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Tell the Truth and Make Space for Hope

Richelle Joe
University of Central Florida

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Tell the Truth and Make Space for Hope

By J. Richelle Joe
UCF Forum columnist
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As the country grapples with hard truths, the power of representation can sustain our hope for a better United States.



J. Richelle Joe's mother taught her a valuable lesson as a troop leader during her years involved with the Girl Scouts: Tell the truth and make space for hope. Our parents are our first teachers, and in my case they were also my Girl Scout troop leaders. Although I was not the most enthusiastic Brownie or Junior Girl Scout, I

endured campsite latrines for the opportunities to sell cookies, accumulate badges and socialize with other girls my age.

Having my parents as troop leaders was a bonus — their insistence that I not receive special treatment notwithstanding. The benefit for me was the chance to observe their service to others through which they taught me more than they could have imagined.

Probably the most poignant lesson I learned from my parents' involvement with Girl Scouts came through a cultural event held regionally each year. During this event, local troops represented various countries, sharing what they had learned about the history and culture of those nations.

Our troop was selected to represent the United States, and my mother devised a plan for our troop to demonstrate the diverse heritage of the nation. Our Girl Scout troop included girls whose families identified with Italian, Greek, Irish and Mexican ancestries, so my mother wrote a culture-specific poem for each girl and encouraged them each to dress in a style reflective of their heritage. Each poem ended with the same couplet:

I'm proud of my country and my heritage, too.
I'm happy to live here. I love it, don't you?

These poems taught me about the traditions and cultures of girls I had known as friends and helped me to appreciate their backgrounds while simultaneously maintaining pride in my own heritage. They also assumed a patriotic love that I still wrestle to internalize.

For my poem, my mother focused on our African ancestry, acknowledging our inability to trace our roots to a specific country of origin due to the perils of slavery. She wrote about the strength and perseverance of our ancestors despite gross mistreatment and managed to also include some Black history facts. I remember practicing my poem and ultimately delivering it with great satisfaction knowing that my mother had written such meaningful words.

As I reflect back on this experience and the words of the poem, I smile thinking of my excitement at the time.

My people came from Africa, so proud and so strong
Many bad things happened to them before I came along.

My childhood home was filled with books, and through these books, my parents encouraged me to be a student of history and culture. I absorbed information about African civilizations and appreciated their greatness. I was also keenly aware of the brutality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the system of chattel slavery that provided much of the economic foundation for our nation.

As an adult, these lines continue to resonate with me as I am grateful for the generations of Black people who pursued freedom all while facing the injustices and indecencies of debt peonage, sharecropping, lynching and Jim Crow segregation.

While I smile at my childhood excitement, I also read this poem with a stark realism that encapsulates the complicated love I have for this country.

They went from bondage to freedom yet have managed to show
That America is for trying your best, don't you know?

I am certain that my mother intended to instill in me a sense of internal motivation and determination that I would need to navigate life as a Black girl and now woman in the United States of America. She had lived through segregation in a small town on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and had made her way from a farm with an outhouse to the campus of one of the state's Historically Black Colleges and Universities and ultimately to lead a classroom of her own.

As a child I probably embraced, without question, the idea that trying your best in America mattered. My perspective as an adult is shaped by the knowledge that barriers exist and shape the opportunities we pursue. Sometimes we can try our best, and it won't matter.

And then my mother sprinkled in some inspiration and hope.

I've learned about Washington, our capital – D.C.
It was surveyed by Ben Banneker, who was Black, just like me.

Representation matters. It mattered all those years ago when I studied Benjamin Banneker, Martin Luther King Jr. and Shirley Chisholm. It matters just as much now as millions of girls witnessed the election of the first woman — a woman of color — to the office of the vice president.

The year 2020 has been tumultuous, and I am glad that my mother had the foresight to both tell the truth and make space for hope. Today, that is the lesson for me.

Our nation has plenty of hard truths to face. I remain hopeful that we will indeed face them and become a better United States of America.

