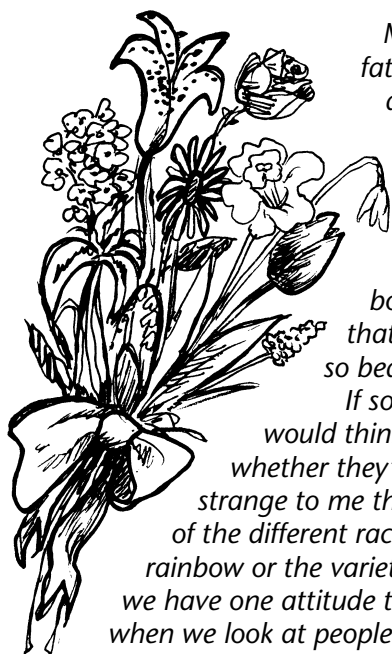


## Chapter 30

# Diversity: The Beauty of Differences



*My mother is African-American and my father is White. My great-grandfather was Irish and his wife was Native-American. I have one aunt who is Japanese, and one aunt who is Puerto Rican. I call my family the 'Rainbow Family.' When we have family reunions, there are so many shades of color that it really does remind me of a rainbow. And what I like best about rainbows is that it's not just one color that makes a rainbow so beautiful, but the combination of all the colors. If someone said that they hated rainbows, you would think they were crazy. Everyone loves rainbows, whether they're from China, Africa or America. What is strange to me though, is why we don't recognize the beauty of the different races the way that we appreciate the colors in a rainbow or the variety of flowers in a beautiful bouquet. Why do we have one attitude towards nature and then change the rules when we look at people? To me, this seems hypocritical.*

*It's not always easy being of mixed races. As I became older, people started asking me what race I was. I didn't know what to say because I'm not only Black and I'm not only White. So one day I asked my mother, "Mom, what race am I?" She told me that I'm from the 'Love race' because it was my father's love and her love that created me, not their skin color. She advised me not to allow other people to define my identity by race—even if they're adults, because adults have their hang-ups too.*

*Her explanation not only made me feel proud of who I am, but it also made a lot of sense to me, so that's what I tell people now: "I'm from the Love race and love is colorblind."*

*Sure, I still get pressured to fit into other people's cookie-cutter images. Sometimes people only see the part of me that they can relate to. When I hang out with some of my Black friends, the White kids criticize me. And when I hang out with my White friends, some of the Black kids say that I'm trying to be "too White." Sometimes I feel that I don't belong anywhere. Some of my bi-racial friends feel the need to change their behavior, depending on which group they're hanging out with but I think this is a waste of time. If people don't like or respect me for who I am, then I don't want to be friends with people who are like that. It's pretty lame if someone doesn't want to listen to good music just because the singers are Black, White or Latino. Good music is good music regardless of what color the musicians are.*

*Everyone knows how cruel kids can be, especially in middle school and high school. Sometimes kids make fun of me, calling me "Oreo," "half-breed" or "mutt."*

*Even though their nasty and cruel words will never break me, it does hurt my feelings. No one likes to be mistreated, especially when it's for something that you have absolutely no control over and it has nothing to do with who you are as a person. The name-calling used to really bother me and sometimes I would go home in tears. But my struggle to understand who I really am inside gave me a stronger sense of myself and made me a more compassionate person. Since I know how much it hurts to be misunderstood and rejected, I determined that I would never be the kind of person that mistreats other people, no matter who they are. Now that I'm more confident and secure with who I am, people leave me alone.*

*I realized that most kids want you to be like them and so they can't accept the part of you or your family that isn't what they are. This is small-minded and we will never bring about a peaceful community, or better yet, a peaceful world if we continue to think like this. These are the toxic thoughts and emotions that wars are made of. So I say that we better wake up and realize that we are the ones who must decide how things go—we will just cause a lot of suffering and cheat ourselves if we don't change our attitude towards people who are different than ourselves. It begins right here and now—not in our 20s and 30s.*

*Even though my family and relatives are of different races and from different cultures, we all love each other and respect each other. My Japanese aunt cooks food that is really different than what I'm used to but her dishes are delicious! She taught me how to make Sushi. And my*

*Puerto Rican aunt is a great dancer. Whenever she dances, everyone else sits down. I learned how to do 'Salsa' dancing watching her. My Polish grandfather is so funny and he's a great storyteller. He has a story for every occasion and they're all true, from his own life experience.*

*I am so grateful that I was born into a very mixed family because it helps me to love and appreciate all kinds of people. That's why I choose to have friends of all races. Perhaps that's the solution to racism. Maybe we should all get married to people of different races and nationalities. Then eventually, there won't be any color lines. Everyone will be from the Love race. If my relatives can live as a loving family even though we're all different races, then I know that it's possible for the world to live in harmony as well.*

*Mina, 16*

## What is Racism?

Racism is the assumption that some people are better, or deserve to have more rights than others, or are more important, based on their racial background. Racism is just one way of drawing a line between people. Racism has been a serious and historical problem in the United States. Have you ever experienced racism, or seen someone else experience it? Try to imagine what you would do if you witnessed one of these situations:

- ☞ *A Mexican boy answers a question in class and some of the students laugh because he has a strong accent.*
- ☞ *A Jewish boy is teased in the cafeteria because he wears a yarmulke (a small hat that covers the top of his head).*
- ☞ *You are discussing China in your history class and one of the other students makes a rude comment about the way Chinese people look and lots of people laugh.*

The sting of racism hurts so much because people are rejecting something a person cannot change—himself. And yet at the same time, someone who is acting racist is making a judgment about another person without knowing anything about that person, but rather judging him or her by the way they look. As one ninth-grader put it:

*You have to get to know someone before you judge them. The color of their skin or their culture doesn't matter. Know someone before you say*

*something about him. If you don't know the person, don't say anything because you may hurt their feelings or make a big mistake.*

*Taysha, 14*

When someone is making judgments based on how a person looks, or what ethnic group that person is from, not only is his behavior damaging to that person, but he also hurts himself. Little by little he is making his world very small by accepting only those people who are most like him, and by cutting other people out.

## Colorblind?



When a group of ninth-graders were asked if they felt the world would be a more peaceful place to live if we humans were colorblind, or rather, could not see each others' race, they said "no." At first some of the students thought it would be a good idea, as it would make it harder for people to judge others based on skin color. But after a bit of discussion, the students felt that people can come up with dozens of ways to artificially decide who is valuable and who is a second-class citizen. Racism is just one of them—perhaps the most obvious one.

The students said that people might be seen as different or strange for many reasons. They felt that sometimes people were treated differently because they were physically handicapped, or because they dressed a certain way, or somehow did not fit in with the crowd. One student said,

*People are always going to be different, and I think that people just need to get over the fact that everyone is not the same, and that is almost always for the better.*

*Ashley, 14*

So, instead of denying our cultures and racial backgrounds, we can all benefit from the richness of living in a society that is so full of people from different countries and different shades of skin. We could look at our country as a giant painting full of vibrant

colors, instead of being a flat painting with just a few colors. These colors represent the differences between us culturally and racially, and represent the beauty of combining all variations of people. So, which is more exciting, and more beautiful—the painting full of color, or the painting with one color? When David, a high school student, was asked if he would like to go to a racially mixed school, this is what he told us:

*I would prefer to go to a school with many different races because you can learn a lot from people who may come from a slightly different place, instead of sticking to your own ideas all the time. You shouldn't get like: this is my idea, and I'm right and you're wrong and that's it. You can see and try to understand where different people came from and why they are the way they are.*

David, 14

## Living Up to Cultural Values

What do we, as a culture, value? Some of our values are remarkable. Many people come to the United States to escape persecution in their own country, or to find better opportunities. Why would people do this? What do we have to offer? Let's take a look at a few of our society's values:

- ☉ *All people are created equal.*
- ☉ *All people have the right to freedom of speech, religion, and expression (just to name a few).*
- ☉ *Our government is ruled "by the people, for the people."*
- ☉ *Each individual person is valuable, as are his or her thoughts and ideas.*

These values speak of respect towards others, acceptance and working together for the greater good. America is often called the "Melting Pot" because so many different people have come here from around the world to live. So, on the one hand, we have a richness in our citizenship that few other countries have, and on the other hand, we have to take a look at how we treat each other, and if we are true to the values of respect and equality that we claim. The Constitution doesn't say, "*All men are created equal except for the ones that we are afraid of because we really don't understand them.*" Or "*Our government is ruled by the people who we agree with and for the people who we hang out with.*" Or "*each individual is valuable, according to the color of their skin, or their cultural background.*" In reality, no one would be very proud to live in a coun-

try that stated these things.

In the past, individuals and groups of people have fought, even sacrificing their lives, to establish these basic human rights and cultural values that are founded upon certain universal principles. As a result, doors have been opened that once were closed. But it is not time to celebrate our progress just yet. Now it is your turn to uphold these principles and expand these values in order to create a better America and a better world for us all. How can we do this? Here are some suggestions to start you off:

☉ *Speak up:* If you hear someone making racial or cultural jokes about people, speak up and let them know that it is not okay to talk about people in such a blind and damaging way. You may ask people: Do you really believe that you are better than those people? Do you even know anyone that is Polish (White, Black, Chinese, Hispanic...)? How would you feel if someone said those kinds of things about you without bothering to get to know you at all?

☉ *Expand your social circle:* If you find that you only hang out with people who are just like you, and that you don't know much about people outside of your social group, take a chance and try to expand your friendships. You may find that you have a lot more in common with someone of another race or culture than you thought. You may also learn new traditions or listen to new ideas that you otherwise would not have known about. Variety is the spice of life.

☉ *Question yourself:* Listen to yourself, and ask yourself: how am I making judgments about other people? Am I judging people based on their character or am I making assumptions about people based on what I think they may be all about? How much do I really know about a person before I decide what my opinion is about that person? Do I feel that all people are valuable and deserve to be treated with respect?



*The biggest problem is that racism starts with something small, and that is just a little bit of closed mindedness, and then it grows, and may even become accepted, and then it is a big thing, and soon none of us are respecting each other.*

Erica, 14

## Who We Are on the Inside

The African-American author and evangelist, Joseph Jennings, who got fed-up with a life of crime and violence and turned himself around, recalls two experiences he had in high school—one with his counselor and one with his shop teacher.

*I'll never forget it, as I sat down the guy looked up at me and said, "Joseph, you're wasting your time. There's no sense in your taking any pre-college courses, because you'll never be college material. Not you."*

*I sat there for a moment.*

*I couldn't believe what this man had told me. First of all, he really didn't know that much about me. He assumed that I had no potential because I was poor, black and had a reputation for being a fighter.*

*He had given up on me in advance.*

*Maybe one reason (I hadn't given up on myself) was because of my shop teacher. His name was Mr. William Baldwin. While in his class, I had developed a reputation as an at-risk student: violent, cussin', playing and always getting myself and others into trouble. One day I was walking down the hallway and he came up behind me and placed his hand on my shoulder.*

*"Joe," he said. I turned around and he looked me straight in my eye and said, "Joe you know... there's something special about you. One day you're going to be somebody important." And he squeezed my shoulder. What did he see in me?*

*...Mr. Baldwin was a very silent man. His effect on me changed me more than any gun-toting drug dealer and hustler I ever knew. It was not that he was so powerful, but he used a powerful tool—more powerful than any tool in the shop class. He used the powerful tool of loving and caring and listening—putting a piece of his life into respecting others for who they are on the inside.*

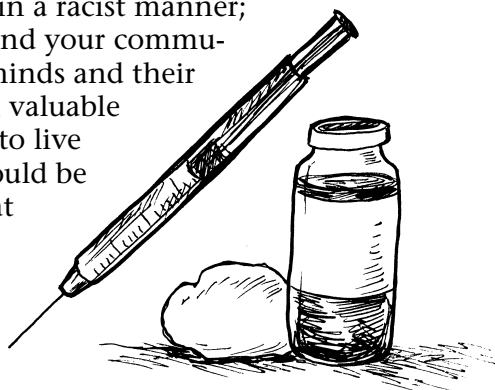
*Excerpt from Joseph Jennings' Life Story: Prisoner of the American Dream*

Joseph's experiences with these two people were pretty powerful. What is the difference between them? One of them, his shop teacher, was able to see beyond the exterior. One of them, his counselor, was limited by his assumptions about Joseph and, in a

way, encouraged Joseph to accept these limitations himself. It is so easy to put people into little boxes where we think they belong. It is much harder to see people beneath the surface, looking at them through the eyes of respect—but doing so can make all the difference in the world.

## How Is It Up To Us?

Racism can only exist if we tolerate and accept it. If it is not supported, and people do not buy into the act of judging others superficially, it cannot continue. It is like a disease. When a vaccine is discovered for a disease and everyone is vaccinated, the disease no longer becomes a threat to people's health. You can't get a disease that has been whipped out by a good cure. So what is the cure for racism? The cure for racism is not to tolerate it. There are many ways of showing intolerance of racism: demonstrating a respectful attitude towards all people; speaking up when people are behaving or speaking in a racist manner; helping to educate your friends and your community so they too can open their minds and their hearts to the truth that we are all valuable and equal. If everyone were able to live like this, the disease of racism would be cured, and people would find that they live in a more diverse and interesting world. So, in reality, it's really up to us whether or not we are going to allow racism to exist.



## Journal

Imagine that you have an older brother, he is 25. He has just become engaged to marry a young woman of another race. How do you think your family would react? Do you think that it would make any difference to family members that his future wife was of another race? How would you feel about it? Do you have any family members of various races?



## To Do

1. Imagine that you and your partner have five minutes to present a speech to a school that is having serious racial




problems. The title of your speech is, “The Cure.” Outline for the students how you think they can best overcome racial problems, and how to implement these ideas in their daily life at school.

2. Go to the library and find information about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. When you think you have enough information, answer the questions below and discuss them with your class: *Who was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? Why was he so famous? Explain his non-violent approach to social change. What difficulties did he suffer through in his life? If he were here today what advice do you think that he would give to your class about overcoming racial issues? Why do you think his message was so powerful?*
3. As a class, go to the web site: <http://www.hrusa.org>. At this web site you will find the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. With your teacher read through the first 10 articles. Here are some questions for discussion:
  - How many of these articles have anything to do with race?
  - Do you think that all people have the right to live with respect and equal treatment (in all countries of the world)?
  - Do you feel that all of these articles are followed in your country?
  - If you could add any articles to this declaration, what would you add?
  - If you had to make five articles of your own, governing how people treat each other around the world, what would your articles be?

## Key Ideas

- ⊗ All people are created equal, and all people deserve to be treated with respect.
- ⊗ The cure for racial problems is respect towards other people and intolerance of racist ideas.





Like snowflakes, each person is unique,  
and yet, when we join together,  
we can blanket the world in peace.