

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My parents are good people who have always been very supportive of me. We've rarely disagreed, but now we are at odds. Recently, I started dating a woman who is of a different race and as our relationship has deepened, we've discussed marriage. My parents don't approve although they have been friendly to her face. They claim that they are not prejudiced, but don't think that different races should marry or have children because life will be too hard for those kids. They feel so strongly about this that they have said they would no longer help with my graduate school tuition unless I stop seeing my girlfriend. Do you have advice on how to handle this?

-- Bill

Dear Bill,

There are two issues addressed in your letter: prejudice and extortion. I'll start with the first.

I believe that your parents are out of step with the way the world is moving and, although they may declare themselves to be free of prejudice, I don't agree. As the world becomes smaller through technology and connection, people have many more opportunities to interact with, befriend, and fall in love with others who differ in ethnicity, religion, culture or race. American has always been a 'melting pot' of people and statistics show that this trend will continue and escalate in the future. A study in 1999 by the National Research Council of the American Academy of Sciences suggests that by the year 2050, 21% of the U.S. population will be of mixed racial or ethnic ancestry. Most Americans have a decidedly optimistic view of a multicultural future. A USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll conducted in 2001 found that 64% of respondents said that it would be "good for the country" to have more Americans "think of themselves as multiracial rather than belonging to a single race."

Did you know that for the first time the decennial census in the year 2000 no longer required respondents to fit into neat and distinct racial and ethnic boxes: white, black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American? Instead, the survey allowed people to check as many boxes as apply. That's a good thing for such mixed race individuals as golfer Tiger Woods, politician Barrack Obama, baseball player Derek Jeter, singers Mariah Carey, Norah Jones, and Alicia Keys, actress Halle Berry, actors Keanu Reeves and Benjamin Bratt, and diver Greg Louganis among many others. Their successes – and those of 6.8 million Americans who define themselves as being of mixed race – attest to our changing world and that the celebration of diversity is best expressed in individual lives and relationships.

You cannot make your parents change. But you can offer them opportunities to interact with your girlfriend. By getting to know her, they may be able to extend and see beyond ethnic or racial differences and see her as a unique individual. It is through these personal connections that we individually and collectively may come to a new consciousness about the ways human beings are alike rather than focusing on the ways we may differ. By celebrating our diverse heritage and the unity that it offers, we can

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9/8/04

better remember what many of us have overlooked what was echoed in the haunting words of poet and novelist G.K. Chesterton at the beginning of the last century: “Among all the strange things that men have forgotten, the most universal and catastrophic lapse of memory is that by which they have forgotten that they are living on a star.”

Regardless of whether or not your parents come to see your girlfriend in a new light, you must follow your own heart on this decision. If you are old enough for graduate school, you are old enough to make your own choices.

Talk with your parents and tell them how you feel. Let them know that you appreciate all the help they’ve given you in accomplishing your educational goals but that you cannot allow this gift to influence your choices about who you will choose to love. They may have your best interests at heart – within the context of their limited worldview – but they should not blackmail you with your tuition because of your choice in girlfriends. Be prepared to pay for your own tuition and graduate school expenses. Make an appointment with the Financial Aid Department of your college or university and see what loans or scholarships are available. Get a part-time job if necessary. Get a full-time job and attend school part-time if you have to, but follow your own conscience in this important matter of the heart.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.