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### INTERVIEW

## Five Questions with Jaiya John



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We want to thank Jaiya on both a professional and personal level for answering your questions with candor, passion and soul. The goal of this column is to provide our audience with insight and understanding around issues that affect our children's self-esteem and identity to name a few. Jaiya does just that. His experiences-and his willingness to share his feelings about them-touch all parents and bring our awareness of the issues our children face to a new level. We are so grateful for his thoughts.

As a reminder, if you haven't read his book, *Black Baby, White Hands: A View from the Crib*, don't hesitate. [Click here](#) to purchase his book.

Interview on following page:

**Coming Up...** Our next featured guest is **Tiffany Morrison**, owner of Mix It Up, a new line of greeting cards for interracial couples and multiracial consumers ([www.Mix-It-Up.net](http://www.Mix-It-Up.net)).



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I would like to first express my gratitude to the readers for their questions. The power of humanity to improve itself lies in our collective stories. The flow of truth from one person to the next. This is the reason I felt responsible to write my memoir *Black Baby White Hands: A View from the Crib*, which was one way for me to address questions like the ones offered here. So, thank you for taking the time to participate in our collective human enrichment by simply pausing to reflect. With my responses, I pray that I honor your reflection.

**1. As a person of color raised by Caucasian parents in the middle of the desert, did you struggle to fit in during your childhood? Did you face adoption related issues, or race-related issues when growing up?**

I believe that all children struggle to fit in to varying degrees. Adoptive children do not experience a life categorically different from other children. The thoughts and feelings are simply of a different texture, hue, intensity, and magnitude. Of course, any adoptive child faces adoption-related issues, and any transracially adoptive child faces race-related issues. What is useful to consider is the nature and ultimate purpose of those experiences, rather than focusing on labeling them as positive or negative.

So, yes, I did struggle, which can be interpreted as both a difficult and a useful truth. I was a very deep-feeling, deep-thinking, sensitive, passionate, compassionate child. Given this nature, being African American in an almost entirely White family and community environment, in a White-dominated society, I was constantly aware of the fact that I stood out. But not in the benign way someone with freckles stands out. I was quickly conscious that my distinctiveness had tremendous emotional meaning for the people in my life and in my country. I knew it wasn't just my color that created attention and reaction; it was the *content of my color*. My color and facial and hair features were indicators of my race; of my root; of my heritage; of my belonging to a category of people that had been assigned a lesser and more negative value by society. A people who sparked deep feelings of guilt and denial in a great many Caucasian people. It was what my *cultural category* and its emotional weight meant to others that I struggled with.

It is difficult to be a child and have to make sense of the fact that the very people in your life who love you and who you love also have a distinct discomfort with a part of you, your race. And to contend with this discomfort, whether rooted in unfamiliarity or prejudice and most likely both, creating all kinds of strange reactions. The contradiction between love and prejudice is a painful one to reckon with when you are a child trying to feel good about yourself; needing to fit in; wanting to belong. Emotionally and psychologically, it is like being the tap dancer auditioning in a theatre full of ballerinas for the ballet director who is searching for a ballerina. There is something meaningfully different about your nature, your *style of being* in the world; and yet you are desperate to be seen as 'normal.' Even as you also desperately need the fact that you are a tap dancer to be not just tolerated but honored, understood, appreciated. I almost constantly felt as though I was auditioning—for family, friends, classmates, teachers, community—to gain acceptance as a reasonable variation of what they were. In doing so, I incurred damage to my own sense of beauty about what I was.

At the same time, it was that very struggle with identity, esteem, and belonging that shaped me into a person with a disdain for prejudice. I became determined to grow up and do something about the way we treat each other in this world. My childhood planted in me a passion and determination for standing up to the sickness of prejudice; that passion and determination gave me courage. And now I find that my childhood was preparation for an adulthood of being a teacher, a student, and a force for change. But had I not had such a personal, intimate experience with the contradictions of love and prejudice I would be much more likely to now be an adult who shrank like many people do from facing the honest truth about race relations in this country and from human relations in this world.

So yes, I faced issues, thank goodness. For it is by truly facing issues, rather than remaining ignorant of them or fleeing from them, that we discover the truth of who we are; the truth of who all of us are.

## **2. What do you wish your parents had done that they didn't do?**

**I**t is too easy to blame and find fault with parents; especially in retrospect. Because after all, parents are usually the ones we depend upon the most for our well being. I wrote my book not as a criticism of my parents but as just the opposite. By being as honest as I could about my experience and allowing that truth to be a teaching and healing force for other children, families, and society, I sought to honor what my parents were for me. My parents raised us five children to be strong, self-directed human beings. And an ingredient in being that way is the ability to make positive, useful sense of your own life.

There are not things that I wish they had done that they didn't do. Rather, there is recognition of how our life together affected me and affected each of us in the family. I recognize the amazing depth of their love; the enormity of their devotion and sacrifice. They showed us what it meant to be a responsible parent and how important it was to treat people with kindness and compassion. We were raised to be grounded, humble, and grateful for our blessings. In New Mexico you can see poverty all around you if you look. It continues to be one of our most materially impoverished states. And that poverty is largely 'color-coded' as being the possession of segments of the Latino and Native populations. I carried a consciousness and guilt about this state of affairs as I walked through my life. My parents both came from childhoods, families, and communities of modest means back in Peoria and East Peoria, Illinois. So in many ways, my parents, through their own grounded social values, positioned us children in such a way as to not walk as though we were above others.

I certainly understand that my parents were a product of their own racial, ethnic, cultural, and regional backgrounds. And through that prism or outlook on life, they did everything they could to make us feel as though we were loved and cared for. Obviously they were not prepared to understand the cultural reality and challenges that my brother Greg and I faced as adoptive Black children. In that sense there was an endless stream of things 'absent' from our lives that had they been present would have eased our path. But at this time in my life I cannot wish that my parents had done things differently. I am who I am because of the beauty and blessings of my joy *and* my pain.

## **3. What advice about race would you give to Caucasian parents raising children of color?**

**I** would respectfully give them the same advice that I would give to all parents. Stretch yourself out of the comfort zone of who you are and dare to explore the truth of who your children are. Especially explore the parts of your children that are unfamiliar to you or that cause you discomfort. Every parent-child relationship is a cultural transaction. Regardless of race, we must be devoted to honoring the unique cultural personality of each child. I define culture as a person's *way of being* in the world. Race is only one aspect of that. The adoptive reality is another among many. If you cannot celebrate, nurture, and learn from the child's divinely distinct *way of being*, everyone loses and the wounds are deep. Do not run away from what you fear in your child; let that thing you fear instead be your teacher. I pray that you as a parent take the opportunity to honestly reckon with your own wounds, fears, and insecurities. All of this breeds your prejudices. And ultimately it is our prejudices that harm our children the most.

'Colorblindness' is one of the most destructive attitudes a parent can take. Colorblindness is a dynamic that is meant to exist between the law and humans; not between human and human. That is what Martin Luther King meant by the term: legal blindness in passing lawful judgment. Mainstream society has completely misunderstood, distorted, and misapplied the concept. Why would you strive to ignore what makes a child unique? Why pretend that all children are the same? Do not create that painful cloud in your family that leaves the child feeling as though she is only allowed to talk about and expose the parts of herself with which her family is comfortable. The child's color is beautiful and worthy of celebration. More importantly, what her color means to her identity and what it reflects of her heritage is beautiful and worthy of celebration. To make a child feel as though her socio-biological heritage is meaningless is absurd and hurtful. We don't need to transcend race; we need to transcend our prejudiced relationship with race. There is no need for us to pretend that we don't notice individual differences in order to be considered a good person. We do not need to love each child in precisely the same fashion in order to let them know that we love them each in the same amount. In fact to attempt this one-size-fits-all way of relating to our

children, and to human beings for that matter, creates the opposite effect: The sensation that I as your child am not being loved fully; not being recognized for who I am; and that something must be wrong with the part of me that makes me different from you, given that you are so motivated to avoid it. I have my own song. Let me sing it. What's more, sing it with me. And then we may achieve the symphony called family.

#### **4. What role did your teachers play in helping or hindering the development of your racial identity?**

As with virtually everyone in my life, my teachers were well-intended and almost universally unaware of what it might be like to be a racially isolated Black adoptive child in a White environment. So the role they played was the role of unawareness and all that it brings. As teachers, we are not only responsible for conveying 'basic' curricula. It falls upon us also to create learning spaces that feel safe to each child. Not just safe from physical harm but also safe from harm to the spirit. To create this safe space requires the willingness to work toward being able to *empathize or imagine* each child's reality. This in turn influences how we teach our class lessons and which lessons we teach; how we manage children's social relationships in class and on school grounds; and how we monitor and respond to children's developmental needs. Of course the relationship between the teacher and the child's parents is central to all of this.

#### **5. Given your experience, are you for or against trans-racial adoption?**

To be succinct, I must respectfully express that I receive this question frequently and while I appreciate the curiosity that spawns it, I always wish the wording of the question were different. We seem to be so thoroughly socialized in this country to approach every social issue as though what matters most is what 'side' of an issue a person takes. We seek validation for our opinion and look for opportunities to classify others according to their opinions. All the while, the children of adoption go through their lives simply wishing that adults cared more to *understand* their experience. To me, that is what matters: Do we wish to genuinely understand each child's experience? If we do, we will be motivated to actually learn, instead of focusing on taking up sides and positions.

Every child, family, and situation is unique. Therefore every judgment about transracial adoption should be made on an individual-case basis. Transracial adoption is occurring by the thousands. I care about nothing more than that as a society we do everything in our power to understand these experiences. That is what we owe these children. We can do better with our laws and policies. We can do better with our child welfare practices, family recruitment, screening, and child placements. We can do better with our post-placement support. We simply can never rest and feel as though "Give every child a loving home" is as far as we need to evolve in our level of sophistication. Tag lines are cute, but love is only a foundation. Children need much more. And unfortunately, love can and does exist in millions of homes in which there are also other attitudes and behaviors that deeply hurt the child. My prayer is that we humble ourselves to the path of understanding and finally leave our adult agendas alone. These five questions have humbled me. Thank you for giving me this space to connect with you. May we each continue to grow!

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