

Help! I've Been Reclassified!

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ September 16, 2007

For the last year, I have been in an identity crisis. I no longer know who I am. You see, I've been reclassified.....maybe. I invite you to share this journey with me.

My father is Biaggi Pasquale Luigi Oliva. Both his parents were from Italy. There is no doubt about anyone's identity in the Oliva family. We all look very much alike.

I love my father and I have some wonderful memories of him. He was a good man who drove a Ballantine Beer truck. (How many of you remember Ballantine Beer?) He and his partner Jimmy made daily local deliveries. Each team had their own route. When they finished their route, they were done for the day. My dad Jimmy would sometimes be done by noon and at other times by five or six at night. It just depended on what kind of day it was, which businesses they had to visit and what they wanted to do with their time. Sometimes...

When I was in elementary school, every once in awhile during the recess we had right before lunch, my dad's Ballantine Beer truck would appear on the street outside of the school playground, and he would whisk me off to Jack's deli where we would indulge in Roast Beef Wedges in the huge front seat of his truck. Afterwards, he would drive me back to school.

How times have changed. Now he would probably be arrested for trespassing or kidnapping even before I got into the truck. At the very least he would be scolded for impairing the morals of small children by parking A BEER TRUCK in front of the school. And, I would probably be suspended for three days for leaving the school grounds without permission.

But that was then, a different time. I loved those outings with Dad. To this day, I relish rare roast beef sandwiches made of lean very red meat and tasty sliced tomatoes, a little salt and pepper and a dash of mayonnaise on crunchy Italian bread. That food and that memory hold a very warm spot in my heart. It shares a place with the image of my dad hopping around in pain in Florida while everyone tried not to laugh.

My parents never took a vacation while I was growing up until I was 15 years old and my brother Glenn was 13. Then we went to Florida to see my dad's youngest sister Evelyn and her husband John. They were "carny" people. They worked in the Joey Chitwood Automobile Thrill Show. John was a daredevil clown who rode around in a teeny tiny car and did scary tricks, while my aunt was shot out of canons. Our trip was timed to be just before the "carney" season started. The very first day we were in Tampa Bay, the "boys" went deep sea fishing. What were they thinking! Eight hours on an open boat in bright sunshine for these pasty New York- pale guys. That night after coming home, elated with the joy of having been on an adventure, my father turned redder and redder and his body became more and more painful as the hours ticked by. My mother, known as the Noxema Queen, plastered him with Noxema as he jumped around in discomfort to the cold cream's touch. He was so funny that we put a feather in his thinning hair for he looked like he was doing a Native American rain dance. Poor dad. It took half the vacation for him to feel better.

But those warm memories of my father are not my favorite. My favorite memory is a much more serious one. I am proud every time I think of it. While I was growing up my family did not do too many things together, but one thing we did do, was to go out to eat. We often tried out new restaurants, ranking them on our personal approval scale. One night we ate Italian, enjoying a tasty meal in an uncrowded restaurant. Several waiters stood behind us, chatting in Italian as they passed the time. We were quietly eating, and I did not notice anything unusual about my dad's behavior or attitude until he stood up, walked over to the waiters and began reprimanding them in Italian. "No, we are not Jewish,"

he said. "But that does not matter. You should not be talking about any group of people in that way. It is nothing but a mean spirited stereotype and is not appropriate here or anywhere else." My father quietly but sternly scolded them. To their credit, the waiters were not only amazed but also embarrassed and apologized profusely. I was so proud! My father, who had often told me to stand up for what I believed in -- who had often told me to loathe prejudice, was modeling for me in a most authentic way. I left that restaurant feeling PROUD. That is my favorite memory of my dad.

My mother was born Elsie Marie Escalante, the fourth of five children. Her parents, my grandparents, were from Castille Spain but had immigrated to the United States. The family lived in Brooklyn New York, but I am not sure if all the kids were born in the states because the two oldest ones spoke Spanish almost exclusively. My grandfather was the superintendent of an apartment building. I never met my grandmother; she died when my mom was a small child. My step-grandmother was from Puerto Rico. She smiled and giggled a lot but did not often speak because she did not know much English. I remember well that, in some way, the family let it be known how hard it had been for my grandfather to marry this Puerto Rican woman. Certainly, marrying someone from Puerto Rico was a major step down for someone from Castille, Spain. I was amazed even then at how we invent pecking orders to make ourselves feel valued. Later, I learned a funny story about my cousin Lulu. All through school Lulu never let anyone know that she could speak Spanish. She did not want to be labeled, with one of those really flattering tags like "Spic." She kept this charade up through high school. Then, once she graduated and was looking for job she realized that she could make much more money if she were bilingual. Suddenly, she claimed her heritage. "Well, yes, of course, I can speak Spanish. I am Hispanic." Instant employment. Just claiming her Hispanic background was an entrée to a high paying job.

And therein lies the problem.

When I applied to college they had this funny ethnic centered question on all of the forms: Are you white, black or Hispanic surnamed? Please check only one. Now for most people, this might not be a problem, but for me it was a conundrum. You see Oliva is my dad's name. He is Italian, but Oliva is a Spanish word, not an Italian one. I am Spanish surnamed. But what was the intent of the question? Were they trying to find out if the respondent was Spanish? Then why didn't they just ask directly? Or were they saying that it was important to learn if your father was Spanish? Did this mean that the mother's lineage did not count? Or is one only Spanish if the father is Spanish? I couldn't figure it out so I decided to go with "Spanish surnamed." I reasoned that whether I checked "Spanish surnamed" or left it blank, either answer would be a half truth and, like my cousin Lulu, claiming my Spanish heritage for college entrance purposes, was probably, during that particular era of mandated diversification, a positive response. I could be part of the school's minority quota.

Although I was never quite comfortable with checking the "Spanish surnamed" box, I found that it came up more and more as I entered the college world of scholarship and financial aid forms. As the years went by, the wording on the boxes changed: Soon I was no longer asked if I were Spanish surnamed. I was asked if I was Hispanic. At first I was pleased with this change. I could answer this more comfortably. I am Hispanic...Well, I am half Hispanic; does that make me Hispanic? If we use the 1/16 criterion that is applied to Native Americans, then I am definitely Hispanic. If we use the "any drop at all" criterion that is often applied for "black," I am definitely Hispanic. So, I check it off: I am Hispanic.

My comfort was not to last long. Hispanic was either broadened or narrowed, depending on your understanding of the term, to Latina. Am I Latina? Does Latina refer to Latin, which would include Spaniards as well as Latin Americans? No, I don't think so. My grandparents were from Spain. Of course, my mom was raised by her step-mother, who is from Puerto Rico: Does that make my mom Latina? Or, is she still only Hispanic? Soon afterward, I was not only being asked if I were Latina and/

or Hispanic, but I also became labeled a “Person of Color.” Hispanics and Latinos were now identified as persons of color. It was when this metamorphosis occurred, that I became thoroughly confused. Am I a Person of Color? I had never thought of myself in that way before. I’ve always identified as white. Yet some important people are telling me that if I am Hispanic or Latina, I am a Person of Color. Others scoff at that assumption. Some ask me what I want to be. They tell me that I can choose how I wish to identify. Some equate person of color with black; others are careful to say “black and persons of color.” What does it matter? I want to scream.

But it does matter. It matters when I apply to the government. It matters when I search for jobs. Right now, in many parts of the country, a white looking person of color is in great demand as is an Hispanic surnamed person. When I look for a position my resume will be put in the “yes, to be considered” pile on the basis of my name alone - if the company wants to diversify. In another company, when I look for a position my resume will be automatically rejected - if the company wants to retain another type of image. Right now I can help fill diversity quotas if I claim a particular heritage. I am part of the privileged white society if I do not. In which way, am I a fraud?

It does matter. It matters when my father’s name is put before the City Council for the position of Director of Parks and Recreation and he does not get confirmed because he is labeled a Democrat. Not because he is not the best qualified; not because he does not have the education; not because he does not have positive letters of reference. Not because of any personal quality at all, but because he does not belong to the right group. For my father, the pain was so great that he never voted again. It does matter.

It matters when qualified people are denied jobs because of discriminatory policies. It matters when unqualified people are given jobs because of discriminatory policies. It matters when I am given a scholarship because of my father’s last name. It matters when I am not given a scholarship because of my father’s last name.

It matters because we continue to label people in terms of broad, general groups. We tend to treat others in specific ways, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, because of their perceived memberships in these groups. I do it all of the time! I know that if I am going to meet the second richest man in the world, I have a certain set of expectations of this person that have absolutely nothing to do with the person himself, but are clearly related only to the label “rich.” My anticipatory set will be very different for this man than if I were told that I was going to meet a Quaker, conscientious objector. And yet, could not both labels pertain to the same person? Of course they could!

For years, I refused the label “feminist.” Although I was pretty sure that I knew what it meant, I did not like what it meant to others. For years I refused the label “liberal.” It seemed too blanket a term for my personal belief system. If I have to be a pro-choice, anti-war, anti-gun, environmental eco- feminist welcoming democrat then I do not fit the label. Yes, I hold many beliefs that are generally labeled liberal; but I also hold beliefs that would put me firmly in a conservative camp. Tell me how many liberal characteristics is enough to be labeled liberal? Is any one characteristic a label breaker? And, if you still want to call me a liberal, what happens to those other parts of me that don’t quite fit with this label?

Perhaps it is my psychological background that focuses me so straightforwardly on the individual. Perhaps it is my abiding belief in the first principle of Unitarian Universalists: The inherent worth and dignity of every person. Not the inherent worth of every group, but the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I believe that this principle requires me to look beyond group labels. It constantly reminds me to be open and curious when meeting and greeting; when entering into relationship with others. I must constantly be aware that I cannot know someone by the labels that are attached to their presence. The only way to know another human being is to curiously engage that person, to look

beyond the labels and groupings. I realize that this is not always as easy to do as it, at first blush, may seem. When I am actively protesting a policy that the person next to me is supporting; sometimes it is hard to curiously engage them. Yet, it is that personal knowing that really matters.

Do I care whether or not I am reclassified? Yes, I do. Although I find it intriguing to view myself from new perspectives, there is also attached to my interest a very real confusion and, perhaps even, a certain shame. A shame that I have not recognized the fullness of my heritage. A shame that I might have, deep down in my gut, knowingly ignored my true ethnicity, a shame that I might be afraid to embrace that heritage.

Perhaps, I am an Hispanic Person of Color who is passing for white. For the past few months I have been considering that idea. When I am in a group and they bemoan the fact that there are no Persons of Color in the group, I raise my hand..."Well, excuse me, technically, I am a Person of Color." No, please do not misunderstand. I am not minimizing this issue, nor am I making fun of it. But where should I stand? I am not diminishing the issues of prejudice and discrimination in this society. But prejudice and identity formation start on a very personal lived, level. Right now, this is my reality. Where should I stand?

I am concerned and confused. I feel untruthful raising my hand, claiming my heritage, and I feel just as uncomfortable with the assumption that I am white. Am I Hispanic? Latina? A Person of Color? Am I a fraud? Would I be a fraud for "passing," hoping that no one will notice that I am not white? Or would I be a fraud for "passing," claiming myself as a person of color? Perhaps one day it will not matter. But, for as long as people treat me differently on the basis of their labels for me, then it does matter and I do not know the answer that claims the most truth.

It does matter when and how we label people. We do so because labels are helpful to us. Grouping folks with similar traits, characteristics or behaviors helps us to image them, to respond in certain ways and to develop a set of expectations. But for each time labeling helps, there are other instances when it serves to reduce people to their lowest common denominator, thereby leaving out their unique constellation of characteristics. I ask myself, in what situations is that acceptable? How can I bring myself to be fully aware of when I am reducing a person to a label and to ask myself, "For this occasion, is that okay?" By remaining aware of my actions, I may be able to illuminate those circumstances when the answer is "No, I need to find out more about that particular person in order to conscientiously consider the situation." Even then, I know that I will miss important distinctions. For example, even with conscientious awareness of the unique differences among persons and the importance of looking beyond the label, I might still overlook the utter anguish associated with a check mark or lack of a check mark in a box for "Hispanic,...Jewish,...lesbian,...homeless,...black,...disabled.