

## Differentiation by Prejudice

By Gulay Ozcan-2010

Spotted hyena. Yellowfin tuna. Humpback whale. We use many adjectives to differentiate between different looking animals of any species. Each and every difference is the mark of a certain trait which makes those animals unique and special among their species. This difference is praised, and, is often the subject of our further interest. We do the same thing to differentiate people of our own species, and name them making use of some of the easiest of differences, such as what color their skin is, where they live or come from, what religion they follow (or don't), what sex they are, and the list goes on. But throughout history, we have rarely used traits like race, ethnicity, religion and sex to praise our fellow human beings for their differences. Instead, we have frequently chosen to exploit these traits and use them as classes or categories to discriminate against those who don't belong to our class or category. Racial discrimination has been an official government policy in the U.S. and in South Africa until recently. Hitler tried to wipe out Jews for his superior Aryan dream to thrive. All types of discrimination involve some form of exclusion or rejection, and sometimes even violence. Through the ages, however, people have found different types of methods to cope with such behavior. Some have ignored discrimination, while others just could not stand it and have chosen to change it through violent or non-violent actions.

For some people, the only way to handle discrimination is to adapt to, ignore and act as if it does not exist. There are several reasons behind this type of reaction. The most important one, perhaps, is the survival instincts of those involved. In an autobiography I read last year, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*, the author James McBride tells the story of his white mother who was born into a Polish Orthodox Jew family that

escaped the Nazi terror, ran away from her somewhat racist father, married twice to African Americans, and gave birth to and raised 12 children during the segregation period. While she could belong neither among whites nor African Americans, she managed stayed away from all the constant abuse from both sides by ignoring any and all discrimination on a survival-first instinct. She first wiped out her Jewish heritage by changing her name to start a new life she would fit in. Then she shut herself to all racial criticism and slander by pure prioritization and placed education of her children before everything and got all of them through college. Although she chose not to act on it herself, she followed the issue of discrimination closely. McBride says “When Malcolm X, the supposed demon of white man, was killed, I asked her who he was and she said, ‘He was a man ahead of his time’. She actually liked Malcolm X”. Knowing the downside of a tragedy is not enough, though. Should we act on it or not is the question we need to ask ourselves, and that choice makes all the difference. David A. Shapiro, in his intensely written lessons-for-life book *Choosing the Right Thing to Do*, describes his childhood memory of a fire in a gas station just outside of Glacier National Park in Montana and explains his father’s inability to help the man on fire and the woman whose child was inside the gas station through a moral stance of inaction. This inaction is not simply through lack of compassion, but through lack of knowledge about what awaits us and fear for those we love and care for. We defer to others for action and results, expecting them to act on behalf of us. Years ago, when I was a girl, I tried to help a young man who was having a fit of epilepsy by making him smell an onion to end the fit, knowing from past experience that its strong smell could inject consciousness into him. My mother literally did not allow me to help him. When I asked her why, she simply said that it wasn’t my duty to do it. I had to have my own child to understand that my mother was only trying to protect me from a potential blow I could receive from this unconscious but shaking

man. Yet, as Shapiro states at the end of his story, “But I wonder what our world would be like if this survival-first message was the moral legacy of Socrates or of Martin Luther King, Jr., or of Gandhi.” Certainly, not much would have improved and what these men stood against would still be unquestioned.

Some people cannot just ignore the discrimination around them; they need to do something to eliminate any and all kinds of discrimination. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr., played a revolutionary role in the events that led to the change in segregation laws and the establishment of equal rights for all. His Gandhi-like nonviolent methods of protest, such as the boycott of the Montgomery bus system, pushed him into the American struggle for civil rights. King employed different methods in this struggle; he wrote articles, organized marches, and gave speeches. In one of his speeches, King tells us how his belief system regarding racial and financial discrimination and his method of non-violence form his opinions on the Vietnam War. Many people accuse him of mixing peace and civil rights. His reasoning, however, is simple and suggests that he is “called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make the humans any less our brothers.” The war, aside from drawing the funds away from poverty programs, also causes more black and poor men to be killed at the fronts. Therefore, wars, as direct results of financial, ethnic and political disagreements, need to be addressed the same way any other discrimination is addressed, and that is with non-violence. Violence only makes things worse. My country, Turkey, has had several revolutions in its past, the most recent of which was in 1980. Prior to it, the youth was segregated into three main groups: conservatives, liberals and nationalists. Each group was a rival of the other two, and almost every day we would hear of new killings in the name of domestic politics. In the end, the military forces made a coup and took control, and none

of the three groups were able to take control. Had these young men chosen to express their opinions peacefully, respecting their differences and not trying to gain leverage by brute force, they would have all made their statements. They would have been heard and, perhaps, listened to by the other groups. They could have negotiated their ideas and ideals, and could have found some common ground to build the future of Turkey. Instead many lives were lost, Turkey was under military administration for two years and its progress toward a modern civil world was hampered. The actions of the people of a country have far reaching consequences than their beliefs. Opinions need to be shared and supported, but unless an environment of equality and mutual respect is formed, there are no real winners.

People's ways of handling discrimination may be quite different, but any differentiation that may form a basis for discrimination is unacceptable. The only acceptable differentiation should be one based on merit (skills, good manners, success, etc.) and merit is not a birth-right; it is earned. Those who have earned some merit may be offered certain benefits compared to those who haven't, but even these people cannot discriminate against others. Ignoring discrimination because of personal priorities and survival instincts may be understandable, but it is still not acceptable. Whether we are victims or witnesses of such discrimination simply does not matter. It may take more time than we desire, but if we truly want to have a world where there is no discrimination, the only effective way is to raise our voice, take a stand and fight all types of discrimination.

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