



Balancing Two Worlds

Being half Navajo has always been a weird experience; It's not immediately apparent that I'm half Navajo, and that has put me in a strange position for most of my life.

When you don't look like the "others," people, including close friends, are more likely to be very vocal about their biases; "Navajos are drunks," "they're greedy people who live off the government," "send a Navajo into a casino and you'll never see them again."

But it also meant being pushed away, sometimes by my own family. "Oh look, the white girl's here...", "Why should she get anything? Her dad is white, he can get it for her," "You'll never understand what it means to be Navajo, because you're too white."

For most of my life, I have battled with the idea of race in placing where I belong in the world, because I walked the line of listening to two sides debate how I was not enough. Not Navajo enough. Not white enough.

It bled into every aspect of my life, down to the way I would eat. On the reservation, we would use our hands and our bread to hold our food. At home in Gallup, my dad would get mad at me, "Don't eat with your fingers! Use a fork!"

I have always referred to myself as a half-breed, a mutt. Which carried a lot of weight as a child to defend both sides of my lineage. I read books about the long walk, and coyote stories. But also about the wars that resulted in Czechoslovakia and the Slovak Republic.

And yet, one of the biggest things that still troubles me in the debate of race and society, is the concept of privilege and how to describe to others specifically what "white privilege" is, and how it functions.

I can tell you that white privilege is real, but I can't accurately describe what it feels like.

It's hard to explain what it means to learn that people are more likely to respond to your questions than they are to your mother's, even when those questions are phrased in the exact same words.

Or to describe what it felt like to watch the differences in reactions when my dad entered a store, versus the suspicious looks that would pass across my Navajo brother and uncles.

Even as children we knew there was something different, my Navajo friends pushing me forward "Leslie, you go ask the teacher, she likes you better..."

White privilege isn't always as obvious as "If we were living in WWII I wouldn't be killed by Nazi's because my skin is light."

It can be quiet. Subliminal. Sneaky.

It has taken me years to consciously realize how white privilege affects my life, and the lives of the people around me that I care for the most.

It has taken me years to realize the duty I have as the "white girl" to use my voice to acknowledge and defend the part of my lineage that people cannot see.

And it has taken me years to realize the duty I have as "the other" to speak up in defense of the Navajo people knowing that the strength I have today is a direct reflection of the resilience of the ancestors that I used to read about.

"You'll never understand what it means to be Navajo, because you're too white." It's true. Somehow in the mess of DNA that grew to be my body, I ended up lighter, taller, with big ears and a bigger nose than any of my cousins. But that will not sway me from standing up for the Navajo people, and standing as a representative for my Navajo family.

In today's political climate, if we are to fight about who we are and what the color of our skin means, then let it be known that I am a half-breed mutt. My Navajo grandmother is alive in spite of a European colonialist genocide of Native Americans. My Yugo-Slavian grandmother was the descendant of one of the few white peoples to be targeted by Hitler and the Nazis during WWII.

Almost my entire being is a collection of DNA from peoples who were killed and persecuted for being a certain "race" -- which makes it all the more important for me to be an ally [in] the fight for equal rights for those who may look different from myself.

My biggest hope is that my "white" friends can try to understand, and also do the same.

By: Leslie Radosevich, Engineer, NASA Ames Research Center

Citation should be as follows:

Radosevich, Leslie. "Balancing Two Worlds.", 13 Aug. 2017, www.epicsnm.org