

Chad Francour
“Be the Change”
Because I can

Be The Change

“Be the change you wish to see in the world”

Mahatma Gandhi

Mr. Gandhi’s thinking was a noble idea but life gets in the way, we adapt, we delay, we put aside our idealisms to our youthful naïvety. What if, we stood fully by our principles? Plenty of people have tried in recent time. Julia Butterfly Hill lived in an old redwood tree for two years in an attempt to keep the tree safe from loggers (<http://www.juliabutterfly.com/>). Then there was LaVoy Finicum, whom defied the federal government and kept grazing his cattle on federal land after he was asked to remove them. Both felt that it was the right thing. Ms. Hill saved the tree after an agreement was reached with the logging company and Mr. Finicum was killed by Oregon State police at a standoff on an off-site reservation (http://www.oregonlive.com/oregon-standoff/2017/06/fbi_agents_indictment_resulted.html). Both said they had no choice but to take drastic action. It was a matter of principle.

This truth is, in daily life; we try to avoid these kinds of people. These people can be exhausting and emotionally draining. These people stick to their principles no matter how small the benefit or how much the cost. We are going to look at an interracial couple that have ideals just as deep. The couple wanted to live without compromise and free of expectations or stereotypes. It was harder than they could ever imagine.

The story begins in 1994 when former President Bill Clinton created an organization called AmeriCorps (<https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ Americorps>). It is a national agency where individuals would commit their time and skills to get things done for America (<https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ Americorps/join-ameriCorps/what-ameriCorps>). A quick comparison AmeriCorps has is to the Peace Corps. Mr. Clinton concluded the inaugural ceremony for the volunteers with asking three questions.

1. What is right?
2. What is wrong?
3. What are we going to do about it?

In other words, the group of volunteers would turn their words into deeds. In exchange for a small living stipend and assistance in education; the volunteers term lasted for about one year. They would tutor disadvantaged children, build homes in lower socioeconomic status neighborhoods, and help with maintenance in national parks.

The two individuals had just graduated from high school with an eagerness to make a difference in the world. Royce was a tall and handsome African American gentleman. He was a natural born leader and very loving and charismatic. He was the head of their campus community. He desperately tried to include everyone in extra service projects beyond what was already required of AmeriCorps. He was a go-getter when he came to acts of service. Jessica was a beautiful caucasian lady.

The community, generally, on their free time played a lot of ultimate Frisbee and they bonded, eventually, like most young adults who are broke and trying to help the world, they began pairing up. Jessica and Royce first interaction occurred by accident. Royce hit Jessica in the head with a frisbee. Their relationship grew with an unexpected trip to Santa Fe. It was this trip where Jessica began looking a

little bit differently at Royce. She always knew that he had a good heart. Jessica states, “They probably fell in love in the land of enchantment in New Mexico.” Royce says, “Falling in love just happened,” furthermore, “I am looking at Jessica in a different way and understanding.” Maybe they fell in love because of the weekend together or it was the atmosphere. He also said, “Maybe it was the clarity for not pushing so hard and when he listens to his heart, it usually does the right thing.”

Both decided to go to college at New Mexico State. Jessica was getting a double major in Women's Studies and Sociology and Royce was doing a Physics major and a double minor in Music and Math. In the crisp New Mexico nights they would talk about information they were learning and the ideas discussed in class. They thought a lot about social justice, oppression, and fairness. An example could be; what did it mean to be a feminist, activist, or a proponent for rights of rights for indigenous people. The two had great conversations, when late nights and cheap beer, produced meaningful arguments. The thing about Jessica and Royce; they did not see these things as debate issues.

Royce, for instance, had grow up with stories of the civil rights movement from family members. For instance, his uncle Franklin McCain, was one of four black college freshman who sat down at an all white lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/11/us/franklin-mccain-who-fought-for-rights-at-all-white-lunch-counter-dies-at-73.html>). It is been suspected that the civil rights movement was born that day. These actions eventually led to the desegregation of lunch counters across the South. When Franklin was interviewed about what he had accomplished, he said he acted because it was time to make a stand, furthermore, try to think how an action will affect the other people around you and never assume that you are the center of anything. He was a man of the people (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fcguBF7Qz4>). He finally adds a statement that is thought-provoking. He said, “If you see a wrongdoing, do not follow your head or heart but to follow your gut.”

Royce follows his uncle’s advice and that was one reason why he pays close attention to injustice and inequality. Royce feels those same emotions his uncle fought against. Jessica and Royce sit down at a restaurant and the server will not know what to do. There is a black man and white woman sitting down and who will pay for the check? Both felt they wanted to live an honest and open lives unencumbered by those same stereotypes and prejudices. The more they talked; the more they knew that it was the right way to live.

At school, Jessica came across an idea that was so powerful that she could not stop thinking about it. For her undergraduate degree in women’s studies she began a research paper about gender stratification in prekindergarten classes. Her thesis was how adult project on to a child from birth that affects the way he or she navigates and experiences the world. She started to see a child’s gender influenced all kinds of choices. I am a substitute teacher and I notice the influences of gender on what color clothing students wear at the schools. For example, boys tend to wear blue and black were as girls are more likely to wear pink or purple. Another noticeable example may be the type of clothes. The boy have a tendency to wear jeans and a sweatshirt; whereas, girls are more prone to wear dresses and more fashionable clothing.

The idea that boys wear clothes that might get dirty, thus, symbolizing boys are rough and tough. If we look on the other side of the coin with girls clothing, we see more clothes that are delicate and would be ruined if one got them dirty. Giving the persona that girls are precious and dainty. Looking at other gender specific stereotypes; as early as second grade we see this idea that boys are better than girls in math (<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0165037>). Jessica, similarly, had to take Remedial Algebra in college, expecting to do poorly.

One night as Jessica was having a difficult time with math; she decided to ask Royce for help solving the problem. Long story short, all Jessica needed was a little confidence and the know how that yes I am a female and I am excellent at math. This is where Jessica wondered why her teachers in early grades (e.g., second through high school) had not expected or challenged her at math. Those same stereotypes may be also applied to science positions (<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0165037>). Her newly discovered confidence in her math class earned her an A. The well-deserved grade in her class changed the trajectory of her entire college experience. She concluded that gender, like race, is an accident at birth.

In the couple's evening conversations, they began mulling over why a person's gender maximizes or minimizes the potential. These discussions opened each of their eyes to what boys and girls can and cannot do. Rules that have been so ingrained into our culture that most do not even realize it. How we decide to dress our children or choosing a color (e.g., blue or pink) depending on the sex. When someone is expecting a baby, for example, our go to question, "Is it a boy or girl?" The couples that do not want to know the sex of the child could respond to the question, "It is a human." I firmly believe that label, boy or girl, shapes the whole child-rearing process and how one's family, friends, or community responds to the pregnancy, birthing process, and the aftermath. Those choices, even though, may be unconsciously decided; they are still choices that one needs to make.

After college, the couple headed in opposite directions. Royce headed to Connecticut to be an officer at the Coast Guard and Jessica took a position at Washington D.C. as a statistician with the Census Bureau. Royce would travel to Jessica one week and Jessica would venture next week to Royce. The couple seemed to be living a content life until Royce received a letter, as a young candidate in the Coast Guard are not allowed phone privileges, from Jessica saying that she was pregnant.

The couple's plans had to change. Royce requested a land position and Jessica put on hold graduate school. As the couple were making preparation for the child, Jessica wanting to give birth without minimally invasive medical procedures. She wanted an ultrasound for the child. All those conversations the couple had about gender came rushing back into reality. Jessica knew that she did not want to lump her child into the same categories as she had learned about. She did not want a princess or a baby in pink. What Jessica wanted for her baby girl was for her to decide what she wanted to be and not what society thinks she should be. In other words, Jessica wanted to raise her daughter free of gender stereotypes.

This idea of gender-neutral parenting has been considered in the past. If we look in the 1970s, we see Lois Gould wrote a story about a genderless child called X (http://web.bend.k12.or.us/jeremy.rubenstein/Mr._Rubensteins_Language_Arts_Page/Senior_English_file_s/PDF%20X.pdf). In a story the parents keep running into problems as they are trying to raise a child without revealing his or her gender. The family and friends become enraged with X's parents and those same caretakers kept running into problems like toys and clothes. The point, Ms. Gould tried to make with her story was to highlight all the gender stereotypes will act as rules for children from the extra curricular activities to the sports they play and the pursued interests. Jessica and Royce did not want to hide their child's gender but they wanted her to decide, instead of society, about her gender.

There is an abundance of research one can find on the Internet regarding this style of parenting. It would take a lot of effort on both parents but it can be well worth the time. For example, Royce and Jessica avoided purchasing things like baby dolls and Barbies. The couple wanted open ended free play toys. For example, giant Legos and multiple colored blocks. They wanted bright primary colors and all

kinds of animals, so, they waited. In the meantime they decided on a name. They called her Isis after the ancient Egyptian Goddess whom had limitless power.

Isis, however, had other plans. She was born two months premature. She was born on November 7, 2000. She was rushed to the neonatal unit in the hospital. All that Royce and Jessica wanted, now, was for Isis to survive. One of the issues with an untimely birth is the infant had to nurse every two hours. Jessica and Royce had lived within one mile of the hospital. The feeding for Isis took a good 40 to 45 minutes. The couple would travel home and rest for 15 to 20 minutes and have to travel back to the hospital to feed her. Likely so the time Isis was in the hospital was exhausting. The hospital was the first place that the couple saw gender stereotyping.

One evening as Jessica finished feeding Isis; a nurse came over and said that she can go home and rest for the night and the nurse team will bottle feed Isis. Jessica had Isis dressed in a fairly neutral colors before she left and so she went home. The next day when Jessica arrived at the hospital she found a bright pink and frilly little baby girl with ribbons in her hair. The nurses were so excited to see Jessica's reaction to what they had done with her baby. Jessica was horrified because because everything that she had learned in college came back to the forefront. In addition, Jessica was immediately validated by her reaction because another person visiting another newborn said look at the precious and dainty baby girl. Jessica replied, "We are in the NICU and we want to go home so we are not going for precious and dainty but for strong, powerful, and healthy!" The language people used mattered to Jessica.

The words people use are significant. There were two types of tones to target boys and girls. I searched on YouTube, "Toy ads for boys in 2017," and a large majority of them centered around superheroes and some kind of vehicle. I then searched, "Girl toy ads in 2017," and the main theme was babies, dolls, and bright colors. Why are we as a society okay with this? Jessica wanted to walk the walk not just talk the talk. She wanted to put forth the right effort into parenting her child. Jessica and Royce thought that if they could just get past the NICU; the hard part would be over but they were so wrong.

When the interracial couple took Isis home the problems had just begun. For instance when Royce had his biracial child in a sling, individuals would peak in and say, "Oh what is it?" Royce desperately wanted to say a baby. Everyone else was confused by the not knowing the sex of the child or how to interact in a situation without knowing the gender. Here is what Jessica encountered, questions like, "Do you wish your child was a boy," or "Are you sad you had a girl?" Jessica thought; where is this question coming from or is this person crazy? Of course not I am not sad; I am thrilled beyond belief. Her daughter is still a girl even if she's not wearing bright pink and other florescent colors. It was not all strangers who questioned Jessica and Royce's parenting but their family. For example, after the parents repeatedly said not to send dresses but family members would not listen and consistently send them as proposed gifts. This created some tough relationships between one another. Jessica thought that if you are going to spend money my child at least listen to my requests. In turn, the family member said he or she does not know how to have a relationship with Isis if they could not relate to her. The emotional reactions of family members had never been expected by Royce and Jessica. The family members took the way the couple parented Isis as a personal insult.

Jessica and Royce, to strangers, were insufferable politically correct do gooders and to family they were hurting the baby. They were fighting many unconscious biases that had never been expected. The couple would fight against one norm and then they encountered another one. Jessica talks about one painful interaction after Isis decided to cut her hair. She explains that her daughter wanted her hair short so Jessica thought it was okay because it was Isis's hair. A person whom Jessica respects and loves said

that it was inappropriate for her to allow Isis's hair to be cut because she did not understand the cultural dynamics. Unbeknownst to her that when African American women were enslaved; their hair was sheared off (Byrd & Tharp).

The untold truth is when a person breaks a social norm; other popular rules (e.g., lines of communication) as well get broken. The couple felt ostracized at first from family. The couple became estranged from Royce's mother for many years. The tension within the siblings was thick. The couple would say this is not an assessment or judgment of you or how you may have done things in the past but what matters is how we want to raise our child. The problem was the way a person expresses his or her sex or gender in the world. They wanted Isis to discover her choices and not have her choices prescribed by the world. Another way it could be looked at is giving a child as many opportunities to figure out what he or she likes and whom they really are as a person. The child's clothes and toys are all functional items, and those things are not a person's identity. The point of her coat was to keep her warm and the point of her shoes was to keep her feet safe.

Many proponents to this type of parenting might ask; what if Isis wanted to wear fancy dresses would Jessica say no? Jessica would do some investigating on why she wants a dress but the answer is still no. Royce and Jessica want to be the change even if it is hard. If we look at the first paragraph of this paper we see Ms. Butterfly Hill, Mr. Finicum, and Mr. McCain doing the right thing not because it was easy or self gratifying but because it was a matter of principle.

Yes the work is worth it. Change happens within those little moments because systems of unfairness are just the sum of all the small choices we make. In other words, change does not happen within those dramatic choices when we are trying to make long-term systematic changes it happened within those little ones. For instance, there is a huge capitalist drive to make girls and women to purchase products or clothes that change her appearance. These cultural norms that we may pass down to our children with love but maybe they were started by a marketer. The question now is; was the way they raised their child worth it?

Her parents felt that as Isis grew she embraced and internalized the power of choice they had given her. In the interview at the National Public Radio station with Shankar Vedantam and Isis; Mr. Vedantam said Isis projected her sharp sense of humor and self-confidence. It comes through in the stories that she tells about her childhood, for instance, when Isis was just three years old she wanted to take horse riding lessons. Royce and Jessica said she was not old enough because the standard age at most riding stables was five years old but Isis was insistent on riding a horse. Her parents found a stable that agreed to let her try riding.

The parents had wanted a daughter, even in the NICU, who knew her own mind. Royce and Jessica even felt the need to homeschool Isis. They felt this would give her the freedom to grow as a person and keep at bay the unnecessary rules. The couple had the teaching mindset of what do you want to learn and not just you will learn social studies or spelling today. The big question is with homeschooling; how will a person assess that Isis knows this much or how will a person know that she can read and write etc.. Royce's answer was humans are naturally curious and when given space and time for conversation; the child is going to be curious about his or her world and are going to find ways to do things. His philosophy behind education is when people are motivated internally by passions and drives is what serves a person later on one's education.

Isis received an uninhibited education. She excels at science and math and is not really a fan of the color pink. Isis has certainly accomplished a lot in her days but there are times when it was hard.

Those days where she actually had to prove that she was in fact a girl but Isis feels that her parents had not gone too far with the gender-neutral parenting. The stories that come out of her are ones of climbing trees and digging worms for the family's chickens. Isis seems to know who she is as a girl but does not seem confined by those traditional gender constraints. She can be herself.

I hope my readers have felt some emotional need to question those gender roles and ultimately those same social norms that are ever so embedded into our society. I would also like to extend a thank you to Mr. Vedantam and Isis. They have not only put forth questions but have ignited an overall curiosity into my own childhood experience. I think that if we want to see a change in the world we have to start being different.

Footnote: If a person has knowledge; he or she is powerful. We all have strengths and weaknesses. The social norms that I have researched about disabled individuals should not be seen as a potential, beyond friendship, relationship. I would like to propose a rhetorical question: I am physically disabled but why is it that the opposite sex of whom is not disabled influenced either consciously or unconsciously by these social norms?

Resources

Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America. Ayana Byrd & Lori Tharps