

Makes Me Wanna Holler, or Jump off a Bridge!

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The Mask

Aaaah, the sweet smell of success! No matter how many times I experience it, I never tire of a new conquest. I've proven once again that I am the *man* at H & S (Holcomb & Smythe). I am the closer – brought in to seal the deal with difficult clients. And, I seldom disappoint. Although I must admit that this time, I was hurt that I wasn't initially included on the project team to woo our new prospect, a billion dollar British pharmaceutical. But, when my nemesis, blond and blue-eyed, Paul, dropped the ball, I'm the one who reeled them back in and sealed the deal.

So, what the hell – yes, I agreed to join the team for drinks afterward. I don't usually participate in the after-work gatherings, because they always seem to quickly go south. Once they get a few drinks under their belts, my white colleagues tend to lose their inhibitions, and with them their sense of decorum and respect. I remember the last after work gathering. Paul's female administrative support person, presumably at his urging, challenged me to validate the rumor about the sexual prowess of African American men by meeting her in the rest room to demonstrate my skills. In other words, she wanted the Mandingo fuck. I was embarrassed, for both her and me. Despite my many accomplishments at the firm, I will always be viewed by mainstream America as either a thug or a Mandingo warrior. I'm so tired of having to dispel others' misconceptions of black men. I'm exhausted from being a spokesperson for Black America. For example, just last week in the middle of our leadership meeting, one of the firm's principals asked out loud, "What's with the Black Lives Matter protests? What do those people rioting in the streets really want?" Don't they realize they are destroying their own city.

Almost immediately, the eyes of all of my colleagues turned toward me. I wanted to scream out loud, "Why the hell is everyone looking at me. We are not a monolithic race and I cannot be a

spokesperson for an entire race of people!” Instead, I muttered slightly audibly, “I have no idea. I’ve been asking myself the same question.” Almost immediately, I wish I could have retracted my statement. Why am I unable to take a public stand on issues that go against the grain of the mainstream point of view? I often find myself angry at my own cowardice.

Nevertheless, I decided to join my colleagues for this after work celebration. Why not savor the moment of my latest “win”, and, at the same time, rub it in Paul’s face, that, once again, the sole African American on the leadership team was called in to save the day. Predictably, we all had far too many drinks. But, as I saw Paul’s admin begin to stumble in my direction, I decided to call it a night. Yes, I was turned up, having consumed far too much tequila, but what the hell? How often does the brother get to rub it into the face of the nephew of the firm’s founder that he is the biggest asset on the payroll.

Driving While Black

I know I’ve had a few too many, but, damn if those flashing red lights don’t look like a police squad car. Wait - where’s the median in the road. Oddly, it seems to be vacillating from side to side. Wait – what? Are the flashing lights signaling me to stop?

“Aw snap!” I paused. I’d better pull over. Here he comes. “Is there something wrong, Officer?”

“Sir, are you all right?”

“Yes Officer. I’m fine.”

“May I see your license and registration please?”

“Can you tell me the reason you stopped me, Officer?”

“You’ve been driving erratically for the past two miles. Your license, please?”

“Really, I’m fine. Yeah, I’ve had a couple of drinks but we were celebrating. I’m in complete control and perfectly fine to get home.”

“Your license, Sir.”

As I recall, it was at this point that things went way south.

“It’s in the glove box. No, wait, in my pants pocket. Oh shit!” The moment I uttered those words, I knew what horror awaited me. Please God tell me this isn’t really happening. I felt the warm trickle between my legs just as I reached in my back pocket.

“Sir, I’m going to ask you one more time – your license and registration, please!” The officer was starting to get impatient. He had placed his hands on his hips and was tapping his gun holster with his right forefinger. I had no way of knowing it then, but later learned that this same officer had just returned to his post following two weeks of desk duty for engaging in a physical altercation with another motorist at a seemingly benign traffic stop. It turned out that the entire event was captured by a cell phone video.

Despite this recent bit of history, the officer seemed determined to enforce compliance to his instructions. Before I realized what had happened, but following his fourth request for my license, he directed me to step out of the car. I tried to explain that I couldn’t get out of the car just now.

“Sir, you don’t have a choice. Please get out of the car.”

“I was totally paralyzed. In my entire adult life, my secret had never been exposed to anyone other than Mother. There was no way I was getting out of the car and revealing the stain that had overtaken the seat of my pants. Despite my inebriated state, I knew I had to do whatever I could to protect my secret and stay in the car.”

My brow began to sweat. I had to think fast. “This is because I’m Black, right? You wouldn’t have forced a white man out of the car. Give me your badge number. I’m going to file a complaint right now. Just as I reached for my cell phone, I saw the officer’s demeanor change.”

“Aw, hell no. I’m not going through this again. Look, I’ve been patient with you. But, you people take things too far.” As his right hand began to tap his gun holster, he shouted, “Open the door slowly and get out of the car. . .now!!!”

I couldn’t believe what was happening. Would he really use his gun on me? Suddenly, the possibility seemed real. Along with the rest of the country, I had heard about Freddy Gray, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Walter Scott. These were horrible tragedies, and I sympathized with both the victims and their surviving families. But, I was not them. I was a member of what DuBois called the talented tenth. I am a role model for the race.

Before that night, I had never even seen a gun before. But, as I listened to the officer’s voice quickly grow louder, the threat became real. I swallowed my pride as I opened my car door, and slowly lifted my legs, one at a time and planted them firmly on the sidewalk. I had temporarily

forgotten about my incontinence problem as I carefully exited the car, leaned face front against the vehicle, with my hands extended above me on the hood of the car.

In the darkness, the officer did not initially see evidence of my "situation". But, during the pat down that followed after he slapped handcuffs on me, his hand landed between my legs.

As his hands reached my crotch, he abruptly pulled his hand back. "You peed your fucking pants? Oh, shit! I hope I have hand sanitizer in the car."

"Officer, why am I in cuffs? Am I under arrest?"

"Alright Cuz, I've had just about enough of your shit. Shut up before I light your ass up!"

I pinched myself. I must be dreaming. This couldn't possibly be happening.

"Now sir, you've crossed the line. I have respectfully followed your orders, and I'd like the same level of respect to be afforded to me." This cop probably didn't even have a college degree.

"I've treated you with respect, and I expect the same from you. I'm not your cousin. My name is Bartholomew Jones."

"Well, Bartholomew, what are you doing driving around here at this time of night, anyhow? "

What was implied in his question was that the officer believed I had no right to be there.

Instead of answering my question, he shoved me into the back of his squad car.

Believe it or not, this encounter was only the beginning of my nightmare. The entire situation was unbelievable. And to think that the day started out with such promise. Earlier that day, I had helped the firm land the biggest account of recent memory, and, as a result, I personally

earned a huge bonus to go along with it. But, just a few hours later the day had ended with my arrest and overnight stay in the Brooks County jail. The charge, which I learned once I arrived at the police station, was drunk driving.

I was placed in a holding cell with three very suspicious looking characters. There was a 50 something year old Latino who mumbled to himself in Spanish; and two white men who were both intimidating in distinctively different ways. One looked like a professional wrestler, and had a menacing stare. He spent his time pacing back and forth in the 16 X 20 foot cell, and flexing his orange-colored, overly tanned muscles. The other man, whose age was difficult to ascertain, was slight in build. His eyes seared right through me while his mouth, turned slightly at the edges, affected a strange, creepy smile. I'm not sure how long he had been incarcerated, but he smiled like he had been there for quite some time. He gave me the creeps. Needless to say, there was no way I was going to fall asleep in a holding cell with these characters. I stayed awake until the following morning when I was taken before a magistrate who allowed me to post my own bond. I went straight home and passed out on the bed.

Dating Disasters

I was jarred from my slumber with a start. The melodic sound of Farrell singing about feeling happy, "like a room without a roof" was too much to bear. And, what the hell does that mean anyway? I picked up my phone and was initially confused by the time. It was 2 PM. Wait! What day is today? Oh, that's right. It took me a minute, but fairly quickly, the pounding in my head and ringing in my ears reminded me of the events of the past evening.

The call was from my ex, Nikki. What the hell did she want? I hadn't heard from her in at least six months – since she'd declared she'd rather be celibate for the rest of her life than waste any more of her precious time with a down-low brother like me. To this day, I still can't figure out how she accessed my text messages. I was so careful not to leave my phone lying around. And, I thought it was nearly impossible for anyone to figure out my security code. But, somehow she did. That's how she found out about my fling with Lance.

It's not that I cheated on Nikki – really. At least not in the traditional sense. What seemed to have really upset her was learning about my about my bisexuality. When Nikki found evidence of my latest tryst in my cell phone, she asked, “How could you be attracted to both men and women at the same time? I can compete with another woman. But a man. . .? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

What could I say? “I don't know, Nikki. That's what I've been trying to figure out for most of my life.”

It was true. I began questioning my sexuality in college. No, to be true, it first happened in the locker room following PE class. The locker room was the setting that offered my first exposure to the private parts of other men, in particular white men. There were only a handful of African American students at my very elite high school. And, I was the only one in my grade. Since the eighth grade, I had been taller than most of the boys, and my voice was an octave lower.

Because of this, I was very self-conscious about my physique. This was particularly true when having to dress in front of my classmates. Even if I was late for biology class in the afternoons, I always took my time showering and getting dressed after gym class.

On one particular day, I thought I was alone in the locker room. But, when I pulled back the curtain to exit the shower, there was Paul, standing there staring at me. When our eyes locked, he dropped his towel and entered the shower. Initially, I was gripped with fear. But, something inside of me was aroused. Instead of fighting him off, and telling him to get the hell out and leave me alone, I found myself opening my arms to welcome him. It felt as if I'd waited all my young life for this moment. Paul moved toward me as he entered the shower, dropped his towel, and gently kissed my lips. When he grabbed my shoulders and spun me around so that my back was against him, I obediently turned and allowed him to take me on a journey to ecstasy. I never imagined anything could feel so good!

But, when the shower ended, I was immediately filled with guilt. Pastor Jackson's booming voice immediately filled my head. "Whoremongers and adulterers will not see God!" For the remainder of the week, I walked through the hallways at school with my head held down. And, I avoided all contact with Paul. Despite the resulting body odor, I stopped taking showers at school. When Paul called out to me in the halls between classes, I pretended not to hear him. He resorted to stuffing letters in my locker, telling me how much he cared for me, and promised to keep our relationship a secret. Relationship? What the hell was he talking about? We had no relationship. Relationships were reserved for a man and woman, a boy and girl. It was what Kina, from my neighborhood and I shared. It was what allowed us to kiss, and go to the movies, feel each other up, and accompany each other to our respective senior proms. Eventually, I would marry a woman. But, a brief sexual encounter in the boys shower. No, that was no relationship.

Throughout the ensuing years, I continued to ride the seesaw of contradiction between publicly dating women while privately fucking men. For many years, I seemed to balance my secret life of sin quite well. Or, so I thought.

But, that was before I began dating Nikki. I knew she was different from the start. And, actually, I welcomed that difference. She was funny, smart, and best of all, she was crazy about me. And, surprisingly, Mother seemed to accept her. Perhaps that's because Nikki provided the bow for the storybook packaged life she imagined for her son. But, when I hadn't proposed marriage within six months of dating, Nikki became impatient, and then suspicious that there must be someone else. Nothing I said stemmed her skepticism. She was determined to locate the source of my true affection. What she failed to realize was that affection had nothing to do with it. It was solely a sexual desire – one that I could not seem to break. On an intellectual, emotional, and agape level, she was my “boo”. But she said that wasn't enough for her. Nikki wanted it all. The problem was that I didn't have it all to give. So, predictably, Nikki dropped me like a bad habit.

Now, just thinking about Nikki's number on my telephone exhausted me. I didn't have the energy to reopen that can of worms. I fell back onto the bed and returned to slumber.

Las Cucarachas

Oh, please God, no! That can't be what I think it is. But, as the stream of pee saturated my left butt cheek, as well as the mattress beneath me, the damp sensation of lying in a puddle of water was unmistakable. Shit! Well, thankfully, it's not shit, but urine. I had wet the bed again. No, I'm not a two year old. I'm a 40 something year old, grown ass man who happens to hate

getting out of bed, even when nature screams “get up before you pee on yourself!” In fact, I hate mornings. No, let me keep it real – I hate just about every aspect of life in general right now.

More accurately, life scares the hell out of me. Just getting out of bed has become overwhelming. I’m serious. As soon as my foot hits the floor, I stand a 50/50 chance of going toe to toe with a cockroach. That’s right, I said cockroach. And, those bad boys are bold! When I discovered the first one, I thought for sure it was an anomaly. When it sensed me chasing it with my shoe in hand, it made haste, ran across the floor, and quickly dashed under the baseboard. I thought I’d scared it into vacating the premises. But, over time, that nasty creature has returned with all of its kinfolk, and together, they have multiplied hundred-fold and overtaken the entire house. I bet there are three generations of those unwelcome guests living under my roof! There are now so many of those things occupying my space, I’m starting to believe their name is on the lease.

We never had roaches in our home while I was growing up. In fact, we never had bugs of any type. My mother was vigilant in keeping uninvited guests at bay. “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” was her mantra, and that was only surpassed by the mandate to “fake it until you make it”. My mother has probably wondered, “How did my son become so trifling?” Well, that’s a fair question, and I’m not sure I have the answer. Well, maybe I do, but it’s a long story - one that I’m currently exploring more thoroughly with the help of a skillful therapist. But, to keep it 100, I must admit that the bed-wetting incident was not an anomaly. It’s a pattern that

began a long time ago. Truth be told, I seem to have lost control of my bladder shortly after I was initially potty trained and began wearing “big boy pants”.

Uh oh, I Got to Pee!

My first conscious memory of losing control of my bladder was as a small child. I must have been no more than three years old at the time. Wait – maybe I was four. Yes, I had to be four because my pre-school teacher, Ms. Johnson, was seated in the front, stage right, cheering me on. I remember her warm smile, along with the gentle wave of her hand beckoning me to walk toward her from backstage, in the wings of the auditorium, where I stood, legs crossed, peeking out at the audience. Despite her approving glance and encouraging smile, I just couldn’t seem to muster the courage to move out onto that foreboding stage. My legs were paralyzed- firmly planted in place like the roots of an old oak tree. That is, until I felt the sudden, involuntary shove of my body at the hands of my mother, who, sensing the impatience of the audience that had paid good money to see the children’s fashion show, quickly snuck up behind me and literally shoved me onto the stage. She moved so fast, I initially didn’t realize what had happened. Before I knew it, I stumbled onstage in front of hundreds of faces, all smiling and laughing, and simultaneously pointing in my direction. Initially all I noticed were white teeth encased in bobbing heads, in all shades of African American, from cafe au late to coffee black. Although many of the smiles and laughs were both approving and supportive, all my “four year old self” felt was mockery. I was so paralyzed by the audience that I didn’t realize what I’d done. It wasn’t until I felt the yank on my arm and the disapproving voice of my mom, admonishing me for embarrassing her, did I realize that I’d wet my pants.

Afterward, as I hid behind the curtains of the stage, I heard the muffled voices of laughter, coming from the audience. Initially, I wondered what they found so funny. Then I quickly discovered that the laughter was directed toward me. I had peed in my new suit pants, right there in front of more than 300 good Christians from the AME regional conference fashion show.

This memorable event served as my maiden voyage into the sea of humiliation. I don't mean to sound overly dramatic, but that's how I feel about it. It was my introduction to my mother's disapproving glance and disdainful voice that would soon become as familiar to me as my own reflection in the mirror. While this was my first experience with both public and mother's disapproval, it certainly wouldn't be the last. For the rest of my life, I would perform like a trained circus monkey, forced to occupy center stage, while a blinding spotlight revealed my pee-stained suit and a slowly suffocating bow tie. And, when I inevitably disappointed her, it was my mother's disgust that rang out louder than her love and support.

Yet, those who are familiar with my relationship with my mother will likely be shocked to hear the real deal. Most people think we're a tight pair. Not long ago, one of my female coworkers inquired about our seemingly impenetrable bond, following Mother's unannounced visit to the office. Apparently she mistook Mother's public embrace and syrupy sweet voice as a sign that ours was a close relationship. What she didn't hear was Mother's admonishment in my ear to "stop behaving like a dumbass in front of all these white folks". I was out of sorts for the rest of the day as I attempted to determine what the hell prompted the seemingly unprovoked, critical

salvo. Regardless of my age, education, professional achievements, her criticism would inevitably send me reeling into a pit of ineptitude. It seems that I had failed once again!

Boy, Pick up This Damn Phone

It has now been 10 months, and 23 days, and 6 hours since I've spoken to Mother. Yet, each time I glance at the land line telephone quietly resting on its cradle in the kitchen counter, my mind floats back to our last conversation. Although it's been nearly a year, I still replay our dialog word for word as if it were a script from my favorite movie.

"Boy, what took you so long to pick up the phone? Didn't you see my number?" And, despite my explanation about being in the shower, Mother didn't want to hear it. Instead she assumed the worse: "hmm, you probably peed in your damn pants again, didn't you?" Before waiting for a response, she began hurling so many "trifling ass" bombs in my direction that I finally hung up on her. Although she continued to re-dial me all day, I refused to answer her calls. One quick glance at caller ID saved me from further insult. My spirit was crushed by the mere glance at the telephone. I just couldn't take it anymore! Never again, I resolved, would I subject myself to Mother's humiliation.

Yet, Mother's disapproving voice wasn't the only one ringing in my ears. Throughout my life, I've experienced so much rejection – starting with an invisible father whose absence left me anxiously waiting for his arrival throughout my entire childhood; teachers who expressed low expectations regarding my potential; and lovers, who, after short periods of dating decided to pursue "other options". It's surprising I made it through to adulthood unscathed. Scratch that. I was definitely not unscathed.

But, something about that last conversation with Mother convicted me that I would no longer tolerate her insults. Despite her threatening commands, I could no longer continue in my role of trained circus animal. I was slowly choking from mindless obedience, and the only anecdote for my torturous death was to break away from her entirely. The choice was clear: break free or die.

It would be difficult – much like an addict deciding to go “cold turkey” from their drug of choice. For as much as I hated her, she was still my mother and I loved her. And, she was the only living relative I knew. There was both comfort and pain in our relationship, and cutting her off felt much like detoxification.

Despite my description of Mother, I must admit to my own culpability in the dysfunction. Part of the problem with her, in fact a huge part of the problem has been my unwillingness to stand up for myself. As an only child of an overbearing, single mother, I have always had a great need to please. Somehow, by pleasing others, I’d mistakenly thought I’d find fulfillment in their acceptance. Yet, regrettably, I’ve never successfully achieved that state of being. While my immediate response to her military-like commands seems to bring about a regulation in Mother’s breathing, her satisfaction is always short-lived. With her anxious demeanor, she quickly moves on to a new target of dissatisfaction. Following a short-term period of calm, she simply migrates to another rant. Regrettably, this pattern of dysfunction typically left me directly in her line of fire.

Working While Black

“You know you are the first”, Mother constantly reminded me about my position as Director of Communications with Holcomb and Smythe, a top rated PR firm. Whatever you do, don't show your color. This advice was code for saying to check my culture and true self at the door and behave in a manner that would be perceived by the majority folk as racially neutral. But for all of her admonition, Mother neglected to tell me I was how a 6'1", dark complexioned, full lipped, baritone-voiced, kinky haired man shows up anywhere as “color neutral”. And, furthermore, why would I want to do so?

But, despite Mother's advice, I'd done pretty well in my career, just as I am. I've been at H& S (Holcomb & Smythe) for the past five years, and have been promoted twice. Within three years, I was promoted to my current role, and I now report directly to our CEO. While I am the token AA in a management role, I'm treated pretty well. Now, there's good reason for that.

Throughout my life, I've always worked twice as hard as everyone else just to remain on equal footing.

This was a lesson I learned back in grade school, when my teachers appeared oblivious to my hands raised high in the air, waving like they just don't care, and eager to respond to the question of the moment. No matter what I did to gain the attention I so desperately needed, I was either ignored or singled out for behavioral issues. “Bartholomew, quite down”, was the phrase most often shouted in my direction.

I often wondered why Mother selected a school so far from our home, filled with students who looked nothing like me. I inquired about her selection only once, and her response was so long

and protracted I swore I'd never ask again. She went on ad nauseam about white schools, and how they were so much better than those in our AA neighborhood. She lectured on the importance of mirroring the speech, mannerisms, and habits of my white classmates "if I wanted to be successful in life". In her rant, Mother painted a picture that everything white was good, and everything inherently black was inferior. This philosophy had framed my self-efficacy since childhood. Even now, I'm quite self-conscious about my blackness, particularly when I'm in the company of white folks.

In spite of my anger toward Mother, I must give credit where it is due. Were it not for my early exposure to mainstream resources, I would likely never have experienced the level of professional achievement that I currently enjoy. Despite my exclusion from the interpersonal niceties that my white, and even Asian classmates received from our teacher, my outstanding performance on tests was indisputable. And, since most kids on the playground didn't want to be bothered with me anyway, I had more time to study. I learned early that the "black tax" was an unfair assessment that I would continue to pay throughout my life. It meant that I must be smarter, faster, friendlier, and more diligent than any of my peers. It was a high price to pay, but was not without its rewards. Being a high achiever earned me the designation of salutatorian of my high school class; made me the recipient of a full academic scholarship at Princeton; and equipped me to become an early recruit to one of the nation's top PR firms.

Although, I'd have to admit that being smart also brought about challenges. I was reminded of this during an after work social at a local bar. While my group was seated immediately, a group of young AA men who were already waiting for a table when my party arrived was turned away

due to “lack of availability”. Shortly after they departed the establishment, a similar sized group of white young men arrived and was seated immediately. I couldn’t help but feel bad for them. My heart ached for this obvious act of discrimination. Yet, my role within the firm made me reluctant to carry a banner for civil rights. When called upon to choose between my race and my professional role, the company always won out. As Mother has reminded me throughout my life, I am the chosen one. And, being the chosen one leads to isolation, often from my race and culture, and at times even from my colleagues.

School Days

As I sat in my car waiting for the light to change, I caught sight of a little boy holding the hand of a man, presumably his father, as they walked up the street en route to the neighborhood school. Given his height and wobbly gait, I imagined him to be about five or six years of age. The sight of the pair immediately tugged at my heart as I was reminded of the hole in my own heart resulting from the absence of my own father.

Since I never met the man, I defaulted to the myriad qualities that I imagined him to possess. He was tall, with big hands, and a full deep laugh. He was an intelligent man with a very important job that kept him on the road with non-stop travel. That was the only plausible explanation for his constant absence from the life of his only son. It was certainly more palatable than Mother’s description of the man as a “no count nigger”.

The sight of the father and son brought to my recollection my own first day at school. Mother talked non-stop throughout the entire drive to school. While I was initially excited about the prospect of meeting new friends and curious about experiencing a different environment, by

the time we pulled up in front of the grade school that would become my second home for the next several years, I was frightened to death. While I don't recall her entire soliloquy, I do recall her saying something about the school being a training ground for me to become the nation's first black president. Although Barack Obama beat me to that role, Mother never stopped pushing me towards lofty, improbable accomplishments.

I still remember the bow tie and suspenders that served as my daily school uniform throughout my childhood. "Dress for success" was another of Mother's mantras. Instead of success, my clothes were like a neon sign that shouted I was fair game for ridicule. On that first day of school, I received my first of many "ass whoopings" at the hands of classmates who wanted to make an example of my wardrobe and called me names.

No matter how much I begged Mother to allow me to wear jeans and t-shirts like the other kids at school, she insisted on dressing me in a manner that she called distinguished, but left my classmates labeling me "fag". The most frustrating part about this label was the mixed bag of emotions I felt once I reached adulthood and came to terms with my own attraction to both men and women. Everything I had been taught about same sex relationships convicted me that they were wrong. But, since I had explored sex with both men and women, and enjoyed both genders in different ways, maybe I was indeed a fag.

The schoolyard teasing would likely not have hurt quite as much if I'd had a refuge. Had there been someone at home to explain the natural insensitivity of grade school boys and girls, or stroke my wounded psyche by affirming their love for me just the way I was, I may have responded differently to my classmates' incessant teasing. But, given Mother's short temper

and impatience with me, I always felt under attack. I rotated daily from grade school teasing to parental humiliation. When it became too much, I withdrew to the solace of slumber and the inevitability of loss of control of my bladder. “Gregory, you did it again. You wet the damn bed!” my mother would scream as she tossed me from the bed onto the floor and exposed my nocturnal sin.

Comfy Couch

“How can you invite more joy into your life?” That was the question posed by my therapist, Dr. Leon Schwartz. “Are you kidding me?” I responded, but only in my head. I’ve never even considered the prospect of joy. My survival has had absolutely nothing to do with the pursuit of joy. I’ve spent my entire life striving to be the best, first, smartest, most innovative, and outstanding, just to survive. I’ve never even considered the possibility of joy.

Yet, I must acknowledge that what I’ve been doing is no longer working for me. The accomplishments and toys I’ve acquired no longer provide the level of satisfaction that they once did. Truth be told, I feel pretty empty. Maybe my “perfect life” isn’t so perfect after all. Sure, I’ve got a nice home, drive a fast car, and sit in a corner office with a breathtaking view of the city. But, who can I share it with? I thought I wanted the picture-perfect life with a wife, two kids, and a dog. But, each time I get close to having it, I mess up. And, now I wonder if I really want that life anyway. How can I openly acknowledge my sexual preference for men? Do I want to develop a relationship with another man? Am I gay? Bisexual? Am I more concerned with pleasing Mother than finding true peace and happiness? How can I show up in the world comfortable and confident in my black skin? How can I gain control over my bodily functions?

These are some of the questions I ask myself, as I sit on Dr. Schwartz' comfy couch, pondering the meaning of joy. To find the answer, I need to know what it feels like to be joyous. While I haven't figured out the "secret sauce", I just keep thinking that there must be more to life for me to discover.

I'm reminded of a proverb that says that in order to get something new and different in your life, you've got to be willing to give something up. Although I'm not yet sure what I'd like to acquire, I'm clear about some things I'd like to shed – fear of judgment, self-criticism, doubt. And, maybe if I'm able to unlock the door to the things that are holding me back, I'll find a sense of peace and happiness.

And, if that first question wasn't enough to confound me, Dr. Schwartz has also challenged me to think about what I would do with my life if I weren't afraid? In response to this question, I've got some clear thoughts. Like the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz, I'm seeking courage. If I were courageous, I would never allow myself to be verbally abused by Mother, or anyone else who is critical of my life choices, my race, my preferences, or my intelligence. I would show up in every situation, without a mask, in the skin I'm in. For now, it's just a pipe dream. But, sometimes dreams do come true.