

Celebrating Diversity

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I love the acronym GOD standing for generator of diversity (Edelman, 2006, p. 27). I hold no particular religious affiliation, but my spiritual practices are informed by my atheist-Taoist father, my Buddhist mother, my agnostic sister, Christian, Hindu and other spiritual philosophy held by friends, professors, colleagues, acquaintances that speaks true to my experiences and upholds a high moral standard of being. Diversity is the hallmark of evolution; we need people to be different in order to survive as a species. Differences used to bother me as a young five to seven-year-old child who wanted the world to be perfect. But a perfect world is a dead world; just as a steady heartbeat is a dead heartbeat; it is static and unchanging, unable to adapt to ever-shifting circumstances (Davis, 2011). I wish to celebrate GOD, celebrate diversity. Using the metaphor of visiting a family's house as a guest, feeling cold, and seeing a broken furnace, my reaction could be "I didn't break the furnace so I'll let my host deal with it" or "I noticed your furnace is broken, could I suggest we fix it together?" (Lund in 407 seminar, January 16, 2012). Perhaps after the furnace is fixed, it is overturned too hot to overcompensate for the cold. Hopefully, a balance just right will be monitored, just as the tiny adjustments in your steering left and right keeps your vehicle in the middle of the road. As a left-handed, second generation Chinese-Canadian pre-service teacher, I am committed to creating stories, lesson plans and classroom communities which celebrate diversity, promote equity and give insight into the perspectives of those who have not traditionally been represented in a positive light. The process of writing such stories has given me much to ponder, much to research, many mistakes made and many insights gained. With his consent, I hereby introduce you to Zy.

I met Zy nine years ago. He introduced himself to me as a rambunctious boy, the younger brother to a princess named Ria. I never intended for Zy to be a protagonist at all, but

there was something intriguing about his situation being locked up behind palace walls, so I set about getting to know his family and origins. Zy, turned out to be Ria's adopted illegitimate half-brother and had an intersex condition much like his blood father. Growing up watching Japanese cartoons among other life experiences, I have always been intrigued by the concept of androgyny and the evolution of sex. I was familiar with cross-dressing characters in cartoons, but they were never the main character and were always played for laughs. With a desire to be "original", I cast Zy into the role of main character. Having done so, I did my research to discover some very sad truths about real people who did not fit the gender binary. This drove me to delve even deeper into the subject, because I wanted the story to be more realistic, to speak to real people trying to solve real problems not fixable by the wave of a magic wand. I realized later, how sensitive the subject is and how much I have hurt Zy with my ignorance, poking jokes at him that were not very funny and rather demeaning from his point of view. We used to fight a lot, perhaps due to our shared immaturity at fourteen. Due to the nature of publishing my work on the web in a digital community, Zy and his kin have opted to remain in stealth whenever possible, but when the condition does come to light, as it often does with his potential in-laws, I see that he is repeatedly asked by every other commentator: "Is Zy a boy or a girl? What's inbetween his legs? How does he/she have sex?" To which Zy usually answers, "It's none of your damn business."

No one is entitled to that private information. The only exception is his girlfriend, who understandably, deserves to be enlightened sooner or later. The first time I heard this type of question asked, I thought it was no big deal, since I have asked those questions of Zy myself, but I can see that having to answer it again and again and again, it gets rather tiresome and the reminder that you are different can be excruciatingly painful. You really do wonder, stepping into his shoes, why do people care and why are they so ignorant? It is because socialization,

prejudice, discrimination, privilege and oppression often work under a coat of invisibility. It appears the way things are today have always been this way. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) write, "the norms of our culture are most often invisible until they are violated," and Zy violates that norm, which dictates every baby is born either clearly one sex or the other so society knows how to treat them accordingly (p. 17). As a clearly cisgendered female person, I have the privilege of being perceived to be female without being interrogated or blatantly ignored due to my gender identity as I navigate my way in public, on transit, in stores and social gatherings.

Privilege and prejudice are knives that cuts both ways; positive or negative, "they are always unfair" (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012; Lund in 407 seminar, January 16, 2012). For example, if left-handed people are superior to right-handed people in terms of creativity or intelligence or balance, then that puts right-handed people at a "disadvantage." While I may have a positive prejudice/stereotype for being left-handed, it still does not change the fact left-handed people are a minority and live in a world of tools, appliances, equipment and other objects designed for right-handed people. Right-handed persons do not take any notice because they do not need to—the oppression is invisible. Their worldview lacks this layer of prejudice and discrimination, so they "hold a common assumption that others share [their] worldview" (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012). Righties may remark that left-handed people are too sensitive to their condition despite seeing reminders, once in a little while, watching a leftie look around for a left-handed seating position in a lecture hall or table to avoid bumping elbows or scrounging around for a left-handed bow in archery or a left-handed glove in baseball, or a left-handed guitar, yet still think to themselves, "I just see people as human" and I don't discriminate (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012, p. xxiv, 14).

Being left-handed, I truly appreciate and am grateful that society accepts and celebrates left-handedness, rather than treat it as the work of the Devil or a sign of a witch. Today, when people see I am left-handed, they say "Oh you're so smart and creative! You use both sides of your brain." It is not seen as a "disability." Had I been born three centuries earlier in Europe, I may have been executed for witchcraft because two right-handed persons giving birth to a left-handed child could only be the work of Satan. Willingly or unwillingly, I was possessed by Evil because I chose my left hand over my right. I am reminded of being left-handed whenever I walk into a restaurant and move my utensils to the left for my convenience, but at least I do not have to fear for my life. For Zy, when people find out, his condition is not celebrated. Instead it is usually met with confusion, along the lines of "well you have to be one or the other so choose!" The concept of being neither or a bit of both is unimaginable for a binary gendered world and the persons in it. If he is unlucky, then he very well could be in physical danger if he is "outed." If I could give him a world that celebrated androgyny, then that would put heavily "masculine" or heavily "feminine" people at a disadvantage for being so "extreme." After all, who wants to be seen as a solitary, unfeeling, giant, monstrous, hairy, primal brute or a lovely, emotional, tiny, delicate, needy, weak flower?

Preconceived notions—prejudice—we hold about other people based on the groups they appear to fit into are formed from past experiences and tints our view of new inputs, influencing our actions, prompting us to discriminate intentionally or unintentionally. Prejudice cannot be separated from socialization because "neurons that fire together wire together" (Edelman, 2006, p. 21, 55); connotation and meaning are acquired via context during the act of perception. The human brain automatically files away implicit associations from our surroundings, giving us socio-cultural notions such as what constitutes ideal beauty, racial stereotypes and gender roles,

which were conceived by our predecessors. They arise from the act of perception—of seeing particular pictures or hearing particular remarks in particular contexts over and over and over. Those are the neural connections that light up when the visual-audio input reaches our cortex, whether we want them to or not. Socialization and prejudice can be teased out through an Implicit Association Test and the reactions can change if people are presented and reminded with strong examples that are exceptions to the rule (Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 42-43).

As Weasel-Bear-Johnson said, every person, aboriginal or of a different background, wants to feel "validated, valued, visible and have voice," through positive representations of themselves in media, education and the world we share (403 plenary, January 17, 2012). As a second generation Chinese-Canadian (or CanAsian) growing up in the 1990s, I am grateful for the privilege of being seen as the "smartest" minority, or the most "artistic/musical" minority, especially with the knowledge that Chinese immigrants in Canada were not always seen that way a century ago. Fresh off the boat (FOB) was used in my father's generation as an insult, conjuring images of broken English, but for my younger sister's generation, being FOB was a source of pride in the sense that one has not lost their heritage despite being born in English-speaking Alberta. These racial stereotypes continue to take on new meanings as each generation negotiates what it means to have a racial identity (Sudra, 2009). For example, I like being seen as a "kung-fu fighter" but not a "cat and dog eater," despite my pride of frugality in Chinese culture. We have the reputation for eating everything and buying cheap things because we have been historically poor (while the Emperor was very rich). No matter how bleak history has been in any nation, educators can choose to highlight the achievements made and frame issues as current, living, work-in-progress problems that students can participate in imagining solutions for.

Everyone is unique and beautiful on their own lifelong learning journey and intersecting identities. In a sense, it is GOD's will. We are interrelated, interconnected and interdependent. What separates our consciousness is the message sent to our brains by our skin receptors (Ramachandran, 2009). If I accept that socialization and prejudice cannot be avoided and have deep implications on what I feel to be cultural norms, then I need to examine whether or not I agree with certain current, ubiquitous associations, or whether I want to embody the change I want to see in the world and contribute to creating new associations and new contexts in which to battle associations which are harmful and hurtful to members of my human family. Part of my role as an educator is to provide an alternate socialization, to critique and interrogate the perpetuation of an unequal normalcy. I believe a world of equity is achievable when diversity is reason enough to celebrate.

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