

DIFFERENT

I sometimes forget what it is like to be different. Different in a way over which I have no control, different in a way that some eyes and minds will always use to define me as not one of them, but as *that* type. I spend most of my life in their world and feel that it is just as rightfully my world, our world. And many ways, I do belong with them. I think like them; I take special note when I encounter someone who is not one of us. Then something reminds me, neither am I.

On a recent Saturday, I jumped off the bus at Davis Square and, like a veteran Boston pedestrian, paid no attention to the traffic light. The coast was clear from both directions – so I thought. As I made it halfway across College Avenue, a beat up red car whipped around the corner. I froze, then took a quick step back. The driver slowed, and the moment of danger was gone. But the scene played on. The driver rolled down his window and glared at me.

“Can’t you read? Stupid gook!”

I blinked my eyes, then watched the car zoom away. No one else heard him, and perhaps anyone who saw the both of us quickly forgot, merely one more close encounter of pedestrian and car on the crazy streets of Boston. I gathered myself and scurried across the avenue, saying nothing. My first thought was, “Hmmp – the guy can’t even get his ethnic slurs right.”

But as the words sunk in, I was surprised by how deeply they dug, how long they lingered, and how much they hurt. I don’t remember how long ago it had been since these words had been directed at me. So long ago that I considered them to be no longer a part of my world. Yet here they were, one unsettling incident that made me remember and made me think about other people. People who hear these words every day, people who know that they are different, who know that they will always be *that* type no matter how they speak or dress or how much money they have. If one ignorant remark can affect me so deeply, how does it feel to have it part of your daily life?

I grew up with soy sauce but also ketchup. I grew up with stories of Hong Kong and Peking, but also of Bunker Hill and Gettysburg. I grew up rooting for Taiwan in the Little League World Series, but also for the Yankees in October. And while I realized that that made me different, I came to think that everyone was slightly different, so that made everyone the same in the end. As I got older, I began to regard my being different as merely one field in a demographic database, one box in one column to check off in a form with many columns: yes, I’m Chinese; I’m also male, lefthanded, child of suburbia, wayward Catholic, youngest sibling, near sighted.

In adult life, I am surrounded by people who know better than to act unenlightened, who have been trained to think that maybe I am one of them, after all. What's more, I have learned to take advantage of my differentness. In social settings, I can tell jokes and use the exaggerated accents that no one else would offer in my presence. In the business world, I am part of a "disadvantaged" group meriting extra consideration when competing with the white establishment. I am the model that all other people who are different should copy. In the same way that smart people or tall people are different, in my world – our world – different is a path to better.

So, if I can do it – if others who are different in the same way that I am different can do it – why is being different still such an overriding issue for some? Why don't they brush aside the insults and indignities? Why don't they take advantage of being different?

Then I remember my encounter on a recent Saturday in Davis Square. I wonder how I would handle the continual reminders of being different. I imagine that I would be wary, defensive, even bitter about the hand dealt to me. We may be more civil than we had been in years and decades past, and more people may be trying harder to look past the differences. But the struggle is far from over.

I sometimes forget what it is like to be different. It is good – if also stinging – to be reminded.

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