

THE LONG-PROMISED DAY?

LOVE LESSONS LEARNED WHILE STYLING HAIR

By Joy Smith

I have occasionally thought that I carry all of my personality around on my head. . . . I sometimes walk into a cocktail party and let my hair do the talking for me. I stroll through the room, silently, and watch my hair tell white lies. In literary circles, my hair brands me as “interesting, adventurous.” In black middle class circles my hair brands me as “rebellious” or “Afro-centric.” In predominantly white circles, my hair doubles my level of exotica. My hair says, “Unlike the black woman who reads you the evening news, I’m not even trying to blend in.” Hair surely becomes a source of others’ interpretations of one’s politics, one’s social agenda, one’s personality, one’s profession, even one’s (un)professionalism.

—VERONICA CHAMBERS¹

HAIR—IT’S AN obsession. Men and women all over the world spend hours fixing and millions of dollars perfecting the perfect “do.” Looking through old photos of myself, a Pandora’s box of sorts, my eyes magnetize right to my hair. “Like it,” or “hate it,” I sigh under my breath. Memories of midnight bleaching or coloring frenzies in Rapunzelish attempts to avoid cutting my locks and the necessary emergency fix-ups following these mad fugues are still fresh in my mind. And though, like any addict, I occasionally experience relapses, my “hair fetish” took on a new dimension when I had my first child.

Through the help of my African-American partner and our two daughters, time with extended family members, hair classes for mainly adoptive parents of African-American children, my own experimentation with a corn-rowed hairstyle, the media, friends, peers, books, the Church, and the following experience, I’ve come to understand that hair is just one big beautiful allegory for loving myself and my neighbor: becoming anti-racist.

MOST of my life, I have struggled with “bad hair days” and the other inconveniences of head hair, but like most white women, I easily find a hairdresser who cuts and styles my hair well. At

the corner market and even in clothing stores, I come across a myriad of products (with packages depicting people of my race) containing hair products specifically designed to treat my mane either chemically or naturally. And more important, I rest assured every night that my hair, no matter how unruly, will never be labeled “good” or “bad” because of my race. Many readers of this essay may know white folks who have chemically straightened their hair to avoid a “bad” hair label, but, as Neal Lester points out, this process differs greatly from the “complex political, personal, and social implications” that take place as “little black girls’ hair” is transformed from “its non-chemicalized form to a processed state that lengthens the hair as it straightens it.”²

My consciousness of the social implications of hair (along with many other subtle ways whiteness is privileged) awakened very slowly. I couldn’t see these aspects very well even while dating my partner, Darron Smith, or after our marriage and the births of our daughters, Keisa (nearly three now) and Eagan (sixteen months old). Yes, members of my family were (and still are) concerned about our union and the subsequent children, but like the “good liberal” I was, I dismissed their fears as racism they couldn’t spot because of our generational differences or as originating from their unexamined ac-

ceptance of uninspired comments by early LDS leaders. I likewise brushed aside a frightening, racist encounter with a Provo police officer and the less significant—though, at times, equally uncomfortable—stares and whispers of strangers as experiences with ignorance in less-enlightened folks. I never considered that I, too, was racist—and am still.

The events forcing me from my cozy belief that I was a “good white person” into an awareness of the racialized world we live in began when our daughters were born with hair that was immediately labeled “good.” With Keisa, the nurses—who seemingly cared less about the child’s nourishment than her appearance—delighted in playing with her soft curls and made certain to affix the little pink bow “just right” for her newborn picture. Similarly, when Eagan arrived, the nurses in the maternity wing pronounced her the unofficial recipient of an award for “best hair in the nursery” and gave me a whole package of pastel-colored bows to place beside her gorgeous tresses. Like most new parents, I embraced this attention and all their pronouncements with pride. And when it became even more clear that our daughters had inherited more of my fine, straighter, hair texture, I took pride in the fact that I was their white mother. I hadn’t begun to understand that in my pride, I was unconsciously privileging white notions of beauty.

As the girls grew older and their hair longer, and as I began to better understand my own thinking processes, comments and the fixation on their hair by friends, white family members, and strangers became increasingly tiresome. None of these folks believed themselves to be racist, but obviously they were keenly aware of the girls’ color or they wouldn’t have felt the need to say such things. In search of love and kinship, I decided to attend some Black History Month activities. I signed up for free hair-care lessons taught by a selfless African-American hair stylist, Tamu Smith, whom I had heard a lot about, but in my do-it-yourself individualism and fear had never felt any need to meet or ask for help.

At the first hair class, I sat next to other white parents. Except for me, all had adopted black children. We were surrounded by our children, who were overjoyed to play with other boys and girls with varying degrees of beautiful brown skin and the wonderful array of hair textures associated with being of African descent. Finally, my daughters and I were in a space where being black was not exotic—positive or negative—just normal.



JOY SMITH has a bachelor’s degree in English teaching and is a former middle and high school teacher. She is now busy raising two children and is planning to continue her own education next year.

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Joy Smith with daughters Eagan (in backpack) and Keisa (in front), and nephew, Tevor Benjamin

I let down my guard. Here was a community that cared for African-American children! Yet even as we parents openly professed our love for our black children, many of us still did not know or understand how to love them *as* black children. I heard surprising generalizations and culturally dismissive statements from some parents that were prejudiced, even downright racist. I struggled with these comments, trying not to become upset, as I knew most of the remarks simply reflected an ignorance about race. In response to these words and attitudes, I'd try to draw from my meager data stores and share whatever insights or broader perspectives I could. But I came to realize that I needed to humble myself and study much more about race, to learn about it not just intellectually but pragmatically as well.

*Don't remove the kinks from your hair,
remove them from your brain.*
—Marcus Garvey³

LOVE is much, much more than shared living space. Darron often shows me what love is by yanking me out of the various racist traps I fall into and sharing his insights as well as turning me on to some great literature about race. Almost daily we discuss racial matters, even

though many times I slide back into complacency, resenting such frank and often heated discussions. Yet we continue to act and speak about these things out of love for each other and our children. We grow more in love through honest communication, understanding that our racial action or inaction has a profound positive or negative impact on how our African-American children will form their identity. I continually strive not to dismiss the relevance of fully embracing my partner and in-laws as I learn from them and other African-Americans about the variety and intricacies of the African-American experience far above and beyond hair styling.

Most whites, including those of us who have intimate relationships with people of color, tend to deny that racism exists, especially in ourselves. Christ taught that love is about bravely facing our fears and changing. I appreciate (though not always immediately—I'm still working on that!) when others show me this kindness.

Even though it is difficult, I am enjoying the ritual of atonement—removing the kinks from my brain, a brain full of almost thirty years of racial indoctrination, prejudiced notions, and thinking processes that have developed as I have benefited from unearned white privilege. I feel free. And by finding more powerful, creative ways to actively practice anti-racism, I am learning to replace fear with love—the transformative power that should be shared.

TAMU couldn't come to our most recent hair class, so Keisa and Eagan spent the evening playing with friends as I chatted with the other parents. As I reflected on these classes, I realized that for me, our hair lessons had turned into love lessons. I now knew many new hairstyles and where to find the hair products to use on my daughters' hair. But my lessons ran much deeper. I had learned I can't love when I fear what I don't understand.

I thank God for this beautiful world and the people in it. I hope that by celebrating our differences and our similarities, we will follow the example that Christ set for us. Christ reminded us that our world consists of

neighbors besides those who live next door—who are most likely of our same race, sex, ability, age, class or sexual preference. Our communities include people we must make special efforts to know and come to love. Truly loving them may require us to comb loose every kink and knot in our twisted reasoning, but there is so much joy in staying the course together—in love with each other. As bell hooks writes:

The individuals who are part of [the] beloved community are already in our lives. We do not need to search for them. We can start where we are. We begin our journey with love, and love will always bring us back to where we started. Making the choice to love can heal our wounded spirits and our body politic. It is the deepest revolution, the turning away from the world as we know it, toward the world we must make if we are to be one with the planet—one healing heart giving and sustaining life. Love is our hope and our salvation.

EVEN as Keisa and Eagan wriggle and squirm and sometimes cry while I fix their hair, we already share so much more than a daily chore of hair care. And even sometimes, just like in the children's book by bell hooks, our days begin: "All kinks gone! / All heads of joy! / . . . Just all girl happy! / Happy to be nappy hair!"⁴ ☺

NOTES

1. Veronica Chambers, "Dreading it . . . or How I Learned to Stop Fighting My Hair and Love My Nappy Roots," *Vogue* (June 1999):171, 178.

2. Neal A. Lester, "Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks: African-American Daughters and the Politics of Hair," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24 (Apr. 2000), 204.

3. Marcus Garvey and Amy J. Garvey, with Ann Jacques Garvey, eds., *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (Dover, Mass.: Majority Press, 1990), 207.

4. Bell Hooks, *Happy to Be Nappy* (New York: Hyperion, 1999).