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From Cultural Competence to Cultural Humility

by Jacqui Greene

I'll never forget the first time I was the target of someone's racism. I was a junior here at UNC, a white young woman from upstate New York, walking down Franklin Street hand-in-hand with my new boyfriend. I found him, a black sophomore from Raleigh, quite a tall drink of water, as they say. We were walking down the street and someone rode by us in their car, rolled down the window, and yelled "vanilla and chocolate don't mix!" It stopped me in my tracks. He took it in stride. It wasn't a big deal. He had encountered far worse in his life.

That handsome young man is now my husband. I have walked beside him in life for 27 years. During those years I have experienced how our culture responds to us as a couple and, perhaps more importantly, how our culture responds to him. People taking our order at a window or checking us out at a cash register usually assume we are not together. Each of us had grandparents who were deeply disappointed by our marriage. I have never been pulled over by the police. He has been pulled over several times.

I have watched people sometimes welcome him because of his race and I have watched people avoid him because of his race. I have learned that race impacts his experiences all the time. Most of all,

I have learned that I can never really know what it is like to live those experiences—to walk a mile in his shoes.

Our family grew from the two of us to include three beautiful biracial children – two boys and a girl. My journey of motherhood is inexorably influenced by my children's race. When I am with them without my husband people ask me about their heritage. Are they Greek? Where did they get that curly hair? I have wiped their tears as they recount the cruelty of other children telling them that they are not black enough and not white enough. I have nearly blown my top at a principal of a school where my son was called a racial slur and told to put a rope around his neck and jump. I say a prayer each time I see a School Resource Officer at one of my sons' schools, asking God to make that officer one of the good ones who won't be quick to arrest one of my boys. Not because they are committing crimes, but because I have learned that their actions as children are so often interpreted harshly by adults.

I have been to many cultural competence trainings. This kind of training is prevalent in my field of juvenile justice. It is rooted in the theory that we can teach people from one culture all they need to

know to understand a different culture. It focuses on making people from one culture an expert in the culture of another. It is as if we can learn what it is like to experience life as someone of another race or ethnicity.

Life has taught me a different lesson. As I live life in partnership with my husband and as a mother to my children, I know that I can never truly understand how race impacts their lives. I do not and cannot walk in their shoes. Instead, I can watch and listen as we walk some days side-by-side and as they tell me about other days. I can listen about their experiences, working to put my interpretation aside so I can simply appreciate theirs. I can strive for cultural humility.

Cultural humility is a concept that has its roots in the medical field. If you are interested in learning more about it, there is a four-part series on YouTube that you can find at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Mbu8bvKb_U&list=PL879555ABCCED8B50&index=1.

For me, the lessons of cultural humility are widely transferable. It's not that we should or can be experts in the experiences of others. It's that we should acknowledge that we don't know what we don't know and be humble in learning.