

Shame and Pride

Shame and Pride was a popular self-help book written by Donald Nathanson, M.D. exploring the "Birth of the Self." The book and its message take on new significance in today's political environment.

When I was a kid, my father had a friend who was a paraplegic. One of my strong childhood memories is going with my father to visit this man. My dad wanted me to see that his friend, Nat, had a terrific sense of humor and was never downcast. His home was dark and scary to me. Nat had an African American man who worked for him, helping him in and out of the wheelchair, to dress, bathe and take care of everyday activities. I do not recall the assistant's name, but he was always part of the conversation and was a thoroughly entertaining fellow. My father once made a cryptic comment to me after a visit with Nat and his assistant: "You know that his assistant is really a Black man, but he oils his skin with lemon to appear White. What is wrong with our society, that a man like this cannot feel comfortable in his own skin?"

My how the world has changed. African Americans are now justly proud of who and what they are.

As one who knew Nat's assistant and pays attention to the current sociology, I could not help but be quizzical about Jessica A. Krug. She was a college professor at the prestigious George Washington University who pretended for most of her life to be African American, Latino or Caribbean. In reality she is Jewish - from Kansas City, Missouri. Why is this woman living a lie, giving up the pride of being Jewish to take on another identity which is not hers? Why has it become so unpopular to be Jewish but so acceptable to be Black?

In Israel there is a significant Black Jewish population from Ethiopia. Jews came to Israel not as slaves but rather were brought on numerous rescue missions beginning with Operation Solomon and Operation Moses. Those Black Jews have distinguished themselves in every walk of life, and proudly serve in the Israeli Defense Forces. When Barack Obama, as President, went to Israel, he was anxious to meet with Miss Israel who was an Ethiopian Jew. So strong are the family bonds and traditions of Ethiopian Jews, that they discourage their kids from marrying non-Ethiopian Jews.

There is a lesson in the pathetic Krug story. One can simply dismiss the woman as schizophrenic, bipolar, or with a multiple personality disorder. Who knows what her pathology is, but we do know she is confused as between Shame and Pride. Hopefully, we are raising our children to be proud of who and what they are, while always aspiring for the best, regardless of the color of their skin.

Is it possible that Krug simply adopted a new identity because she thought she could get further as a college professor by being a person of color from a background of either Latino or Caribbean? Is it simply a matter of fraud intended to advance her career?

I worry about people who lose a job or an education because someone else, who may come from a disadvantaged population, receives a privilege. The issue of reverse discrimination and the fairness of creating people of special privilege has even reached the level of the United States Supreme Court. Should a wealthy and successful African American receive a special place at Harvard over a poor White person? Should we be judging people by the color of their skin or how badly their descendants were treated?

In 1911, my alma mater, New York University, imposed a limit on the number of Jews who could attend the University. This form of bigotry spread throughout the college and university world. By the time I applied for school, I was told that certain Ivy League schools would not have me because they had created places for others considered underprivileged. The same form of reverse discrimination has occurred to Asian Americans.

It is time in America first to have the difficult conversation, but a necessary one, as to whether the unfairness perpetrated upon certain groups should be transferred to others deemed privileged in society. No group of people on planet Earth could compete with the Jews for the sheer mass of bigotry, death and destruction which the Jewish people have endured. There are some who have tremendous resentment for Jewish memory concerning the Holocaust in Europe during World War II, believing that there should be statute of limitations on empathy for the Jewish people. Others believe that when a people have been enslaved or mistreated, they should receive special privileges until the political establishment has purged itself of the sins of its forebearers.

The world we should be striving for is one where our citizens going to school and looking for jobs receive equal opportunity. If we try to live in the past, and address every evil of our ancestors, we will never be able to figure out a fair formula. Quite to the contrary, we will only continue to snap at each other's heels and inflict more harm upon those who are viewed as different.

As to folks today, who are suffering or are disadvantaged, every civilized society needs to have a safety net to help uplift its members so that they too can draw upon their intellect and instincts to be successful. Discriminating against some, to make up for the mistreatment of others, is a losing proposition. Not only do we know that it does not work, but in fact it creates more animosity.

Shame and Pride will continue to be a fundamental modality of human behavior. Individuals and groups will continue to be driven by the very emotions that are most destructive.

There is a similarity, albeit a quirkish one, between Nat's assistant and Ms. Krug. What they were trying to achieve from their adopted status may not be clear to anyone else. What we do know is that their fake identities were harmful to themselves and to others who might have truly appreciated what those people were really all about.

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