

Dominant Narratives Oppress the Oppressors

Wealth, whiteness, and family are three components of an uncontested trinity. Having these three things, a wealthy, white family, can essentially propel any given person further through privilege than almost any other set of traits ever could. In business, these traits are accepted, common, and even sought after in many scenarios. I will never ignorantly defend this cycle, one that echoes prejudice upon all those missing these traits. However, I challenge you to consider that these traits, in rare but real situations, can pose as a major obstacle.

There is power in storytelling. With a stock story, which we learned about extensively, it's easy to be completely captured by its contents and brainwashed by its lessons because its intent is to resonate with the general public through a mainstream platform. As with most people, especially me having only been in elementary school, these stories served as the only sources of what I thought to be wisdom in my life. As sinister as the intentions of the the stories may be, it's important to remember the color-blind, less self-motivated mindset of a child. The many stock

stories perpetuating messages like “white families are perfect,” or “racism doesn’t exist because MLK fixed it,” or even “white people have no problems because they are perfect” served as the perfect concoction to make me blind to the areas in my life that weren’t okay. The primary stock story I intend to challenge here is that of the dominant narrative being written for the majority and written in such a way that benefits America’s majority. While I wholly acknowledge this to be widely true, I believe the excuse it gives people to turn a blind eye to people in need, whether they be black, white, or rainbow, is dangerous for the wellbeing of not only others who it affects through prejudice, but those who are held on a pedestal within the stories.

As an extremely impressionable child, I became blinded to the wrongdoings of my family through this narrative and therefore lost the ability to speak out. When the whole country tells the little white boy that his family’s doings are justified through skin color, he accepts it. That is how racism self-perpetuates. It is my story of difficulty in seeing myself and my surroundings beyond what I have been told they are by the dominant narrative throughout my childhood. While reading my story, I ask that you consider my realities not for how they are represented in pop-culture, or the stock story, but how they materialized in my life and how that may have affected me through time. Also, how the dominant narrative that problems don’t exist within white families could convince me that the wrongdoings of my family were okay.

One of my fondest memories has always been my first time pitching in a little league baseball game. Although I never threw a strike, for me it was a story of overcoming failure. When I sift through the memories of that day, it’s always ruined by its ending. As with any young kid publicly failing, I cried. I cried a lot! This is the first time I remember my dad instilling in me his family-famous phrase “don’t get sad, get mad!” While on paper it may seem like an innocent, maybe even playful, doctrine, the phrase loses its charm as boy turns to man. It

was this sentiment that within me began an avalanche of misdirected masculinity, bitterness, and hatred.

Like most little boys, my dad was my hero in every which way. In the car when he sped down the freeway he would insist the car was flying. I totally bought it. Why wouldn't I? He was the only source of answers I knew at the time outside of my equally clueless elementary school friends. However, at that age that phrase my dad coined found itself being repeated in almost every aspect of my life. Can't open the peanut butter? Don't get sad, get mad! Can't draw? Don't get sad, get mad! Can't handle the older boys calling you names? Don't get sad, get mad! I remember running up to my dad after school in the second grade begging him for answers as to why the older boys wouldn't stop picking on me. He told me the answer wasn't within introspection or a father-son lesson, but was through the enactment of violence. He had told me to give it my very best to hurt those boys equal to the way they had hurt me. I spent the rest of the day in the principal's office being told what a bad student I was and how I should have handled myself. But how could I have told my superhero no? My dad came breezing through the door, grabbed me by the hand, mildly threatened the principal, and I was enrolled in a different school the following week.

My first introduction to the injustices of the world was through one of my dad's many stories about his time in Afghanistan. He had been a student in Afghanistan and Pakistan since he was three. His intention was to illustrate how lucky I was to be able to attend a new school without fear, but the story did nothing more than open my eyes to how gruesome the world could be. Since Afghanistan was heavily conflicted at the time he was enrolled there, his first experience in an Afghanistan elementary school was rolling up in a bus to a guard station resembling a bunker that had been riddled with bullet holes the previous night. The fresh blood

of the soldiers guarding the school entrance still covered its interior and he has never failed to emphasize the deep-seated fear of “others” this caused him. This, in a way, was my first experience with racism within my family. Ever since this experience, he openly admits it had been difficult for him to entrust people of middle eastern countries.

For the longest time, I wanted to be exactly like my dad, even going on into middle school. However, middle school was where the white family veil began to peel away to reveal some of the inner workings of the family I had been born into.

It was probably the early hours of the morning before the sun had risen when I woke to the sound of my dad angrily tossing together a suitcase by the front door. Curious George having been my mascot for so long, I stepped into the hallway to see an open bag with clothing sprawled all about and an older Glock model resting in the bag at his feet. Surprised to see me, my dad grabbed me by the shoulders and frantically tried to tranquilize the confusion sprinting through my head. “Son, dad will be back soon. Aunt Kim (my cousin at the time) needs our help right now and sometimes we do things for family that we shouldn’t, but that’s what makes a family a family. There is nothing a 'Johnson' won’t sacrifice for his family, and that includes his security, his morals, and even his faith. I love you.” Having been freshly enrolled in my fifth or sixth grade class, such heavy words completely lost their power with me since half the implications I hadn’t even been exposed to yet in life.

Only in the ninth grade through court proceedings did I discover what my dad had gone to do and why my mom had cried for the days following his departure that morning. That morning my dad, uncle on my mom’s side, and older cousin (age 16-20 at the time) had armed themselves, found themselves a vehicle, and illegally crossed the border into Tijuana, Mexico where they had received a call from my cousin, Kim, begging to be saved from her current

situation. My mom's side of the family, Kim's side, had never had a college education. Kim had been sending pictures of the cigarette burns in her breasts her pimp had pressed into her skin for whatever reason he may have had (which to this very day she has scars from). My dad, uncle, and cousin, taking my dad's phrase "don't get sad, get mad" to heart, raided the apartment complex she was in that day. The same day, she was brought back to her home in Texas, the Tijuana news had a million questions for the locals, and my dad returned home in such normal fashion he didn't have to have any answers for us because he didn't raise any questions. My uncle, however, told my mom what had been done. The details of this story were kept from me for some time in an effort to preserve my steady grades and underlying sense of stability. I can only imagine how my mom felt watching her son grow up viewing my dad, her nightmare in the making, like superman.

The first time I was really involved was in late middle school when I had visited my grandparents with my dad in Sacramento. My grandparents live on a semi-remote farm in the agricultural, central valley side of Sacramento. That day, two dark helicopters descended on their wheat fields dumping police officers out from either side. While I was experiencing awe and shock at what I was seeing, it was my dad's reaction that fascinated me the most in the long run. It was unclear which farm the officers were searching for, but they made themselves clear when they rushed into the home full-force demanding the location of my half brother. The sight of relief washing over my dad's face had never made sense to me until recently. However, my half brother had been missing for a multitude of years, so even we didn't know where he was. There was a massive apology by a few of the officers as they cleared the home and prepared to leave, but it was the first time I had firsthand experience in the game some of my family had been playing in the shadows.

In eighth grade, the answers to the many questions raised by the police that descended on my grandparent's fields that day came up in a phone call received from a Chicago police station. "Dad? Dad?" called out the caller who later identified himself as my half brother, "Barry" (pseudo-name). We knew he had been a troublemaker, but only my dad was aware of the level of his offenses. On my eighth birthday he had come to the house, given me a small wooden, toy car. I cherish this gift and actually still have it. However, Barry had been involved with a Nazi group since the years leading up to his return home. His mom, my step mother, had been unintentionally killed in a drive-by shooting by a group of young, black men. While rationally speaking, this shouldn't inspire a blanket hatred for an entire racial group of individuals, I still understand how he found himself in that dark place in his life. I don't sympathize with Nazis or white nationalists in any way, but I can't help but feel sorry for the happenings of Barry's life and the events that led to those decisions. For that reason, I to this day challenge people to see these kinds of extremists as people. When we see them as people, they notice it. And although it didn't work for Barry, ***I still believe showing these people that they are loved and that they are as dignified as we are is the best way to lead them down a better path.*** Anyway, Barry had visited with the intention of getting away from his addiction to meth-amphetamines. Though he tried to rid himself of this disease, he crawled back to it. I feel conflicted about him. I love him very much, but I cannot love what he stands for. He was eventually caught in a shootout with police and criminally charged the large scale production of meth-amphetamines. I don't believe I will get the chance to meet him again unless I visited his prison, but revisiting my past with him is not worth whatever emotions they may cause me.

These series of events spiraled out of control in an extremely short period of time, mostly from eighth grade to eleventh grade. My dad left the family in 2015 after I had found evidence of it and made the extremely difficult decision of telling my mom about it. I bore that burden for nearly half a year before revealing it because the ultimate consequence of it was the unraveling of my family structure, but keeping it to myself took an emotional toll on me. I didn't think I would be able to recover from if I hadn't told. My dad returned home time and time again unannounced. My mom was completely destroyed. Sometimes when people feel that sunk, they do things they wouldn't normally and are more agreeable even in areas they shouldn't be. For the following year after his "leaving" I would see him return home, hear him having sex with my mom through the walls, and lay in my bed with my fists clenched until the following school day.

After that whole year of this, I had lost all respect for my dad. But worst of all, my mom had lost all respect for herself. As a result of the seemingly endless chain reaction, my mom's stress manifested itself in her health. I had had a surgery earlier that year for my own health-related issues, but the only using the medicine prescribed to me wasn't me. My mom was heavily using the vicodin I was prescribed. Watching her descend into this pit for the first time completely shattered my reality. Regardless, there was a late night where she was calling for me from the kitchen and by the time I came into the kitchen she wasn't able to say my name anymore. Laid out on the ground, my mom was gasping for air, wincing in pain, and shaking uncontrollably. I desperately dialed "911" and asked for an ambulance. I spent the night in the hospital with her after she had had an emergency surgical procedure to remove her gallbladder which had ballooned to five times the normal size as a result of blockage caused by opioid abuse.

As of now, my mom and I are healing and work hard to repair our relationship, even if some days it feels like a rocky road. Since then, she has learned to be more resilient. Together we

face a huge array of personal challenges, many of them even still surprising us. Just a couple months ago my dad's third child was born. The mother is 28. It hurts knowing I saw him as Superman, but breaking that delusion has been of utmost importance to my life. Sometimes these difficulties can be hard to bring up because of how often people will neglect my feelings on the basis of my skin color.

This year has been by far the largest challenge as I have found myself in the middle of building a federal case between the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, my father, and I. I rush through the end of this story for several reasons, one of them being a maximum story length, but another being the sensitivity of the case. In short, while searching through my house I came across several large, russian-imported 300+ round ammunition crates with more than ten extremely illegal automatic firearms carrying possession sentences of over a decade each in the wall of one of our closets. I have been involved in interrogations, interviews, and am a component (on the right side of the law!) assisting in a case more broadly related to a gun-running organization my father has been suspected of operating with.

Overall, the situation is infinitely complicated to the point where my father may even appear at my graduation out of spite for court ordered restraining orders from him and different members of my family.

I hope the takeaway of my story is not one born of negativity but one born of recognition for the chaotic possibilities even within a white family. For so many years I couldn't accept the possibility that my family was abnormal in part because of the dominant narrative. The dominant narrative, in total, hurts all those that do not, or cannot, fit it. It hurts minorities, it hurts my peers, and it has hurt me. While the damage it does differs, the importance lies within finding

counterstories, like the one I have presented, to reveal the fallacies within the dominant narratives.