

DIVERSITY - A PERSPECTIVE FROM A COLLEGE STUDENT

I worked for some years at Brookfield Zoo in Chicago. On some days special rates would apply, and groups of inner city school children would visit. It was my job to make connections with those students. One day in trying to get a young boy to talk about his goals, I began by asking him to tell me something he would like to do in the future. He said he wanted to see stars. I nodded as if I understood and absently commented on how that seemed like a good goal. I did not think much more about it, not for many years, not until I realized that young boy had taught me a lesson about the real meaning of diversity.

The issue of diversity is currently more mysterious than it has ever been. Diversity used to be, for lack of a better term, black and white. But much has changed; great strides have been made on global and national levels. 150 years have passed since The Thirteenth Amendment became law. Four years ago The United States elected its first African-American President. 50 years ago *Jim Crow* croaked; in the same era, the flames died out on the last cross that was set on fire with the law on its side. These changes and more have been bounding leaps forward, but not without sordid steps of resistance, even today. With this new diversity in the cultural arena comes an undertone of doubt and skepticism which may show the nation's true colors regarding diversity.

But what is Diversity? I will not (refuse is more like it) state the dictionary's definition of diversity, nor will I bother looking it up for myself. To do so would be like looking up the word *person* and expecting it to define me (or you!) with any degree of precision. Imagine a *diverse* photo. Is a picture that includes two white males, one Asian female, an African American couple and a paraplegic student, all appearing to be happy to be together, really an example of diversity? I would say no; that is not a diverse image. Staged diversity for the sake of diversity is not really diversity at all. Yet we are bombarded with such images. And while they symbolize great progress from the days in which only able-bodied whites were deemed suitable to model, I contend these newly familiar "diverse" photographs cripple the true essence of what it means to be a diverse populace. Such photographs do not reflect the real world, the world outside the photo, or more critically, the inside world. Authentic diversity cannot be captured in a photograph, especially not one that tries too hard to "be diverse." Staged diversity is not really diversity at all.

Take a prairie for example; a wide open stretch of land may very well be a monoculture, that is to say, an area in which only one type of flower grows. If there is a meadow entirely filled with blue Iris flowers, planting a single rose in the midst of the Irises will not immediately create a natural and balanced garden of both plants. And taking a picture of that one Rose next to an Iris, as if those two individual plants represented the diversity of the entire prairie, would certainly be a misrepresentation of the landscape. It takes years for the wind to blow and the weather to acclimate the meadow into a dual population, one in which both roses and irises, red and blue, thrive together in balance. But if that balance is our goal for the future, we have to understand the truth of the prairie today so that we can help each plant—each individual rose and iris—thrive.

A more relevant example may be Ripon College, where I am a student. Like many colleges, although we aspire to become more diverse, we remain a predominantly white school. Yet, like all colleges and universities—in fact, like all organizations, be they schools or

corporations—my college tends to display its commitment to diversity by displaying photographs of “diverse” students. A Burmese student was pictured on the cover of a recent newsletter. This student is certainly diverse, I know this from experience. But that experience isn’t carried through the photograph: if the photograph is all we know of her, she is an exemplary model of a diverse student primarily because she does not look like most other students at the college. To me this particular student is diverse not because of her appearance, but because of her singular perspectives, her staunch humor, and her extreme enthusiasm for any project she believes can help other people. A person can’t be distilled in photo, just as a person can’t be condensed into a one-sentence dictionary definition. It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, but these words are always—only-- speculation about what really matters--that which lies outside the margins of the photo and that which hides inside the mind and heart of the person looking at the camera. Pixels will never capture this.

I am not suggesting that a racial or ethnic background has no impact on an individual. On the contrary, the impact can be substantial. But it is never so great as to define the whole of the person. Two native born Wisconsinians with blonde hair and blue eyes can be dramatically diverse, almost wholly different except for their shared appearance. One may aspire to be the next Packers coach; the other may aspire to write the next big Broadway hit. And each of those blond Wisconsinians may share their individual aspirations with people who appear to be different from them, such as an African-American man from Georgia or perhaps a dark-haired Burmese woman. This is diversity. Diversity is not only skin deep.

We must be mindful always to acknowledge that diversity has many levels, and though race may be the most obvious and therefore most encompassing, it is not the only factor; far from it. Statistically, my school is not diverse; but statistics are on the surface, and, like photographs, they do not always tell the whole story. In my travels on our campus I have yet to meet two students who even resemble each other’s personality with any depth. My major is Communication. Last year, I took a class in which each student gave a speech about an issue they cared about to students at a nearby youth center. This was the day I realized that small, private Ripon College is, in fact, diverse. With the exception of one, every student in this class was a white male between the ages of 19 and 20 from the Midwest; yet our speeches—our concerns-- could not have been more different. One spoke of how to cope with the shifting of technology, an issue I could not care less about. Another spoke of the emergence of dangerous weather catastrophes, another on human rights in the third world. I spoke of the trials of animals in captivity and the subconscious cruelty of the institutions that support such practices. Another student, a gambler’s son, spoke of the difficulties of his family life, how he slept in front of the door, protecting his sisters from loan sharks and bookies who sometimes came to collect in the night. This was a diverse battery of speeches from a group of students who would appear, in a photo or demographic statistic, to be virtually identical. We all hailed from the same land, but, as it turned out, we were from different worlds

I truly believe that diversity is all around us. I also believe that the time has come for us to learn to view diversity as something more profound than simply black and white. As a society, we need to evolve past the point of using that reductionist process; as individuals---no matter how we might appear in a photograph—we need to demand to be seen for who we really are both inside and outside the margins.

”Black and white” diversity remains an issue, of course. Racism persists; until it is eradicated, traditional notions of diversity must not be ignored. But we can’t let our focus on the “black and white” blind us from the diversity that is all around us and also within us.

Not long ago, when I was speaking with a Professor about why a transition from an inner-city high school to a private college like Ripon might be difficult for some students, I thought back to the boy I’d once met at Brookfield Zoo, the boy who aspired to see stars. The week before I met him, he and his classmates had visited the famous Adler Planetarium in Chicago; I now realize that the experience must still have been setting heavy on the young boy’s mind when he told me he dreamed of one day seeing stars. My middle class, suburban upbringing blinded me to what he really meant. Not until years later as I spoke with my professor about the profound difference a student would experience in transitioning from an inner-city high school to a small town private college did it hit me: the boy had never seen stars light the night sky. He had seen only the orange glow of polluting light emitted from the towers which dominate the night in his neighborhood. When I met that boy, I was too young to recognize the depths of diversity; I was too inexperienced to appreciate the lesson he was teaching me: not everyone sees the world as I do.

I believe everyone should have the intrinsic and mundane, yet awesome experience of viewing the stars in the night sky. I have looked up at the *stars* on many a cloudless night. I also have seen stickers of *stars* on returned tests in my elementary school days. I have been moved by music created by a rock *star*. I have seen a movie *star* in my local coffee shop, and I’ve knocked my head, which induced me to see *stars* of a kind I hope never to see again. Diversity is a matter of race, of ethnicity, of religion, nationality, gender, sexuality and all the other categories that don’t wholly define any one of us. But to me, true diversity is defined by the type of stars we each have seen, which ones we hope to see, aspire to see, and how intently we plan to look.

Once, I spoke with a boy who had never seen stars. He taught me how to see people.

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