

Along the track

The Richness of Diversity

After being removed from his birth parents at three years of age, Australian Musician, Composer and Singer, Archie Roach lived with three different foster families. He particularly loved being a part of the third family, a Scottish family called Cox. In an interview I read recently, he was asked: 'When did you see yourself as different?' 'Never', Archie said, 'until I walked home with a mate after school one afternoon. I'd grown up with him at school. I took him to meet Mum and Dad who were white people. We were walking back to his place, he stopped and said: "How come your parents are white, Archie?" I said: "What do you mean?" He said, "Well you're black." "That's the first time anyone called me black. And from then on I thought, I think he's right. This is interesting." So I went home and asked my Dad, "Am I black?" He said: "Who told you that?" "Well, my mate who was just here". He said, "Where does he live, I want to speak to his father!" He was going down to have an argument with him.

On the same day I read that interview, a photo appeared picturing two five year old boys, one black, one white who had their hair cut exactly the same so that their teacher would not be able to tell them apart!

We are not born with any sense of being different, being superior or otherwise. We are not born with prejudice, it is not inherited. It is learned from others. The learning of prejudice is a complicated matter and it takes a long time. We have to work at it. Children, for example, may begin to grasp the concept that some children are different from them, but that is more a matter of curiosity than anything else. Children get their first hint of what prejudice really means from language, the way adults speak about others, from their words loaded with emotional impact that can wound theirs or others fragile self-esteem. But it takes children time to learn to whom these words refer and to completely understand why others reject or even hate these people. How we speak about others conveys a very, very powerful message.

Prejudice is defined as preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience. So much prejudice is 'unreasonable', not based on people we actually know, rather it is based on conjecture or what we imagine the case to be. All

sorts of things contribute to our suspicion of others, mostly though it is ignorance of who they are, what they may believe or why they act as they do.

"You're an aboriginal," Archie's foster father told him. "You are the first people of this country. You were here long before anyone else. We just came after you people". And Archie said, it made him feel proud of that. "He had this wonderful way, because he's a Scotsman, he had this wonderful way of talking about his culture, he spoke Scottish Gaelic and he was very passionate, he loved sharing his stories. So I became interested in my culture and my stories."

Our words can bring unity and harmony, in the sharing of our stories. Our words, our stories can invite us curiosity, a desire to know more, to understanding or we can just let others do our thinking for us and follow the mob. We can give in to fear born of a lack of knowledge or sympathy of the other's ways or we can reach out and welcome people into our space. It is our choice.

In the words of Pope Francis:

"It is precisely to the extent that we open ourselves to others that life becomes fruitful, society regains peace and people recover their full dignity."

Dear brothers and sisters, do not fall into the trap of closing in on ourselves, indifferent to the needs of brothers and worried only about our own interests."

Dismantling the barriers of the world begins in the home, turning a prejudiced world around, one heart at a time.

I'll leave the last word to Archie. "We are all part of each other's stories. You have to acknowledge that you can't have one story without the other, they are all important if you want to have peace."

Regards
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