groups by the size and shape of our bags regardless of the contents within. In the beginning, I thought I had a definite sense of race. As time passed, I realized that for most of my life, I had never really given it much thought. Did I miss something? Had others gotten a head start on the path towards self-definition? My background taught me where I had descended from and whom I was comprised of. My own racial identity was not clouded, but not probed by my own conscious. With thoughts of race and what it meant to be of a particular race a ‘hot topic’ throughout my life, my sense of need to be defined by a race never developed… until now.

Born to a red-haired father and a blond-haired mother, it was safe to bet my mother was going to be able to mark “white” on my birth certificate. Why would she not? Both of my parents were white, all four of their parents were white, and all of their parents were white. We grew up in an old farmhouse outside of the city where you knew all of the neighbors even if they were ‘a ways away.’ We knew something about our descent; Dad would tell us of his French-Swiss line, and Mom told us of her German family history. Race was a word we did not hear much of. It was not as though we were totally cut off from the outside world; we did meet different people here and there. Dad worked from home and his customers came in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Mom took care of a number of the neighborhood children, and the kids we grew up with were from all walks of life. Our parents taught us the basics: manners and kindness and to be thoughtful and caring. We learned (by watching their example) how to share with each other and with those who had less, and offer to help those who could not help themselves. For the most part, everything we learned about race came right from our own home. We were taught that no matter how the “bag” looked on the outside, it was what it held that makes a real difference. Mom and Dad said that people were people whether related by love or blood. They taught each one of us that we could all be different but remain the same. I do not remember any real debates over the issue; everything they said seemed to make sense. There were no obvious issues in our community either. All nine of us attended the same small, rural school district that was definitely lacking when it came to racial variety. It was not that we lived a sheltered life, but a non-diverse existence. It was not until 1992 did our thoughts begin to expand outside our own little box. It was in that year that I befriended a German exchange student and our family became involved with the organization that brought her here. Later that fall we met our first overseas sister. For the next thirteen years our family grew and became part Japanese, Colombian, Brazilian, Mongolian, German, Swiss, and Albanian. We would make ties with so many others in so many ways that it was unbelievable how fast our family was spreading! It was in this time that we learned how unimportant race was, and the importance of just connecting as people.

Although, we never gave race a second thought when adding to our family, there were those who did. There were a few remarks and mishaps by those less inclined to learn from those who were different from them. There were no monumental incidents, but there were some eye-openers. The biggest was from a young lady whom we never got to meet. Because of the non-diverse nature of our lives, we were intrigued by the idea of welcoming
in a student from Ghana. Unfortunately, because of our lack of multiplicity at our local high school, the district thought we would be ill-advised to bring her here. That one decision taught me how apathetic some members of our community were. Although I do not believe they thought she was in any danger, I do believe they opted out of teaching our own students what it meant to be accepting and open (it was then that I felt they should have taken their own bag and put it over their head). It was easier to deny her the chance to teach and learn than to put forth any effort it might have taken to overcome obstacles a student from a culture so different from ours might bring. It seems ironic that I became that very student our community was trying to avoid. While a high school junior, I was an exchange student to Japan. It was definitely a role reversal; I transitioned from host to student and from majority to minority. I was the only ‘white’ student and the only American in my new school. It was never a confrontational issue. I was more like a novelty. That in itself was disheartening because I wanted to absorb and learn while I was sharing myself and my world. It was hard to be taken seriously. On a daily basis, only judging by my appearance, people assumed I was American. “May I speak English?” “You have beautiful white skin.” “Do all Americans have freckles?” “How did you get blue eyes?” I felt like they thought they knew me even before I had a chance to utter one syllable (and it made no difference if it was in Japanese or English, their mind was set). Despite this feeling I can say that my experience as a whole was definitely a positive one. I learned to relate to the feeling of not belonging, of being labeled, and of being similar but not close enough to count.

Even with the chance to experience such diversity in my life, personally race seems like a foreign concept to me. I am a blue-eyed, white, freckle-skinned brunette. The key word, though, is “white.” What is it to be “white?” I do not feel “white.” Most days I do not feel like anything. Is that bad? Should I feel like I belong to some list? Is my lack of relating attributed to the “racial imagery” Richard Dyer talks about in “The Matter of Whiteness?” Is it that non-spoken inclination that all “other people are raced, (and) we are just people?” I do not think so. Did my parents do me a terrible injustice by not emphasizing our race over others? Absolutely not. I have come to believe they gave us just the right amount of “racial education.” Racially speaking, we could be classified by our skin color and our family background. They informed us of our family origins and even helped us trace some of our roots and ties. So, what is it then? What am I missing? I think it is a culture identity, not racial identity. The who and what that makes me who I am. It is the traditions and heritage that my ancestors passed on that somehow fell out of our own bag on its way down the line. There are no dresses, no special dates, and no habitual traditions that signal my race. The lack of those traditions was not the fault of my parents, either. It is something that has been spilled from the bags of families all across America. There are, however, Houma traditions, things we have created as a family but none of which have been handed down by some older, wiser, revered generation that some cultures take for granted. Too often, I think people try to overlap culture and race. Race is used for sorting us by how we appear, not for who and what we really are. I think that is what Zora Neale Hurston means when she writes, “At certain times I have no race, I am (just) me.” Even on the days I do not “feel like anything,” I can say a lot of things about myself, and I am proud of myself for my many bits and pieces. I am proud to be a mother. I am proud to be a student. I am proud to be an American, a woman, a good employee, a friend, and a volunteer. All of these things are key in giving definition to who I am, regardless of what I may look like or resemble. Of all the things I am and all the things I do, it has never occurred to me to be proud to be white. It is not that we were taught not to; it is just that even with all the assumptions that come with that title, it does not really say anything distinct about who I am.

What, then, does race say? Does it say, “Your mother is South-African and your father is Chilean?” No it does not. Does it say, “Your father is Taiwanese and your mother is Russian?” No it does not. It does say, “Your bag is definitely different; your nose is larger, your hair is straighter, your skin is olive.” It tries to point out our dissimilarities (“hey- you are Asian”) while grouping us for our generalities (“Well, Chinese or Vietnamese- it is all the same!”) By Webster’s definition we know that race is “a category of
humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits" (Merriam-Webster, 2004.) That definition does help when we need to separate ourselves by biological qualities, but it is useless in defining anything we really are. It is when we use our lives–our habits, our traditions, our inclinations–to further segregate each other and ourselves according to what we look like we may do, all in the name of ethnicity. A person is more than the sum of his/her parts. A person is thoughts, feelings, and a soul. A person learns and adapts, learns some more and adapts again, and relearns and readapts. To try to find an all-encompassing bubble to pigeonhole each individual in a world of change is futile. Continuing with the concept as inept as race only feeds the drive that we will lose some sort of identity on our diversity. It is that personal identity that makes us unique as a whole. I am not naive. No one believes that we will live in a world of peace and hearts and flowers. The idea of a non-racial world is a utopian one, but it gives hope to a better place of belonging for those who strive to advocate it. I do not believe they aim to rid the world of race, but they wish to replace it with something more meaningful and concise, and that gives us a chance to fill our bags with even more diversity.

As people try to adjust or replace the meaning of definition by race, the importance of such definitions will soon become obsolete. We can be part of a group of people whose bags contain things that link us together and separate us at the same time. We can belong to something greater than the sum of our own parts; it is all in the regard we each hold our different contents. The beginning of my journey into my own racial identity showed me how little a connection I felt towards such distinctiveness. What is it to be ‘white?’ After thoughts of my own background, looking into my own racial identity (or lack thereof), and exploring my thoughts on the concept of race itself, I do not feel any more connected to a label that my bag has been assigned. If anything, I am trying to find a new definition of myself, one that embraces my many parts and prides, and does a sufficient job of conveying who I really am. The whole point is that I am a who, not a what. I do feel as though I can change and connect myself with other people regardless of what bag they are using in their own mind. I find people more interesting for the stuff they carry around all day–the stuff that gives them weight and character. People are still people, and I am a person, too, so why not use that connection to create something as strong as our bags will hold?

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