

The Continuing Saga of Rachel Dolezal

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Not long ago, I wrote a column about Rachel Dolezal, a White woman who believes she is Black. Though both of her parents are White, Dolezal steadfastly maintains that she is Black.

She is in the news again due to her Netflix documentary, *The Rachel Divide*. She is the subject of much animosity and viciousness from many Blacks and White supremacists alike. When she takes her son to a Black barber, she is angrily told to park away from the barber shop. Blacks and Whites on social media abuse her relentlessly. She constantly feels unsafe and fears for her safety and the safety of her Black sons.

Her 13-year-old biological son wisely observes that all of her problems would be over if she would just say she is not Black. Instead, she doubles down and goes so far as to adopt the West African name, Nkechi Amare Diallo.

Dolezal compares being “trans-racial” to being transgender. However, it is a problematic analogy. First, there appears to be a biological basis for many that identify as transgender. Conversely, there is apparently nothing biological about identifying with the social construct of race. Still, it could be that some people identify as transgender mostly or entirely due to cultural, family and social influences.

One of the biggest problems I have had with Dolezal is that, in 2002, she sued historically Black Howard University for discriminating against her because she was a *White* woman. If she is going to switch races when it is in her best interests, this is a perfect example of the White privilege that so many Whites believe does not exist.

What might be the best thing about Dolezal’s case is the way that it makes us wrestle with the concept of race. If a person has just “one drop” of known Black blood, she is Black, and more importantly, treated as such. Conversely, no matter how much White blood a Black person has, or is discovered to have, she is still Black. Make sense?

Dolezal's parents were strict religious fundamentalists. According to the documentary, they thoroughly abused their children in numerous ways. They even went so far as to list "Jesus Christ" as a sort of midwife for their child on the birth certificate!

Dolezal's biological brother allegedly sexually abused her and her adoptive sister. Rachel maintains that her parents regarded her biological brother as a blessing from God. But they evidently saw her as something far less than holy. It seems that the Dolezal household was utterly dysfunctional and confused.

It is one thing to strongly identify with Black culture. However, it is something else entirely to identify *as* a Black person. For example, my late brother (and some of his friends in the martial arts) used to identify strongly with Asian influences. He idolized Bruce Lee, ate with chop sticks, drew and painted pictures with Asian themes, and even changed the spelling of his first name, Jay, to Jae, to make it appear Korean.

Similarly, one of his best African American friends closely identified with Puerto Rican culture. He spoke Spanish and even joined the Coast Guard so that he could be stationed in Puerto Rico, where he became deeply immersed in Puerto Rican life and culture.

However, at no time did my brother or his friend forget that they were African Americans. If Dolezal simply respectfully identified with Black people and Black culture, most Blacks would be flattered and accepting of her. After all, many Blacks have or have had White friends that strongly identify with Black culture. Moreover, many Blacks have embraced White entertainers such as the rappers Eminem and the Beastie Boys, singers Teena Marie and Robin Thicke, and the Average White Band (AWB.) As long as Whites are not guilty of cultural appropriation, "it's all good."

In Dolezal's case, it is still important to go back to her childhood. At one time she was an impressionable girl trying to survive in a dysfunctional household with Black adoptive siblings and allegedly abusive parents. As a teen, she became immersed in Black literature and became more "woke" than a lot of Black people. It is unfair to maintain that she is simply a woman that has the free will to make a

decision to identify as a Black person. There could have been numerous family, social, cultural, educational – and possibly even genetic – forces unbeknown to us that might be responsible for the woman that the girl has become.

Finally, someone in the documentary wisely and respectfully suggested to Dolezal that perhaps she should see a therapist. Why not? Perhaps a good Black psychologist could help her through her identity crisis.

It certainly couldn't hurt, and she can use all the help she can get.