

Of Interest

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November/December 2007

What a Difference A Difference Makes

by Liz Ashe

I was cleaning out my attic recently and came across my son's elementary school artwork and his used box of crayons. It's been 20 years since I've looked at his work and I was struck by all the bold bright colors. In one picture, he must have used every crayon in his box of 32.

I thought "wouldn't artwork be dull and boring if we only had one color rather than a different array of them." And similarly, wouldn't the world be dull if we had no differences and only one way of thinking or doing things. Without variety and differences, the world would be quite blah and mediocre.

But sometimes differences can interfere with our interactions with others. Most Americans accept the values of justice, equality and democracy, but in many instances, it's only an ideal. It doesn't always reflect reality. Most folks, (even those who say they aren't prejudiced) have some unconscious biases, stereotypes, beliefs and ways of seeing and judging others.

We are all products of our culture, upbringing, environment and experiences. But regardless of how or when we assimilated our information, woven in the fabric of all our lives is our core values, beliefs and ways of "seeing" the world and categorizing those around us.

Unfortunately, in some instances, there is a connection between our categorizations, biases or stereotypes and how we behave. When we look at people based on these categories and then attach a judgement to them (good, bad, right, wrong), we may treat that person differently. My husband is a brick mason and he tells of the countless times that he was treated differently when he was in a suit and a tie versus his "scrubby work clothes."

We all have a tendency to be most in tune or comfortable with people like ourselves. There seems to be an unwritten rule - the more like me you are or if you do things my way, the more "normal" and okay you are. But the more unlike me you are or if you do the opposite from me, the more "weird or wrong" you are.

We have less experience accepting and or embracing differences. Many of you remember the child's puzzle with the various shapes and a box with cut outs that match the shapes. No one shape, size or color is better than the other is. Once the puzzle is done, all the pieces, mixed up inside, contribute to a larger whole.

People are as different, individual, and unique as all the pieces of the puzzle. We are who we are. Not accepting differences or not understanding or respecting diversity is the same as trying to fit a certain shape into the wrong hole. It won't fit. There is no right or wrong, just different ways of "seeing" and "being."

"We can learn a lot from crayons: some are sharp, some are pretty, some are dull, some have weird names and all are different colors.... but they all exist very nicely in the same box."

Author Unknown.

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Disrespect happens when our feelings or judgments lead to behavior that violates the right of human beings to be different and to have different lifestyles.

Don Imus's (CBS Radio and MSNBC) remarks about the Rutgers women's basketball team cost him his job. He claimed it was a joke that went "way too far." This is a clear message that the game needs to change.

The Game Needs to Change

In today's climate of heightened sensitivity, it seems it has never been easier to offend, insult or violate someone else's "rights" as the rules and laws keep changing. It's almost as if we need a weekly tabloid of things we can and cannot say to avoid offending each other. But we need to continually be sensitive to diversity issues.

The workforce has changed. Because of demographics and increasing global markets, a more and more diverse group of individuals are and will be working together. Because the retirement age keeps increasing, several different generations, (traditionalists, baby boomers, generation x'ers, and millennials) will also be working together. People will have to accept their differences and learn to work with each other.

Anyone can raise diversity issues, but each person must change, not necessarily their thoughts or core values, but their behavior. How you "act" toward others replaces "equality talk" with outcomes i.e. "walking the talk." In other words, it doesn't matter what you feel in your heart of hearts; what matters is what you do or don't do. It is much easier to change behavior than private beliefs and opinions.

We don't have to feel guilty about what we believe but as adults, we do have to be mindful and aware of diversity issues. Once we become aware, the ball is in our court to personally take responsibility for:

- getting new information
- challenging past assumptions
- giving others permission to be who they are without judgement of right or wrong
- behaving in a manner that shows respect for differences.

**If We Can't Talk About It,
We Can't Change It.**

It is unrealistic to expect everyone to understand you or to know how best to interact with you based on your "uniqueness," but one thing is clear; **if we can't talk about it, we can't change it.**

Understanding someone different from you or helping someone understand you requires moving across the lines of boundary which defines that difference. It means communicating with each other and educating each other about diversity, customs and ways of doing things. And if we can keep this basic thought in mind, diversity can be managed.

People deserve respect, not because they are white or of color, Catholic or Protestant, Hispanic, Native American, gay or straight, but because they are human beings. In essence, try treating other folks as if they were you in disguise. How do you want to be treated?

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