



Video Story Transcript

Because I'm Jewish, Doesn't Mean I Have Horns: An Encounter with Anti-Semitism in Appalachia

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeELbNRIWII>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Laura Packer.

When I was in my early teens in the 1970's, I was given an opportunity that many people who grow up in cities never have. I went to visit family friends who lived in the mountains of western North Carolina. It was a welcome respite from the noise, and smell and stifling heat of my Philadelphia home. At my age, I'd never been any place like that. So, when I stepped out of the airplane and found myself in beautiful, green mountains, surrounded by fresh air and bright sunlight, it was like heaven. I stayed with a host family and they treated me like I was one of their own. For the first few years that I went there, I basically was a mother's helper. I helped with the kids, I weeded the garden, I cleaned, I did whatever they needed me to do. And in exchange, I got to be in this beautiful place and spend time with people who really cared about me. I got to learn about a whole new way of living.

As I grew older, the family began to offer me opportunities to explore the world around me and learn a little more about this community. I was in the beginnings of a lifelong fascination with folklore, so this was an incredible opportunity. At the same time that we were exploring and meeting amazing people, I had to confront my own prejudices about what people who live in the mountains are like. All I really knew about Appalachia and life in Appalachia came from television. So, I was probably expecting something of a cross between Hee-Haw and the Grand Ole Opry and some kind of terrible insulting joke. I expected to find people in rags with no shoes and no teeth. I met some people who didn't dress in whole clothing. I met some people

who could have used better dental care, who suffered from the effects of poverty. But I met so many people who were kind. And I count myself very lucky that my liberal parents taught me to be respectful of everyone I meet. So, I hope, at least in my memory, I didn't say anything too embarrassing.

The people I met were healers and cooks. They were knifemakers, and woodworkers, and farmers, and musicians, and dancers, and seamstresses and all kinds of amazing things. At the same time, some of them were doctors, and politicians, and teachers and had real professional careers. All at the same time, they practiced these crafts that they had learned from their families going back for generations. It was an education unlike any other that I'd ever had. I remember to this day and I'm deeply grateful.

Well, every person I met was welcoming. I learned how to spin. I learned how to make jams and jellies. I got to hold spoons that had been carved out of wood just a moment ago. It was amazing. These crafts were essential to their community. And I began to learn something about what it is to be a member of a community where you and what you can do actually has a central value. In the city where I lived, everyone was replaceable. Here, people were not. They had to depend on their neighbors and each other to get through the long winters up in those mountains. One of the last people I was taken to meet was a quilt maker.

We drove up a long path to get to her house, kind of, perched on the edge of a ridge. I remember looking out and the view was astonishing. Her garden tumbled down the mountain in front of us. And there were trees everywhere. And the sky was so blue. This woman looked like she was probably 100 years old. Though, honestly, I expect she was maybe in her 60's. She had long, gray hair that was held back in a braid. Her face was bright with wrinkles from smiling and laughing her whole life. A life spent out, time out in the sun, sun time, in the sunlight. And she invited me into her home to see the quilts that she had made. She told me the names of the patterns; she pointed out the fabrics that she'd used. Saying that, this one came from her husband's shirt or that one she bought at the store, that one was from her quilt, quilt that her grandmother had made that she then repurposed. She told me that she learned to do this from her grandmother and her mother. And she taught her girls. And then she, kind of, sighed and said, "My girls. I don't think they do this no more."

It was a moment suspended in time. And then afterwards we went and sat out on her porch. We looked at the garden. We looked at the sky. We listened to the birds and the sounds; the wind in the trees. And I realized I couldn't hear any cars. The only sounds were the sounds of the natural world and the sounds we made. My host family was nearby and this woman started asking me all kinds of questions about my life. I answered them all as best as I could because it seemed only fair. She'd invited me into her world and now she wanted to know something about mine.

She asked about how old I was. "I'm 13, ma'am."

She asked me if I had any siblings and I told her, "No, I had neither brothers or sisters."

She asked me what grade I was. "I was starting ninth grade."

She asked what I like to do. "I like to read."

She asked me what my parents did for work, what my home was like? All kinds of questions. She asked me where my family was from and I told her, Russia.

And when she looked puzzled, she said, "My family's been here for generations. I don't really know where we came from."

And I suddenly saw her world as so much bigger than mine even though she probably barely left the mountains she grew up on. There was a pause and then she had another question. "What church do you go to?"

"No, ma'am. I don't go to church."

"Well, that's not right. You should go to church. What church do you go to?"

And I said, "Ma'am, I don't go to church. I'm Jewish." There was a long pause.

And then she said, "You can't be Jewish."

"I am."

"But you don't have any horns." If this had been a movie there would have been a cut over the faces of my host family which I'm sure were shocked and stunned. But it wasn't a movie. And honestly, I can't tell you what their response was. I can tell you only that the world was very quiet for a moment. And in that moment, my 13-year-old self gave me a gift that's lasted the rest of my life. I realized that how I reacted mattered. How I responded in that moment. If I responded with dismay or shock or belittled her in any way, it would change the way that she felt about Jews in general, and probably city people as well. But if I responded kindly, maybe we both could learn something from this. So, I said, "Ma'am, I'm sorry but I don't have horns."

"Well, they must have been cut off when you were a baby."

"No ma'am. Jewish people don't have horns." She looked at me skeptically and I said the only thing I could think of, which was, "Would you like to look?"

She got up. She had these long, strong fingers. And I remember noticing a scar on the side of her hand as she raised her hands to my head and began running her fingers through my hair. She stopped at every bump, every scar, parting my hair to look more closely to see what it might be. And when she finally was done she sat down and kind of mumbled something. I don't know what she said. I'm probably just as glad I don't know. I stood up and my host family gathered around me. And I, I thanked her again for her time, and for sharing her quilts with me and for sharing her life with me. And we got in the car and started driving back down the mountain.

The silence in that car was very different from the silence on that porch. We were surrounded by the rumbling of the vehicle but also by the silence that was growing between us, until finally, my host father asked me if I was okay. And I shrugged.

I was... I was confused. I was shocked but I wasn't afraid. I wasn't upset. I was just surprised. I'd read about anti-Semitism but I'd never encountered anything like that. I'd never met someone who made assumptions about who or what I should be based on my beliefs. Or maybe I had and I hadn't known it before. But in that moment, the world had shifted. He told me that he was proud of me for the way I responded. And then the conversation drifted. We talked about her quilts, and the view, and the sky, and what we would have for dinner that night.

We got back to our home and life went on because that's what happens. Life goes on. I wish I could tell you that I've never encountered anti-Semitism since. But that would be a lie and I wish that I could tell you quite honestly that I always responded with as much grace as my 13-year-old self did. But that too, would be a lie. I can tell you that what I learned from that experience. And what has carried me through my life again and again, both when people have asked me foolish questions, and when I have asked something foolish; been

tripped up in my own assumptions, is, I remind myself to be kind. I remind myself that we all have assumptions. We all make mistakes. We all have beliefs that we don't even know might be insulting to someone else. I hope that the next time I find myself in a situation like that, because, of course, there will be a next time, I wish there wouldn't be, that my 13-year-old self will nudge me and will remind me that the first opportunity, the first thing I can do, is to remember that this is a moment of grace.