

Geneva Ebisu

Essay Contest

On a television talk show, a guest told a story about his young son's first day at kindergarten. His son had excitedly told his father and a visiting friend that he had made a new friend at school. When the father's friend casually asked about the race of the other child, the son had replied, "I don't know, I don't remember." The talk-show guest had recounted his son's answer with obvious pride, stating that this showed that young children are so free of racial prejudice they don't even notice race. The guest lamented that adults were not more like his son. The audience, in apparent agreement, enthusiastically applauded the story.

Although I could understand the sentiment and hope of the father, the story as a morality lesson on race relations confused and bothered me. I wondered, what if the child was simply unobservant? What if he had been asked the height or hair color of his new friend, and the child had answered that he had not noticed - would the father have felt similar pride in the response? Probably not. And, what if the child *had* been able to describe the color of the other child's skin, should the father have felt ashamed? More troubling, if we as listeners assume that it is better not to notice a person's race, isn't that really a reflection on how negatively we feel about that person's race?

This story embodies the hope many of us have of a society where, as Dr. King dreamed, one will not be judged by the color of one's skin, but by the content of one's character. But, it also demonstrates some of the problems in trying to reach that goal. In his book, Brian Copeland

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accurately describes many of the conflicts and mixed messages about race in our society. He describes how he was harassed by whites for being black, and by blacks for not being black enough. He writes that his mom would encourage him to be proud of his race, but also scolded that he was acting like his race when he misbehaved. Understandably, he felt torn and rejected as both a child and as an adult.

If we denigrate a person for not acting like his race, are we not just as prejudiced as one who denigrates another *because* of his race. If we expect people of our race to think and act a certain way, do we not place limits on ourselves, rather than reinforce the positive aspects of our race? I believe that the hope of a "color-blind society" does not mean we should strive to be blind to color. It does not mean that we should pretend we are all the same, or should strive to be the same, whether among the different races or within a certain race. It does mean that we should recognize the differences in our heritages, celebrate our various cultures, learn to accept each other, and to still allow ourselves to be individuals.