

# Mary Catherine and me: building cross-cultural relationships in ‘post-racial’ America

by Holly Elissa Bruno

**May 9, 2009:** In Raleigh, North Carolina at the graduation ceremony of North Carolina State University’s chemical engineering class, my daughter, Lily Jin Hee stands taller than her 5’5” stature. She’s labored five long and rigorous years for this degree. Lily, herself a person of color, rarely thinks twice about a person’s race. Just as in preschool, Lily’s friends are all delightfully different from one another. Nonetheless, I note that while NC State graduates many students of Asian descent and some of Latino heritage, no black chemical engineers receive diplomas with Lily this semester.

**July 2009:** President Obama drinks a cold beer with Harvard Professor Gates and Police Sergeant Crowley. You probably know the story: Our President invited the men to discuss their differences, after Sergeant Crowley arrested

Professor Gates. Kept at a distance from this conversation, news commentators argue over what has and has not changed in ‘post-racial’ America.

How far would you say we have come? As the children in our programs tumble into a glorious kaleidoscope of cultures and traditions, are we, their models, fully ready to demonstrate from the inside out, authentic and trusting cross-cultural relationships?

*This article is an invitation to reflect on how authentic our relationships are with people who differ from us, especially in culture and ethnicity.*

Warren Goldstein (2009), University of Hartford Professor in “Why this white guy was not arrested while trying to break into a house,” describes how

differently he was treated from Professor Gates, despite the fact that Goldstein used keys to attempt to enter a house at night that did not belong to him. Gates was entering his own home. When the police arrived, they ‘had a chuckle’ over Goldstein’s ‘mistake.’

Observing how he was treated differently from Professor Gates, Goldstein writes:

*My hope is that lots of white folks will finally get what our African American brothers and sisters have been trying to get through our heads. . . . It’s different being black. Every day, we white people benefit from being white, from white ancestry and from acting as if we deserve the benefits of being white. When we hunt for housing, real estate agents regard us more favorably. We don’t get followed by store security. We get better deals from car salesmen, more generous treatment from juries, and — despite myths of rampant affirmative action — our*

Holly Elissa Bruno’s (MA, JD) textbook, *Leading on purpose: Emotionally intelligent early childhood administration* (McGraw-Hill, 2008) explores the art and science of building authentic and respectful relationships. Former Maine Assistant Attorney General and Associate Professor and Dean of Faculty at University of Maine-Augusta, Holly Elissa describes herself as a ‘recovering’ attorney. Her keynote addresses have engaged audiences from Reykjavik to Phoenix and Tampa to Budapest. As Adjunct Faculty at Wheelock College, she teaches early childhood leadership courses.

**Editor’s note:** We asked Holly Elissa to write on this topic to follow up on an NAEYC presentation she did several years back. In this article, she offers one perspective on the importance of developing cross-cultural relationships. In its draft form, this article was shared with a diverse group of early childhood professionals who offered feedback and helped shape the article. We are interested in hearing what you have experienced and what you have written or presented on this topic. We hope this article sparks interest in continuing this important discussion (see page 31).

*kids rarely compete with qualified African American kids because so many urban schools, where most black kids are educated, are flat out disasters. Racism thrives in many places — in hospital emergency rooms, in bank loan departments, in country clubs and churches and synagogues and universities.*

Lorna, seasoned and dedicated inner-city director, reflecting on the Gates-Crowley encounter says: "This is our world to those who see it. My child and I could write a book about the encounters we have had with this issue. And I will tell you that it will always continue." Marcia and Suzi, early childhood leaders in West Virginia and a bi-racial team of diversity trainers who present nationwide, report Suzi's credit card is immediately accepted when they check into hotels. Marcia's is not. Gail, former early childhood director in Massachusetts, who leads workshops with me, says: "My friendships with white women are very rare. There has to be some more authentic connection to take it up to that level."

*What does it take for adults in our life-changing profession to share relationships across differences that meet Gail's standard of "some more authentic connection"?*

We carry lessons from our childhood experiences into adulthood. Those of us 'of a certain age' (over 30?), are likely to have experienced racial and class lines drawn with a billy club. Today's lines may be drawn less obviously.

As I share some of my story as an educator and a white woman, I invite you to reflect on your history of relationships, professional and personal, with people who differ from you, especially in culture and ethnicity. As you read about Mary Catherine and me (see page 28), a

friendship which still matters to me, recall your childhood friendships with people who might not have looked, acted, or spoken like you. As you read my story, what story would you tell? What lessons did you take away?

### **There has to be some more authentic connection**

In 1963, President Obama's parents could not have married legally in a number of states. Mary Catherine and I graduated from Corning Free Academy in Corning, New York, in June 1963. The lessons we learned were wrenching: "Someone is going to get hurt." Doors that opened for me slammed in Mary Catherine's face. Was your story different?

Holding Mary Catherine in my heart, I have been on a quest to learn how to make things better than they were for us. As I share some of my journey with you, I invite you to reflect on your own journey that brought you to this day.

### **White women need to listen**

Over a decade ago, my colleague and fellow 'recovering' attorney, Doris, who is Afro-Caribbean, and I were preparing our first presentation at NAEYC's Professional Development Institute (PDI). Our topic was "Building partnerships between women of color and white women." In preparation, I conducted an informal study while I traveled across the country teaching courses for Wheelock College. I asked any woman willing to talk with me:

- How important is building partnerships between women of color and white women to you?

Women of color: *Not a priority. We have too much on our plates.*

White women: *Definitely a priority.*

- What one factor helps most in building these partnerships successfully?

Women of color: *White women need to (stop talking and) hear our stories.*

White women: *Overcoming paralysis from our own guilt and fear.*

My study concluded: *Women of color need to remain hyper-vigilant to thoughtless put downs; white women are freer to initiate, trust in, and build relationships.* When women of color told me white women need to "stop talking and hear our stories," I listened. Life stories of early childhood colleagues of color are riveting:

- Bunny's guidance counselor in upstate New York denied Bunny's request to take college preparation courses. Bunny was told: "You'll be someone's cook."
- Bernadine, as a new adolescent coming of age, was forced by her Arkansas school system to take birth control pills. Only after years of medical intervention could Bernadine give birth to her own children.
- Rosalind, penniless in North Carolina was enlisted by her mother as a prostitute. After an abortion at age 13, Rosalind had to break off from her mother to return to school.
- Laurie Ann, in her master's presentation at Harvard, laid out her design for an early childhood program where children can live and learn traditional Hawaiian cultural practices. Laurie Ann fears these practices will otherwise be forgotten.

No question about it: As a white woman, I need to listen to and learn from the life experiences my colleagues of color are willing to share. Recalling Mary Catherine, I see again how precious, and perhaps rare, authentic multi-cultural relationships are.

## Authenticity and vulnerability: What's trust got to do with it?

Trust is the heartbeat of successful relationships. If we trust each other, we can face most anything together. Without trust, we cannot even begin. Trust is born of authenticity and vulnerability. My journey toward authenticity deepened in the summer of 1969, in Bethel, Maine, at NTL (National Training Laboratory for Applied Behavioral Sciences). As a rookie teacher, I participated in six weeks of volcanic experiential training on race relations and change theory. School systems nationwide struggling with school desegregation, like Chicago, Denver, and Charlotte, North Carolina, were represented. I heard so many gut-twisting stories of abuse experienced by educators of color and torrents of white guilt from white educators, I wanted to shrivel up tiny as a bug and crawl away. Running away from the realities of racism was and is not an option.

That fall as one of three white staff members at West Charlotte Senior High School, an all-black inner-city school, I walked through those doors ready to share anything I could, and open to learning all I could. To this day, I recall the lessons I learned from my students, not the least of which is: schools sorely lack understanding in how to inspire young black males. The advice I heard from a trusted colleague and friend still holds true: "The test for you will be what you do and say when only white folk are around."

Forty years later, while writing this article, I asked black, Asian, and Latino friends and early childhood professionals to advise me: "How do you know you can trust a white woman?" They responded:

■ I can trust a white woman when I feel she respects me for who I am NOT what I have materialistically.

## Mary Catherine and me

Mary Catherine Berhannon rolled her eyes for only me to see, marking the start of another Cynthia Stewart dry-as-dust social studies lecture. To squirming 7th graders like us, sitting silent as tombstones rankled like a life sentence. Mary Catherine and I mastered the art of sliding folded notebook paper messages back and forth without getting caught. Our epistles, pulsing with pencil art, 'knock-knock' jokes, running comedic commentary, and girly secrets glow in my memory more than any of Miss Stewart's Civil War facts.

At 11, Mary Catherine and I were best friends. Tomboy misfits, our puppy dog friendship secured our own world within the buzzing galaxy of our 'boy crazy' classmates. We cut up in the cafeteria, whispered during 'duck and cover' air raid practices, always chose each other first for sports teams, and had each other's backs as we trudged the familiar path to the principal's office.

When separated by summer vacations, we wrote a lifeline of letters. We prayed that one another's dreams might come true and soothed each other's wounds. I believe we found our voices in those notes and letters.

"Someone is going to get hurt," my mother warned. "Stop writing her and find another friend." Mother's terse explanation made no sense. I had heard in Sunday school about a burning bush, but why would anyone want to burn a cross, of all things, on our front lawn? I kept writing secretly, albeit with wary enthusiasm. We didn't know, Mary Catherine and me, that my mother's forecast would come true, regardless of our hearts' desires.

As we transitioned to high school, Mary Catherine and I were separated by the class system of 'college prep' and 'business track' courses. Our lunch times and study halls didn't coincide. We had different teachers, different homework, and different options. My classes took place on the top floor, hers on the bottom. We began to make other friends.

After my singing troupe performed 15th century Italian madrigals at a high school assembly, I looked up to see Mary Catherine's gospel group take the stage to sing spirituals. My heart clenched. We had lost one another before our own eyes. That was 1963. My friend's eyes were angry. Mine were sad.

Years later, I searched for Mary Catherine to make amends to her for my part in letting our friendship slip away. I was too late. Rumors varied on the cause, but the message was the same: Mary Catherine died young in New York City.

Trusting a woman in different colors is her reaching out to know my family and culture, accepting me for who I am, and letting me BE. No one will put me down. (Vickie)

■ Trust takes time to develop and results from behaviors and actions as well as from intentions. (Joy)

*It has taken me years to more quickly spot and root out these forms of white superiority in my thinking and to challenge them in groups I work with.*

— Margie Carter, (2001) in "The journey to become a white ally"

■ Partnership for me is not friendship. I don't have a choice for the 'higher good of the work,' so I have to partner with white women. My partnerships that turn into friendships with white women are VERY rare. There has to be some more authentic connection to take it up to that level. (Gail)

■ Better yet . . . how do you know you can trust anyone? (Luis)

How do you know that another person, or yourself, is trustworthy?

We feel trust and distrust on a cellular level. Racism is systemic, not just institutionally but internally. Take a look at some recent findings in the new field of neuroscience, the study of how our relationships affect every cell in our bodies.

## Challenges to partnerships: The weight of niceness

Our bodies are neurologically wired to assess and reveal our comfort or discomfort with another person even before our mind decides whether to welcome, avoid, or shun that person (Cozolino 2006). According to a 2007 study, the most common reaction we have to someone who differs from us by race is fear. When a person announces: "I don't see differences" or "I don't have a prejudiced bone in my body," my jaw drops.

The truth is we all have biases regardless of our ethnicity or culture. To shed the heavy cloak of bias and be present to the person beside us requires humility and courage. Margie Carter (2001) confesses, "Today I take this as a given: I will periodically make a mess of things, despite wanting and trying to do the right thing."

According to Dr. Phyllis Chesler, conflict is tough for the majority of women (2001). However, without facing conflict over differences, we lose opportuni-

ties to grow in partnership. Statistics highlight this challenge. Guess what percentage of early childhood leaders feels assured in confrontation? What percentages of women and of men tend to avoid conflict, take things personally, want to rescue others and 'forgive but don't forget.'

White middle-class women like me can 'process things to death.' Practiced at dissecting, analyzing, and describing situations and relationships, we fling flurries of words to cover up or hide from uncomfortable emotions. We dread confrontation. Conflicts are inevitable, especially when we work with people whose cultures and heritages differ. Misunderstandings are not inevitable.

Our likelihood as women to 'tend and befriend' under stress and not react with 'fight or flight' was confirmed by UCLA researchers after 9/11. This relational affinity is not the same as wearing the prickly cloak of niceness. White and Latina females are socialized to be 'good girls.' In *Odd Girl Out*, Rachel Simmons (2001) notes, "The socialization of Latina girls most resembles their white middle class counterparts . . . they are expected to be non-aggressive, pure, and self-sacrificing." Making nice can interfere with trust.

Black women's options are different. In *School girls: Young women, self-esteem and the confidence gap*, Peggy Orenstein (1994) refers to Mary Williams Burgher who noted: "From the start, the model of European femininity — grounded as it is in delicacy, innocence, and an idealized

*I know if I can trust a woman based on the "feeling" I get from her. I think of it as "how our spirits connect." But this is true of women of color as well as white women. Spirit does not have a racial color.*  
— Adrienne, early childhood leader in Boston

helplessness — has largely been unavailable to black women. Instead they have measured their self-worth through strength of character and a tenacious sense of self."

## Pathways to partnerships: More authentic connections

How can we form relationships that are authentic and trusting with people who differ from us, especially given all the challenges from without and within?

I found a cross-cultural team that has written about their conscious effort to build an authentic and dynamic connection. Even though their observations were made years ago, Drs. Beverly Daniel Tatum and Andrea Ayvazian's (1994) insights apply today. Here are the four dynamics that helped them stay open and authentic working side by side:

- Commitment to staying in the partnership for the long run.
- Owning the conflicts that inevitably emerge.
- Sharing a process for facing and working through the conflicts.
- Acceptance that race means some experiences can't be shared.

As I read over the yellowing handout for the PDI presentation I mentioned earlier, I wonder if these 10 steps for white people who choose to progress from awareness and acceptance into action might still be of use:

### Awareness

- Envision the world where white people are not in charge and European-derived culture is a minority culture.
- Identify my assumptions about myself as a white person, about people of color, about our relationships.
- Notice manifestations of white privilege all around.

## Acceptance

- Listen when someone shares her/his anger without making it about me.
- Accept that good intentions alone are not enough.
- Ask for and listen with my heart to the life stories of people who differ from me.
- Forgive myself for the many times I stumble as I work to change.

*Eighty percent of early childhood leaders are uncomfortable confronting others (Bruno, 2008); seventy percent of women and forty-four percent of men avoid conflict and can hold grudges. (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator data, 1998)*

## Action

- Resist denying, running from, and shutting down uncomfortable emotions.
- Speak up about injustice, instead of waiting for a person of color to take a stand first or alone.
- Take initiative in confronting racism when in the company of a group of all-white people.

With hindsight, I can see the difference these steps would have made for me as a white woman in 1963 and perhaps even today.

What works for you in building relationships with people who are different from you? Whatever we do or don't do, children will learn about relationships by watching us.

## Post-racial and/or multi-ethnic America?

I choose to believe that early childhood professionals today co-create environ-

ments where not just children but adults too can grow in authenticity, vulnerability, and trust. Whether America is post-racial, multi-ethnic or both, in our profession, we can choose to not only respect but revel in our differences.

Vickie, an early childhood educator in Buffalo, says "I always tell my friends and students: I might only be a 4'10" Filipino but I have strong roots and my wings can soar like an eagle. After 54 years of celebrating life, I have learned that it doesn't matter if I have 100 or more acquaintances, I have four priceless friends." To Vickie, the ethnicity of her priceless friends does not matter.

Janet Gonzalez-Mena tells me she has passed through the stage where, as a white early childhood speaker and writer, she lectured white people about white privilege. "I made them feel bad about being white and turned them off from listening to me. They didn't want to be white and I didn't either. Then one day I woke up and realized that I am who I am and it's good to be me. Since then my ability to create partnerships with people of color, and white people too, has greatly improved."

I know how close Mary Catherine and I were as children, rejecting as long as we could the pressures swirling around us. Today's children do not have to grow up in the same spiritual poverty. Of all the lessons I have learned and continue to learn along the way, one thing remains true: Look to see the soul in each person's eyes. That's sacred enough and cannot be disrespected.

This one's for you, Mary Catherine.

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We invite you to send us your reflections on your experience in building partnerships with people who differ from you. Please send comments to [www.ChildCareExchange.com/comments](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com/comments).

We will collect and make available these reflections on the *Exchange* web site and send out an alert on *ExchangeEveryDay* when they are posted.