

### Raising Up White Boys?

I suppose I first noticed them in college, those boys who acted as if the world and everyone in it was created precisely for their use. They moved through life with a kind of single-minded self-devotion that made the problems of others recede far into the distance, ultimately to fade completely from their concern. I had to admire the way they approached everything with a pervasive confidence that seemed unshakable.

But there was another side to them that was less admirable. The source of their self-confidence was a narrowness of outlook and perspective that defined as relevant only those others most like themselves. This did not emanate from a sense of superiority; that would have required at least some recognition that those who were unlike themselves, men of color or women, for instance, were even moving about on the same plane. And the way they acted, although blameworthy, could not be attributed to them any more than routine breathing could. The way they were was, simply, the way they were.

What to do with these boys? How to keep them in check? Well, for a number of years it has seemed reasonable to place them in positions of leadership where their behavior is very public. Here, their slender views might allow them to pursue goals of a certain sort, and at the very least their moves might be monitored. They could even be taught to give the appearance of being open to diverse people and ideas. Moreover, their natural propensities would cause them to attract others like themselves and so function like a giant societal dustbuster gathering up their tiresome lot and assembling them into a kind of legion of the narrow. If you have ever been in a meeting dominated by these boys, often in Washington or an executive suite, certainly at many scientific meetings, you know what I mean.

But my concern is less about these big boys, and more about my own small ones. As the father of white boys I have often wondered how best to raise them up in a world where diversity, if not always comprehended, is increasingly the reality. How can I help them learn not only to understand but also to appreciate truly those who are quite different from themselves in conditions, values, attitudes, and perspectives? Moreover, how can I help

them reach beyond themselves in this way while they are also in the vulnerable position of forming their own outlook? And, how can I help them when I am still working on this for myself?

For me, there are, to be sure, lots of constraints and barriers to achieving anything resembling a perspective that allows one to appreciate diversity. There are the natural limitations of well-worn life patterns that come from being settled in a community, a job, and a stable set of friends and associates. Moreover, many of these constraints are sought as we try to create the social conditions in our lives conducive to raising a family.

After a young adulthood characterized by multiple moves into quite different communities in many parts of the country, I am now deliberately rooted like a tree in a single community and will be at least until the children are grown. Settling down often means pulling in and simplifying to have sufficient time to devote to raising children. Even living in a diverse neighborhood does not help if one lacks the time to move beyond a few house lengths in any direction.

All of this poses a challenge with many aspects. At the simplest level it comes down to this: How can I model for my children the art of making diverse friends, when I am not at the stage of life where I am making new friends and the diverse friends collected earlier in life are scattered widely?

My job, like most others, offers few opportunities and even less time to cross perspectives and most of these are not visible to my children. Most adults define themselves as successful if they are in a stable job, or at least if they are stable in an occupation. The early adult experiences of temporary jobs, the time spent as a construction worker, a toll taker, a salesman, are now just memories. These make fine stories, but children can't really know the people one met in those different circumstances.

There are, of course, some strategies that seem to help. The children are making friends all the time, and encouraging them to reach out to other children from different backgrounds is one way to help them develop an appreciation of diversity. Since I can't really choose friends for my children, this means putting them in positions where they will meet children from a range of backgrounds.

In my case, living in a state where communities are mandated to include a range of housing types for all incomes levels helps in this regard. Being within easy walking distance of homes that differ in price by a factor of 10 has been enormously helpful, though it would be even better if the same price range existed within a line of sight.

In a diverse neighborhood children find each other, and my den now regularly looks like the UN. The occasional overheard conversation indicates that they are learning a good deal about each other. Despite the range of delegates in attendance they all seem to like lying on the couch and watching sports. It is this common orientation that allows them to

reach across ethnic, racial, economic, and religious lines. Of course, there are other lines that are not crossed.

Public schooling has been an asset in several ways. First, it offers a chance for my children to meet many other children from across the community different from themselves. This is a key asset of public schooling although you would never know it from the rhetoric of contemporary educational policy makers.

Second, in addition to allowing my children to reach across certain lines, it also signals to me the lines we have been less successful in negotiating. We may be making some progress with ethnicity, race, income, and religion, but we are still not crossing lines of language and ability very well.

The success of my children in appreciating diversity is deeply affected by the success of their school. If schools themselves make progress in these areas, there is a good chance that the children in them will make progress as well. Separating students by ability and by language makes it difficult for children to reach across these barriers to understand each other. When such school separations follow ethnic and racial lines, there is greater difficulty crossing those lines outside. Individual students can move beyond their schools to appreciate diversity, but only so far.

We do many things to prepare our children for living in the world. It would be nice if we could teach them not to act as if the world and everyone in it was created precisely for their use and the use of those most like themselves.

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