

Learning and Accepting “Differences”

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Sounds of the harsh metal crashing into the 400meter building echoed through the city. 17 minutes later, the second thunder-like jolt pushed the city into an enormous pit of chaos. People scrambled like tiny ants being attacked by a huge and invisible enemy. Some frantically tried to reach their loved ones, some collapsed onto the streets and burst out crying, and some just stood there, stupefied by the overwhelming scene unfolding in front of them.

The double-attack on the world trade center ten years ago sent a wave of shock across the world, and of course, across the Big Apple. Almost 3000 people were killed and an innumerable number of people received emotional traumas. People in the city were completely engulfed by fear. It is a common phenomenon, to see fear transform into hatred and violence. This was exactly what happened. New Yorkers and Americans were shocked by this sudden attack on their homeland. For the first time in U.S history, the mainland was attacked and people became aware of their vulnerability. This fear transformed its self into deep-rooted hatred.

After 9/11, cases of violence against people with Arabic ethnicities started to appear. Many Arab Americans and Muslims were subjected to groundless discrimination following the September 11th terrorist attacks. There have been many cases of violence against Arab Americans and people who had been stereotyped as Arabs,

such as Iranians and people from South Asia, because of their “similarity to Arabs in their appearances”. Also, people with Arabic ethnicities are frequently treated unfairly in places like airports, where they must go through an especially thorough check to board their aircrafts. But one must wonder. Had these segregated people done anything wrong? Did they have anything to do with the terrorist attacks? Many were immigrants who had been living in the U.S over decades. Why were they, all of a sudden, seen as an enemy by their once-peaceful neighbors?

This summer, I was blessed with the opportunity of being a part of a summer program called Phillips Academy Andover Summer Session. This was an academically rigorous program that was held in a small town in Andover, Massachusetts. Students from about 100 countries gathered in this small town to spend a month learning, experiencing, and connecting, to themselves as well as the multi-colored cultures existing in the world. It truly had an amazing and surreal atmosphere, where you could constantly hear five different languages-English, French, Spanish, Chinese, and other languages that you could not quite place-from right where you were standing. The table that I sat during my lunch breaks included people from Germany, America, Russia, Cambodia, France, Indonesia, England, China, and Turkey. In the evenings I would study with my classmates who came from countries such as Colombia, Greece, Puerto Rico, and Bangladesh. Naturally, each person spoke different languages, had different complexions, and had different ideas. Each person had their own cultures, their own religions, and their own perspectives. With this much differentiation between the students, a

conflict over cultural differences can easily be expected. However, that was not the case. Despite our cultural differences, we were able to connect with one another and were able to become best of friends. How was this possible? How could people with such different backgrounds get along so cheerfully?

One thing that I noticed in the attitudes of the people in Andover was their eagerness of learning about each other's cultures. Almost all of my friends seemed curious about one another and their distinct cultures. "So, tell me about your country," was a frequently heard phrase across the campus during the summer.

I too was asked this question multiple times. In response, I would always explain to my inquirer that the Japanese culture valued mutual respect and harmony, and that it was a culture that was closely tied to the people's daily lives. My inquirer seemed to remember this when I bowed to a fellow Japanese friend in the corridor. My inquirer nodded approvingly and said, "Teach me more".

In another instance, a girl in my class that was a Muslim had to fast because of Ramadan. Especially because 9/11 happened when I was still in first grade of elementary school, I had always had the impression that Islam was not exactly bad, but still, a little frightening. I confessed this to my friend. She took me to breakfast and explained to me that Islam was a religion of peace, focusing on internal conflict and overcoming your desires. She told me that Ramadan was a part of that path to conquering yourself and following Allah. I was amazed by the tranquil nature of Islam and at the same time, was ashamed of my ignorance. I realized that I

had, based on the shaky opinion of society, stereotyped and judged an entire culture wrongly. But now I know that I was completely mistaken.

This ignorance of mine can also be seen in the people who have been discriminating Arab Americans after September 11th. These people attack Arab Americans because they stereotype and judge Islam and Arabs and do not try to learn the culture. It is very dangerous to keep something that you cannot understand and leave it that way because it leads to stereotyping, judging, and as a result, hating. This is not just in the instance of the September 11th attacks. Many of the problems concerning discrimination and conflict between parties are caused by lack of mutual understanding.

The “Andover standard”, which learning and accepting each other was a natural phenomenon, could be a sublime solution to this. What if we could have the curiosity and the motivation to keep on learning and accepting each other’s cultures? If the “Andover standard” were to spread, segregation and discrimination would surely fade away. Members of the coming generation must keep in mind that it is their responsibility and obligation to have the curiosity towards the cultures in the world and to make an effort to understand them. Ignorance can bring costly consequences. Learning and accepting differences are a key to a more peaceful future.