

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF NAOMI WASHINGTON LEAPHEART, PART 2

Naomi:

I had a black upbringing at home, at church, at school. I didn't have any sense that there are people who are not black and who I could be in relationship with. So I got to high school and Cass is organized such that you take a test and then you get tracked essentially. You get placed into a curriculum program. So I was in, I want to say it was called Science and Arts, but it was the Honors AP track. There were other people in Business, there were other people in Pre-Med, so depending on what track you were in, you would go through High School in this cohort with your particular curriculum.

Naomi:

Science and Arts gave me the opportunity to take Honors AP classes but also the music, there was art and so continue to do well rounded as a student of the arts because I had to take those classes. I took Latin as a language, somebody told me that would be useful because if you do something related to Law, Medicine or something of that origin.

Naomi:

I felt very comfortable in my Honors and AP cohort, these were other nerds, who wanted to talk about what I wanted to talk about, who liked to study and that was fun for us. Continued the well roundedness, I was in the academic decathlon, singing in our group, called the [inaudible 00:02:03] Ensemble, the only black in the country. I was continued to be challenged academically just like, in the form of school. This was also the first time I had met people who were sort of, out. Looking back, I know that there were queer folks at the school, people who now, are out but of course, we didn't talk about that, there was never any academics on that. There was never any conversation of it, it just wasn't a thing. It was illegible to the people at my Christian school, that people could be something other than heterosexual, identifying as something according to the gender binary.

Naomi:

In High School, I met Freshman and Sophomores, who were out and we kind of just never talked about it but I so admired their courage to be. Some of them were living in households where one parent was cool and the other was not or neither parent was cool. But they just insisted that while they were at school, they were going to be fully who they are. I rolled with a group of friends who were dorks, who were misfits and who were queer. At school, my faith was less. It was- I was going to say, I didn't bring my faith so much to school. I went to church on Sundays, acted in my church community, but it wasn't according to how I related to other people. Certainly not like K-8, where we were just talking about the Bible together but this was just the way we related. Interestingly, I was able to discover more of myself because I was hanging out with people who were so interesting and had such confidence in who they were that I felt like I could discover parts of myself that didn't have anything to do with the church.

Naomi:

So... I enjoyed High School, I was a teenager so it was all the angst that comes with that. I didn't feel like High School was terrible. I liked High School, I liked my friends, I liked the teachers, who said you could do whatever you wanted to do. You didn't have to do what people had prescribed for you. You could be a musician if you wanted to do that, you can read books all day long. You can do that, yes. I wrote short stories, I wrote music in this group for the first time. It was really my friends who influenced and expanded my imagination about what was possible for me but out there in the world.

Naomi:

I read philosophy and different frameworks for viewing the world, not just the Bible. There are other frameworks and other ways of knowing beyond that and I got that in High School. I really enjoyed High School. I was also part of something called the Mosaic Youth Theater of Detroit when I got to High School. I think its internationally known now but you sign up to either be apart of the singing company or the acting company. The singing company is a well trained choir that goes around singing. The acting company does the writing of screenplays. By the end of the year we come together to put on a musical. The singers singing, the acting parts acting. So I was in that, that was very rigorous. But also, again this was full of great kids, who were out and who were in relationships and so I know that these relationships were critical to my spiritual development because I was beginning to shed some of the anti-LGBT, anti-woman, anti-sex negative, body negative ideologies that I inherited from that religious upbringing.

Monique:

So talk now about I read you chose UPenn because of a revivalist so talk to me about that ultimate choice, when you got there, was it a good thing? Why did you choose Urban Studies as a major among the many things at an Ivy League institution?

Naomi:

I wanted to get away from Detroit, High School had begun to crack open the possibilities in terms of exposure. I wanted to be away from Detroit, I was concerned about the money, I was concerned about being near somewhere. I think probably all the Ivys came to visit my high school and so our guidance counselors would take students out of class to fill a classroom to speak to the representatives.

Naomi:

So I remember getting called out of class to go hear a person from there talk and the person encouraged me to do an interview with an alum who agreed to interview prospective students and the alum was a black woman who was a doctor who lived in Detroit. So I interviewed with the black woman and I can see, I thought, what I want to be like her. That piqued my interest but again I looked at that price tag and I think I knew it was an Ivy League school but I had no sense of what that meant, I just knew Harvard and I knew Yale but I didn't know anything about the other Ivys at all so I put my application in, thinking, I'm not going to get in. So I also put my application in to the University of Michigan because Michigan is a great school. I knew I could get in I thought I could get in to Michigan and that will be my safe choice if I don't get into Penn. And I think I got in. I'm trying to think about the timing. This revivalist came in April so it was either I was waiting to hear back from Penn or I had already heard back that I got in but I had not sent in my \$200 deposit or whatever you are supposed to send in to hold your spot. And this revivalist came to do a week long revival and I saw in the bulletin that he pastored in Philadelphia and I was like "I wonder how close his church is to the school." And I don't know. So I timidly asked him one night after services. I think I had gotten in and I said I got into UPenn and I don't know anything about Penn and the city of Philadelphia and I'm really concerned that I won't have a church home while I'm away. He said "Oh my goodness Congratulations! Penn is 10 blocks from my church so when you get there," he took out something and wrote down a cell phone number and said "When you get there call this number and we will send the van to come and pick you up and take you to church." And that for me was a sign that this is where I'm supposed to be because this person comes to my church in Detroit so there is some degree of approval or relationship with people I trusted. This pastor has already told me to call when I get there and I can come to church and I don't have to find out how this is before Uber

and all that. So that to me was a sign. Then all I needed was the money to be able to go and I got a good financial aid package that was a mixture of loans and work study and scholarship. So it was a real churchy kind of decision to say I think that this is the Holy Spirit.