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Louisiana judge should pity himself, not biracial kids

By *Maya Rock*

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This week in Louisiana, Justice of the Peace Keith Bardwell refused to grant an interracial couple a marriage license. His argument - that he acting out of concern "for the children who might be born of the relationship" - was familiar to me.

I remember watching TV talk show hosts in the 90s with biracial children and young adults fielding questions from the audience about their existences and hearing the same "concern" expressed over and over. I have no doubt these audience members meant well. At the same time, I felt they were essentially telling me, a biracial child, that I would be better off dead than living my life.

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But my life has not been defined by my racial identity. I grew up in the Northeast and never experienced overt racial prejudice. My problems were typical teenage problems about getting decent grades while simultaneously trying not to look dorky. I was an individual, plowing through the world. I was not a walking symbol of America's racial problems.

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OPINION

I scoffed at the talk show audience members I saw on television and told my mother angrily, "How could they say such a thing? How could they deny my right to exist?" As a young child, I recognized the strangers' sudden concern for hypothetical children rang false.

Too many biracial Americans have succeeded in our society without lamenting their dual heritage and even celebrating it. Our current president is the most obvious example. In my own experience, I've actually found being biracial rather freeing for the same reason some people might think it is fraught with angst. Belonging to no one group allows me to flow through and fit with many. It makes it that much easier to open your heart to common humanity.

What I found striking about the story out of Louisiana this week - and the reaction to the judge's comments - was how it laid bare a particularly insidious way of manifesting racism. By claiming that society would be too hard on the children, Judge Bardwell was putting the blame on the outside world, neatly sidestepping, in his mind at least, that the most meaningful racism in this case might actually be coming from within himself.

I don't doubt the sincerity of Bardwell's intentions. No one wants to look in the mirror and admit that their views come from less than noble places, places of fear and hatred. But I think we have to be careful how we respond to this kind of event. Are we going to shoot back with the same kind of fear and hatred that Bardwell comes from?

How many of us have passed judgment on who should - or should not - be having children? Or who should or shouldn't be married -- maybe not based on race or religion or sexuality, but simply on some distinct incompatibility we have decided means they shouldn't be married? Maybe they're the wrong class or political party, or they talk too much at parties or are somehow physically unattractive?

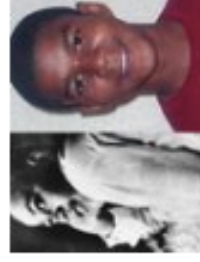
What I would suggest is that instead of using Bardwell's declaration as a moment to roundly condemn prejudice against interracial marriage, we use it as a moment to look within and find out where we still have similar prejudices. In which instances do we pretend that what we are doing is for the greater good? And upon what individuals might we be stepping on on our way to achieve those ends?



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