It's Okay To Be Different, As Long As You're Not

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Education should address our prejudices, some of which we might not even be aware of.

Recently, members of our college’s Diversity Committee were discussing the extent to which participants in a campus climate survey might have been reluctant to identify themselves with their ethnic group. During the course of the discussion, a faculty member on the committee commented to me, “Some of the faculty feel that you are too much in our face about your being Jewish.”

Stunned, I considered the ironies. This comment was made at a meeting of the Diversity Committee, which supposedly embraces differences. Moreover, the meeting was being held during the Christmas season, when the college was heavily decorated with Christmas symbols. All around us, members of the dominant culture were prominently celebrating their cultural identity. Did they know that they were doing this? Did they even think about the implicit and explicit messages that they were conveying by their attitudes and actions?

Not surprisingly, on the survey itself, most survey participants reported our campus to be respectful and welcoming of diversity. Many members of the dominant culture do not perceive — literally, do not see — the ways in which their community creates an atmosphere of exclusion or insensitivity to persons or groups who are not part of the dominant culture.

I am reminded of a class discussion that occurred at another college, in which many of my white students expressed, quite sincerely, that they didn’t see racism as they went about their daily activities; further, these students either implied or stated that, in their view, racism didn’t exist in their community. The discussion began to take a different turn, however, when the only African-American student in the class began talking about her being followed by store
personnel when she would enter local department stores (the same ones that a number of the students frequented) and about other examples of her having been subjected to racial profiling.

Why didn’t my white students see these problems that this African-American student experienced routinely? Perhaps in part because they themselves didn’t have her experiences and, it seems, didn’t know from problematic teachings and attitudes to which we have been exposed. As a white heterosexual male, for example, I would be naïve to believe that I am ever could be completely free of the influences on me from dominant-culture teachings and attitudes that I have learned about skin color, sexual orientation, and sex. In all likelihood, my colleagues face the same difficulty with respect to problematic cultural teachings and attitudes that they have learned about religion.

Be that as it may, what I heard in my colleague’s comment was that, in at least some faculty members’ minds, I have not not been acting the role of the model “different” person. How should I respond to this ontological conundrum? How much of myself do I hide from others in order to fit in with them? But should I have to — or can I really — hide parts of myself that make me who I am? Is acceptance by members of a dominant group really worth the price of self-negation? Members of dominant groups are often unaware of, if not blind to, the ways in which their actions, attitudes, and assumptions help set the norm for everyone to follow. How many of us from dominant groups consciously think about, for example, the limited list of titles on forms (Mr., Mrs., and so on), or about the closing of schools and other governmental entities for Christmas, or about the use of the words “bachelor” and “master” to indicate college degree levels? This lack of self-awareness causes difficulties for many persons from non-dominant groups who work or otherwise associate with members of the dominant group and who all too often are reminded that one has permission to be different from the norm as long as one doesn’t call attention to one’s differences.

Sadly, my colleague’s comment to me was neither the first nor the most problematic of its kind that I’ve encountered. Indeed, my experiences have led me to wonder how open to and accepting of difference many of us educators truly are and how committed to diversity our institutions really are. To help us answer this question, I would like to suggest that we all undertake a thorough inventory of our campus’ diversity-related accomplishments, as well as an honest appraisal of our own attitudes and actions.

On our campuses, how successful have we been, for example, in honoring our commitments to in-
creasing the diversity of our faculty? Do our courses interweave diversity themes seamlessly and thoroughly? Do we celebrate a people’s history and culture in other than the people’s “recognition month”? Here is another way to frame these questions: Are our campuses so open and welcoming to everyone that there is no longer a need for our institutions even to have a diversity committee?

On an individual level, we might ask ourselves about the extent to which we actively welcome, include, and engage all of the “outsiders” in our midst. On this point, I remember a comment made to me a number of years ago by one of my older relatives, who had lived his entire life in the deep South. When I asked him how he had dealt with the antisemitism and exclusion that he had experienced, he thought for a moment and then replied, “Well, it wasn’t that you were ever excluded. It’s just that you were never invited.”

Many of us undoubtedly feel that we are in fact quite open to and accepting of difference. And none of us wants to believe that we self-deceive. Nevertheless, we need to ask ourselves pertinent and tough questions about our attitudes and actions if we are to be strong, successful agents of positive social change. How comfortable do we really feel around others who are different from us — including those who, demonstrably displaying their differences, are not afraid to be and show who they are? How accepting of them are we when their displays of otherness especially challenge or otherwise trouble us? Persons who are different from us and who demonstrate their differences openly around us can discern our blatant or tacit acceptance or rejection of them.

Ultimately, if we are to be the change that we want to see enacted in the world, then we must be willing continually to challenge our beliefs and actions in good faith. For, it is not enough for us to espouse views of respect for and acceptance of others or merely to proclaim that we accept and celebrate difference. We must be willing to create an institutional community in which everyone is truly respected—a healthy, accepting community in which everyone feels genuinely invited.