

DIFFERENCES

The world is full of different kinds of people. I think it is called diversity. Unfortunately, most people do not want much to do with people different from themselves. As the song in West Side Story goes, “stick to your own kind.” Most of the world’s wars seem to stem from hostility to “the other.” But what is strange, is that we are all different.

I love it when there are two sayings which everyone repeats, and which are contradictory, like “the more, the merrier,” and “too many cooks spoil the broth.” With regard to differences: “opposites attract,” and “birds of a feather stick together.” So which is it? It is whatever you want it to be to support your position.

There are a great many different kinds of differences: racial, religious, national. These are the ones that lead to trouble when one racial, religious or national group feels it is superior to another racial, religious or national group; or feels threatened by another etc.

Then there are different kinds of differences within the different racial, religious and national groups. These may also lead to trouble: geographic, mental ability, physical ability, mechanical ability, gender, age, language.

So how do we deal with all these differences so that we may have “a shenere un besere velt,” a beautiful and better world; a world of peace and prosperity, and love. Where people will see the best in one another, where we will love our neighbor as ourselves, and be kind to the stranger, where we will beat our swords into ploughshares, where the lion will lie down with the lamb etc.

The last few observations come from the bible, and there are those who say religion is the cause of much of the war and hatred in the world today. My religion is the true religion. You will not go to heaven continuing to worship your religion. Even within the same religion, there are disputes that lead to wars. There are those who are still trying to convert others to “their” religion.

Religion is something that people made up. They believed there was a god, or lots of gods, and attributed all kinds of power to their god or gods, and they trusted in their god, and believed that other people’s gods were not the true god. And they figured out how to worship their god, and over the years or centuries or millennia, they revised their ways of worshipping, but they still insisted that their god was the true god.

However, race was something that people did not make up. It was self-evident. Even more self-evident than all people being created equal. Some people had lighter skins than others. And the people who had the lightest skin, thought that they were superior to people who had darker skin. There was a time in ancient days, that one group would fight another group, and the victorious group made slaves of the losers. More recently, when the inhabitants of Europe, who had white skin, headed south and discovered the inhabitants of the continent of Africa, who had darker skin, they enslaved them, declaring them inferior.

About the same time, some of the inhabitants of Europe, heading west, discovered the inhabitants of the Americas who also had dark skin, but not as dark as the inhabitants of Africa. Rather than enslaving them, they killed them.

7-15-14

When I sat down at the computer, I had intended to explore the differences among people in their skills, talents, aptitudes. Why are some people smarter than other people; more musical, more artistic, more mechanical, more inventive, more athletic, more gentle, more aggressive. Looks like we are back exploring heredity versus environment. Recently, there was a discussion about talent versus practice in becoming an outstanding musician. Apparently the answer to the question, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" is not "practice." Either you have it or you don't. And if you don't have it, all the practice in the world will not get you there; at least not as a world-class "talent."

Another expression: success is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration, or was that 1% and 99%? Whatever the ratio is, it contradicts the idea that you either have it or you don't. It does not necessarily follow that if you "have it," you will be a success. With regard to success, being lucky plays a big role. Another expression: "I'd rather be lucky than good." Being at the right place at the right time. Knowing the right people. Being born to the right family. Being born on the right continent and in the right century. Going to the right school. Having the opportunity to learn what it is you are going to be good at. You may have the potential of being the greatest scientist, artist, ball player, chef etc., but if you are not exposed to the discipline, your talent will mean nothing. Thinking about my parents, it occurred to me that if they did not come to America, and I was born in Eastern Europe, our lives would have been very different.

7-16-14

America is supposed to be a land of immigrants. It wasn't a thousand years ago. I have no idea how different groups of the first peoples related to one another, but I am afraid that they might not have lived in harmony. Did the Choctaw have cordial relations with the Chippewa? Did the Chippewa get along with the Iriquois? Was everyone invited to the Algonquin round table? Who was the last of the Mohegans, and what happened to the rest of them? There must have been a lot of fighting if part of their ritual was smoking "the pipe of peace." Why is it that the most common artifacts associated with native peoples are arrowheads. (Found any, lately?) I am afraid that bows and arrows were not only used for hunting animals. If we are to believe the movies, almost every people in Europe, fighting one another a thousand years ago, fought with bows and arrows, and spears, and axes, and knives and swords. Until the invention of gun powder. I read somewhere that it wasn't guns that wiped out most of the Indians that were wiped out in the 18th century; it was disease. The Native Americans did not have immunity to European diseases, and the generous Americans gave them smallpox-infected blankets

that really did a job on them. And let us not forget Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act. Go west, young braves. The Americans will provide you with your very own Indian Territory. (Indian Removal sounds like Urban Renewal, which we used to call Negro Removal.)

Getting back to guns, they also did a job on those who did not have them, and it made them less diverse. You have to admit, it made the white people superior. However, I believe I read somewhere that gun powder was invented by the Chinese, and Marco Polo brought it back from the mysterious Orient. I also read somewhere that the Chinese discovered the Western Hemisphere about the same time that the Vikings did, but neither was as enterprising as the Spanish, the English, the French and the Dutch.. The Spanish Conquistadores worked over the Mayans, the Incas and the Aztecs, and the English and the French took care of the native peoples north of the border, even though there was no border.

You can write a book about what was done to the darker skinned peoples of the Western Hemisphere, and several people have. I am not going to even attempt writing a couple paragraphs about it. I simply want to observe that the Incas and Aztecs had a much older civilization than their conquerers. They knew astronomy, mathematics, architecture, art and anatomy. (They certainly knew where the heart was located.) There is a one-liner that the Jews, two thousand years ago, were so advanced, they already had diabetes while the English were still swinging from the trees. The same can be said for the peoples south of the border, if there was a border. Still, the Europeans believed they were on a mission to civilize the inhabitants of the western hemisphere, convert them to Christianity, and pick up some gold in the process.

So what happened to them? Their societies and religions were destroyed, many were killed in battle, and many more died of European diseases, like their northern brothers. Many Spanish conquistadors intermarried with the native peoples, others returned home, married and brought their Spanish brides back, priding themselves on their lighter skin. Today, light or dark skinned, if they come to the US and are poor, they are called "spics" and illegals, and some Americans of European heritage will want to "send them back where they came from."

Having grown up in New York, with a large Puerto Rican population, the Newyoricans I knew, were citizens. In fact, my Assemblyman was Jose Torres, and his son, Frank, was my friend. But they were part of the Puerto Rican community that came before World War II. They were like the German Jews who came to the US before the great influx of Eastern European Jews from the 1890s until the early 1920s. In my junior high school class, there were several Puerto Rican kids who were the equal academically of the majority Jewish student body. What we did not have were black kids. True, Johnny Burgos, and Mousy Caballero were not the best students, but Armand Escobar was as bright as anyone of us.

7-17-14

When we graduated in 1942, discrimination was taken for granted. Colleges had quotas to keep certain groups out, usually Jews. But some colleges and universities did not want other groups as well, like Catholics and blacks. As usual, the Jews were getting too numerous by the '20s, in the Ivy Leagues, so someone came up with a lovely Latin term, "numerus clausus," closed number. It was occasionally tied the group's percentage in the population. If you are 5% of the community, you should not be 35% of the student body. For blacks, some schools utilized "numerus null." They wanted nothing to do with diversity.

Today, schools are trying to find a formula to get certain groups in. It is called "affirmative action." After society has excluded minorities from the benefits of an inclusive community, to make up for it, society has to act affirmatively to include those groups that had previously been discriminated against. In addition, it is argued that it is to the advantage of the institution to have a diverse population, so it should be race conscious in order to achieve diversity.

I may have written about this before, but it fits in here, so here goes. It was 1963, and I was the Education Director of the Amalgamated Laundry Workers Joint Board. The union's manager, Louis Simon, wanted to set up a scholarship fund for children of union members. The membership was largely female, black and Puerto Rican. They were low-paid, despite the union. They did the hard, dirty, stinking work. The highest paid work was done by men, majority white, the laundry drivers. They were also the driving force that created the union in the '30s. (unintended pun.)

The union was clearly integrated. And male dominated. The manager was white, the assistant manager was black. When Mr. Simon asked me to create The Louis Simon Scholarship Fund, an exciting undertaking, I looked around to find a model. (There was no Google.) I checked with Workers Education Local 189, and learned that there were several such programs, including one run by my old union, the ILGWU. To be fair, and to avoid charges of favoritism, I learned that the scholarships were awarded solely on the basis of the applicants' SAT scores. I could have done that too, but I was pretty sure that if that were the case, all the scholarships would go to the children of the white laundry drivers.

What yardstick should we use to select the scholarship winners? Unfortunately, I can't find any material about the scholarship among my papers, but I am pretty sure I came up with the following: 1. The applicant had to be accepted to either a two year or four year college. (No acceptance, no scholarship.) 2. The applicant had to submit his/her high school record, and three letters of recommendation. 3. The applicant had to describe some form of community service in which they participated. 4. The applicant had to write an essay about career goals. (What I want to be when I grow up.)

I then identified a distinguished panel of application reviewers. Among them were civil rights and community leaders, a national union official, and an employer association representative. (The employers were sharing in the cost of the four scholarships to be

awarded, which I believe was \$500 a year for four years.) We publicized the scholarship program throughout the shops, the Business Agents distributed application forms, and in June 1964, the first scholarships were awarded. If I remember correctly, it worked out just as I hoped. Two young men, and two young women; two black, one Hispanic and one white. All right out of central casting. As diverse as you can get when drawing from a pool of laundry workers' children..

This is an early example of affirmative action, as far as I am concerned. It recognized that it would be unfair to those children who grew up in poverty, in homes without books or intellectual stimulation, who attended inferior, de facto segregated schools, to compete solely on the basis of test scores. I therefore introduced other factors, equally important in measuring an individual's potential for them to succeed in school, and in making a contribution to their community and to society. The children of our white members did not grow up in the lap of luxury, but they did not face all the obstacles that the children of our minority members did.

For many years, as a staff member of the US Civil Rights Commission, I was deeply troubled by what I saw as a distortion and a misuse of affirmative action: the small percentage of middle class blacks were reaping the benefits of affirmative action. Companies (and institutions of higher education) that wanted to conform to the law, recruited from among this pool, looking especially for two-fers—both minority and female. As far as I was concerned, the poor white children of Appalachia, and rural America were as much in need of affirmative action as poor black and Hispanic children. They grew up in poverty, in homes without books or intellectual stimulation, and attended inferior schools. The difference was that they did not have the stigma of race or national origin.

7-18-14

It is assumed that young people today are less prejudiced than previous generations. Some attribute it to the end of de jure segregation, thanks to *Brown v. Board of Education*, and to the passage of civil rights legislation. Also, the opportunity for minorities to make their mark in various fields: film, sports, literature, theatre, art, music etc.

I grew up in a Jewish community in the Bronx where my Jewish neighbors, who had experienced anti-Semitism, and were watching with growing horror, the rise of Nazism, opposed segregation and the treatment of black Americans. They opposed all forms of discrimination. Some racists insisted that Jews were using the blacks as their foils so that they would benefit if America ended discrimination. Some blacks were anti-Semitic and saw the Jews as their exploiters, their landlords, their bosses, the owners of the neighborhood store which overcharged them. As a resident of the Bronx, I was a Yankee fan, and I watched with mixed feelings as many of my friends became Brooklyn Dodger fans when Jackie Robinson was hired by Branch Rickey. It was commendable. It was a statement of support for this pioneer effort to bring black ballplayers into the major

leagues. It was similar to my cousins in Astoria who rooted for the Detroit Tigers because of Hank Greenberg.