One of my most memorable childhood experiences was Christmas Eve at my grandparent’s house when I was 9 years old.

I vividly recall the smells of authentic Swedish cooking – creamed corn, lefse, meatballs with white gravy, – and (ugh) the ever present smell of lutefisk. It was a tradition every year. But the year when I was 9 was life changing.

Just as I reached to take a helping of potatoes, my grandmother uttered something about the “colored girl” and everyone looked directly at me. “Colored?” I looked on my arms and hands for marker or something on my skin.

My mother promptly wisked me into the bathroom and explained that these people – the people I knew as my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins – were not really related to me. What? That was confusing – but what blew my mind and broke my heart is when she told me that the man I called Daddy wasn’t really my father. Apparently, my real dad was a Puerto Rican from Chicago who ran out on us when I was a baby. “What? Not my Dad? No Way!” How could that be?

He was always there for me. He hugged me when I hurt. Cheered for me when I did well. He was everything a girl could want in
a Daddy. How could he not be mine? I cried endlessly and was completely clueless about what any of it meant.

In time it was revealed to me that being Puerto Rican was something that I should be ashamed of. I didn’t even know what it meant.

The only reference I had was the woman who played Maria on Sesame Street. She was Puerto Rican and her real name was Sonia too.

It was an identity that I was assigned on that fateful Christmas Day when my “grandmother” showed the family how she really felt. The fact that I was (in her words) “not white” was more powerful and important than the fact that he loved my mom and me very much.

I remember overhearing my grandmother talking to my mom as they watched me and my sister play. “Wendy is going to be really successful -- she is so pretty and so smart.”

I thought that meant that I would not amount to anything. Even as a child people would ask me “what are you?” It was a question - but it was really a statement.

I began to believe that I must be an ugly duckling.
That is until one night when I was young parent reading to my toddler boys the same story. A powerful jolt of energy filled my body and my eyes welled up with tears. I wasn’t ugly at all – just in the wrong nest. From that moment I began to channel the pain of rejection to become the best that I could be. To prove them all wrong and succeed not only in spite of them but also because of them.

I continued my quest to understand my identity and my place in the world through my academic studies. The first paper I ever wrote in college was an essay about identity called The Ugly Duckling. At my professor’s urging I submitted it for publication in the local paper and it was published as an op-ed piece! The responses were amazing – and that’s when I learned that I wasn’t alone.

When my dad died two years ago, one of his friends told me that my dad’s biggest regret was that he kept me in heterogeneous environments where I was treated badly because of my identity as a “Hispanic”.

My dad was one of the few people who did not force me into an identity dichotomy. He didn’t care that we were not blood related. He didn’t care that his mother hated the concept of me. He didn’t care that my classmates and neighbors looked down
on us because there was a brown one in the group. All he cared about was that he loved me. And he took such good care of me.

My experiences with bias and exclusion made self-exploration imperative and fueled my passion to do, be, and know more about myself.

I once heard someone say that “true cultural exploration comes from the annoyance of feeling totally lost”.

As Hans Christian Anderson wrote, I am like the Ugly Duckling “no longer a dark, gray bird, ugly and disagreeable to look at, but a graceful and beautiful swan.”