

Prejudice: Is it Culture or Race?
Posted On: January 01, 1970

I have been watching the splendid Cosmos, the successor to the original television series by astronomer Carl Sagan in 1980. That visionary astronomer introduced us to the magical world of space, spurring many young people to consider astronomy as a career. Neil DeGrasse Tyson was one of those youngsters, a Black teen from the Bronx, who was invited to spend a day with Sagan. Now Dyson is returning the favor by producing the new Cosmos, embracing a half-century of incredible progress in our knowledge of our galaxy and beyond.

Thirty-five years ago, who would have imagined that America's most famous spokesman for the magic of science, an astrophysicist to boot, would be a Black man? This would have been as unthinkable then as imaging a two-term Black president. What has changed in the realm of prejudice?

Almost all human beings around the world still react to subliminal signals when something alien appears in their midst. The alien is perceived as a threat, a threat that can disappear only when something in the culture provides an avenue of acceptance that defuses the fear.

The ancient Greeks recognized fear of the alien and gave it a name: Xenophobia (fear of the stranger). But in Greek mythology, there is an important story of an elderly couple, the sole survivors of the great global flood, who welcome several strangers who came to their door asking for food and shelter. The strangers are gods, of course, who give them the gift to re-people the world.

Many of the fairy tales that I read as a child featured young people encountering a frightening old hag (or in some, a bear) in some difficulty. The bad children threw stones at them. The good ones offered them water and freed them from traps. The frightening hags (or bears) were enchanted beings who rewarded kindness with important gifts. In the real Medieval world, however, old hags were targeted for burning as witches and bears were tormented in street theater; yet the myths were there to make the thoughtful consider the benefits of kindness.

A Jewish myth at Passover is that the much-welcomed prophet Elijah sometimes hides as a homeless man. The moral is to be charitable even to the most hapless.

The Western World increasingly accepts women as human partners rather than property. We now have successful and educated Blacks as astrophysicists, judges, and even a president. It is easier to do this when these former "others" talk, act, and look much like ourselves. Early in the women's movement, women burned their bras and denigrated men. This brought them backlash. But when they began "dressing for success" and demonstrating competence, the backlash diminished.

In the lesser-developed world, every effort is made to kill the "other," as we can see in Iraq, Sudan, Thailand, Pakistan, Syria, and the Congo. In our world, however, one has to be a dedicated bigot to hate our president or dismiss an astrophysicist who happens to be Black just because of their color. These men speak, think, and dress like their peers, which makes it difficult to see them as "other" any more.

The Gay community is increasingly mainstreaming because so many look, dress, and speak like the rest of us. Had it just been up to the counter-culture in the Castro district of San Francisco, the acceptance would not have come as soon.

The intractable misery of inner-city Black neighborhoods may be more due to culture than color. As successful Blacks leave the inner-cities to meld with the rest of our middle class culture, those left behind have no models to emulate. Unfortunately, our popular culture of trash talk, thug dress, and violence has made it difficult for a community in which talent or genius cannot thrive. It isn't color, it's culture that creates the "otherness."

As much as some visionaries love "multiculturalism," the fact is that every community, country, or civilization has its own common core. Sharing in it is what makes us a community. And our common culture recognizes responsible behavior and decent manners as essential values.

675 words

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