

PEACE BEGINS WITH A CHILD

I am a teacher so I think in terms of educating a child. A child who enters this world is “tabula rasa” – like a blank slate. Have you ever interacted with a baby sitting in a supermarket cart, right in front of you? Personally, I can’t resist smiling at one and waving, and inevitably, all the babies I wave to will look back at me wide eyed with curiosity and embrace me with a smile on their face. But as a child grows, she begins to experience the world through her parents, extended family, teachers and other significant others. Sadly, this openness can diminish in some over time, replaced by fears and prejudices they pick up along the way.

As I reminisce about my childhood, I recall with gratitude my early experiences in a multi-cultural environment. Chinese from Malaysia grow up in a rather culturally diverse environment, somewhat like California, where I now live. As a child, I awoke daily to the sound of muslim prayers broadcasted over the loudspeakers of the town mosque near my home. Till today, the sound of muslim prayers or Arabic words do not evoke images of terrorism as they do for some, but rather, of home where I grew up. At school, we spoke only the common language, English, regardless of our racial background. That common language, I believe, was a huge integrating factor – it made us all the same, there were no secret messages whispered in small racial groups. I did not divide my friends into racial groups. They were simply Habibah, Mejinder, Rachel (who happens to be an Indian Christian) or Eng Kim. My mother let me visit all of my friends with no restrictions based on race (only time – of day, that is), and I ate at their homes, trying out each of their unique ethnic foods, and now have a palette that appreciates a wide variety of foods from around the world!

My mother, who loved baking, frequently had me deliver cakes she baked, to my neighbors, who were mostly Malays. That’s because she shared a common passion with the Malay women – cooking! As for dad, I remember his friends in our home; it felt like the United Nations (looking back) at my house. Friends with names like Rajadurai, Chow, Hamsah (all real daddy’s friends’ names) sat and chatted in our living room. Whereas dad spoke English and two Chinese languages regularly, he also learned to make speeches in formal Malay in his middle age as he had to present speeches as a government official.

While my parents did not consciously think of creating an environment of non-prejudice for me and my siblings, they accidentally created such an environment for me! They lived in such an environment and integration was as natural as breathing and it was the same for me. From birth, my “empty brain” was filled with memories of faces, names, foods, smells and images of so many cultures and it felt so rich, so “right.” To this day, I find it hard to hear someone criticize

people of different cultures in a berating tone. I feel as if I am a part of all of these cultures. They have all become a part of me. When they are criticized, I almost feel it personally. I'm uncomfortable with the idea of being "tolerant" of others' differences. Rather, I prefer to think in terms of cherishing our differences – it's what makes the human race interesting!

Unfortunately, as an adult, I seem to find it harder and harder to find a voluntary multi-cultural environment. I often see people choosing to be friends with only those who look and speak like them, including most of my relatives. I feel saddened because I feel so much is lost when people only keep to what's familiar and comfortable. It's like living in a black and white world when one could be in a world of color! Prejudices seem to abound in the adult world. I did not see it as a child, but now I see it. I often long for the purity of affections I felt among my multi cultural environment in my childhood. To this day, those deeply ingrained feelings help me to see the world through the eyes of others.

Hence I truly believe that for all peoples on this earth to coexist peacefully, we must provide opportunities for young children to be friends with people of many ethnic groups, and learn to see the world from other perspectives, not only one's own. And if such opportunities are impossible because of where they live, young children can still be educated through the media, books and schools. While parents should be at the forefront of such an effort, yet they are themselves often very much prejudiced, and unable to effectively do this. My parents were not without their prejudices. Fortunately, they did not let this prevent me from mixing freely with others and forming my own opinions. But ultimately, I believe the burden of a more objective education and providing opportunities for direct contact with other ethnic groups may fall upon educational institutions.

It's easy to destroy and hurt those we fear and do not understand, but much more difficult to hurt those we empathize with or feel a part of. When we are able to see that when we destroy or hurt others, we hurt only ourselves, then we will be less likely to do it. I believe this to be the key to peace – both the ability to see the world through the eyes of another and the understanding that ultimately, we are all a part of the same whole.