

Live Your Dream - Thoughts on the day of the Black History Month Assembly

By Reiko Tahara

<Scene One: PS261 Auditorium>

On the Day of the Black History Month Assembly, to be honest, I was pretty depressed. My husband and I make movies together, but no good news yet had come to our recently completed documentary work, on which we had spent the last 6 years of our lives. Are we one of so many who are just dreaming an unachievable dream of being recognized and appreciated? The voice of doubt was entering my thoughts. I was planning to spend most of the day for myself, maybe shopping for clothes, or catching a movie. I hadn't done anything for myself in some time. I was in need of a confidence boost in some way. But first I was to drop off my daughter, attend the Black History Month Assembly (my favorite parent was organizing it), then deliver some video tapes to a client for my recently established video & DVD authoring business (I shoot and edit memoir & fundraising videos, and transfer home videos for all the good people of NYC).

It turned out that I didn't have to watch a movie to be inspired, because the Black History Month Assembly was far better than any movie in the theaters. It did something I had not expected; it spoke directly to my heart. The goal of the organizers was to share with the audience the history of slavery and pass on the legacy of the black experience. There were teachers and parents of various backgrounds who supported the cause of the event. And there were children –children who were expressing themselves and something beyond themselves using their voices, bodies, and imagination. Highlights included a play about the emancipation of a nine-year-old slave girl at the historical Plymouth Church here in Brooklyn, a dance performance from Alvin Ailey's "Revelations", both performed by the older students, and songs with black history themes. Children of various skin colors performed together, joining hands, putting all their lives into it. The play evoked thoughts and emotions about the meaning of freedom. The dance pieces were a rare perfection indicating weeks, maybe months of solid practice and preparation under the supervision of devoted adults. Dancers danced selflessly to the beat of the music. Smaller children sang with all their might, not knowing the healing power in their young voices.

Some of those children may have just started to recognize their own respective colors and the invisible divisions of the real world. Some may still be unaware. But they all expressed their very existence of the day, of the moment. What a dedicated, touching act – like a dance offered to the gods. How joyful would all who struggled for freedom feel if they saw the children's performances, and the diversity and harmony among them! The last attraction of the event was a "Live Your Dream" speech by Etu Evans, a successful fashion designer. He talked about his own childhood and how, as a kid, he was teased, called names, and thought by his teacher to have a learning disability. But he had a dream. And he worked hard for it. He called many children up on the stage and asked their names and dreams and how they would make them come true. He stressed

that we had to work hard to live out our dreams. When he asked the audience, “Who has a dream today?,” my hand shot up along with many children’s hands, in the rear corner of the packed auditorium. At the end of the event, the main organizer Pat Collins came on the stage and read an excerpt from the famous “I have a dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We all closed our eyes and listened.

<Scene Two: Downtown Brooklyn>

I was crossing a busy street in Downtown Brooklyn to meet my client, still filled with strong emotions from the Black History Month Assembly experience. When I was almost on the other side, a man probably in his 40s came toward me and we almost ran into each other. I saw his face in that moment but I’m not sure if he saw me. As he swiftly swerved to the side and went on crossing, I heard his voice: “Chinese b****.” I turned around but couldn’t make up my mind what to do, but didn’t want to let it go. “What did you say?,” I asked. He turned around as he crossed the street and put his index finger to the side of his thick felt aviator hat and shook his head several times. I couldn’t quite digest what I was feeling, so I just stood there, and kept looking at him. “I am not Chinese. I am Japanese,” is the phrase that my daughter has been continually saying since she was in kindergarten in response to kids who teased her at school (except that she just ignores them now.) I often told her that Chinese or Japanese doesn’t matter, we’re all from Asia. But that same phrase was in my head. Many thoughts came to mind and passed: “Well, I am not a b****... you didn’t even look at me and how can you judge me like that... you don’t know me... you-don’t-know-me...” And I just stood there. Of course it was not the first time I heard those mean words thrown at me. It is such a common thing in New York City and they come from people of all races and I should be even accustomed to it by now. But still, after that inspiring event, those words had a surprisingly negative power. The man turned around many times, a few times with gestures indicating my craziness or stupidity, a few times just staring at me. Maybe he thought I was casting a fierce glance at him. Maybe I was, though I didn’t mean to. I wasn’t angry, but just confused and sad. He disappeared into the crowd, staring at me.

It was still too early to meet my client so I went into a cheap coffee shop on Jay Street to shake off my wooly mind with a cup of coffee. I was standing on a long, slow-moving line of hungry people waiting for hot breakfast sandwiches, when a Latino man behind the counter cooking eggs asked me what I wanted. I said, “Just a cup of coffee”. He rested his egg-beating hand and looked straight at me. It made me a little nervous. Then he smiled and said, “You don’t have to stay on the line, pretty lady. Just go to the cashier and get your morning coffee.” My wooly mind loosened up a bit with his smile and gentle words. I could start letting go of the negativity that man in the intersection had put on me.

<Scene Three: In Our Heart>

To know yourself and to live with the confidence necessary to achieve your goals and dreams – what a difficult task that is. ”You can’t give up,” “Don’t worry about what others say,” and “You need to be proud of yourself...” We know, we know. But still, our minds can be hurt or brightened up sometimes so easily by others’ eyes and words, especially when our minds are shaky. I can imagine if it’s the mind of a child, it must be

much more sensitive and fragile. While it's so important to focus on our own goals, how do we act each other? How do we communicate with each other? Like the short order cook, I want to be ready to stop what I am doing no matter how busy or stressed or preoccupied I might be, and look into their faces when I talk to people, and if I can, I hope to transfer something positive to them. Maybe it'll help them stay confident and focused on their dreams. Thinking those sorts of things and all that jazz, I will go on my own small, yet big journey to live out my dreams.