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## The Hair: Reflections by a White Parent

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# *formations. // living at the intersections of self, social, spirit.*

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## The Hair: Reflections by a White Parent

Posted by [Aana Marie Vigen](#) on August 10, 2015 · [7 Comments](#)

In infancy, it was the eyes. But ever since toddler-hood, it has been the hair. My son is eight years old. He was born with deep blue eyes and fairly bald—just a smattering of sand-colored hair. As he learned to walk, his hair began morphing into its current “tow-head” state. (That term comes from old German roots referring to the hue of flax.) So, yeah, my son has white-blond hair.

“So what?” some may ask. “Why mention it?” Because *so many* others do. [Toni Morrison called our attention to the bluest eye](#), and with all due respect to Dr. Morrison’s penetrating insight into American mindsets and histories, in my immediate family, it’s all about the hair.

My son receives compliments about the color of his hair—from people he knows and from those he merely passes on the street—nearly every week. Some weeks, it’s nearly every day. All shades and colors of people smile and tussle his hair, pat him on the back, tell him he “looks like a movie star,” say he is “beautiful.”

I mention it because I see his pride in his appearance and the confidence in his walk. I mention it because I don’t see other hair colors garnering so much positive attention from complete strangers. I mention it because of how early this color has shaped his sense of self and because of the way he is received by others. I see how fast people (other parents, teachers, persons in authority) “size up” others—including children; who is “cute,” “a trouble-maker,” “outgoing,” “hyper,” “clever,” “smart.”

Even more, I mention it because I am trying to raise a white boy with a healthy sense of self-esteem. But I don’t want it to be built on a foundation that depends on the undervaluing of others—implicitly or explicitly.

The person we see reflected in the eyes and responses of others etches strong impressions into our psyches at an early age. This dynamic also shapes what we begin to expect from others—how we assume they will look at us/welcome us or not.

Here is an example of what I'm trying to describe, a "counter example" in which I play the part of stranger:

Recently at a park with my family, I encountered a lovely dark brown boy, maybe two or three years old, walking with his family. As he passed by me on the path, I said "Hello There!" and smiled. He replied with a resolute "No!" and a scowl on his face. A family member reproached him and said, "She wasn't being mean to you, she was just saying 'Hi.'"

"So what?" one might retort. "This child was just being a typical two year old who says 'No!' to everything."

Maybe. Or perhaps he was reflecting his prior experience of white people telling him to do stuff, correcting him, or maybe even showing him they are wary of him through subtle (or not-so-subtle) body language, rather than greeting him with friendliness and a smile.

I don't know for sure. But to me, his reaction to me—the white stranger—said a lot more about white society than it did about his age or personality.

Back to my son: Many describe him as an "old soul." I have never seen him hit or intimidate another person. He feels profoundly sad for sick, wounded, or dying people and animals. He can talk about his feelings with strong insight and vivid description. Meanwhile, he loves to read and talk about war and dramatic, physical contests of force, skill, and will—from Harry Potter battling Voldemort to World War II trivia.

My son may have "peace and justice" parents, but the boy loves to learn about machines, vehicles, spies, crime-fighting technology, weapons.

My son also expresses deep respect for police officers and for those who serve in the military. As his parents, we have both encouraged respect and spoken honestly, explaining to him that these persons are called to protect and to serve and that they also make mistakes. He knows about police brutality and Ferguson. It makes him mad. He knows the name of Michael Brown. He has chanted at a public demonstration with us, and others from our church, that "Black Lives Matter."

So the other day on a walk we started to talk Halloween costumes and he said he "probably wants to be a soldier from the WWII era." I asked him what nationality he might represent. He replied, "probably German." He's seen Nazi uniforms in books and in a museum and to him, they are the most attractive. Think about it: that's the look the Nazis were going for—fierce, stylish, intimidating—an effective visual way to recruit young Aryans and simultaneously to strike terror into the hearts of all their targets. Nazis "dressed to impress."

So, what I do with this?! My tow-headed child, without fully comprehending it, basically wants to be a Nazi for Halloween! How do I talk about this in a way that does not shame him?

Well, the first thing we did was get frozen custard.

Sitting down, I then broached the topic by asking him to tell me how he would define the word "symbol." His answer was a bit vague, so we clarified that a symbol is a visual representation of an idea that can't be explained quickly, that the visual stands for—embodies—that idea or

concept.

Then because we have been talking a lot of about ancient Greece and Rome recently, we talked about the example of the eagle being part of the Presidential seal and that it has once stood for the Roman Emperor. We also talked about how the Nazis re-appropriated a several thousands-year-old symbol (now known as the swastika) to mean something completely different than it did in these ancient Eastern and Western cultures.

Then I asked him how he thought his classmates might feel if he came to the school Halloween party dressed as a German WWII soldier. “What would your costume symbolize for them?”

His eyes got big; a dawning expression came over him. Then he looked me in the eyes and slowly remarked, “I never thought of it that way.”

After a short pause, I mentioned the hoods and sheets of the Klu Klux Klan, which they had learned about in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and about which we have talked at home on a couple of occasions.

In short, as my son imagined how his friends might feel, some of whom happen to be Jewish and/or darker-skinned/haired than he is, he had an epiphany about costumes. I think he realized that it’s one thing to be a scary wizard like Voldemort or a ghost but quite another to symbolize a living terror who rained—and still rains—terror, harm, and death on people in our world; in our nation; in our city.

This kind of learning is critical for children like my son. As parents and teachers, we have to risk such conversations. We must also never underestimate what children as young as this (and younger!) are capable of understanding and of how much they are being shaped by what we do and do not offer them. And we cannot afford to miss how early **all** our children are shaped by race—in their self-perceptions, their perceptions of others, and of how it all can affect their encounters and relationships with others in very tangible, sometimes tragic, ways.

So, no, my son won’t be a Nazi for Halloween. And if he asks, no, he isn’t going to be a police officer either.

Not now.

Not given the moment in which we live.

Not with that hair.

And I will do my best to explain why.



Aana Marie Vigen is an Associate Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Loyola University Chicago. She is passionate about advocacy and education on global climate change and Christian moral agency. She is also passionate about her local congregation, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (ELCA). And she loves teaching and living in Rogers Park with her spouse and son. Both this church and her family help her have—and enact—hope in the world. She focuses most of scholarly work on socio-economic and racial-ethnic inequalities in health and healthcare (in the U.S. and globally). She is also interested in: the relation between ecological health and human health; ethnographic methods in Christian ethics; the intersection of Christian Social Ethics & Bioethics; Protestant Ethics; Feminist Ethics; White Anti-Racism. If you want to know what Aana has written, here are a couple of highlights: She is the author of *Women, Ethics, and Inequality in U.S. Healthcare: “To Count among the Living”*. In addition, she co-authored (with Christian Scharen) *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* and co-edited (with Patricia Beattie Jung) *God, Science, Sex, Gender: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Christian Ethics*.



Filed under *Uncategorized*

## Comments

**7 Responses to “The Hair: Reflections by a White Parent”**  
**rebecca todd peters says:**

August 11, 2015 at 9:28 pm

Thank you Aana, what a powerful post!

*Reply*

■ **Aana Marie Vigen says:**

August 11, 2015 at 11:37 pm

Thanks so much, Toddie!

*Reply*

**Susan Halvor says:**

August 12, 2015 at 2:20 am

Well put... Thanks for the great example of having challenging conversations with your son!

*Reply*

**Susan Halvor says:**

August 12, 2015 at 2:21 am

Reblogged this on *With Good Courage* and commented:

Very grateful to Aana Vigen for this thoughtful example of how to have a challenging conversation with your child about race and the power of symbols.

*Reply*

■ **Aana Marie Vigen says:**

August 12, 2015 at 11:42 am

Thank you so much, Susan – I appreciate your thoughtful feedback. And thank you so much for sharing this with others via your own blog!

*Reply*

**Georgia Anne Moore says:**

August 13, 2015 at 3:09 pm

I can just see his smile now. That fella of yours is going to be a world changer and I cannot wait to boast that he was in my 2nd grade class! He also has two pretty great parents who have helped mold him into the fine young man that he is today!

*Reply*

■ **Aana Marie Vigen says:**

August 13, 2015 at 4:47 pm

Thanks for these kind words from a great teacher! Primary education is so vital and I am glad for the role you play in children's lives.

*Reply*

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