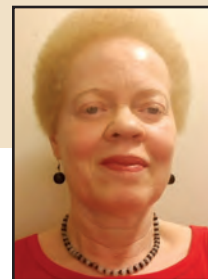


Is she Black or White?

By L'tanya Geddie | Owings Mills, Maryland



“Is she black or white,” was an audible whisper I often heard in my younger years, from other black people, in public, when I wore permed hair. During those years, whites assumed I was white, though I never intentionally tried to “pass.” I actually grew up believing that an albino was a black person who looked white. Although frequently called “Casper” and “white cracker,” I survived and always had a core of friends. I remember thinking that at least Casper is a “friendly” ghost.

In 1963, my third grade class was bused to an all-white school for desegregation. My first experience around white children was disappointing. Even though I looked white, they rejected me along with my schoolmates. My schoolmates still teased me during our bus travels.

That said, I have frequently been amongst whites who did not recognize that I was black. Occasionally, like a fly on the wall, I was privileged to hear the reality of their negative views of black people, which would only be spoken and validated amongst themselves. This first happened when I was seventeen, attending a Yale University weekend event for potential students. Three white students were assigned to show me around and I was housed in their suite. Their conversations had racist content. They did not know I was black, and I was scared to

claim my identity and endured an extremely uncomfortable weekend, so I “passed.” Surely, if my opinion were asked, I would have disclosed my truth. I let this experience determine that I would not attend Yale.

I have certainly learned since that day how to proudly speak up for myself and to attempt to modify people’s not-so-nice views. However, there were times when I truly wished I was white. As an African American, despite my nice personality, I felt that I was generally unattractive because of my albinism. (Marriage and family eventually happened for me, however.)

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During my career as a social worker for Baltimore public schools and social services, I had to clarify my identity for black clients who did not want a white social worker, and white clients who thought they had a white social worker. I sought and had much success in conveying the higher principle of a human being desiring to help another human being.

In my experience, children with albinism in American black families are likely to receive more attention than other children in the immediate and extended family. Compliments about cuteness and pretty hair may be excessive and may represent historical and subconscious perceptions of whiteness and bloneness being more attractive. As I grew older I did hear subtle messages about “improving” my appearance by dying my hair and wearing make-up. But as my self-esteem grew, I rejected



these suggestions. Still, when photos are being taken, I often ask, “Can you take that over,” since I can appear quite bright among other black people.

Rearing two sons (now adults) with normal pigmentation has gone rather smoothly for me. My sons have said that they generally tell their friends about their mom’s albinism before the friends meet me. Once at a vacation pool spot, some white kids heard my young sons



address me as “Mom.” They appeared startled and inquired, “How could that be... were you adopted?” Then they concluded, “Your dad must be black.”

A particularly scary experience occurred while I was driving my black teenage son. We were pulled over by a white police officer. The officer viewed me as a white woman, doubted my claim that Andrew was my son, and suspected that Andrew was hijacking me. Allegedly, Andrew looked like a wanted individual. I insisted on our truth, but I wish I had verbally addressed the officer’s racial profiling.

I have matured through the difficult and interesting experiences in my life as an African American woman with albinism. Lately I have been wearing my hair in its natural afro style—I feel this is a physical affirmation of my identity. I thank God for the way I was made and for my journey.