



POPSICLE STICKS *and Other Gifts*

WE DON'T ALL DO EVERYTHING THE SAME WAY—THANK GOD.

POPSICLE-STICK CROSSES make good grave markers for parakeets, but they weren't enough for Jared. He felt they didn't do justice. He wanted real headstones.

Jared's parents had bought three parakeets—one for each of their boys. No one knew that the fumes from cooking with a Teflon pan were toxic for parakeets. The family learned that the hard way.

A special funeral ceremony was conducted, and the family made popsicle-stick crosses to place at the head of the grave for each parakeet. Jared, however, wasn't satisfied.

Children diagnosed with autism often have a difficult time expressing the deep feelings they have inside. Such was the case with Jared. Moments of deep sadness caused by the death of the parakeets seemed to open his mind to a creative solution. Each day, as he walked to school, he passed an old historic cemetery. He decided to stop and check things out. He found two headstones engraved with the exact same day and month when the parakeets died. *What a fitting memorial*, he thought.

While not large, they were still heavy for this 6-year-old. It took him two trips, but he felt it was worth it when he placed the new markers beside the popsicle-stick crosses. What Jared had done was illegal, but in his mind, he had not done anything wrong. He was simply showing respect for the much-loved parakeets.

GOOD COMPANY

I met Costen in Romania. He was unkempt. He drooled. His words were garbled. Cerebral palsy disfigured his appearance. As I strained to listen, I began to realize that the person on the inside was much different from the one I saw on the outside. Those who knew Costen explained that he was a chess champion and had the ability to play multiple games at once. He was indeed intelligent and highly respected by those who saw beyond his physical disabilities.

Jared's act for the parakeets was not insignificant. Costen's ability to play chess is amazing. And they are not alone. The World Health Organization reports that one in seven, or 15 percent of the world's population, has a significant disability.¹ The way we understand disabilities is critical. It influences the way we treat these individuals. What is not always understood, however, is that our treatment of them frequently shapes their own perception of their worth.

How we see diversity and how we relate to others begins with the way we think.

Ellen White understood the power of influence upon those who struggle with personal identity. She wrote, “Respect shown to the struggling human soul is the sure means through Christ Jesus of the restoration of the self-respect the man has lost. Our advancing ideas of what he may become are a help we cannot ourselves fully appreciate.”² A popular quote states: “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” Understanding a person from the inside out and not vice versa is an important first step.

GOD’S ORIGINAL GIFT

When God created the world, He did it with a great deal of enthusiasm. Day after new day He concluded it was “good.” Scripture assures us of the power and strength He had as the Creator. His name, Elohim, emphasizes that in Genesis 1. When He created humans in His own image (Genesis 1:26) and placed them in the world that had been created for them, God’s excitement burst forth with “It is very good” (Genesis 1:31).

However, that wasn’t enough. In Genesis 2 another descriptive name was given: *LORD* or *Yahweh* conveyed that He was also compassionate and trustworthy. The full meaning of those names would soon be seen when sin entered. God was indeed trustworthy. God’s gift to humans was not only creating them in His image—it included His continued presence. Regardless of the detour caused by sin, despite the spiritual and physical condition of humanity, God promised not to leave.

The Bible clearly expresses the value of every individual. That value is not derived from what a person can or cannot do. Their worth comes from God and is respected by God to such an extent that He radically invested Himself for their redemption (John 3:16). Life is sacred, and it is only God who is in the position to determine one’s ultimate right to live.

God is our identity both as individuals and as His church “body” (1 Corinthians 12). Our identity from God’s perspective is based on who He is and the value He has placed in each person. Diversity does not detour His love. It is divinely inherent in the human DNA.

THE MASK

I not only said it wrong. My thinking was wrong. Terry was my best friend, and I was willing to defend him at any cost. Terry was the only Japanese student attending our school. One day a group of rowdy boys approached us on the playground. When they asked what race he was, I immediately assumed they were prejudiced against him. With fists clenched, I interjected before he had a chance to reply, “He is an American. That’s who he is!”



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I've thought about that experience many times. In my effort to do what I thought was right, I did an injustice to Terry, myself, and the whole issue of diversity. At the time, it seemed that being an American was the one common denominator that settled any differences. With the best of intentions, I disregarded his heritage and his uniqueness. I tried to remake him into my image and that of everyone else at the school.

Since then, I've learned that I am not the only one who has tried to resolve diversity issues by dismissing differences. Doing so is disrespectful. Comparing others with our model of correctness is not helpful.

Aimee Mullins was born without fibula bones in her shins. Her legs were amputated below the knee when she was a year old. She asks for no sympathy. She is a fashion model with prosthetic legs. She reminds us, "I want to be seen as beautiful because of my disability, not in spite of it."³ Stephen Covey shares that the single most important principle he has learned about interpersonal communication is to "seek first to understand and then to be understood."⁴

However, if understanding is to be effective, it must be from the other person's perspective. Hearing persons, for example, can easily misunderstand the life of a deaf person. To conclude that deaf people are isolated, disoriented, and uncommunicative and live in a world without meaning would be wrong. Such a conclusion almost begs for the deaf to be treated with sympathy. This is a false assumption.

One writer points out, "In the hearing stereotype, deafness is the lack of something, not the presence of anything."⁵ In reality, the deaf see their situation as a culture more than a disability. Their culture is filled with history, values, behaviors, art, and its own language. As is so often the case, if we don't have the right starting point, it is not possible to fully appreciate the differences that do exist.

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THINK POSSIBILITY

How we see diversity and how we relate to others begins with the way we think. The German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder observed in the 18th century that we cannot know ourselves without a reference point outside of ourselves. That reference point is Jesus. Any source other than our Creator and Redeemer will lead to destructive relationships and the depreciation of the unique contribution those who are not like us can make. To get it right, we must start right.

The apostle Paul knew it was possible to change perceptions. He could personally say after becoming “a new creation” in Christ that believing makes it possible to see differently. “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” (2 Corinthians 5:16, NIV).

The story is told of Lawrence, a deacon in Rome in the third century. He understood not only the concept of diversity but also the unique value of every person. During the persecution of the early church, Lawrence was given a position of trust. He cared for the treasury and riches of the church and the distribution of alms to the poor. At the beginning of August 258, Emperor Valerian issued an edict that all bishops, priests, and deacons should immediately be put to death.

The emperor demanded that Lawrence turn over the riches of the church. Early historical records indicate that he asked for three days to gather the wealth. During those three days, he distributed as much of the church’s treasury to the poor as possible. On the third day, he appeared before the prefect or regional governor. When ordered to hand over the treasures of the church, Lawrence presented the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the

suffering, and declared that these are the true treasures of the church. He reportedly said to the prefect, “The Church is truly rich, far richer than your emperor.” This act of defiance led to his martyrdom.

What Lawrence believed and taught at the peril of his own life was a timeless truth: “Those whom we believe are the students often become our teachers.” Diversity of all kinds provides lessons needed for our character development. Ellen White suggested the same when she wrote, “I saw that it is in the providence of God that widows and orphans, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and persons afflicted in a variety of ways, have been placed in close Christian relationship to His church; it is to prove His people and develop their true character. Angels of God are watching to see how we treat these persons who need our sympathy, love, and disinterested benevolence. This is God’s test of our character.”⁶

It took a Jared in my life to start me thinking differently about popsicles and the need for diversity. I’ve learned that differences are important. Along with Jared, Costen, and a billion others who make up God’s family, I have discovered that God appreciates uniqueness. Indeed, God’s gifts come in many shapes, forms, colors, races, and perspectives. ■

¹ World Health Organization, December 1, 2020 (www.who.int/news-room/facts-in-pictures/detail/disabilities)

² Ellen White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 281.

³ Andrew Solomon, *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity*, p. 37.

⁴ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, p. 237.

⁵ Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community*, p. 7.

⁶ Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 511.

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