



Lessons from a Reindeer

When I was a child, of all the Christmas television shows that ran in the month of December, my very favorite was Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer. You know the one—the 1964 musical/animation that would air each Christmas season, with Burl Ives narrating as Sam the Snowman. Oh, I could not wait for that show to come on!

In my footie pajamas, with a bowl of ice cream for dessert, I would sit in front of the television at 8:00 p.m. sharp waiting for my show to begin. I can still feel my uncontained excitement. Looking back, the show really took me on an emotional rollercoaster ride. I remember feeling empathy and sadness when Rudolf was teased about his nose. I felt hopeful when Santa and Clarice, his reindeer girlfriend affirmed Rudolph and his unique nose. I can still hear Rudolph saying of his girlfriend, *"She thinks I'm Cute!"* I felt vindication and elation when Santa asked Rudolph to guide his sleigh. Even then, the story's lesson about being seen was one that resonated to my core.

We can all likely harken back to childhood memories when felt we did not belong. As a young black girl, I went to schools in predominantly white environments, and was often the "only" or part of a minority of black children in a class. To feel unseen, unheard, and undervalued was, sadly, a common experience. Managing microaggression became common place, as I had to explain my hair and the width of my nose, endure teasing about the darkness of my skin, experience being called the "N" word, and told to go back to Africa—although I was born and raised in New Jersey. It was normalized childhood racial trauma that those of us who experienced it, had no words for, but we could always feel. That is why I felt like Rudolph's story was my story—it was one I understood.

Rudolph's story is one of hope. It is about diversity, acceptance and belonging. Rudolph was not seen, accepted, or appreciated by his peers for the one thing that made him different—his unique very shiny, glowing, nose. However, Rudolph's nose was his strength, not his weakness. We know the special ending... Santa made space for Rudolph and invited him to use his unique nose to guide the sleigh. The truth is, we all thrive where we are valued and affirmed. I know I did. As a child I was taught never to dim my light or dull my shine—even when it seemed most difficult. In some way we are all like Rudolph, we want to be seen, accepted and appreciated for who we are, in all of our uniqueness. What we look like, where we come from, how we learn, who we love, what we believe, are some the unique things that make us shine.

As we enter this holiday season, let us keep the lesson of Rudolph in mind—there is value and strength in diversity and acceptance. We should all be encouraged to shine brightly and to make space for others to shine.