

Christi Bruchok
Community Literacy and Intercultural Communication
76-378 Flower
May 10, 2000
Intercultural Inquiry

Hiding the Flaw

Is it okay to be different? I think almost anyone would immediately answer “yes” to this question, especially in this day and age. But what “kinds” of different is it okay to be? In general, society seems to accept people of different religions, race, and sexual orientations. People are free to express themselves in any way they wish; someone can dye their hair neon colors or get body piercings, and that is okay. Someone can show passion for academia, or be the master of the bodyshop, and that is fine too. If Joe or Jane Smith were approached on the street and asked, “Do you think any of these people are weird, or that they should be treated differently?” they would naturally answer, “Of course not.” However, if no one thinks anyone is strange, this should imply that there are no outcasts, and everyone receives equal respect from everyone else. In theory it sounds really good, but clearly this is not reality.

It is true that everyone is different, but when one person has a difference that makes him the minority in a group, it is common for that individual to receive unbearable amounts of torment and ridicule, particularly during childhood. I am going to make the claim that no child likes to be teased or left out. In these situations, there is literally nothing the child can do to change that element which makes him different from the rest. He cannot change the color of his skin, his physical handicap, his mental challenge, his speech impediment, or his inherited appearance. So what is this poor alienated child to do? In this instance, it is certainly not okay to be different. To some degree, everyone wants to fit in with the norm; to be accepted by peers, and to not stand out as a freak.

Children who stand out as different have a propensity to try and mask their difference and try to “fit in.” They have to come to terms with their differentiating characteristic on some degree. In this inquiry I am going to deal with the issue of what these children do to “deal” with their differences. The way in which they overcome being an “outcast” becomes incorporated into almost every aspect of what they do, and in a sense, eventually defines who they are. Thus, it is an issue that is extremely personal to each individual and his or her dilemma, but some of the underlying concepts are similar. First, I will describe what it was like for me to grow up as a legally blind student in a small suburban school district. This will show my insight into the topic, demonstrate my passion in inquiring about this, and set up a real example of what one might do in my situation. Then I will portray scenarios about different kinds of “abnormalities” and children might have, and propose some options and outcomes they might take to overcome standing out.

My story – A Physical Disability:

I was born with severe myopia and strabismus. This caused a condition called nystagmus, an uncontrollable shaking of the optic nerve. As an infant I had surgery to correct the muscles in my eyes in order that they would move simultaneously. I got glasses at six months to correct the myopia, but there is nothing that can be done about the nystagmus. If the eyes never stop shaking, it is impossible to focus on anything. So, although I had very thick glasses, I was still considered to be blind.

I was very popular in nursery school, and not so far from it in kindergarten. It must be somewhere around second grade when kids develop a sense of “cool” versus “geek.” As a first-grader, I will never forget the day when a second grade girl marched up to me on the playground and called me “four eyes.” No one had marked me as such

before, and the words stung like venom. From that moment, I knew that it was not acceptable to be blind. I just had to figure out how to be able to “see.”

I have never been able to read the blackboard, not even from the front row. Teachers often came up with the brilliant solution that I should just walk up to the board and copy down the information by standing in front of a room full of peers who would undoubtedly make fun of me. I was never a fan of that idea, so I came up with my own plan. I wrote down what they said out loud, and either raised my hand later for assistance, or copied a friend’s notes after class. My solution also had loopholes. Sometimes when I raised my hand, the teacher instructed me to get up and copy it from the board. That was the embarrassment I tried to avoid in the first place. Copying a friend’s notes only worked if I had friends in that class. Even if I did, reduplicating someone else’s notes is never as effective as taking my own notes. Copying what the teacher says out loud is only efficient if the teacher says anything out loud. Upper level math and science classes really started to present a dilemma in that respect.

Reading books and papers was another problem I had to overcome. If I had my nose practically touching the pages, it was an open welcome for ridicule. In elementary school I was given large print books which were enormous and heavy. I resented that they marked me as different, and managed to convince my intermediate unit instructors that I could read regular print. This decision came back to bite me whenever I was asked to read out loud, because the plain truth was that I really could not read regular type with any ease.

By the time I got to middle school almost the entire class enjoyed mocking my disability. I refused to wear glasses. Even after an eye injury when I could not wear my contacts, I preferred to walk around completely in a fog that to wear those coke bottles. By the time I got to high school, I had figured out a fairly successful way of projecting the image of being a fully sighted person. This was my way of fitting in with the world

around me, to not stand out as an object to be taunted. All children with an alienating difference spend their primary years learning how to cope with being unlike their peers and trying to understand why they are different. So many of them, like me, find it socially easier to pretend they do not have this “flaw,” even though this makes most ordinary endeavors more difficult. These children must always be conscious of whether they have an “audience” at any given time.

Image is one of the central motivations for teens. Trying to project an image of being of a characteristic that is not inherent is an engagement known as passing. This was popular among the black community in the early part of the twentieth century when African-Americans were not considered socially acceptable. Nella Larsen wrote a novella called *Passing* speaks to this exact issue. Light-skinned black women would pass as some other ethnicity that was accepted by the social elite in order to be allowed into certain restaurants or parties. A central character in the story was a black woman with an exceptionally pale complexion who passed as being white in order to marry into a better life. She wore ivory powder to lighten her skin even more, and had to be extremely conscientious at every moment to not mingle with the black community, particularly if she felt she was being watched.

In this next section, I am going to discuss the issue of being black or white at the “wrong time,” and how some people handle these situations. I am first going to speak of a friend of mine who moved to my school during the most pivotal moment of adolescence. As I’ve described from my story, the students at my school were very narrow-minded and thoroughly enjoyed making fun of people for things that were beyond anyone’s control. Coupled with this issue, my town was almost all white, and she was not. I will then speak of my experience in working as a mentor in the Community Literacy Center, and what I noticed of a few of the teens there. Racial issues have

extremely different meanings in a multicultural, inner-city high school than they do in a suburban, upper-middle class white high school.

Black and White:

Jwan moved to Southern Lehigh in the sixth grade. Her parents had recently divorced, and her mom decided to take her daughters away from the city life in Florida and bring them to the suburbia of Eastern Pennsylvania. Southern Lehigh consisted of predominantly white, upper-middle class families. Jwan was half black.

It's hard enough for a child to move to a new school, and it's a pretty tough adjustment starting middle school. Jwan also had to get used to living in a quiet little town in a whole new part of the country. If this combination wasn't bad enough, she needed to figure out a way to deal with being the only nonwhite student in her class. She had never been put in that situation before, and it made her feel awkward and out of place.

There was no way Jwan wanted to become part of the woodwork – it's natural for kids to want friends. But she couldn't change the color of her skin. To compensate, she took on the role of the class clown. Her bubbly personality rewarded her with a lot of attention. She would joke with teachers and classmates alike. But the novelty of an entertainer only lasted for a brief period.

By high school she had come up with a new method of fitting in. She straightened her hair and dyed it with blonde highlights. Since she was only half black, her skin wasn't that dark. She took to becoming a groupie of the Backstreet Boys, a white, mainstream band. Her attempts to project a white image were indeed successful.

Now that she is in college, her role has reversed. She goes to Temple University in Philadelphia, and lives in the Franklin Housing Projects in the inner city. Now that she

is in a multicultural setting, rooms with black women, and is dating someone who is also half-black, she has altered her image. She now projects herself as a black woman, speaking black vernacular and calling herself a “yellow-skinned beauty.”

In my experience working at the Community Literacy Center on the North Side of Pittsburgh, I noticed some interesting details that speak to the idea of conforming to not stand out. John was the only white teen in our mentoring group. Not only was he a minority in that respect, but he was also small and really enjoyed school. It seems he should have been a target for open ridicule. But it didn't appear that the kids treated him in a disrespectful manner on any level. One argument could be made that since inner city schools are so diverse, they truly are colorblind. But I will argue that children tend not to really be blind of anything, although they can learn to be pretty fast. This was likely to not have been the first time John found himself as a minority, so he probably had to come up with techniques for handling these situations long ago. From what I witnessed, there was no tension between him and the other teens, but he didn't seem to become “friends” with any of them either. During our pizza dinner, he chose an empty table and sat by himself filling out surveys instead of sitting with the others and socializing. Thus, it appears that on one level, he didn't feel like an outcast, but on another, he didn't feel he exactly “fit in” either.

What observations I made I found particularly striking. There seems to be a lot of information to support my theory that children find methods to make themselves fit in with the crowd. Even on a small scale, people tend to change certain beliefs or opinions of people based on the views of their friends, or the crowd of which they wish to become a part. In the next section of the paper, I will turn to a life story discussed by Keith

Gilyard about the shock he initially felt when he was forced into a room full of white people for the first time.

PS 149:

“I didn’t feel very humored, though, when he ushered me into Class 1-1 and exposed me to a room full of White kids”(Gilyard, 43). In Keith Gilyard’s book *Voices of the Self*, he remembers what it was like to move from the Bronx to Long Island. His initial reaction to being in the minority was clearly one of fear. There was a black girl in the class, but he felt she was more like them. “It’s like they were trying to stare me back out of the room”(Gilyard, 43).

So Keith put up his defense mechanisms. In his old neighborhood, no one had ever called him Raymond before, although it was his first name, and he felt that it sounded very important. He introduced himself to this class as Raymond, to try to fit in more. He began his performance, projecting a certain image to the white community, while another to his family. “Be a Raymond, a brother, a son, a Keith, a son, a Raymond, a son, a brother. Keep juggling and save myself”(Gilyard, 43). This is the kind of role playing that speaks to my thesis. We try to portray the image of what we need to be to feel comfortable with a given group of people.

In Conclusion:

Nobody likes to feel left out. When people are born with disabilities, abnormalities, genetic obesity, or if they belong to a religion or ethnic group different from everyone around them, they need to find a way to cope with this situation. When the “problem” exists from birth, people begin the process at a young age. It is often

initiated by playground teasing or hazing that makes the individuals feel victimized and outcast.

To overcome the problem of feeling like a social reject, people take on roles. The image one portrays can disguise the differentiating characteristic in a way that will make the perpetrators of torment see past the difference, or see the different individual as part of the crowd. Whether the person is blind and pretending to see, black and pretending to be white, or anything else, the issue remains the same.

So is it okay to be different? I would venture to say that, in the primary years of life, it is only okay to be different if the difference is understood and socially acceptable. Children don't understand much of anything yet, so anyone who is different is mocked and alienated from the group. To be accepted, these children do whatever they can to hide their "flaw." As a result, the way they go about doing daily tasks revolves around who is watching, and what image needs to be demonstrated at that moment.

Works Cited

Gilyard, Keith. The Voices of the Self. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

Johnson, Jwan. Email Interview. 6 May 2000.

"Passing", An Intimation of Things Distant: The Collected Fiction of Nella Larsen. Doubleday: New York, 1989.