



LET'S RID OUR MINDS OF RACIAL PREJUDICES

My parents grew up labeled as “blacks,” rejected by most white people based solely on their complexion. While they instilled in me a deep sense of pride, respect and compassion, they also unknowingly passed on a deep resentment. It wasn't until I worked at the Mayor's Youthline — a database of resources for Boston youth — that I realized I had been contributing to the same racial tensions that my parents had endured.

It happened to be the only minority on staff that summer. Surviving 40 hours a week with people who have traditionally treated my family as inferior seemed impossible. I was afraid and alone. Yet I was convinced that I had to be an exceptional representation of a minority. I demanded absolute respect and fairness.

I analyzed every word my coworkers said, trying to detect a hint of unjust contempt. If one said, “I like blue ink better than black ink,” or “Print this on white paper,” or “Get the one in the white package,” I immediately thought, What's wrong with black? Did black ink remind them of black people? Did they want things just because they were white?

“By rejecting her because of her background, I was committing the same crimes that my parents had been victims of. I was so afraid of being judged, that I didn't realize I was judging everyone else around me.”

I knew my parents were right when Nicole, one of the white girls, said to me, “Hey, Shari, do you want to go get some fried chicken for lunch? I know a really good soul food place.” How could she say that? How dare she say that? She was trying to make fun of me by inviting me to eat “black people” food. I had enough.

“Why, because I'm black?” I snarled at her through fierce eyes. When my eyes met hers they revealed the pain of my assumption. How could I be so foolish? She asked me because she thought it would be nice to go have lunch and she liked soul food. By rejecting her because of her background, I was committing the same crimes that my parents had been victims of. I was so afraid of being judged, that I didn't realize I was judging everyone else around me.

I had to change my way of thinking. This task is by no means an easy one, but I have discovered the benefits are worth it. I stepped out of my comfort zone, relaxed my guard and eased my barriers. I am no longer distracted by thoughts of possible prejudice as I work, study, socialize and train with people of different backgrounds. I've made new friends and discovered musical genres I never knew about. I even ate at a new soul food place.

I have made this change in myself, but I cannot act alone. Dr. King, Rosa Parks and the civil rights pioneers paved the way, but now it is up to us to continue their work. I challenge you to join me in making a change within ourselves. Let's be committed to suffocating prejudice by not giving it breath in our thoughts, actions or words.

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