

**Integrity Curriculum**  
**Michelle Ciurea**  
**Beacon Hill Friends Meeting**  
**First Day School 2011-12**

**Lesson 11: Authenticity - ‘Passing,’ part 2**

**Silent worship (5 minutes).** *Begin with 5 minutes of silent worship. Use a candle or other object (like the jar of water with sludge slowly sedimenting down) to help kids center down. Anyone can give a message but doesn’t have to. Adult models this!*

**Snack.** *Lay out snack after worship. Make it available throughout.*

**Quotes** – *keep various integrity quotes on display throughout the lesson without comment.*

*Also display the photos at the end of this lesson plan.*

Who remembers what “passing” is? *(allowing others to believe you are a member of a social group that you are not really a member of).*

Last week we read a story of a Jewish boy who ‘passed’ for German during WWII in order to save his life. For the most part, we felt that what he did was morally OK because he did it to save his life.

Today we will talk about passing along racial lines. We’ll talk about some stories of blacks whose skin and features are so Caucasian-looking that most people believe they are really white. Some of them do indeed spend their lives pretending they are white. And some of them don’t.

**Historical Background**

What could be the advantage of passing as white? During slavery, passing could mean freedom. Many fair-skinned slaves posed as white in order to escape. After the Civil War, Southern whites, wanting to keep the white race as pure and powerful as possible, instituted a rule that anyone with "one drop" of black blood was black. Even though the Civil War had ended slavery, the Southern states passed a series of laws called Jim Crow laws that discriminated against blacks in order to keep them on the lower rungs of society. That spurred even more fair-skinned blacks to cross over and pass for white whenever they could.

In modern times, passing meant being able to vote in the South. It meant a job in the office rather than a job cleaning the office. It meant schools with the latest equipment and books, instead of dilapidated buildings and out-of-date textbooks. It often meant better housing. It meant being treated with respect, not disdain.

The peak period for blacks passing as whites was the first half of the 1900's. During that period (in fact, going as far back as the late 1800's) just who was white or black depended upon what state that person was in. Between the 1890s and 1950s, the peak period for blacks passing as white, every state had its own racial definitions. A person could be born white in one state and be designated black in another depending upon the racial laws in that state.

Then there were the people in-between. Before the Civil War, when there was still slavery, there was another race category besides blacks and whites. These were 'free people of color,' who generally had mixed racial heritage and were born free to free parents. Free people of color could be brown with European features, or light-colored with African features and everything in between. "They were not considered either black or white. Society had an in-between place for them. They were generally in the building trade (carpenters). The women were mostly maids. Some were slave owners, others were staunch abolitionists.

An example of 'free people of color' are Louisiana's Creoles. They had ancestors who were European, Native American and African, and they enjoyed a preferred status no matter what color their complexion. Creole is not a race. It is a blended ethnicity and a blended culture. They were accustomed to freedom, not to slavery. They did not relate to African-Americans who were slaves. However, after the "one drop" rule was instituted and Jim Crow became the law of the land in the South, things changed. Creoles were often called "White Negroes" and many of them cut ties with family members, especially the ones who could not pass. Once these laws were [enacted], passing made more sense, and it became more necessary.

Sometimes blacks used their fair complexion not for personal gain but to change things for the better. For example, there is Walter White, famous NAACP chief executive, who worked for civil rights for African-Americans. His light skin allowed him to investigate lynchings and race riots in the 1920s. This gave him credibility he would not have had if he looked black.

In the 1940s, blacks who looked white helped integrate Lewis Place, a neighborhood in St. Louis. Like many cities during this time, Lewis Place had regulations that prevented blacks from buying homes in certain neighborhoods. But in the '40s, fair-skinned blacks would purchase homes on Lewis Street – letting brokers think they were white -- and then transfer ownership to darker-skinned black people who had actually bought them.

## **People Who Passed**

**Lavinia Ferguson**, a grandmother whose ancestors were German and black, tells a story from the times when there were racial laws on the books. "My mother ... she got an excellent job at the time with the telephone company. She had a beautiful speaking voice. And she won awards and commendations. She was just doing fine. But apparently, someone became aware and made a report. They came in one day and they said, 'Eunice, we've gotten some information here that says you have colored blood. Is this true?' And she said, 'Yes.' And they said, 'Well, you know, in that case, we have to let you go.'"

Until the 1950s and 1960s, Jim Crow laws denied blacks the same jobs, rights and educational opportunities that whites took for granted. But the fair skin that Lavinia's family and others had allowed them to surreptitiously slip across the color borders, or pass. "It was just a way of life," explains Lavinia.

**Thelma Marshall** from Pittsburgh knows that routine. During the 1950s and early '60s, she did what her mother before her had done, as well as her grandmother and aunts. She passed for white. "One time I told a woman I was black "One time I told a woman I was black, colored in those days," Marshall recalled. "She said, 'You won't get the job unless you pass for white.' " So that's what Marshall did. "I passed for white on lots of jobs," she said. "I had to be white to get the jobs." It's what many fair-skinned blacks did during those times.

Marshall's remarks are without shame or remorse. She felt she did what she had to do. Still, it is a prickly subject, and the 76-year-old woman does not want to offend so she asked that her real name not be used.

Marshall never thought to pass permanently, although she had family members who did. Some fair-skinned blacks with "good hair" and keen features did not pass but did "the next best thing" by marrying others with fair skin. This was a way to keep kinky hair out of the family and light complexion in. "For generations, my mother's side and my father's side married fair so they could get jobs," Marshall said. "My great-grandfather had a barbershop, and he passed for white, and he had only white customers in his shop."

But for many fair-skinned blacks, it was about more than getting jobs. There was a mind-set among some, especially the black middle class, that celebrated and sought to preserve their proximity to whiteness. Some social organizations, fraternities and sororities admitted only fair-skinned blacks or those who could pass the "paper bag test," meaning they could be no darker than a brown paper bag.

To this day, Marshall would have preferred that her children marry white or at least very light-skinned people. She says, "All my children married black, much to my regret. I would have preferred they married white. ... It's still an advantage to be white."

**Anatole Broyard** is a more famous case of passing. He was the longtime literary critic for The New York Times newspaper. Born black and raised in black neighborhoods in New Orleans and Brooklyn, he passed for white for decades because he did not want to be labeled as a Negro writer, he had said, but simply a writer. For years, Broyard sidestepped rumors of his ancestry and would credit his skin tone to a very distant relative who may have been black. Even in the last days of his life, his body withered by cancer, he denied his wife's request to tell his children of their true heritage. They met Broyard's darker-skinned sister, Shirley, for the first time at his memorial service in 1990.

**David Matthews** is a 40-year old from Baltimore who is the son of a light-skinned black man and an Israeli mother. Jim Crow laws were long gone by the he was growing up in the 1980s, but he says that in Baltimore, even as a child, he could see that barriers for young blacks were still there.

He says, "You're like 'OK, I can be treated as one of this group, the black kids, who the teachers automatically assume aren't going to do well. They're going to get the minimal amount of attention. But I noticed that the white kids, who are probably only 20-30 percent of the population in the school, got more attention. Teachers assume that they somehow had more on the ball."

Matthews, who walked every day to a school in a primarily white neighborhood, simply chose to be white. "Walking those three blocks, I knew all I needed to know about where I wanted to be. I saw the Volvos as opposed to burned-out Cadillacs [in the driveways in the white end of town]." He began hanging out with friends who were almost all white and Jewish. But when Matthews entered high school, he says girls and their fathers wanted to know his background. "Every girl I dated, the parent's first question was 'What nationality are you?'" Matthews would say his mother was Israeli, but he wouldn't mention his father's race, instead saying he was Presbyterian. He also avoided mentioning which newspaper his dad worked at because he was the editor of the Afro-American newspaper, and that might have given something away.

When his mother returned to her homeland and he was raised by just his dad, things got even more complicated. He couldn't bring most of his friends home. "I think that at that point, I was in such denial," says Matthews. "I didn't know what a treasure I had in my dad. All the things he had been through and the circles he ran in. I mean, my dad was like a star and I didn't know it until I was an adult. I was just in complete denial."

David Matthews' father, Ralph, who is fair-skinned, says he would be highly insulted if anyone suggested he pass as white. "My father's black and my mother was black. That's how they viewed themselves, and I grew up in the black community," says Ralph Matthews. When he discovered his son was passing for white, he says he was puzzled. The father says, "I wasn't going to call him out. And he wasn't, in my view, passing ... He may or may not withhold information. I don't call that passing. I call that, you know, social strategy."

It was not until David Matthews went to the University of Maryland, and a young black movie director named Spike Lee came out with the movie "Do the Right Thing," that Matthews finally realized the rich heritage he was giving up. Matthews, now a 40-year-old screenwriter, describes himself as mixed race.

Some people in the black community may say Matthews was committing cultural betrayal when he chose not to tell society he was black. But Matthews says, "I see it as being efficacious. I did what I had to do in order to get along every day. So, I didn't see it as a betrayal."

**Rabbi Joel Alter** is an example of a different sort of passing. Alter explains, "There's no question that I was passing at the seminary, because I'm gay and I'm at a seminary that won't knowingly ordain gay or lesbian students. So, yeah, I'm passing." Alter, considered a model student at the conservative rabbinical seminary he attended in New York City, knew that honesty would end any chance of becoming a rabbi. He was learning to be a man of God, but deceiving the very same institution, which he adores, which was uncomfortable. "Every single day for five

years I'm thinking, 'OK, I'm done. I have to leave the program. This is crazy,'" remembers Alter. He stayed, and today he is an ordained rabbi. While he still regrets the deception, Alter believes it is the only way to force open closed doors. Even today, the conservative Jewish movement still does not ordain gay men and women.

### **People Who Didn't Pass**

The young unkempt woman still in her pajamas shuffled into her 8 a.m. college psychology class and sat down next to **Barbara Douglass**. "I'm sure glad there are no [blacks] in this class 'cause I can smell them a mile away," the young woman declared. There must be something wrong with your nose," Douglass replied, "because one's sitting right next to you and you can't smell me."

Although Barbara Douglass never told anyone she was white, people see her porcelain skin and her silky hair and assume she is. But Douglass, who lives in Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania is a 62-year-old black woman. She could pass for white but she has never tried, she said.

"Growing up, I knew of people who did, and I was even instructed not to say, at that time, that they were colored. In order to get their jobs, they had to say they were white."

Barbara Douglass recalls the difference between going out with her white college friends vs. her black college friends. "We went to a show, about six of us [black students]. The manager came and sat behind us. I asked him 'Why are you sitting behind us?' He said, 'I have to make sure you don't destroy anything.' "

Douglass said she told the manager that he had never sat behind her before. His response was, "You never came with these people before." Douglass, who the manager had assumed was white, encouraged her friends to leave the theater rather than be insulted.

When she was a young child, her parents didn't emphasize racial differences. "I just figured people came in different shades," she said. But when the subject came up in her dance class, the 8-year-old Douglass approached her mother, who explained to her about race and racism.

"We are a child of God first. We are human beings first," Douglass remembered her mother saying.

In fifth grade, she learned that the United States is a melting pot, and she declared to her mother that she would be a melting pot. Her mother decided it was the perfect definition, seeing as how her ancestors were Cherokee, black, Dutch, German and Irish.

**Dr. Edward Hale**, a retired physician and professor of medicine from Shadyside, PA never sought the advantages of whiteness his complexion could have provided him. Hale, 89, said he followed the example of his father, William J. Hale, founding president of Tennessee State University. Hale had come from a family that had accomplished much by living as black people. His goal was to do the same. "I've always been fond of my dad, loved and adored and respected

my father," Hale said. "He chose to remain black. He got to be a college president." His mother headed up the business department at Tennessee State. She, too, was fair enough to pass, as were his siblings. His sister, who earned a master's in French from Columbia University, married a man who could not pass, Hale said. "But they had a very positive marriage as black, and they lived happily," he added. His brother "used to float back and forth between being white and being black," he said. "He did that for work."

Why didn't Hale? "I chose black because I have a black identity. We had a heritage, and it was something important." His parents emphasized being proud of who he was, excelling at something, making a contribution to society. After getting his bachelor's degree at Tennessee State, he entered Meharry Medical College in Nashville, graduating third in his class in 1945. Two years later, he earned a master's in physiology from the University of Illinois. "As a fair-skinned black, I could pass for white, but you couldn't allow yourself to get to be as outstanding as a white because if you did, people would look into your background," Hale said. When he came to Pittsburgh in 1955 to serve as chief of medicine for the VA Hospital, he knew people would assume he was white. They soon learned differently through his stand on issues and his friendships with other blacks. "I had to make an identity for myself, to let people know who I was," Hale said.

**Attorney Wendell Freeland** remembers a decade or so ago when he and his wife were reading in the newspaper about the fast career rise of a young man who was white. Freeland's wife noted that her husband was smarter than the young man and should have become just as successful. Freeland recalls his daughter saying to him, "You've got nothing to complain about; you could have [lived as] white but you chose not to." Theoretically, yes. Freeland says he can fool even those black people who swear they can detect another black, no matter how fair. But he never considered it. "I never thought about it," said the 78-year-old attorney. "My family ties were so great."

Freeland, who came to Pittsburgh in 1950, grew up in a segregated community in Baltimore. "I learned by the time I went to Howard [University] that I looked different [from most black people]. But I was not different." As a college student, he encountered blacks from the British West Indies and other places who 'passed' to go to the movies or to shop in places where blacks were not welcome. "That was just casual passing," Freeland said. "I knew people who crossed over." He remembers years ago that a high school friend was visiting Pittsburgh and looked him up. Freeland invited the friend to visit him at his office. But the friend did not want to come by until late evening. "I was a Negro, and he was a Negro, and he was passing for white, and he didn't want to be seen with me," Freeland said. "That probably happens to many Negroes who pass, and I don't know how they can stand it."

As obvious as the European portion of his ancestry is, Freeland said it was never a source of great pride or interest to him. "I'm more proud of my great-great-grandmother's manumission [emancipation] papers than any drop of white blood," he said.

"I have to tell you my complexion has certain advantages. I learn a lot about white people by being the only Negro in my group," Freeland said, "though I make it a general rule in certain places to announce that I'm black today because I don't want to hear any off-color stories. It

doesn't bother me if somebody passed and had a life that was more successful and happy than mine. I'm successful and happy, too."

## Discussion Questions

Is 'passing' a betrayal, as some have called it, or is it just 'a social strategy,' as others have said?

Is 'passing' a victimless crime? Does it do harm to anyone? If not, why would it be wrong?

Some say that it was easy for well-educated light-skinned people to take the high road and maintain their black identity. Poor, uneducated folks with the same complexion faced a different reality. "These were people who used their physical appearances because, in many cases, that's all they had," one historian says. "They weren't wealthy. In many cases, they felt this was their greatest, most valuable resource." Are there some circumstances where 'passing' might be morally acceptable? What are they? (for example, is it ok to pass if it's the only way you can get a decent job to support your family?)

Just as in the case of truth-telling, there is a cost to 'passing' and a cost to not 'passing'. What are they?

What are some other ways people can 'pass?' (*e.g. Jews passing for gentiles, gays passing for straight, someone of humble origins passing for rich and/or educated*)

What do all of these ways of 'passing' have in common? (*they are all a matter of power: the powerless masquerading as someone in the power group, in order to get the advantages this confers*).

Does this suggest that powerlessness breeds duplicity? Is it easier to be 'authentic' when you are in a position of power and advantage?

How do people 'pass' in your life? (*e.g. sucking up to teachers to get a good grade or a recommendation, pretending to be someone they're not to get into a certain social clique at school, etc*)

## Sources:

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, "Passing: How posing as white became a choice for many black Americans," by Monica L. Haynes, Sunday, October 26, 2003, [www.post-gazette.com](http://www.post-gazette.com)

"Living A Double Life," by Rome Neal, Feb. 11, 2009, [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-3445\\_162-618820.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-3445_162-618820.html)

(*note: individuals' ages were updated to 2012 to reflect generation they were from*).



Anatole Broyard, literary critic of the New York Times (featured in story)



**Dr. Edward J. Hale, retired physician (featured in story)**





**Barbara Douglass of Wilkinsburg, PA (featured in story)**



**Passing as White: Anita Hemmings 1897, Vassar College alumnae**



The actress pictured above, Fredi Washington, created a storm in Hollywood and was in the film as a black woman who passes for white in *Imitation of Life*. She was considered too 'white' to play maid roles reserved for black actresses, yet she was seen as too 'black' to be a leading lady against a white actor. Refusing to pass for white, she became involved in the civil rights movement

# WHICH IS NEGRO? WHICH IS WHITE?



CHECK YOUR ANSWERS ON CORRECT SIDE OF PAGES ABOVE

- |               |            |               |            |                |            |                |            |
|---------------|------------|---------------|------------|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|
| 1. Negro..... | White..... | 2. Negro..... | White..... | 3. Negro.....  | White..... | 11. Negro..... | White..... |
| 4. Negro..... | White..... | 5. Negro..... | White..... | 12. Negro..... | White..... | 14. Negro..... | White..... |
| 6. Negro..... | White..... | 7. Negro..... | White..... | 13. Negro..... | White..... | 15. Negro..... | White..... |
| 8. Negro..... | White..... | 9. Negro..... | White..... | 14. Negro..... | White..... | 16. Negro..... | White..... |

See Correct Answers On Page 20

Quiz from *Ebony* magazine, April 1952