



All Those Isms

I hate racism, sexism, ageism, lookism. I hate them because they make life more limited and not nearly as interesting or as much fun. I also hate them because they are hurtful and wrong.

These isms are issues that everyone says we need to talk about, but when we try to talk, it just gets worse. Being the foolhardy person I am, here goes:

The first thing we humans need to recognize if we are going to address prejudice is the fear of the other. That fear is pretty hardwired. I was fortunate enough to have a mother who was drawn to the different and she passed that on to her children. However, birds of a feather generally do flock together, and I am still thrilled to run into an Irish Catholic from St. Louis, and, now anyone from Beaufort.

Fortunately, our society is more and more diverse in every way, and research shows us that the younger generations do not distinguish the differences based on physical traits such as sex or ethnic background in the same way as their parents did. Each generation becomes more open, mainly because they deal with each other on a daily basis.

The second thing we need to recognize if we are going to address prejudice, is that there is more than one kind.

The first, a hard-wired hatred for another group based on nothing but one's own sense of

inferiority or fear, is dreadful and can only be overcome through years of social conditioning and the constant message that it is a lower way of viewing one's fellow humans. This is a totally un-cool way of thinking.

Many count on laws to smite these bad attitudes, but, although laws have opened up some roads to equality, human nature can't be legislated. If it could, men would always put the seat down.

The second kind of prejudice, a distaste for a group based on experience or knowledge of them, is actually way more complicated. I call it "postjudice."

For example, if I am an average white parent with an average white kid and most of the Asian kids in our school are leaving my kid in the dirt, that might make me less loving of Asians. This is not fair and not right, but it is understandable.

If I am a smart parent, I will take a look at exactly what it is that these other families are doing to help their kids excel, decide whether that is something I want for my family and kid, and make adjustments in line with my goals. I could also develop the thought that it is a fine thing that we have a group of kids who excel in areas that will eventually lead to the betterment of all of our lives.

Now, before you go getting your knickers in a twist, I am not saying that all Asian kids are smarter than the average white kid. I am sure there are some dumb Asian kids, but school records indicate that Asian kids are doing better in school. I also know that in my neighborhood in NJ, which is predominately Asian, recent immigrants are working their tails off, thriving, and putting my work ethic to shame.

As long as we are talking about Asians (and I am closely related to a whole tribe of Vietnamese and a lone Pilipino) don't you find it interesting that a group of people that is composed of such an enormous diversity of background – Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Malaysian, Pilipino, etc. – is referred to as one group and we don't have marches and rioting over that? When you consider that we put Japanese-Americans in concentration camps on US soil in the 1940's, and few people ever even hear about that, it boggles the mind. I am beginning to think that Asians don't waste energy caring about what other people think about them.

Postjudice invades our lives. If two blonde women in a row dump a fellow, he is likely to be suspicious of blondes.

When I see a very heavy person headed toward the seat next to me on an airplane, it upsets me that I don't want them to sit next to me because it will be uncomfortable. I know that from experience, and I am postjudiced. My heart breaks for them, but I don't want them in my airplane neighborhood because they will make my life much harder while they are there. On the other hand, if that person looks me in the eye and says, "I'm sorry, I know I am taking up extra space" I melt, and the discomfort is more than bearable. In other words, if you or your group is the one causing discomfort, if you acknowledge that, you create communication, which leads to understanding.

My favorite ethnic heritage is Italian. This is totally based on postjudice. I have met a couple I didn't like, but, generally, their authenticity, humor, zest for life, and food, thrill me. As for my own group, Irish Catholic, they started out with a bonus because they were what I knew the best. However, when I moved to Boston and witnessed some of the variety within that group, I was less enamored.

So, we are all prejudiced and postjudiced. What can we do about it?

We, as individuals, can check our attitudes and be sure we aren't making stupid judgments about other individuals or groups. We, as individuals or groups, can make sure we aren't endorsing or excusing uncivil, hostile, unproductive, or threatening behavior toward others. We can be sure not to make excuses for bad behavior. We can concentrate on being the best we can be and not worry about whether other groups think we are wonderful or not. We can open our hearts to others and not assume that they are prejudiced. We can open our minds to others and understand why they might be postjudiced.

Bottom line: In our call to "have a conversation about isms" we have to open our ears, minds and hearts. If a person criticizes your tribe or a member of your tribe, you have to be open to considering if it is prejudice or postjudice. You have to be open to accept that a person who criticizes your tribe may be heartbroken to see the behavior they criticize. You have to be open to understand it doesn't mean they hate you or your tribe. You have to be open to accept that the other person is sincere in wanting to help.

Too often we see people who do not think like prejudiced people, talk like prejudiced people, or act like prejudiced people, rejected because the “other” insists that no one outside of their group can understand and is therefore the enemy. This is very effective in pushing a good-hearted person into a corner. This makes it more difficult for a good-hearted person to avoid cynicism. This makes it more difficult for a good-hearted person to avoid becoming postjudiced.

When fighting against prejudice of any kind, it is useful to ask yourself if you are merely indulging your special feeling of being put upon or if you are acting in a way that will move you closer to your goal. Keep your eye on the goal and involve as many people as you can, through honest and open attention to their point of view, in reaching it. You will be surprised how quickly things can move.