

The Prison of Prejudice 8-25-17

Usually prejudice is harmful. Someone is wronged by someone else's pre-judgement. It is derived from the Latin *praejudicium*, *prae* meaning "in advance" and *judicium* meaning "judgement". No one likes to be pre-judged.

I can think of one time in my insulated, protected and even privileged life when I was prejudged and I decided it would not hurt me. I was in my mid-thirties when I returned to college. Being the oldest in class was an interesting experience. Sometimes I was not liked because I did well in my classes. I didn't do well because I was any more intelligent. I did well because I was motivated to do so. That wasn't the notable instance of prejudice, though; those people simply did not like me for what they saw me do. They experienced that, while prejudice often has no experiential basis.

The memorable act of prejudice was in a class where the teacher wanted us to share information about our lives. Usually I kept my private life circumstances to myself. However, I decided I could answer the question of "How many children do you have?" The answers were called out around the room. "None, One, two, none, two." Then it was my turn. "Six." "Six?", many echoed with incredulity.

A young woman sitting near me said, "Ah, you are one of those stay at home moms with a nanny and your husband makes a lot of money and you can do whatever you want." I smiled and said, "Yeah, something like that." I was divorced and on AFDC, (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), and using food stamps. Her pre-judging of me did not hurt me. I had the privilege of feeling sorry for her for being so quick to assume.

For others, however, prejudice is a daily and constant impact on their lives. It is a force I can barely imagine because I don't live it. Prejudice is certainly a public health problem for all of society. The victims of pre-judgements are also the victims of discrimination. Both prejudice and discrimination are not based on actual experiences, for, by the very nature of pre-judging, the discriminatory actions are based on color, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or some other aspect of life that has nothing to do with the one doing the judging. Even when someone has a negative experience with an individual, it is not logical or fair to judge a group by the actions of an individual.

My protected childhood in South Weymouth offered no examples of prejudice (that I saw or experienced) and I was fortunate enough to have parents without a prejudiced bone in their bodies. My father did have a desire to understand it though. He would sometimes arrive home from his work, where he flew a plane out of Logan airport, and would tell the story of how he asked a Mormon why blacks could not be priests and the answer was something along the lines of, “Well, we don’t know but God must know why.” (This story was well before the revelation that someone had in 1978 that would allow black people to be priests.) I respected and loved my father for asking the question and his ability to remain civil in this discourse of inquiry. That quality and ability goes a long way toward preventing animosity. It was not his mission to change someone’s thinking. It was his mission to understand the thinking.

If you have read this column up to this point, you may have pre-judged me by assuming recent events in the news have initiated this line of thinking. It was watching the Marlon Brando movie *Sayonara* that triggered my memories and caused the topic to surface. When the US Air Force Major Gruver (played by Marlon Brando) finds himself falling in love with a beautiful and famous Japanese dancer, he is forced to face his own previously held belief that US service men should not marry Japanese women. It won four Oscars for good reason. The movie has tragedy and tragic lessons. Before the tragedies present, it entertains along the way, as people struggle to understand ways different from their own.

Hana-ogi, Major Gruver’s girlfriend says, “I’m so frightened and confused. I cannot think. I cannot even understand your thinking.

Admitting that you can’t understand someone else’s thinking is a good start toward understanding their thinking!

Major Gruver’s thinking and feeling slowly changes as he experiences other ways of looking at life. I loved the scene about the rocks.

Hana-ogi: [*pointing to some large rocks right off the seashore*] You see the rope between the rocks?

Major Gruver: Yeah?

Hana-ogi: That is a Shinto sign, showing they are married.

Major Gruver: [*slightly confused*] What, the rocks?

Hana-ogi: Yes... they've been together so long, our people thought it was time they should get married. They look well together, don't you think?

Major Gruver: Yeah, they make a handsome little couple!

He is not understood, though when he tries to share his new perspective.

Major Gruver: You know what I saw yesterday? I saw two rocks that just got married.

Captain Bailey: [*slightly confused*] You what?

Major Gruver: I saw two rocks that got married. And they looked very happy together, too.

Captain Bailey: Oh, I'll bet they did.

Those two rocks could represent my niece and her female partner who will soon marry. They look very happy together. May they never feel imprisoned.

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