

Work In Progress

When Racism Gets Personal: Toward Relational Healing,

Maureen Walker, Ph.D.

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Work in Progress

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Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481
Phone: 781-283-2510 Fax: 781-283-2504

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When Racism Gets Personal: Toward Relational Healing

Maureen Walker, Ph.D.

About the Author

Maureen Walker, Ph.D., is a psychologist with a practice in psychotherapy and antiracism consultation. Her clinical practice and research projects involve developing links between racial identity development and relational theories to support the growth potential of persons who experience disconnections stemming from marginalization and devaluation within the dominant society. She works at Harvard Business School and is on the faculty of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute.

Abstract

In a culture that stratifies human differences, it is inevitable that anxiety about difference would be the source of much suffering. The power distortions that lie at the root of this suffering are manifest in relationships, from the most tangential to those that are deeply intimate. Moreover, the anxieties endemic to a race-based culture have the potential to thwart our most earnest efforts to make and maintain good connection. To adopt the feminist perspective, that the personal is political, is to acknowledge that no relationship can remain unscathed when power and value are differentially accorded based on racial group membership.

Three examples from clinical practice will be used to illustrate how racial anxiety impedes movement toward authenticity, mutuality, and empowerment in intimate relationships. In these examples, three biracial women who identify as black navigate the racial stratifications that contaminate the inevitable conflicts in their relationships with parents, mentors, and lovers. Because of the multi-layered anxieties stemming from living and loving in a racially stratified culture, conflicts which might otherwise be the source of growth and deeper connection become rigidified and immobilizing. In addition to examining the debilitating impact of racial anxiety, the presentation will highlight the relational processes that facilitate healing, resilience, and mutual empowerment.

Everyday encounters bring us face to face with the complexities of living, working, and loving in a racially diverse world. We encounter this complexity in the changing arenas and shifting alignments of love and work. In most instances, we think of these changes as social progress. However, underlying this apparent progress is a social-historical *trauma*, the sequel of which can erupt—seemingly unbidden—at any given moment. It was within this context of complexity that about five years ago I came to know a precocious, young woman whom I will call Lauren. Lauren described herself as biracial: the daughter of an African American father who had grown up during the forties and fifties in rural Arkansas and a white Jewish mother who had grown up in suburban Seattle in the sixties. The culture that shaped Lauren’s parents was far different from the social spaces that Lauren inhabited. Unlike her parents, Lauren grew up in a time and place where *legal* barriers to the corridors of commerce and education had been dissolved for racial minorities. *Legislative* prohibitions against interracial unions had been repealed for the most part. Lauren’s was a world where the social spaces reflected an ethnic and economic diversity unfamiliar to earlier generations, and the people she called friends and family were multi-colored and multi-cultured. For all of its cultural richness and social privilege, Lauren experienced her world as stifling and constricted. In one of our therapy sessions, she commented: “When my father accuses me of thinking about race too much, but blames my mother for not talking about it at all; when my mother can’t understand the part of me that is black—that’s when racism really gets personal.”

In a culture that stratifies human difference, that systematically rank orders human beings according to their racial group membership, it is inevitable that anxiety about racial difference would be the source of much human suffering. The resulting power

distortions give rise to anxieties that manifest themselves in our relationships—from the most tangential to the most intimate. These are the anxieties endemic to a race-based culture, and they have the potential to thwart our best efforts to make and maintain good connection. In *situational* relationships—whether in the context of work or a commercial transaction—racial anxiety can trigger unease and generate a stultifying awkwardness. In more *intimate* relationships—whether among parents and spouses, mentors and lovers, or colleagues and friends—racial anxiety can stifle authenticity and inhibit mutuality. In *any* relationship, multi-layered anxieties deriving from working and loving in a racially stratified culture can contaminate the everyday conflicts which might otherwise be the source of creative movement and deeper connection.

Poet and activist Audre Lorde once said that it is not our differences that separate us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences; it is rather our refusal to examine the distortions that result from misnaming those differences (1984). The cultural tendency to frame difference in dichotomous and oppositional terms also gives rise to relational distortion. To paraphrase Lorde, this culture offers few models of mutual and authentic engagement across difference. What we experience as racial separation is often caused by our refusal to acknowledge the impact of the distortions upon human behavior and expectation. This refusal to engage the resulting complexity pushes us into chronic disconnection. It plunges us into an immobilizing anxiety that betrays our yearning for connection.

Psychotherapists have a unique opportunity to confront and examine the racial anxieties that perpetuate distortion and disconnection. The Relational-Cultural Model provides a critical standpoint from which to engage three questions. First, how do we understand the genesis and the manifestation of racial anxiety in relationship? Second, how does this anxiety shape behavior and relational expectation? And third, how do we make creative use of racial anxiety to foster resilience and reconnection? In exploring these three questions, I have found it helpful to use a model proposed by psychotherapist and author Robert Gerzon, whose tripartite model of anxiety provides a useful framework for understanding the personalized experience of historical racial trauma. The historical trauma of racism translates into cognitive-emotive experiences

that may be described as natural anxiety, toxic anxiety, and sacred anxiety. This three part model of anxiety clarifies that processes of disconnection can thwart the most earnest efforts to engage across racial difference. Because anxiety constricts the range of relational movement and possibility, the cultural trauma of racism may significantly undermine the most personal relationships.

Few people would argue with the philosophers who have asserted over the ages that life is difficult. Natural anxiety is defined as a response of awareness to that difficulty, as recognition of our inevitable limitations (Gerzon, 1999). Natural anxiety is an expression of the uncertainty and ambivalence that checks our *expectation for*, and our *movement in* relationship. With the dissolution of visible and legislated barriers to cross-racial contact, the social cues that guide relationship have become increasingly ambiguous. There appears to be more relational space within which to navigate. However, because of what anthropologist Karen Brodtkin (1999) has called the binary system of racial categorization, it is possible, as some have said, for black and white citizens to sit in the same theater, but each see a very different movie. In other words, in spite of the ambiguity, the categories remain intact—though somewhat more mystified. When relational expectation is defined by a racial binary, the enlargement of the socio-cultural arena may lead *not* to fuller or expanded connection, but to diminished authenticity. As one Latina corporate executive commented, “Being promoted in this organization simply means having to function in more and more spaces where I can’t be myself.” Faced with the racial conundrum of demarcation *and* ambiguity, natural anxiety is a reasonable response. Natural anxiety is a natural response to navigating through a relational fog.

Lauren’s Dilemma

I can think of no better example of a relational fog and its attendant anxiety than that provided by nineteen-year-old Lauren. Once when talking about her lackluster middle school performance, Lauren recalled a game that was directed by her eighth grade social studies teacher. It was called “The Plantation Game.” The object of the game was to buy and sell slaves and see who could have the most profitable plantation; the teacher’s objective was to demonstrate the economic motivations behind slavery and to prove that racial prejudice was consequent to, but not the

cause of, race slavery. Although her memory was mercifully fuzzy, Lauren could not recall any lessons about the brutality of slavery. She remembered some conversation about people whom she dubbed “celebrity slaves like Frederick Douglass,” but not about slaves in general, as if they were actually human beings. Lauren described herself as the only “black-half black” student in this elite prep school classroom.

She recalled getting up and walking around the class bartering and feeling really awful. She went from hating the teacher to liking him to hating herself to believing that the teacher was her friend and would never hurt her to concluding that he had horribly betrayed and humiliated her. She said: “Race was a topic never broached in my home. When I was eleven, I didn’t know anything about racism, I didn’t know about black or white, but I *did* know that I was different in a way that was not positive.” She continued: “I knew something needed to be said, but I didn’t want to be the one to say ‘it’; I didn’t even know what ‘it’ was; and I didn’t want anyone else to bring it up because I *was* the only black-half black student in the room.”

She remembered that the teacher was very popular and the other students all seemed to enjoy the assignment. Clearly, in her mind, something was wrong with what *she* was feeling. Lauren’s experience is totally consistent with the observation that the person violated will often feel at fault for the disconnection (Miller, 1988). Lauren had three other very clear recollections about this incident: that when she finally told her parents they were furious; that her mother promised to speak with the teacher at the end of the school year; and that life in the eighth grade was never the same. So anxious was she about the threat of exclusion *and* the indignity of inclusion, that she placed herself in a kind of academic and emotional limbo. Not able to extricate and not willing to engage, she remained safely on the margins—as she said, “doing just enough to get a B- without really trying.”

To ensure her psychological survival, Lauren employed various strategies of disconnection and dissemblance—not only in school, but with her parents as well. To the extent that we come to know and grow ourselves through action in relationship, Lauren could not know herself, nor could she authentically represent that which she knew.

In many of our sessions, a great part of my work was to hold Lauren’s yearning for connection with her mother, a yearning so fraught with anxiety that she could barely tolerate it. At various times, Lauren and

her mother would engage in verbal “power over” struggles that they perceived as attempts to communicate. In these conversations, each would try to convert the other to her point of view on a given subject. It was often the case that the content of the conversation was far less important than the intent: to change or somehow unsettle the other person. In other words, conversations were contests that they each wanted to win. The inevitable outcome would be long periods of silence between them, as both women had well-honed strategies for disconnection. Lauren would then disappear into MTV, while her mother would disappear into depressive behaviors.

When Lauren recounted these episodes in therapy—criticizing her mother’s inadequacy and inaccessibility—it was important to hold the yearning by both empathizing with her distress and by naming some true thing about positive aspects of their relationship (Stiver, personal communication, 1998). For example, I would often say something about their desire to be visible to and be known by each other. At various times, it was useful to reframe their conflicts as “tenacious efforts to create mutuality.” Indeed, what each woman wanted was to know that she could have an impact on the other. Each woman yearned deeply for reassurance that the other would not abandon her. Both women were terrified by their yearning. Lauren’s mother was profoundly threatened by the vehemence with which her daughter undertook the so-called task of separation: a task rendered even more threatening by the ever visible racial divide between them. Lauren, for her part, needed to know that she could move and be moved by her mother—and that in the movement, she would remain safe.

On one occasion when they were “communicating,” Lauren gave her mother a fairly detailed account of her sexual history. Her mother responded quite predictably—she got sick and went to bed. Although Lauren recounted her mother’s horrified response as a personal victory because it was further proof of mother’s ineptness, she was nonetheless quite pained by this encounter. After we worked through the first level of the narrative, which included painstaking efforts to name her feelings, I asked how was she *hoping* her mother would respond. Lauren answered by stating what she expected. “But what were you *hoping* for?”

Eventually, and with a great deal of difficulty, Lauren was able to say that she wished her mother had been able to talk with her about the raw pain and

mocking emptiness of her adolescent years—that she wished her mother could have held her. Because of repeated ruptures in their relationship, Lauren had come to associate her hopes and her yearning with shame, disappointment, and unsafe vulnerability. One important relational skill for Lauren to develop was more respect for her hopes and more empathy for her disappointments.

From this place of emotional expansion, Lauren was able to recollect more positive images of herself with her mother. For example, she remembered how she and her mother would hold hands walking down the street, and how they would laugh uproariously at the quizzical looks they would get from onlookers who didn't understand this expression of tenderness and affection between two women, of apparently different race and age. From time to time, she could also express empathy with her mother's weariness and understand her wariness in the face of racial difference. In other words, she was occasionally able to practice the critical distinction between anticipatory empathy and self-abnegation. From a place of connection with her own feeling-thoughts, she was able to tolerate feeling with another.

Clinical Post-Scripts

Because the cultural context of therapy was one that places undue emphasis on maternal inadequacy as the source of clinical problems, it was especially important to hold and honor Lauren's barely articulated yearning for her mother. Furthermore, it was important to be mindful of the racial anxieties that surrounded the therapy, anxieties with the potential to exacerbate the ruptures created by a patriarchal culture that tends to devalue and blame mothers and daughters. For that reason, a clinical imperative was to mindfully refrain from tacit competition with Lauren's mother (as we therapists are sometimes prone to do).

A significant part of Lauren's sub-textual narrative was that her life would have been better had her mother been black. As an African American therapist, it was important to avoid colluding with these seductive fantasies, thus establishing myself as "good mother." Second, some would suggest that many of the conflicts Lauren described were typical struggles of adolescence. While that observation is probably true, it is equally true that the anxieties and fears endemic to a racially stratified culture tainted these struggles. When relational images are conditioned by

a racialized culture, race not only becomes the default explanation for any disconnection—it also exploits the inevitable tensions and processes of relational movement.

Often toxic anxiety sits at the root of racialized conflict. As Gerzon (1998) observed, toxic anxiety results from habitually suppressing thoughts, desires, and memories. In the binary system of racial ranking, suppression is standard operating procedure. As Miller pointed out, rigid ranking generates power distortions that trigger conflict, and simultaneously seek to suppress it (1986). The inevitable anxiety centers on past hurts, both individual and collective. It consists of intergenerational memory on the one hand and historical amnesia on the other. This anxiety can reduce potentially productive interactions to ritualized performance. When it remains unacknowledged and unexplored, racial anxiety may rise in toxic form—sabotaging desire for connection.

Sara's Dilemma

An example of racial anxiety turned toxic can be seen in the dilemma that Sara presented in therapy. Sara described herself as biracial and lesbian. Her primary complaint was feeling sadness and guilt about her inability to sustain satisfying relationships. She said that she had been in many therapies before and that this time, she specifically wanted to work with someone familiar with the Relational-Cultural Model. When I asked how she hoped *this* work would be different, she said that "I know something is missing inside me, and I think it's making me mess up my relationships." As we got to know each other over the next several weeks, I learned that Sara was the daughter of a biracial mother who had married a Jamaican man while still a teenager. She was quite young when Sara was born, and by Sara's account, totally overwhelmed by the motherhood experience. What Sara remembers most about her early childhood was her mother's passivity. As she described the relationship: "I learned at an early age to have no respect for her at all." At various points in the therapy, she would talk about her mother with total disdain; her favorite descriptor was "useless." In fact, she had spent most of her 29 years thinking of her mother as intellectually and characterologically inferior to herself. It became apparent that this expressed contempt was in fact a strategy of disconnection used to disguise her yearning for connection with her mother and to assuage the distress of having

concluded that such connection was beyond reach.

Although Sara described herself and her mother as biracial, she thought of her mother as white, and in many ways attributed their disconnection to their racial difference. As she put it, “my mother was *totally mystified* by my hair.” Further conversation revealed Sara’s sense that her mother was certainly frustrated, and probably disapproving of her hair. For her part, her mother was under cultural pressure to produce a beautiful little girl, that is, one who fit the aesthetic prescriptions of a racist, patriarchal culture. To achieve this visual effect, she often tried to adorn Sara’s hair with ribbons and laces. From a very early age, Sara would reject these ministrations and her mother, feeling like a failure, would resort to tears and name-calling. That this disconnection should be experienced on such a sensate level was key to understanding the relational images Sara formed about herself in relation to other women she categorized as white. She remembers being sent off to live with her grandmother, a Ukrainian immigrant, who lovingly provided the care—including hair braiding—that her biracial granddaughter required. Sadly, her grandmother died when Sara was six, and she and her mother were left to deal with each other as best they could.

Sara remembered that when she came out to her mother as lesbian, it was just one additional thing that her mother could not bear about her. Sara’s relationship history with intimate partners was equally problematic. On one hand, she foreswore any intimate relationship with women of different races. In her words, “White women were totally off limits as potential partners.” Sara had come to rely on a set of relational images that served as vigilant warnings that white women could never be responsive to or interested in her needs. On the other hand, she found herself in what she called a string of disastrous liaisons with women of color. Frequent eruptions of rage characterized these relationships, with Sara typically leaving abruptly in a panic of disgust and disappointment. One day, as we were talking about Sara’s constricted relational possibilities, she became aware that what she had rationalized as “Afrocentricity” was in large measure her way of containing racialized anxiety, and that this anxiety countermanded her desire for intimate connection.

She had concluded from her experiences, first with her mother’s withdrawal and then with her grandmother’s death, that racial difference meant abandonment. She simply couldn’t imagine a good

ending to any story that featured cross-racial intimacy, and she developed quite a colorful repertoire of scenarios in which a racially different partner might emotionally and physically abandon her. She therefore lived in a state of emotional truncation, unable to acknowledge or represent the range of feelings, desires, and hopes that make intimacy possible. Ironically, her efforts to make intimate connections with same-race women were grounded in illusions of separation. That is, her efforts to form relationships with black women and other women of color were actually attempts to enact images and illusions she had developed about their being “not white.” Neither she nor they were allowed the range of expression that could be the source of truer intimacy. Her decision to avoid the women she called white—in some ways these designations were quite arbitrary—led to suppressed desire and further constricted the possibilities for greater self empathy and self knowledge.

As Sara began to access and own the painful vulnerability she had felt as a child, she also began to access more positive images of herself in relationship with her mother. She remembered her mother as quite playful and full of good humor. In addition, she remembered that it was her mother who would advocate on her behalf with teachers who were impatient with her being a “late reader.” Her mother’s persistence in the face of bureaucratic powers had prevented her being consigned to a track for academically challenged students. Because these more positive memories had been suppressed along with the sense of unsafe vulnerability and abandonment, she could respond only with rage and derision to any expression of “weakness” by her mother or any of her partners.

It perhaps goes without saying that she was unable to tolerate those feelings of vulnerability in herself. Suppressing her own feeling-thoughts was her primary strategy of disconnection. It was only through disconnection that she could experience a temporary respite from the terror of her yearning. For Sara, the path to intimacy was a path through grief.

As she became more confident in her own relational capacity, she could surface the toxic anxiety, remember past hurts, mourn lost hopes, and move with courage to embrace the complexity of her own yearning.

There are those moments in life when the subtle variations of doubt and shame shape our responses to questions about meaning, hope, and connection.

Those are the moments Gerzon (1998) has described as, “Standing naked and shivering in our awareness of ourselves as skin-encapsulated bits of matter.” We stand facing our aloneness and yearning for oneness. Some have referred to this inescapable dilemma of the human condition as existential anxiety; Gerzon uses the language of scared anxiety. In a culture that over-emphasizes the skin-encapsulation, the separateness, it is to be expected that scared or existential anxiety might turn toxic. Furthermore, when skin itself becomes the basis of social valuation, it is to be expected that the anxiety—to which flesh is heir—might be met with relational distortions.

As Mirtha Quintanales (1983) wrote: “The social privileges of lighter-than-black are almost totally dependent upon denial of who we are...lighter-than-black skin may confer the option of being assimilated—integrated into mainstream American society. But is this really a privilege when it almost means having to be invisible, ghost-like, identity-less, community-less, alienated? The perils of passing as white are perils indeed—being and not being, merging and yet remaining utterly alone.”

Whatever valence is accorded one’s own skin, whether one’s skin is called white or black or any of the multiple, creative variations in between, the perils of passing on skin color are perils that precipitate crises of relational confidence. To submit to a system of valuation based on skin color is to follow a path that leads to what Miller and Stiver have called “condemned isolation” (1997). That is, in response to the anxieties about purpose, possibility, and belonging, there is an experience of disconnection that leads one to question not only her capacity, but also her fitness for connection.

I had an occasion once to observe a workshop in which people from a number of ethnic groups were participating. As the group was commenting on its diversity, one woman who by most accounts was strikingly attractive, described herself as French and Danish. Everyone in the group stared somewhat incredulously at her brown skin, her full lips, and her dark wavy hair.

Finally one man said, “Is that all?” She replied tersely, “Yes.” He pushed further: “Are you saying that you have no African heritage whatsoever, anywhere in your background?” She replied, “Not really, I do have some.” He persisted, “Who?” She replied, “My father.”

The circumstances were such that this woman, Beth, later became my client. Beth came into my

practice two years after graduating from a pre-eminent law school, well on her way to a successful career in legal practice. She was plagued, however, by an emptiness that often left her scared, and she decided to begin therapy.

Early on in our sessions, Beth spoke frequently and lovingly of her mother, a woman of French and Danish background who had married Beth’s African American father during the 1960s. Her mother’s family did not approve. The couple divorced a few years after Beth was born; her mother, however, remained isolated and rejected by her own family. Beth was deeply grateful to her mother because, as she said, “She kept me.”

Her sense of loving connection with her mother was tied to her sense of self as a burden. Along with memories of their fun times, of their mother-daughter outings wearing matching outfits, she also remembered her mother’s isolation. She remembered the white men her mother dated, of whom two were not overjoyed to learn that blending into this family would also include blending with a brown-skinned little girl. She remembered specifically one who would take them out to dinner, and then say “teasingly,” and loudly enough to be overheard: “Let’s go so we can get this kid back to the orphanage.” She remembered her mother’s silence.

Beth herself was terribly lonely, and she was given to wildly indiscriminant sexual acting out, always with white men. Although she initially rationalized her behavior as enjoying her physicality, she was eventually able to address the ways in which she repeatedly put herself at risk. For example, in at least two relationships, she agreed with her partners that (1) theirs was a physical connection only, and that (2) she would completely respect their commitments to their “real” girlfriends. On one occasion, she consoled one boyfriend and “worried with him” when he started to doubt his girlfriend’s fidelity. On another occasion, she helped her partner clean his apartment in preparation for his girlfriend’s weekend visit. As a child who had grown up with a sense of her racial self as burdensome and problematic, Beth had come to see herself as unfit for connection. She had experienced herself as the cause of her mother’s isolation and had thus concluded that she had no right to voice or choice in relationships.

To say the least, these multi-layered images which formed over time precipitated a crisis of relational confidence. Beth confided that in spite of her many and highly visible accomplishments, her sense of

isolation and alienation were longstanding. Furthermore, she could never tell her mother about her pain for fear of adding to her mother's guilt. "When we're together," she said, "we focus mainly on the positive." It became clear that neither woman felt empowered in the relationship. In one sense, Beth felt that her mother was all she had—and to hold onto her sense of connection, Beth had all but canonized her for sainthood. To acknowledge the feelings of disappointment or anger that are part and parcel of any intimate relationship was to threaten their tenuous hold on connection.

In a culture that over-emphasizes skin-encapsulation, that is, a culture that prescribes separateness based on skin color alone, the intimacy between Beth and her mother was under relentless scrutiny and occasional assault. The relational images formed under these conditions led Beth to believe that intimacy could be measured by the extent to which racial difference could be ignored. She found it unthinkable that acknowledging feelings of sadness and disappointment could in fact lead to deeper, more resilient connection.

Any feeling that did not support the *appearance* of connection could not be represented in the relationship. Over time, Beth was able to make use of our relationship to practice "good enough" authenticity. She was able to use the relationship to expand her emotional range. She first had to recognize (often on a physical level) and then to name a fuller spectrum of emotionality. For example, she became increasingly more able to name the irritations she experienced in the therapy with me. One of Beth's strategies of disconnection in relationship with me was to offer effusive praise. As we paid attention to her care-taking efforts both by appreciating her capacity for caring and by naming her expectations for return, Beth became aware of her efforts to use praise to secure her place in a relationship. Along with voicing her awareness she was better able to examine the conclusions that defined her images of herself in relationship. Through our relationship, Beth learned to transform her feelings of anxiety into the energy of awareness; thereby increasing her confidence that she could participate in other relationships in life-enhancing ways.

One opportunity came during a signal moment in Beth's relationship with a new boyfriend, Doug, whom she liked to describe as Irish-Italian. Unlike her earlier partners, this young man viewed himself as

socially progressive and seemed to enjoy engaging Beth in conversations about politics and the many "ism's" in the culture. They could actually talk about race. For the first time, Beth was in a relationship in which she felt safe to more fully represent herself. In fact, it soon became clear that both she and her partner were quite enjoying the politics of their romance. Being an interracial couple carried a certain cachet that neither had experienced before.

There they were, in defiance of and in opposition to a culture that was clearly not as progressive as they: until one evening when Beth's partner wanted to go in to a bar in which she felt very uncomfortable. Beth described the bar as having kind of a "neighborhood chumminess" filled with mostly men and a few women who had obviously been in there for the "long haul." Had they gone in, she would have been the only person of color in the bar. When she expressed her apprehension, her boyfriend initially tried to cajole her out of her concerns. When she persisted, he became somewhat strident, criticizing her for being "too insular." They agreed to go to another place, but sat in stony silence for several minutes. The night had been ruined.

Then gathering all of her courage, Beth told him, "I am feeling really scared. For the first time, I'm getting the sense that my blackness could inconvenience you, and you could resent me." Doug was stunned. Like Beth, he too had formed relational images about the meaning of racial difference. He was quite vested in his image of himself as progressive, a social iconoclast untouched by the ignorance and arrogance of racism. To enter into this conflict with Beth, to give credence to her experience was to deepen a process of mutuality never before attempted. To engage in mutual empathy required him to relinquish his hold on his image of himself. But he did; he spoke about the fear of constriction, and the loss of social acceptance he could experience as a partner in an interracial relationship. According to Beth, he was able to speak—painfully at first, but frankly—about his feelings of superiority, however fleeting, and his frustration when she spoke out of a reality that was different from his. Beth admitted the embarrassment and rage she felt at times knowing that some people viewed their relationship with skepticism or derision.

She confessed that sometimes she was afraid that people would think they were together because she was a prostitute. Sometimes she went to great pains to display the seriousness of their relationship to convince others (and I think also herself), that she was

not just a playmate to be later set aside, or more poignantly—the kid who would be delivered back to the orphanage. Together, Beth and Doug created the courage to bear the previously unspeakable anxieties that threatened to pull them apart. Failure to do so would have left them with what Judy Jordan has described as a “dead zone,” where old resentments smolder and creative energies lie buried. Beth and Doug were able to face their anxieties, wage good conflict, and allow for the emergence of something new.

Summary

These vignettes allow us to glimpse the complexity that these three biracial women were compelled to engage in in their quest for truer, deeper connection. Lauren learned over time that the path to healing was the path of awareness. She learned to practice attunement to and representation of the rich subtleties of her own feeling-thoughts as she navigated the culture: a culture that was nonetheless stratified for all of its ambiguity. For Sara, the task was to *disinter* and *disable* the toxic anxiety that mocked her yearning for connection. Faced with the decision about whether to spend their evening in a bar, to go or not to go was never the real question for Beth and Doug. Instead the quandary was how to relinquish the comfort of relational images—images of themselves and the larger culture—that had provided them with a sense of safety, but had prevented them from achieving true intimacy.

It is important to recognize that however these three courageous biracial women, however they might have described themselves (Lauren as black, half-black, Sara as Afro-centric black, and Beth as French Danish), they lived in a culture that ranked their worth and desirability according to the measure of their blackness. Though it is recognized as scientifically specious, the “one drop rule” carries real consequences in a racially stratified culture. Under conditions of stratification, racial anxieties exploit the normal and inevitable conflicts that might otherwise lead to resilience and healing. It should also be said that though the dilemmas of three women are used to illustrate three types or levels of anxiety, racial anxieties are never really present in neatly compartmentalized and easily recognized form. Instead, they may be sinuously layered around everyday experience. And there is no hiding place. As the lives of three women illustrate, neither family

kinship nor sexual intimacy can offer refuge from racial anxiety—which almost always erupts unbidden. In fact, to declare oneself immune by virtue of biological ties or sexual practice is to forego opportunities to deepen and enliven connection.

A first step toward relational healing is to acknowledge that we are all in and we are of it. A developmental legacy of a racially stratified culture is that its members (on both sides of the inequality) are socialized to adopt strategies of disconnection as survival skills. Failure to acknowledge that reality is to ignore, and thereby fortify, the potency of the culture as an agent of disconnection. The path to relational healing leads us on a journey fraught with risk and imbued with promise. It is a journey of courage and faith: the courage to be mindful and to grieve, to risk letting go of old relational images that function to *contain* our anxieties, in hopes of discovering and enlarging our capacity for richer authenticity. The path to relational healing invites us to enter into conflict with faith in our human possibilities and with desire for the emergence of something new.

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