Ken and I are both grandfathers. We both come from Brooklyn, both are second-generation Americans. Ken was born in 1940, and I arrived in 1944. He experienced prejudice because he was a Japanese American growing up in an America that sponsored “relocation camps.” I was always a spic, heir to the slurs directed at Puerto Ricans and other Latino immigrants in 1950s New York.

We both managed not only to survive but to achieve the American Dream. After a life of hard work, Ken now lives in a high-end retirement community, while I, the son of a father who never had the chance to learn to read and write, claim one of the most privileged jobs in America: full-tenured professor.

Ken met his wife, Pepa, a first-generation immigrant from war-torn Colombia, in New York. They fell in love, got married, took on two jobs, bought a house in Queens, and successfully reared three children.

Our son Adam married their daughter, and, on November 15, 2005, Jacob Morton Fernandez was born. Look at him and you will see elements of Ken’s handsome face and, at least so far, a head of reddish
hair. He is a fantastic fusion who inextricably combines at least five ethnic heritages: Colombian, French, Irish, Japanese, and Spanish.

Jacob obviously knows nothing of the society he has inherited. But his parents do. To the extent they can, they will protect him from an America that will negatively judge him by his “mixed race” roots; the world is in Jacob’s face, but too many Americans will struggle for positive words to describe him. He has done absolutely nothing to deserve this obscene question: What are you?

Jacob is an all-American fusion. Bad-mouth that boy and you will answer to our family because it is past high time to face it and move on: races do not exist; white people are beige; and if we are ever going to define ourselves by what unites us, we urgently need to snap the chains that bind us in mental slavery.

We can overcome. And I will tell you how: be selfish! If you are unwilling to radically reconfigure American culture for the sake of our grandchild, do it for your own.