

Under the Rainbow

By Dennis Knight

In pondering the task of writing on race and culture, I know there are many problems in America associated with race, the most vexing of which is the gang warfare that exists inside of particular ethnic groups of different colors, and probably the root of all that is economic injustice.

I am happy to reflect, however, that we do not live in a color blind society. That's not even worthy as a goal, because the concept by its very end denies the differences that imbue the human race. I have chosen to write my essay as a celebration of race and culture as I relate personal experiences of the kinds we all share as we gaze with full perception of color on that marvelous rainbow we call America.

I grew up in the distinctly white world of Laramie, Wyoming, but on what was euphemistically called 'the other side of the tracks.' Our neighbors on the block were black, white and Mexican. There were tarpaper shacks on the street and traditional houses like our own. As children we played together and some of the friendships we made endure today.

When I was in the Army as a twenty year old, I was just fitting into my second duty assignment in New Jersey when one of my fellow soldiers named Lee wandered over to my bunk, showed me a piece of paper, and asked me to check it out. It was a simple drawing looking down on two men, one white, one black, facing off, their arms forming a circle, their fists nearly touching. One of the four hands clinched a knife. I knew I was being tested, so I looked twice to be sure of what I was seeing. When Lee returned in a few minutes, reclaimed the paper and posed the obvious question, I answered that it was the white guy with the knife. I had passed.

Later that day we engaged in conversation and got to know each other better. Although he could have passed for white, he came from a black father and white mother. Lee Steptoe was raised as a black man and associated himself within that circle. The armed forces had been integrated barely a decade earlier,

and blacks and whites still self-segregated in the mess hall and NCO club. Lee would sometimes invite me along when he was with others of his race. They weren't all quite so ready to accept me on the basis of just one test, but I felt neither uncomfortable in their presence nor compelled to push myself on them. That was 48 years ago, and racial integration is still a work in progress.

In 1974 I married a woman whose ancestors happened to have come from Japan. She was a third generation American, or sansei, whose parents and grandparents were farmers in northeastern Colorado. Her family was thoroughly assimilated into all aspects of the culture of the Western United States, yet they maintained their own wonderful Japanese traditions. Together we had two sons, Thomas and Robert. I used to tell them they were not by halves Japanese and Irish, but all Irish, all Japanese and all American.

As I write this paragraph thinking about my boys, my iPod happens by coincidence to be playing a piece by Denver Taiko, for which both Robert and Thomas drummed with passion. It's a reminder to me of my love for them both, how their lives were enhanced by being members of different rich cultures, and how my own life has been enhanced through them.

My little experiences are my own, but I believe they are shared in different ways every day by millions of people all over the country. The United States is a festival of races, ethnicities and cultures. We play the pipes of Scotland and the guitars of Spain. We dance the polkas of Germany, the waltzes of Austria, the mudras of India and the sambas of Latin America. We thrill to the powwow drums of Native Americans, the djembe drums of Africa and the taiko of Japan. Our own musical traditions of country music and jazz have evolved from the fiddles of Ireland and the horns and woodwinds of Europe.

What a splendid rainbow.