



HUMANIZING “THE OTHER”

If you ask what percentage of your genes is reflected in your external appearance, the basis by which we talk about race, the answer is in the range of .01 percent. This is a very, very minimal reflection of your genetic makeup.

—Dr. Harold P. Freeman

(chief executive, president, and director of surgery
at North General Hospital in Manhattan)

Human beings are great at categorizing and arranging—this goes here; that goes there. We do that with our stuff, *and* we do that with the people in our lives. Separating, in and of itself, isn't the problem. (After all, red M&Ms are just as tasty as green M&Ms!) It's when we attach value-based, good-versus-bad labels to different groups that we get ourselves into trouble. There's this camp and that camp, separated by attributes that are demographic, financial, racial, gender oriented, sexual orientation related, weight based, age based, political—you name it. And then we look at all the different boxes we've arranged and start to say, "My box is not only different from your box, but my box is *better* than your box." This behavior spells trouble. We spend so much time in our individual boxes—looking out at the other boxes—that we tend to start looking at the other boxes as being wrong. Different equals wrong somehow.

Taken to an extreme, we experience bigotry and hatred. All of this is learned behavior based upon biases we are shown—either directly or indirectly—throughout our lives. No one is born a racist, and

WHAT'S RIGHT, NOT WHO'S RIGHT

according to Dr. Freeman, only about one one-hundredth of one percent (0.01 percent) of our DNA has anything to do with our appearance—including our skin color, the size and shape of our noses, and our hair type, ears, freckles, etc. Again, *no one* is born a racist. It's a learned behavior. And if something like racism is learned, it can be unlearned. However, we need to take a first step to make that happen by starting to look at “what's right.” For example, consider these assertions: 1. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are unalienable rights; and 2. All men [*sic*] are created equal. Both of these statements come from the United States Declaration of Independence, a document *many* claim as the measure of “what's right” but few truly *live*. Don't get me started on the Bible. Until we're ready to start looking at “what's right,” we'll be stuck in justifying our bias by arguing “who's right.”

If we're really going to start moving the world together in a way that we can get to focusing on what the world needs, which is some healing and some sensibility and some open dialogue, the first thing we need to do is to humanize “the other,”

those who live in that “other” box.

Here’s an example of what I do when it comes to humanizing others. I’ve been conducting a research project about understanding how people look at everyday activities such as driving, commuting, eating, traveling, and such. I’m using the #help-meunderstand hashtag. I have a very diverse set of friends on Facebook, and two of them are diametrically opposed in their political and religious views. They couldn’t be more different—on the surface. One is a conservative Jew, and the other is a proud Muslim. One is male; the other is female.

That said, on the same post (it was about our views of personal body space in public settings), one right after the other, they commented on what it’s like to ride the subway in New York City. They both described how much they disliked the experience, and their comments mirrored each other almost 100 percent. As I read their thoughts, I thought to myself, “In another context, they may not give themselves permission to actually speak to each other—at all! However, when referring to an everyday, mundane, ordinary situation—this notion of

sitting on a subway in New York—they were able to humanize each other and share something in common. They didn't look at their profile pictures; they didn't look at their “about me” sections on their Facebook profiles. They just simply commented on what was in front of them.

Again, only about 0.01 percent of human DNA has anything to do with our appearance. It amazes me how much *baggage* we have as a species about appearance and how much physical visual cues separate us. How about we spend more time looking toward connection, by recognizing the humanity (the other 99.99 percent) in those around us. Once we're able to see the human in those in “the other” group, we'll no longer be able to dismiss them. We can take a step forward in their direction.

Questions, Insights, Implications

1. Have you ever considered—by relative percentage—the tiny percentage of our DNA that is related to appearance? What does this insight trigger for you?

2. How do you feel about the idea that we innately and unconsciously separate and categorize when it comes to “other” people?
3. Are there other examples in which you’ve seen yourself or others around you humanizing “the other” through shared experiences (as in the story about the New York subway above)?

Again, reflect on these questions, and allow yourself to be wrong and to be open to new perspectives. By doing so, you’ll likely find new insights in the most unexpected places.