

IN HER FAMILY'S FOOTSTEPS

Broadcaster Draws Inspiration from Tradition

By Alison Goldstein



Courtesy Timberly Whitfield

Growing up in African villages as the daughter of African American United Methodist missionaries, Timberly Whitfield never wondered what her parents did at work.

Whitfield watched as her parents, unrestrained by cubicle walls, office complexes, or computers, demonstrated proper nutrition, effective farming techniques, and general survival skills to Tanzanians and Nigerians in areas plagued by drought and poverty.

"They went out to help people with whatever they needed. I always make sure people understand that my parents weren't the type of missionaries who proselytized or converted people—they were lay missionaries," Whitfield says.

Perhaps that is why Whitfield, host of the spiritually grounded, human-interest television program "New Morning" on the Hallmark Channel, is wary of defining the nature of her own faith in absolute terms.

Or maybe it's got something to do with the fact that her husband is a Jewish police officer and B'nai B'rith International member, and they are raising their daughter in the Jewish faith.

Regardless of the origin of her self-defined "spiritual, not religious" life philosophy, make no mistake about it: Whitfield refuses to live her life based on anyone's—or anything's—predetermined confines. Drawing on a cadre of experiences that took her from Atlanta to Jerusalem, and from New York to Arusha, Tanzania, and back again, she's forged a distinct set of values and views to guide her life.

Faith and Values

Much of Whitfield's unabashed open-mindedness comes from her early childhood, spent

largely in African villages. Without creature comforts like television in her family home, Whitfield was out and about, either with her parents or her classmates from British or American schools—largely the children of diplomats from all over the world.

She recalls, "I grew up around children of so many different cultures and faith groups—Protestants and Catholics and Muslims and Buddhists—these were my friends. I would go to church with this group, or go to the mosque with this group or this friend, or go to the temple with this person."

When she went to high school, she remembers, "I was religious because of the circumstance. We had to go to church twice on Sunday [at boarding school], and we had devotions every day after our homework."

Once Whitfield came stateside for college, however, she realized the benefit of her diverse upbringing, opting "not to follow such strict [religious] rules" in an effort to be more free-minded around people who were not so open themselves. In a negative experience at a university from which she subsequently transferred, Whitfield, who had already traveled to 22 countries by the age of 13, encountered students who had never left their hometown, where the school was located.

"They would all kind of tease me because they thought I spoke differently and looked differently and dressed differently." Truly encountering culture shock coming from an international upbringing, Whitfield started her sophomore year at Clark College in Atlanta, vowing to always maintain the understanding, open-hearted values her parents instilled in her from a very young age.

Coincidental, then, that Whitfield was approached about hosting a show like "New Morning," where the central themes revolve around being spiritual, accepting all faiths, and maintaining a centered state of being.

As a religions and mass communications major, Whitfield never expected that her skill set could be so well-suited for a job. When she went in for an interview with the producer of the show, Faith and Values Media, and she learned of its mission—"to enrich spiritual life, heal wounds by advocating religious tolerance, and build bridges of understanding among people of



Courtesy Timberly Whitfield

Broadcaster Timberly Whitfield and daughter, Raina, who is being raised Jewish.

faith”—she could not believe her ears.

“On my résumé, I didn’t say I was a religion major. On my résumé, I didn’t say I was a missionary kid, I didn’t say I had grown up in Africa. It was so weird that they almost thought it was a setup,” she says.

Her previous jobs, she explains, were more in entertainment: As a correspondent for A&E’s “Breakfast with the Arts” and co-host of the History Channel’s “Field Trips USA,” Whitfield had put her master’s in journalism from Columbia University to good use.

“New Morning” was, quite simply, the perfect match. Whitfield says she can take lessons of acceptance from the show and put them into practice in her own life, and vice-versa.

She is now able to approach her parents’ missionary work from a new perspective. “On my show, we talk a lot about tikkun olam,” she says. “In very many ways, I think what my parents were doing early on was an active *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world.”

There are many aspects of the show, she notes, that reflect the way she carries herself already. But there are also new ways to challenge her values.

Case in point: Whitfield let a friend fix her up with an Israeli-Iraqi Sephardic Jew. Raised as a Christian Protestant in the United Methodist faith, Whitfield’s biggest issue about the blind date had nothing to do with faith.

“We talked on the phone a lot before our first date [and I found out] he was a cop—a

New York City police officer. I didn’t care about the Jewish part; it was just the cop thing,” she says.

Evidently, Whitfield got past “the cop thing.” Four-and-a-half years after they met, she and Robert Allen were married.

“The Jewish part” was just fine, too.

Although they are raising their daughter, Raina, as a Jew, Whitfield says neither she nor Allen, a longtime B’nai B’rith member, “is religious, but it is important for both of us that she have a foundation.” She proudly explains that Raina attends a Jewish day school where she learns Biblical stories, Hebrew language, and Hebrew songs. Ultimately, as Whitfield recognizes, “Raina will decide whatever [faith] she wants.”

Whitfield assumes that many people would question why she wouldn’t want her daughter to be raised as a Christian. To that, she simply replies, “It didn’t matter [to me] because Jews and Christians share the Old Testament.”

The family even makes regular journeys to Israel—Robert’s mother is Israeli, so they have lots of family there. While hanging out with Robert’s cousins, aunts, and uncles, they can all take in an episode of “New Morning,” which runs in syndication in Israel on the Karma Network.

The network had no idea that Whitfield had such a close connection to Israel when it bought the show. When someone learned of the coincidence, they began talking about doing a special episode on location. ☺

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