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Identity is something I have struggled with most of my life. I was born in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, to a Puerto Rican mother and Costa Rican father. From an early age I could see that my parents' skin colors were obviously not the same. I often wondered how they could be together because what I was seeing was very uncommon. I didn't know many biracial families or children like me, and even among extended family members it was uncommon.

There was always tension in my family. On my father's side of the family my brother and I were my grandmother's favorites, and it wasn't because we were well-behaved. I was able to pick up on the fact that my skin complexion played a role in the way I was treated. Because of this subliminal message I often felt better than the rest of my cousins on my father's side of the family. When I visited my grandmother on my mother's side, the dynamic shifted. I often felt different and less than the rest of my family members because my skin was darker. I wasn't allowed to use the same hair brush that all of my cousins would share. These experiences began to shape my perception of race and the way I perceived black and white.

I hated being black, and I hated my father for being black. It breaks my heart to admit that sometimes I wished my mother had married another man so that I wouldn't be black. I hated my nose, my chin and my eye color. I hated my skin and my hair. I hated everything about me that made me black, and I did everything I could to make myself white. I started relaxing my hair by the time I was in 3rd grade, and I was straightening my own hair by 5th grade. I would often say that I would never marry a black man because I didn't want my children to have "nappy" hair. As a matter of fact, I wanted to marry a man with blonde hair and blue eyes because my children would have blonde hair, blue eyes and rosy cheeks. Throughout my life I would never identify as black—I couldn't be black because I was Hispanic.

During high school I started to see and experience things more clearly. I remember the first time someone reacted to the fact that I spoke Spanish. He said, "You speak Spanish? I thought you were black." I was shocked and denied with everything in me the fact that I was black. I was not black. I was Hispanic. But everything changed my junior year of high school. See, prior to junior year I was frustrated and wondering why on earth a white guy wouldn't ask me out. It could have been because I was ugly, but I doubt that. All the guys asking me out were of a darker complexion. One day Bass Memorial Academy came to visit our church in Apopka, Florida. I found myself attracted to this nice, dark young man, something that was rare for me at the time. We got to know each other, and over the course of two weeks we started talking about cute girls. He then proceeded to describe me as beautifully golden brown with lovely dark eyes and curly hair. That did something for me, not just in terms of self-esteem but for seeing black as something beautiful. He saw my black as beautiful. This was a paradigm shift for me. I had questions, and I started to explore my blackness.

The more I started to explore, the more I found myself to be angry. I was angry because I felt like something had been stolen from me. I was robbed of my identity, and I wasn't allowed to celebrate it. The church I was attending in high school was an Afro-Caribbean congregation, and to this congregation gospel music, among many other things, was demonized. I couldn't understand this until I understood the colonial influences within Adventism and how that affected countries and populations that were ministered to by missionaries. I didn't have historical role models to look up to; I didn't know what black people contributed to America.

Why was I only learning about black history through movies? Why did I only know the names of Christian contemporary artists? I didn't know any gospel choirs. Why was it so terrible to move and clap during worship? I didn't understand it. The more beauty I found and desired to connect with, the more I felt restricted.

When I got to college I did everything I could to immerse myself into black culture to better understand the part of me that I had for so long denied. But this time, my experience was different. I was learning to express those things which were in my heart. I was learning to be free.

One day I was on my way to the cafeteria, and I was singing the Black American National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson. On my way up the stairs I got a rather unpleasant stare from an older white gentleman. Immediately I stopped singing and felt ashamed of what I was doing. Then he gave me an insincere smile as I continued up the stairs. I kept asking myself what I had done wrong in that moment, but the reality was I had done absolutely nothing wrong. I was in the Campus Center, a center made for students, singing a song. I started to see the subtle micro aggressions and the inconsistencies that existed in my church.

My spirituality started to deteriorate. How could I serve a God who didn't look like me and who didn't understand my experience? I grew up being told that all of humanity was made in the image of God, yet I had experienced everything less than that, not only as a person of color but also as a woman. For a long time I hated being Adventist. I wanted to be a part of a community that would accept me as a woman of color, and for a long time I believed that was in another denomination or religion altogether. But I had a moment in my life that made me realize that I couldn't keep running away. For many Adventists of color the Seventh-day Adventist Church is their home, like it is mine. Just because there are issues in my church does not mean that there aren't issues in another church. The grass is probably the same color on the other side. I live in the United States, who am I kidding? I can't run away from my family and leave them behind. So, I decided if I can't leave I will do everything I can to move the Adventist church to become a home where people of color truly feel like they belong. If that means I am uncomfortable, so be it. If that means I am the only one yelling at the top of my lungs that what is happening is unjust, so be it. If that means I get dirty looks, so be it. If that means I get labeled a troublemaker, then so be it. What I cannot do is sit down and be silent on areas of growth that my church is overlooking. I truly believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church can be a place of belonging for all people as it claims to be.

