
Diversity is not about lumping people into groups
Published: Sunday, April 30, 2006

Teaching students to embrace cultural diversity and educating society about cultural differences appears to be a lofty goal. But we need to take a good look at the downside before we continue to rush wildly toward embracing (and subtly enforcing) cultural differences.

Culture is not a color, and assumptions made on that basis are condescending at best, and racist at worst. Expecting us to fit into the narrow confines of this "other" culture might, ironically, keep us in our place, rather than clearing the path toward progress.

My color may provide a diversity of skin color in Eugene, but a predictable set of ideas and perspectives doesn't necessarily come with it.

We should all be free to keep what we want from our upbringing or "culture" and discard what doesn't ring true for us individually.

Instead, we're asking the impossible of today's minority children. We tell them they are just as good as the majority race, but that they belong to a different culture than the one that obviously holds the reins. When minorities try to immerse themselves in this larger culture, they're told they are not being "true" to "their" heritage! My husband gets no such censure for not adopting German habits and culture.

But that's supposed to be OK, because whites operate outside such restrictions. There is no such thing as a "white" culture. After all, whites are multifaceted, unlike blacks, who supposedly act and think alike.

I remember how a friend of my husband's, an average Eugene white liberal, responded when I told him I wasn't a fan of gospel music. "You're rebelling against your past," he told me.

I replied that I hadn't heard much gospel music growing up, so I couldn't possibly be rebelling against my past. My family played music by black artists, but it was jazz and black folk rather than gospel. Am I less black because I don't love every form of black music? He certainly isn't expected to love all forms of music created by white musicians.

Similarly, my daughter was amused when some white acquaintances commented that she "didn't seem very black." After all, she didn't really resemble the black women in movies and music videos!

Apparently some people think we can't feel good about ourselves unless we embrace everything about all other blacks. Whites aren't expected to feel the same way about other whites. Only true white bigots such as neo-Nazis accuse other whites of not being true to their race.

It's hard to buck this trend. In many quarters, there is tremendous pressure for blacks to come to the same conclusions regarding current events and public policy. To veer away from these prescribed ways of thinking isn't easy. In today's polarized community, anyone who expresses an opinion not in keeping with the conventional liberal (or conservative) view is promptly demonized.

It's not just white liberals or neo-conservatives who insist on defining us so narrowly. Black people do it to each other. Too often we accept a narrow definition of what it means to be black, and enforce these notions within our own community.

For instance, inner-city black kids still complain of being taunted for studying hard, speaking standard English, and excelling at school. They are accused of "acting white." The fact that they think they are merely taking the necessary steps to succeed in society is ignored.

My daughter recently took some college classes where much emphasis was placed on the "black experience in America."

She was informed by her white instructor that blacks face overwhelming prejudice wherever they go, and that they spend a great deal of time thinking and worrying about it. She was surprised to hear this, because it doesn't jibe with her own experience.

"I raised my hand and told her (the instructor) this wasn't true for me and my family. She said I was in denial," my daughter complained.

That's scary. That's real racism. Everybody of a certain race must think the same way, or else their thinking is incorrect? Excuse me? We are individuals, our experiences are individual, and the way we perceive and process those experiences are individual.

When people are afraid to voice their true opinions about racial issues because of a fear of being called a racist (if white), or a sell-out (if minority), the chance for open, constructive conversation is limited. Not many people are brave enough to risk being called derogatory names.

We need to welcome diversity of thought as well as diversity of skin color. Self-censorship is just as bad as censorship by law. We need to listen to all kinds of ideas if we believe what we say about welcoming diversity. If we're afraid to think or express certain thoughts, many useful ideas will never be put on the table. Social conformity in the name of diversity is likely to slow down, rather than lead to, equality.

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