

Ignorance

Curiosity

Enthusiasm

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IGNORANCE

I was born and raised in Zanesville, Ohio. Our state is situated just north of Kentucky and before and during the Civil War, Ohio was a huge player in the Underground Railroad, a network of communities that would shelter African American slaves who travelled north in search of freedom. General Sherman of the Northern Army was born in Lancaster, Ohio, just 30 miles away. One might hope that our state would be a firm supporter of equal rights and the equality of human beings.

During my childhood in the 1950s and 1960s, our school system had eight elementary schools dispersed throughout the neighborhoods. We went to the school which was closest and there was no attempt to encourage attendance at a school that was in another part of town.

McIntire Elementary School was named after our city's founder, John McIntire, and was situated adjacent to an affluent part of town and a neighborhood which was primarily populated by African American families. Most of my classes at McIntire were close to evenly balanced between white and black and brown children. I developed close friendships with both sides of the racial spectrum. We played, cracked jokes, competed in athletics, had arguments and a few physical confrontations over the years, but we always quickly forgot and/or forgave any aberrant behavior toward one another. However, within our community there were numerous signals that this utopian view of races was whittled away.

When I was very young, my parents took me to North Carolina for a vacation, and I was with my mother when we went into a Five and Dime store to look for some souvenirs. This store had a food and drink counter, which was commonplace in the 1950s, and I sat down on a stool while my mother was looking things over and a friendly African American waitress said, "Good morning, young man, but you will have to sit over there; this is the colored section." I did as I was told and later asked my mother why I had to move and her reply was, "Honey, this is the South and things are different down here."

At our one and only skating rink, blacks were only allowed to skate on Monday evenings while the rest of us could skate throughout the week. There was and still is a wonderful ice cream shop, Tom's Ice Cream Bowl, which was located about 100 yards from the Lind Arena Skating Rink. The owner chose to close his business on Monday because he felt he would alienate his white clientele and this continued for decades and was only recently changed to being open on Mondays.

Our city had a large Municipal Pool where I took swimming lessons each summer. Blacks were only allowed to swim there on the infrequent days when the pool was to be drained and refilled with clean water. The city did construct an above-ground pool for blacks and it was known as *The Ink Well*. Neither of these facilities exists today.

In our downtown area, a large Court House exists that has served as the Muskingum County Court House and still operates today. During my childhood, the downtown was a bustling place with all the shopping and restaurants located over four or five blocks. Rest rooms were segregated (White Only) (Colored Only) along with the public water fountains.

Our four movie theaters only permitted Black folks to sit in the balconies. When I attended a movie with my black friends, we had to separate after buying our snacks.

My aunt, who was suffering from a form of leukemia, asked me while in the hospital, whether she could have a blood transfusion from a black person. I told her that she could.

I unfortunately have to admit that I did nothing to change any of these things in my community. In 2025, these practices no longer exist in Zanesville, but there are numerous African American citizens that have not forgotten what it felt like for them when they were young. I look back and wonder why I did not become vocal about this insanity and write something to the local paper, go down to the Court House and publicly question the “Colored” designation, or organize a boycott of the local movie theaters. This memory haunts me to this day and I hope that during my adult years, I have been more aggressive in confronting ignorance when it permeates the town square.

I am also old enough to have flown in airplanes with smoking sections, have taken my family to restaurants with smoking sections, and have ridden in cars with no seat belts, air bags, or car seats for babies and small children. Ignorance has been an unfortunate cause of senseless calamities and it continues to this day.

CURIOSITY

When I was in high school, taking biology and chemistry, and learning about atoms, I wondered where they all came from. In 1946, the year before I was born, Fred Hoyle, a British astrophysicist, published a paper, “The Synthesis of the Elements from Hydrogen”, in which he stated that, “elements heavier than hydrogen are synthesized in the interiors of stars through nuclear fusion reactions.” In the 1960s, this idea was never mentioned in either biology or chemistry and it was also not part of my freshman chemistry class at MIT.

Eleven years after my graduation, in 1980, Carl Sagan, published his landmark book, “Cosmos”, in which he clearly stated that we are all “star dust”. I am not quite sure why I

read the book, but when I came to that statement, it took my breath away. So, a star such as our Sun creates a fusion reaction from all the pressure and in the core, the formation of a wide array of atoms is taking place. All well and good, but how does it get to our lowly planets? You say at the end of their lives, there is some type of explosion, such as a super nova, that spews all of this stuff into space and after eons, gravity will gather together all of the Sun's "trash" and as solar systems such as ours are formed, we eventual life forms can emerge from this landfill and evolve to the complex entities that we are today. When you think all this through and consider the calcium in our bones, and the carbon all through us, along with plenty of oxygen and hydrogen in the form of water, your think, "What are the odds ..." Given enough time and the probability seems to be one! Not as poetic as the Garden of Eden but elegant just the same.

Of course, a revelation like this can bring all kinds of other questions. And some of these are not welcomed by our fellow homo sapiens.

I happened to attend a church work camp in Georgia with my daughter, Jessica. Each adult joined a student group which was tasked with doing some construction or repair for the elderly and poor in that region. I joined a lady and about seven students to build a ramp to a trailer, and put insulation along the sides of the elevated home for two elderly souls. Each day at lunch, different people were asked to give a devotional of their choosing for the group. When my turn came, the sun was shining and even the heat was not overwhelming. So, I decided to talk about the Sun-generated raw materials of life and that we were all "star dust". This group was obviously hearing this for the first time. Since I thought I was on a roll, I threw out the particle-wave theory and compared it with the human-God status of Jesus. While things may be very different, they can be both at the same time. When I finished, the lady offered, "Bill, we will be praying for you." Perhaps not the right audience for all the excitement that I still carried for these insights.

ENTHUSIASM

When I joined the MIT Class of 1969 in the fall of 1965, we were brought into the Kresge Auditorium where we faced the class data which indicated that if you did not score an 800 in math, you were below the 60th percentile. Ok, this is not high school; this is going to be a serious challenge to someone who has never had a B in a course. So, after finding a place to live, classes started, and the race was on. Nice weekly diet of physics, chemistry, calculus, a seminar, and the Greek Tradition which gave us a break from using our slide rules. First problem on the physics problem set: "How many grains of sand are on planet

earth?” After asking a fellow student, “Is this some kind of joke?” away I went trying to find a way to even think about this problem.

The first series of quizzes began after several weeks and we teed up Physics as the first chance to show that we belonged. We had been given a fast-paced whirlwind of motion, force, and energy and most of what we did was solve problems like blocks sliding down planes with or without friction, all stuff I could handle.

I opened the test booklet and there were three problems in this one-hour exam. It went something like this:

“There are two charged plates one with a positive charge and the other negative. They are separated by a distance of so and so. In this space an electron is placed at a specific location at rest. If the electron is released, how long will it take for it to land on the positive plate?” A nice drawing was provided giving all the specifics.

Am I in the right exam? This is basic physics and our test is about electricity?? Panic struck and I muddled through the test putting down as much stuff as I could with the elegance of a blacksmith.

Next class the graded exams were distributed to our small recitation section. Prior to passing out the tests, the professor said that his section had done quite well and wrote the number who had scored in each decile with the last category with one score in the 40s. I peeked in my booklet and sure enough, it was staring up at me. More panic set in. I must be that occasional student they let in just to see if he can survive.

Well, MIT had a place for me and thirty others in my overall class. A watered-down problem-solving experience to get the basics. Into the room limped the professor who was charged with keeping us from jumping into the Charles River. His name was Dr. Philip Morrison, unknown me, but a former integral member of the Manhattan Project during WWII, Here he was, twenty years later after the atomic bombs being dropped on Japan to help some students regain their footing.

The characteristic that was most engaging by Prof. Morrison was the excitement that he exuded when he explained how something worked. He was explaining how an object could be travelling at a constant speed in a circle and it would actually be accelerating because it was changing its direction. His eyes sparkled, his voice rose as if he had right there been Archimedes when he exclaimed, “Eureka!” and ran naked through the streets of Athens. Every class was like this. Discovery after discovery for us, old hat to him. ***I experienced the contagion of enthusiasm from the teacher to the student and how that made all the difference.***

Over my years of teaching, I have tried my very best to show enthusiasm and excitement whenever feasible in a classroom.