

CHAPTER 10

LaTonya with a Capital T

I am happy to be Black and to be back to myself. I know the four-year-old girl in me is proud of me. I acknowledge and salute her, and I call upon her often so I remember to play and keep her childlike wonder. I refer to her as *Tannie*, a childhood name Momma Lorraine gave me. Tannie feels like home. Knowing how I feel about my names, I make a point of learning how to pronounce people's names and I call them by name when I talk to them. I often facilitate the following activity when I do diversity trainings to illustrate inclusion.

"One of the best ways you can honor a person of color is to get their name right," I said to the standing room only audience of predominantly white counselors who had registered to attend my *Impact of Power, Race, and Gender on Cross-Racial Supervisory Relationships* training at a national conference. "If you won't bother to get clients' names right, we wonder what else you might get wrong." I advanced to the next slide of my PowerPoint presentation, where *Whei* appeared on the screen. "How do you think this person's name is pronounced?" I asked, underlining it with the red beam of light coming from the

clicker in my hand. A brave soul raised their hand, “Is it pronounced *Wee*?” I shook my head and thanked the person for their answer before I asked for another volunteer. “*Wee-eye*?” someone offered, singing the second syllable into a question. I thanked the person and asked for another guess. “It’s *Why*, isn’t it?” I shook my head a third time, cognizant of the time and the 50 minutes I had left to teach much information. “This name is pronounced *Way*, and it belongs to an Asian undergraduate student who is a member of my Sister to Sister mentorship group.” I clicked my clicker and a second name appeared on the screen, *Tabyrious*. Before I could even ask for volunteers, someone raised their hand. “This is why I don’t even try to pronounce my clients’ names,” a woman in the middle of the audience offered. “There’s no way I can get that right. Instead, I just talk to them without even trying to pronounce that. And, to make matters worse, they want us to get their pronouns right, too. Like she, his, theirs... I can’t keep up.”

I shuddered as I considered that this woman’s clients wrote out a whole check with her name on it, and she didn’t even bother to acknowledge them by name. What came out of my mouth was much more diplomatic. “Do you mind if I ask if you have any children?” I asked her. “Yep, two sons and they’re grown,” she offered, gathering laughter from the audience. “How long did it take you to name your firstborn?” She furrowed her brow, as if she knew where I was going. “I was going to name him Richard, after his father. A junior, you know? And we were all set but when he came out and I had a long look at him, there was no way I could name him Richard. He didn’t look like a Richard. He looked like an Andrew.” I thanked her

for sharing and offered that the least someone could do to honor Andrew and the story had she shared would be to acknowledge him by name. That name is legacy. I then led the group into an activity where we role-played how to ask for the pronunciation of someone's name without making it sound as if their name was a problem. "If you can pronounce pneumonia, which sounds nothing like it looks, then you can say Tah-bye-ree-uhs," I said as I red-lit the name with my clicker.

I've been called all kinds of variations of LaTonya: *Latoya*, *Latasha*, *Lat-onya*. Once a white man asked if he could call me LT. It is a display of power and privilege to nickname another person rather than try to correctly pronounce their name. Shortening and mispronouncing another's name is also evidence of an existing power differential. We can also tell where a person might be along the continuum of racial identity by their response to being misnamed. If the person doesn't offer a correction or they say, "that's fine" or "close enough," that person may be on the lower end of the continuum, as I was when I tried passing for white. A person who readily offers the correct pronunciation may be on the actualized end of the continuum. There is no reason to be offended when we are corrected; if anything, we should take offense when we are not correctable or teachable.

"I got your name from a statue in Italy," Brenda once told me, without me asking. "I thought it was the most beautiful name. Latonya Michelle. I still love it, don't you?" I spent years hoping to find that statue, and I couldn't find it anywhere online when the internet came out. I had hoped to find a magnificent white carving of a woman with a crown of flowers on her head,

with maybe a cat at her feet. The closest thing I found was that Latonya is a derivative of Antonia, a common name for Roman women. So, Brenda wasn't that far off.

To me, my name had derived straight from the ghetto. Most of the Black girls I knew who were born alongside me in the 70s were given a name with a prefix of Sha-, La-, Ra-, or Ta-. The research study where people with Black-sounding names (i.e. Dwayne, Tariq, Latonya, Wei, and Roberto) received fewer call backs for job interviews they applied for than applicants with Eurocentric, white-sounding names (i.e. Hannah, Hunter, Michael, and Christopher) is well known. It is interesting to note that the study was duplicated in 2021 by researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Chicago and the results were the same, despite Black Lives Matter and the mass hiring of chief diversity officers.

To increase their odds for upward mobility, many people of color began giving their children Eurocentric names. It is interesting to meet so many Black boys named Parker, and Black girls named Hayden. Another research study reported that while people of color with Eurocentric names were more likely to get jobs, their self-esteem and sense of self was not as high as their employed counterparts of color who had ethnic names. In other words, a Black man named Parker might get a job, but he does not have the fortitude to stay there. Dwayne, on the other hand, has the confidence in himself to endure whatever comes his way on the job.

Early in my first marriage, my then husband bought me a nameplate for the desk at my first post-graduate job. It read, *Name: LaTonya. Origin: Russian-Latin. Meaning: Inestimable.* I have loved my name ever since. Inestimable, meaning my

worth cannot be estimated, or invaluable. I finally agreed with Brenda, LaTonya is a beautiful name.

I used to wonder why Grandma Louise did not change my name when she had the opportunity to do so when she adopted me. I never got the chance to ask her but later in life, I heard an adoptive parent say she kept her son's name the same because it was the biggest gift from his biological family that she could give him. I thought that was noble, and it made me appreciate my grandmother for choosing to keep my name as it was. I tucked it away as a mental note, thinking I might need it for a client or two who might consider adoption, or church members of mine if they ever sought me out for advice knowing I was adopted. I never knew the day would come when I would need what that adoptive mother gave me.

Both of my sons were in nursery school, and the firstborn was praying like crazy for a sister. I'm not talking about the now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep prayers I was praying when I was his age. He was praying as if he knew God for himself. I would go into my prayer closet and renounce his prayers, knowing I was unmarried and celibate. I didn't want there to be any reason for him to not trust God, so I needed God to take away this desire for a sister he had.

When my firstborn was ready to enter kindergarten, I felt strongly that I should put both boys in a private, Christian school. I reasoned with myself, *You can't even pay for nursery and you want to put them in private school? This is ridiculous.* But I knew that worrying about tuition money when all I needed was an application fee, which I could afford, was pointless. I interviewed three schools, and thought it was divine intervention when I walked into Angels, the third school. I just had a good

feeling about it, which I did not have at the other two. I visited the classroom where the firstborn would attend, and I noticed on the wall, among the different-colored construction paper balloons, one that read a first name I could not pronounce, but his last name was the same as my maiden name. My maiden name is less common among Black people than whites, so I knew this child was some kin to me. "Who is this kid?" I asked the teacher, pointing to the pink balloon. "That's Whanyae," she answered, with a smile. "Do you know him?" I shook my head. "No, but if he's Black, I know we're related." The teacher walked me outside where the children were playing. "He and his two brothers are in foster care, and the director of the school is taking care of them." That was confirmation. "Foster care? I know we are related." The teacher called out his name, and this dark-skinned, doe-eyed child with a wide smile ran toward us. He looked like I could have birthed him. "We are definitely related. Do you know his mother's name?" The teacher told me that she did not know, but I could talk to the director if I wanted to.

The director's office was the last stop of my tour. I was told that she would answer any questions I had about the school. I was so busy thinking about the child I saw on the playground that I'd forgotten I was there to scout the school for my own child. When the teacher and I got to the threshold of the director's door, a smiling fair-skinned woman looked up. The teacher said, "She thinks she might be related to Whanyae and his brothers. Do you know their mother's name?" The whole encounter moved in slow motion as the director spoke my first cousin's name. "That's my biological aunt's daughter. She's my first cousin." I paused, and without thinking I asked, "Will she get the boys back? If not, I want to adopt them." How I thought

I would take care of five boys, those three and my two, on my shoestring budget, was not clear. The teacher answered, "The boys are in the process of being adopted." The director added, "By a good family, too." I could have shouted with joy from the relief I felt, knowing I'd still be managing a three-person household. "Your cousin is pregnant again," the director offered. "If the baby is born under the same circumstances as the boys, the state will take that baby, too. You want to adopt it?" My first reaction was no, I'd just narrowly escaped adopting three boys. Before turning to walk away, I told the teacher and director that I'd be praying for my cousin, and I trusted that she and her new baby would be okay.

My sons loved Angels and they thrived there. One day I went to pick up the boys and the director stopped us before we could reach the door. "Your cousin had the baby," she happily announced. "Oh, that's good. How are they?" She motioned for me to walk over to her. "The state took it." My stomach dropped. "That sucks," I said. "It's a girl," the woman offered, with excitement. "I have her, you wanna see her?" That was the moment I remembered the firstborn's prayers for a sister, and my body did not know what to do in response. It did not know if it wanted to fall on my knees, break out into a praise dance, or run around the school. The moment felt so surreal, recognizing that God had answered my son's prayer. As if there was one more test this situation needed to pass, I asked what the baby's name was. If my cousin had named her firstborn Whanyae, I could not imagine what this baby had been named. "Her name is Destiny," the woman's smile broadened. Destiny means "predestined" and that's what the situation felt like, a divine and ordained one, and I did not even have to ask God

what I should do. I knew I would adopt her. I did not entertain thoughts of changing her name. It was a gift for her from her mother, as she would be to me.

The adoption process took ten months. There was one glitch after the other. Destiny's father was incarcerated but he fought for his rights. We got to meet a couple of times, and I assured him that I would take care of her. After two court appointments, the judge revoked his rights since he would not be getting out of jail any time soon. Then, the social worker who was working on our case, a Black woman who was pregnant herself, died while in childbirth. Her death was soul-crushing. There I was trying to get a child I didn't carry, and she did not even get to hold her baby. I think of her often, every time I read about the disproportionate number of Black women who die from childbirthing complications. I had become so exhausted from the arduous adoption process that I didn't care how it ended, I just wanted it to be over.

Two months later, I let an older white woman social worker into my home. She had come to bring Destiny to us. "You have the same smile," she said. My smile turned downward as I studied her face, trying to remember where I knew her from. "I'm sorry, have we met before?" She laughed heartily, "Yes, we have. You were four years old when I removed you from your mother's home, and I have come to deliver your daughter. My name is Alden Davis." I may not have remembered her face, but I remembered her name, and I thanked her profusely. Unspokenly, my gratitude was for her getting me into foster care, from where I went to Grandma Louise's house, to safety. I was grateful that she was still doing her work long enough to share this moment with me. The moment was sacred. My life

had come full-circle and the firstborn had got his heart's desire. That story aptly describes much of my life before I started passing, just one serendipitous moment after another. I don't know why that did not feel like enough to me.

That's the thing with racial identity development, as described by Dr. William Cross in his paper on the model of nigrescence: it is the encounters and incidents we have in life that move us along the continuum of becoming. They are not to be judged or regretted but experienced and learned from. The more mature and wiser we become from these encounters, the more anti-racist we become toward the self and others. I have become less afraid, less competitive, less judgmental, and less selfish as I have opened myself up to the full Black experience. Boldness, love, confidence, brilliance, and power—things I did not have or know I had—seem to be natural by-products of fully accepting myself.

My name is written *Latonya* Michelle on my original birth certificate. I realized that people had trouble pronouncing my first name with the lower sentence case. They approached my name as if it is one syllable. They gave up after a while, or I rescued them by pronouncing it for them. Then, because I knew a lot of white girls named Tonya, I'd say, "It's Tonya with *La* on the front." One day in my adulthood, I was writing a check to pay a bill by mail, and I drew out my signature as *LaTonya*. I *noticed* the T was capital, as it was not an intentional act. At least not that I was aware of. I liked it, the way it looked. And it solved the problem. The capitalized T seemed to readily inform people that my name was multi-syllabic. Now they easily say La-Ton-ya. I'm happy about that because I would have hated to capitalize the Y too. The thoughts folks might have about my

mother, assuming she was ghetto if they saw *LaTonYa!* See how easily that white gaze comes up for me? It just goes to show that recovery from assimilation takes as much time as it took to assimilate. I passed for nearly 25 years! I cannot wait to see who I am at the end of the journey.

I may not have changed my name as Brother Ali did but I'm prepared to accept that altering my name is not that different. For me, capitalizing the T was the way I knew to take ownership of myself, my life. If the La at the beginning of my name symbolized the beginning of my life, then a capital T was symbolic of me standing up to what I'd been running from. Capitalizing the T meant accepting what my mother gave me and finding the beauty in it for myself, rather than being marred by what she did and didn't do. Moreover, the capital in the middle of my name is a huge reminder to myself to live the dash in between the dates that will be inscribed on my tombstone; to know that it doesn't matter how hard my life started out, I have the ability and power to punctuate it with as many bits and pieces of joy and love as I possibly can.

Recovering from assimilation is a daily process. Mostly for me it means that I remain conscientious about the Black gaze rather than the veil of whiteness, and focus on what it means to me knowing that Black people are not only watching me, but seeing me. It's the hope that if by any chance there are Black children or adults watching me and wanting any of the peace, confidence, resilience, or success I have gained, they see themselves in me and know that these things are there for them too. I hope that they know they are no different from me, and that they do not have to sacrifice their Blackness or themselves to obtain anything more than what they have. In fact, I hope that

by seeing me they see that what they strive for or what they want is already within them. They already possess the power, courage, and wherewithal to grasp hold of what seems out of reach. If nothing else, I hope they see me and know that they too are enough, and that they are meant to be here, they belong here, and where they are is purposeful for moving them along a continuum to self-actualization, if only they will accept the encounters and learn from them.