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Wednesday, June 24, 2015

Rachel Dolezal and unmistakable identity

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Thanks to CNN, shipboard news and a plethora of Alaskan chatter, even from my perch in the middle of the Gulf of Alaska, news of the Rachel Dolezal affair literally drowned out all other conversations, until of course we became aware of the shooting in Charleston.

As I listened to the interviews regarding Dolezal and the pundits of every color pontificating about a woman they don't know, and will likely never meet, I could think of only one phrase: Who cares?

Isn't the whole point of self-identity just that? How one self-identifies and with which group is in relation to one's self. And isn't that freedom of self-identity in a melting pot society such as ours, one which by definition, must be inherently fluid?

Without a doubt, Dolezal, a 37-year-old, has an unusual background. Dolezal's parents, who have averred to the world their abject whiteness (and I'm still trying to understand why they felt compelled to do that), had previously lived in a teepee, and had engaged in conduct described by others as "hippie-like." Dolezal was not born in a hospital, and when Dolezal was a child, her parents adopted several much younger black children.

After attending a small Christian college in Mississippi, Dolezal graduated with a Master's degree from historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C., married a black man, had a biracial son, and eventually taught African studies at a university in Washington state. She then became a race relations ombudsman for a police department in eastern Washington, and ultimately became the president of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP. She was known as a talented activist credited with instilling undeniable new energy into that chapter of the civil rights organization.

Dolezal also alleged her parents abused her and one of the black children they adopted;

Dolezal now parents that child as well. And apparently, while Dolezal attended Howard, she self-identified as white. So much so that she sued Howard for racial discrimination regarding financial aid alleging that since she was white she received less in tuition support than her black classmates did. That suit was ultimately dismissed. So somewhere along the continuum of graduate school, marriage, motherhood and career, her sense of identity seemingly took a dramatic shift to blackness. She also described an older black man in a photo as her father, and told others she had lived in South Africa for a period of time - a fact her parents dispute.

Although the Spokane chapter of the NAACP initially stood by her due to her talent as an effective leader, Dolezal resigned from that organization last week. The Spokane police department asked her to resign as race relations' ombudsman as well; apparently Dolezal lied on her application for that position - describing herself as of ethnically black descent.

Now, I don't condone lies or deception about one's background. But the question of cultural identity in the melting pot that makes this country great is complex at best. At worst, it's divisive and isolating. It is also difficult to know where to draw the line, or if indeed there is a line that must be drawn. Perhaps more importantly, does that line matter?

Having spent my formative years and university life in the Hawaiian Islands, I was often one of only a few white faces in a classroom. As a young lawyer, I was often the only white woman in the courtroom. But it never mattered; Hawaii was home.

I am not comparing my experience to the black/white divide in America; I relay it only to give context. Had I stayed to practice in Hawaii for the duration of my career, dyed my hair black and gotten enough sun to give myself skin cancer, and then gone on to work, say, for the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, and I had done good work for OHA (as Dolezal apparently did for the NAACP), would that have made me a complete fraud simply because my gene pool originally hailed from Europe? No. But there would be a difference, and fraud may have been the case, had I said my grandparents were ethnic Hawaiians.

There has been much discussion about cultural blackness in the American experience. I am not qualified to illuminate the black historical experience in the U.S., although I am certainly sensitive to it. My personal experience is that one can have compassion, empathy, understanding, and even strenuously advocate for a particular group of people, regardless of one's bloodlines. On the other hand, lying about one's racial background, is another matter altogether, even if done with intentions of doing good. And that is apparently what Dolezal was trying to achieve.

However it came to be for Dolezal, and whatever her personal experience was that led her to the path she chose, those choices are hers and hers alone. If her work for the NAACP and as police department race relations' ombudsman was good, on that is where the focus should be. Not the color of her skin, or what blood runs through her veins.

Is that not what Dr. Martin Luther King would have staunchly advocated? Is that not what we, as part and parcel of American society, desire as a goal? The very nature of the freedom of self-identity should mandate that, and on that is where the collective narrative should be focused.

One pundit said Dolezal has "co-opted the transgender issue" raised by Caitlin Jenner, nee Bruce Jenner. That would be laughable were it not such a pathetic stretch of intellectual gymnastics. That same pundit stated that Dolezal "is delusional." While Dolezal may be conflicted, even confused, given her background and personal experiences, assigning mental illness in this case is not only unfair, but insensitive to the extreme for the sake of a 30-second sound bite - it is also frankly, rather racist.

As Dolezal stated, she doesn't "put on a blackface as a performance." And on this point, I happen to believe her. While there is a level of choice in the matter of self-identity, it is far more complex than that. And can another person really ever argue what someone else feels? Or how they self-identify?

Race at its core is a social construct. By alleging misappropriation against Dolezal, we simultaneously reduce her personal experience to a vast iceberg of nothingness and engage in another type of racism altogether. That is patently unfair and goes against all notions of freedom, for which many of all races have fought long and hard.

Perhaps one cannot shed one's race if one is very black, very brown, very Asian or very white. But if we should be judging that in a national debate, let it be based not on race, but on credibility, decency and hard work. Let that be the only judge. Because of the controversy presented by conflicting accounts of Dolezal's personal history, her conduct, and the apparent web of constructed deceits, she may indeed fail that test. And if she does, then she loses first, and the good she was trying to achieve loses second.

I posit though that self-identity however belongs to the self. Judge Rachel Dolezal and others not by the color of her skin or her historical gene pool, but instead, as Dr. King stated years ago, by the content of her character.

Wherever you come out, common decency requires, at a minimum, just that.

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