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Let it Grow

We begin as seeds; our parents plant us in the world's hard soil. Teachers nurture us into strong saplings, providing nourishment through inspirational literature and informative lectures. Minds blossom in the rarest of flowers; everyone has a unique academic talent and interest. We compete with our peers, hoping to be recognized by the most prestigious of universities. There, professors teach us to reap fruits from our minds; we are challenged beyond all measure. Although traditional education may end with the receipt of a diploma, we will always be students. Personal growth is something we can experience forever. Individuals are challenged to grow personally due to fear of societal perception, the development of communication skills, and becoming more universally accepting.

Unfortunately, one of the most distinguishing traits about a person is their race. Gates Jr. defines race as "the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application" (Gates, Jr. 390). The problem with race is that it identifies people by their physical and behavioral characteristics. People that associate themselves with the same race discover shared qualities amongst themselves that are unique to their group. Acknowledging trait variations can contribute to false societal perceptions because groups might create cultural stereotypes that portray others in a negative light. This leads to racial/ethnic-targeted restrictions, differences in paychecks, and physical attacks or riots. Hill Collins recognizes "[a]n ongoing tension exists for

Black women as agents of knowledge, a tension rooted in the sometimes conflicting demands of Afrocentricity and feminism” (Collins 408). Inside her own racial group, the Black community, Collins struggles to harmonize ideals of African culture and women’s rights into one doctrine. This is extremely frustrating for Collins because she cannot create acceptance and synergy between racial groups without first achieving the support, or positive social perception, of her own racial group. Collins elucidates on how she believes she is socially qualified to assist the Black community, “Living life as an African-American woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing Black feminist thought because within Black women’s communities thought is validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions” (Collins 408). Collins can draw upon her first-hand experiences, growing up in a Black community, to identify social problems and create solutions. She also believes that because she identifies as the same race as the people she is trying to help, she might be received as an inspirational peer. Collins strategy is to “anchor [her] knowledge claims in an Afrocentric feminist epistemology [to produce] a rich tradition of Black feminist thought” (Collins 408). Connecting with her racial community and engaging members in the execution phase of a solution demonstrates effective leadership and social change because it makes Collin’s project sustainable. Members of the Black Community can continue where Collins leaves off, pursuing equal treatment for Black women in all sectors of society. It seems that Collin’s ultimate goal was to unite all racial communities in the cause for securing kind, fair social perceptions of women: “The dilemma facing Black women scholars engaged in creating Black feminist thought is that a knowledge claim that meets the criteria of adequacy for one group and thus is judged to be an acceptable knowledge claim may not be translatable into the

terms of a different group” (Collins 409). It’s admirable that Collins wants to draft a mission statement that all races can relate to. By maximizing the perspective of the issue at hand, Collins removes the trope difference and grants all races the opportunity to collaborate without social stigmas.

Presenting ideas in a way that captivates an audience and inspires them to join the cause is not an easy task. “[D]ialogues, ‘one has no need to decenter anyone in order to center someone else; one has only to constantly, appropriately, pivot the center’” (Collins 411). When communicating, Collins believes one should wait his or her turn to speak, and elaborate when the time comes. Dominating a conversation and/or disregarding others’ opinions is not effective team-building. Developing effective communication skills helps people grow as leaders, followers, and active contributors of a movement. In order to advance the social change initiative, Collins encourages people to find “[c]onnections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one’s glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity” (Collins 411). Being open-minded stimulates personal growth outside comfort zones. Collins wants people to look past racial communities and societal perceptions to find similar plights that groups can tackle together. Perhaps people might “find efforts to rearticulate a Black women’s standpoint” (Collins 409), and inspire other people to join their cause. Many beginning social activists conveyed their messages through literature, Collins included. Gates, Jr. observes, “Political and philosophical discourse were the predominant forms of writing. Among these, autobiographical ‘deliverance’ narratives were the most common and the most accomplished. Accused of lacking a formal and collective history, blacks published individual histories, which, taken together, were intended to

narrate in segments the larger yet fragmented history of blacks in Africa, now dispersed throughout a cold New World. The narrated, descriptive ‘eye’ was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual ‘I’ of the black author as well as the collective ‘I’ of the race” (Gates, Jr. 393). These anecdotes, or histories, are pleas to the world to be heard. People are openly sharing how other members of society perceive them as an individual [based on racial bias] in positive or negative lights. Some pieces, such as DuBois’ *Racial Wage*, are a call to action, persuading members of diverse groups to unify with one purpose: establish universal acceptance.

Universal acceptance is embracing people with open arms without prejudgement. “Each individual has a unique personal biography made up of concrete experiences, values, motivations, and emotions” (Collins 406). We must ignore racial, ethnic, cultural, economic, political, religious, and sexual orientation related stereotypes, and welcome an individual with an open mind. We can learn from each other by asking questions that reveal how our differences impact us on a personal level in daily life. This “new knowledge can generate change” (Collins 406). Diverse social interactions can prompt an interdisciplinary project that involves people from different races, sexes, and even academia. Their social difference “is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged” (Lorde 334). Through continued collaboration and interaction, people gradually “ignore... differences” and never “view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change” (Lorde 334) because they are so focused on the positive. This is not to say that “community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist” (Lorde 334). It is the unique mindset that everyone brings to the table that makes the experience of working in a team

much more valuable. “Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity, as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel, could exist” (Gates, Jr. 392). An individual is a mind, and their ideas make history.

Some might argue that people are not truly oppressed by society, that actions are always a choice. Collins addresses this in her argument, “By emphasizing the power of self-definition and the necessity of a free mind, Black feminist thought speaks to the importance African-American women thinkers place on consciousness as a sphere of freedom” (Collins 406-407). Domination matrixes, legislature for example, do exist. Out of the fear of undesirable consequence, people continue to conform to social and cultural norms. This is a form of oppression. Collins continues, “Black women intellectuals realize that domination operates not only by structuring power from the top down but by simultaneously annexing the power as energy of those on the bottom for its own needs” (Collins 406-407). Oppression can occur anywhere in the social, political, and economic hierarchies. However, the most important thing to observe is not the oppressor, but how an individual or group responds to oppression. Collin gives an example of how to overcome such circumstances, “Rather than being restrained by their both/and status of marginality, these women make creative use of their outsider-within status and produce innovative Afrocentric feminist thought” (Collins 409). An individual must recognize that society is using social norms as a construct to force conformity. By being open-minded to consider alternatives, and then pursuing an option that was not expected, people can blaze new trails and grow personally from their journeys. Following a passion, regardless of what society mandates, is a challenge that will change an individual, for better.

The Human Event course is a humbling experience. Everything I knew, or thought I knew about people, was invalidated time and time again by Plato, Marx, Foucault, and even my student peers. At times, I've been intimidated by assigned material, and the idea of office hours. By approaching each component of this course with an open mind, I've obtained a broader perspective of the world I live in. It isn't just math and science. It's also full of people. Hill Collins and Anzaldua remind me to take make every conversation personable, to connect with and understand my audience. Dreger showed me that it's OK to be a little different, while McDougal and Galton suggested a horrid solution. I can be content with my body, but also feel comfortable with the idea of changing it. Wollstonecraft and de Pizan inspire me to be a better woman who cares about her family just as much [if not more than] her schoolwork. The Human Event has helped me live out the thesis of this essay. At the end of each day, I can look back and say that I overcame peer pressure and declared my desires. As I turn in for the night, I cozy up next to my copy of *Measure for Measure*, because the Duke is a great guy, and the Human Event is now my life.

References

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