

The Beauty of Babel:

BYM Demographics Survey allows us to engage in important conversation around identity and community.

Jesus, as a teacher, was very clever. He often took conflicting ideas, spiritual quandaries, impasses...and by simply shifting perspective, made them into life-affirming opportunities. In the story of “casting stones”, for instance, Pharisees come to Jesus with a yes or no question. A woman has committed adultery and the law says she should be stoned to death. Jesus believes in peace, but also in upholding laws so they are addressing this seeming contradiction. The setup is very black and white. But with a quick turn of wit, Jesus shifts the whole framework. Like any good Quaker might, he turns this binary into a query, answering: “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” Now we are no longer arguing about right and wrong. We are reflecting about compassion, accountability, and community. In my discussions around BYM’s demographics survey, I have often thought of this example and what it has to teach us.

In the past two years, as part of our Growing Diverse Leadership initiative, BYM has begun collecting information on a broader range of ages and on racial/ethnic identity as part of our ongoing demographics survey. As we strive to make the Yearly Meeting more inclusive of and supportive to young adults and people of color, this data enables us to get a picture of our current levels of participation and to see the effects of our efforts over time. However these topics are not always easy to talk about. And while many have seen the significance of gathering this information, others have also raised concerns about possible divisiveness.

Race, now proven to be a biologically arbitrary means of categorizing people by certain physical attributes, has long been used to divide and rank people. Ethnicity, a sociological/ anthropological grouping of people by cultural markers, has also been misused to denigrate. So it’s not surprising that many of us have had negative experiences with talking about these identities. Sometimes being the target of or witnessing prejudice made us feel that identity is dangerous business. Sometimes the negative experience was more subtle like an unexpected look of disapproval from a parent when you commented on someone’s skin color as a child or everyone tensing at a dinner party when you brought up a racial incident in the news. These moments can leave us with a feeling that acknowledging racial or ethnic identities is rude, hurtful, shameful, or just plain wrong.

We were all hurt by a system that told us we had to be separated by our differences and now we get to stand up together against that separation. But here comes the twist. We cannot truly stand up against division and injustice without acknowledging both real cultural differences and different experiences based on how we have been labeled.

If this seems counterintuitive, consider this: research suggests that acknowledging racial/ethnic identity leads to less bias in members of the majority group and better mental health outcomes for people in minority groups than does ignoring race or “colorblindness.”¹ ² As Michelle Alexander, author of The New Jim Crow writes: “Saying that one does not care about race is offered as an exculpatory virtue, when in fact it can be a form of cruelty... Our blindness also prevents us from seeing the racial and structural divisions that persist in society ...We have become blind, not so much to race, but to the existence of racial caste in America.”

The Black Lives Matter movement provides a perfect example. If policing agencies took a color-blind approach to keeping records (deciding not to include information on racial and ethnic identities of victims of police violence) there would be no way to prove or bring attention to the disproportionate use of force against Black

¹ “Colorblindness is the racial ideology that posits the best way to end discrimination is by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity.”

² Holoien et al., 2011 as quoted in “Colorblind Ideology is a Form of Racism”, Psychology Today, Williams, Monica. Dec 2011. www.psychologytoday.com

and Brown people. Whether looking at health outcomes, education, effects of global warming etc., almost every group working for change in the world relies on such statistics to help them discern and communicate a way forward.

Furthermore, it's important to note that how people feel about the significance of their racial/ethnic identity can itself be shaped by the ways in which they identify. For instance, a study of Americans showed that 68% of African Americans and 49% of Hispanic people ranked their racial identity as "Very important" to them, while only 17% of White Americans did so. If you combine "very important" and "somewhat important" that becomes %86 of African Americans and 87% of Hispanic people³. For people who feel their racial or ethnic identity is important to them, or has a significant impact on their lives, ignoring or avoiding it can be very hurtful. It is the bristle at the dinner party that can inadvertently say: your difference is uncomfortable for me, don't bring that here. In a mostly Caucasian environment specifically, "seeing everyone the same" can too often mean "seeing everyone as White" and encouraging them to behave as such. The problem with color-blindness is that if you are blind to any part of a person's identity or experience, then you can never see them fully.

We want unity and to acknowledge our common humanity. And we also recognize that ignoring or avoiding discussion of racial and ethnic identity can be counterproductive at best, oppressive and hurtful at worst. So

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what do we do with this apparent contradiction? I believe, through the lens of Spirit, we can find a frame that allows for a third option that is truly life-affirming. As Bayard Rustin said: "To be afraid is to pretend that the truth is not true." So let us look at truth. The truth is, we are not all the same. And that's ok. In fact, it's beyond ok. It's precisely what points us more fully toward Spirit.

Michelle Alexander suggests it may even be a relief to let go of the energy we spend on the unlikely goal of not seeing what is all around us and instead to put that energy toward a goal that is within all of our reach right now. She writes: "The colorblindness ideal is premised on the notion that we, as a society, can never be trusted to see race and treat each other fairly or with genuine compassion. A commitment to color consciousness, by contrast, places faith in our capacity as humans to show care and concern for others, even as we are fully cognizant of race and possible racial differences."

A year ago, a new narrative of the tower of Babel came fully formed into my mind. In the original telling the people of Babel have been told to multiply and spread out over the world, but instead they all stay together and try to build a tower so tall that it will reach the kingdom of heaven. God looks down on this and is not pleased, so Ze⁴ makes them all speak different languages and they scatter across the earth. I have always heard this story interpreted as a cautionary tale about a prideful people and a punishing God. But what if this wasn't the purpose at all. What if God is looking at this striving group of people and offering them guidance. What if Ze is saying: "You don't create the Kingdom by all being the same, by separating yourselves from the earth, and by trying to lift yourselves above all others. You reach the Kingdom by developing a wide variety of ways to speak about things, by spreading out across the world and developing different perspectives." Perhaps God is telling us that no one person, group, or culture could possibly capture the full complexity of Spirit. So we need people from the desert and people from the rainforests, people who speak tonal languages and people who speak sign-language, people who understand deprivation, and people whose material comfort have allowed the free space

³ YouGov, March 2015, NOTE: Though the experiences of people of other racial/ethnic backgrounds are important to us as an organization, statistics were unfortunately not available beyond African-American, White, and Hispanic.

⁴ Since I believe God/Spirit/the Light is neither male nor female, I have taken to using the gender neutral terms "Ze" and "Hir" in my humanized descriptions. Try it on while reading this and/or feel free to fill in the pronoun you are most comfortable with.

to explore other things. What if the great diversity God creates in this moment isn't a punishment, but a gift, a tool, a finger pointing towards a greater relationship with Spirit.

We are not called to diversity because it is fashionable or politically correct. We are not called simply because it makes our organization more vital, relevant, and sustainable, or because (as research shows) organizations with greater diversity increase the intelligence, creativity, problem-solving, and leadership ability of their members--although all these things are true. We are called to diversity, to equity and inclusion because that is how we live in right relationship with Spirit.

Yes, we are different. We have been scattered across the world and we have come together speaking different languages (literally and figuratively) with different life experiences and different perspectives. But what if we didn't have to be afraid of those differences or hide from them. What if we got to embrace those differences as part of the plan and understand that we can be different and united at the same time. We can be different and share commonalities at the same time. We can be different and love each other at the same time. Because the beauty of Babel was never the tower. It was getting to see the true face of God in all of our wondrous variety.

For more information on the demographics survey, including FAQs, please see link at the Growing Diverse Leadership Page of the BYM website at www.bym-rsf.org.