

Writer Cori Howard, with her partner, Htu Htu, daughter, Jaza and son, Ty.



Mixed Emotions

Living in multicultural Canada, I thought that interracial relationships were proof that race no longer matters. But I've discovered that my pre-child dreams about the beauty of the blend were naive. We'll never replace Burma and I can't ever fully be his home.

by Cori Howard | photographs by Brian Howell



When my daughter was a baby, I spent a lot of time walking her around my tree-lined Vancouver neighbourhood. When she was about one, I took her into a coffee shop, and while I was holding her on my hip, grabbing my coffee and paying for it, the server, a curious young hippie, asked me, “Is that your baby?” I was too shocked at first to respond. Then shock turned to anger and I blurted out, “Yes. Would you like to see me breastfeed?”

I’m white and Jewish, with green eyes and brown hair. My brown-eyed, brown-skinned daughter, like her older brother, resembles their Burmese father, Htu Htu. I’d been asked, “Where is their father from?” countless times. But our biological connection had never before been questioned. It wasn’t until my indignation subsided that I realized how unfamiliar it felt to be treated as different and how odd it was that something so common as mixed-race families would be so misunderstood.

With the recent Statistics Canada 2006 census reporting that nearly 300,000 Canadians were involved in racially mixed marriages or common-law relationships – a 30-percent rise since 2001 – my family is part of a growing demographic. It is, perhaps, the very real manifestation of Trudeau-era multiculturalism. Take my home, Vancouver. As of 2006, 42 percent of Vancouverites were visible minorities, about 70 percent of whom were foreign born. With people from so many different backgrounds living in one city, interracial relationships are simply inevitable.

In my case, although I grew up with the pressure to marry a fellow Jew, I felt more drawn to the reality of my country than to ancient religious traditions. Ever since I was a teenager, I’ve had romantic ideas about how mixed-race relationships could blur, indeed erase, our antiquated ideas about racial differences. In high school, I had boyfriends from the Philippines, Argentina and, much to my Jewish parents’ relief, Israel. From a dating perspective, Canada’s ethnic mix was an awesome bonus for me.

When I was 26 and met my future life partner, I thought it perfectly fitting for someone living in the Pacific Rim to be with someone Asian. Plus, he was gorgeous. Drop-dead gorgeous. Questions of interracial tension, or the racial iden-

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tity of our potential children, were the furthest things from our minds. But the differences that drew us together at the beginning became some of the major challenges of our family life. They surfaced suddenly and unexpectedly years after our babies had been born, interrupting what I believed was a seamless intercultural relationship.

When Htu Htu and I met, I sincerely believed our cultural differences didn’t matter. I ate his food, he ate mine. I went to Burmese cultural events, he came to my parents’ house for every Jewish holiday, eagerly donning a yarmulke. That he came from another country, celebrated a religion I had long admired (Buddhism) and didn’t look at all like he could be a member of my family all contributed to the allure. For him, that I was white and Canadian was part of the appeal, too, if only because it represented a part of his fantasy: A new life in a new country with a new (and culturally different) woman.

Still, when I told people I was living >>

with a Burmese man, people (mostly my parents) would say, “It will never work. There are too many differences.” But, to me, our arguments, even the ones that ended with one of us sleeping on the couch, were just regular boyfriend-girlfriend stuff: jealousy over exes, anger about newly imposed curfews when going out with friends, and territorial disputes over who gets to put what where in the apartment.

Then we had kids, and our differences became more pronounced. Mostly, they were good differences, and they challenged each of us to think about parenting in new ways. Having grown up sleeping collectively on bamboo mats, Htu Htu thought my anxiety about weaning our tiny babies from our bed to their crib was ridiculous, putting my early failed attempts to do so to rest. He was open about circumcising our son according to Jewish tradition, even though we ultimately decided against it. We shared a disdain for the materialist, consumer kid culture surrounding us, and I respected his desire to create in our children a more spiritual, Buddhist sense of values, however difficult that proved to be in our day-to-day life.

It was on the eve of our 12th anniversary that the fault lines began to appear. Htu Htu had just returned from his annual trip to Burma. The pressure was on to talk through everything, have sex, watch a movie and drink some wine, but I could tell he didn’t feel up to any of it. He was spiritually and culturally jet-lagged, an experience that seemed to worsen with each trip. After I nagged him to cheer up or fess up, he finally said, “I just want to go home.”

I was devastated. I was supposed to be his home. Throughout our early years together, we’d decided that geography wasn’t important. Since I’d been born and raised in Vancouver, and was still living here with him, that was an easy and romantic idea. For me. A dozen years later, I realized a country, not another woman, might just take precedence over me and our family.

A friend, an immigrant from Chile who has been living in Canada since the 1970s, says I can’t possibly grasp the effort required to live and work in a culture that is your second home and second language. “There’s this spontaneous part of me that doesn’t exist in Canada,” she said. “It comes back only when I return to Chile. It’s a feeling of lightness that I really lose living here, and each time [I go back to Chile], I become more aware of it, of what I’ve lost of myself.”

Living in an interracial and intercultural relationship – things would obviously be different if we were both born here – I’ve had to accept there is a part of Htu Htu that will always be inaccessible. That’s true of all relationships, but cultural differences can exacerbate that feeling. Because



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I don’t speak Burmese, I don’t understand his conversations with his family and friends and I don’t get an insight into his relationships with them. And because I didn’t grow up in Burma, I don’t know how he feels when he’s triggered by a memory of home, how that nostalgia twists and turns in his body like a storm.

Looking at my two children and my partner, I’m aware that I’m the odd one out, the only one without a piece of Burma within me. While I feel rooted in Canada, my partner and our two children belong to that uncertain place between two cultures. As my four-year-old daughter put it the other night, while we snuggled under the covers, “I’m half-Burmese and half-young.”

In my rainbow-coloured, pre-child fantasy of family, there were no hard questions about race and identity and belonging. Naively, I hadn’t anticipated any speed bumps on our path to being the perfect, post-racial family. There was just the beauty of the blend, the promise of a harmonious, mixed identity where my children would go to school with other blended children and skin colour wouldn’t matter, except in the coveted value of its diversity. >>

Well, adios to singing choruses of “Kumbaya.” These are muddy waters. And marriage is hard work, whether you’re from different racial backgrounds and cultures or not. I don’t yet know how, or if, Htu Htu and I can find a resolution to his homesickness. And I don’t know how we will take on the daunting task of cultivating within our children an internal sense of culture, place and heritage so they feel rooted and connected to both of us. But they’re children and they won’t wait.

I’ve never worried about whether being mixed race will be a struggle for them. I’m fairly confident that in the world they inhabit – where their friends, schoolmates and neighbours are half one thing and a quarter another – they will fit in just fine. Their identity is something else. Will my own rejection of Judaism catch up with them in the end? Will they, living in between two cultures, not entirely part of either, feel at some point not Jewish enough, or not Burmese enough?

My six-year-old son asked me the other day, “Why do Burmese people not celebrate birthdays?” And I had to explain how they instead celebrate the day of the week that you were born, and I told him the story of visiting the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon when he was just two, lighting the candles on the Thursday shrine and pouring water over the Thursday Buddha. I reminded him how we had to take our shoes off and walk barefoot over the cool marble, how we sat “criss-cross applesauce” in front of that shrine and stared up at the night sky, the moon looming and luminescent above us.

“I think I remember that,” he says, hopefully. “I remember ringing the bell at the monastery.” What else does he remember? Singing the Four Questions at my parents’ Passover Seder? Eating matzo-ball soup and the Burmese deli-

cacy tea-leaf salad at the same meal? Singing Christmas carols at school and coming home to the mournful tune of a Burmese ballad? So far, our blending of traditions has been happenstance. But as our children get older and start asking difficult questions – about God and faith – we’re increasingly aware of the benefits of incorporating more traditions, if only to help guide them in their understanding of the world and their place in it.

Sometimes, for Htu Htu, these flimsy rituals aren’t quite enough. To recover from his disappointment at not being able to be in his country more often with his children, he sings. But singing Burmese songs is a far cry from bringing his children to the monastery and showing them how to pray, how to make offerings to the monks, how to climb a tamarind tree. Further attempts to bring Burmese rituals into our house are, in his view, too much work. Similarly for me, the thought of explaining Purim to my children makes me want to lie on the couch and take a long nap.

At least we share that exasperation in the joint project of raising our children. That has helped us feel closer. Together, we have this common goal of raising two considerate and compassionate people, who have a sense, however small and however changing, of their cultural history.

And in the end, it doesn’t matter who my children look like. They’re beautiful. (And I don’t just say that because they’re mine.) They’re beautiful in the way that all mixed-race kids are. You try to place them, tag them to a country, but that place doesn’t exist. They belong only to themselves, the new race. The future belongs to them.

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