

Human beings assume things about others. We judge others based on what we see and tend to shy away from differences. We do it everyday. And for most of us, our days fly by in a blur, making it more difficult to understand when and why we commit these unhealthy actions. Making judgments can be unhealthy because they can turn into malicious assumptions that lead to neglect. By stopping our autopilot, we can take a newer and closer look at someone or something. We have an opportunity to re-frame our perceptions. While some assumptions can be helpful, others can be counter productive and can hold you back from allowing you to understand the world through someone else's eyes. Being able to see the world through another person's perspective is a very valuable skill because it can open greater doors for equity. Assumptions can result in passing judgment on someone else's behavior only because it differs from yours. This pattern is a vicious cycle of criticism based on how we perceive each other and instead of embracing differences; we end up having a cynical view of them. Wade Davis once said, "The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you: they are unique manifestations of the human spirit."

I have encountered experiences throughout my life that have altered and improved how I view people who are different than me. My background has allowed me to come closer in understanding the struggle others endure everyday of their lives. At a young age, I was very aware of the differences that surrounded me: my cream colored arm next to a brown colored arm on the bus, the sleek straightness of a blonde girl's hair in front of me in class, women of different cultures wearing traditional head scarves in the isles of the grocery store. I would always note the various herbs and spices in other people's homes. These distinctions are exterior identifiers and offer little insight into who these people are. Experiences like these have led me to ask the question of how we can suspend judgment and approach differences in physical appearance, ability, cultures and beliefs in order to accept and connect with one another?

As a child you don't see difference, sure you see people that look and act differently from each other, but at a young age your initial response is not to put a label on it. That's how I remember being when I was around eight or nine years old. I have a cousin named Ruba, she's a year and some months younger than me and two grades below me. When we were younger, Ruba and I would always play together. My aunt, her mother, would often politely ask me to teach her a game to just keep her company. I'd be more than happy to do so when she asked, I saw it as a good opportunity to potentially have fun. Sometimes I'd get frustrated with Ruba because of something childish, like not giving me the dice back to roll my turn or her not being interested in playing what I wanted to play. That's the only reason that I could really remember not wanting to play with her and when her mom asked me to play with her the next time I wasn't really interested. That gave my aunt the reason flag to give me "the talk" about my younger cousin. My aunt walked me upstairs, away from all the noisy relatives, and told me about Ruba. She explained to me that Ruba was a little different than me. She told me that she had a difficult time walking but could do everything I was able to do; it just took her longer to learn how to do it. I never thought of Ruba as different, I knew she was like me and that wasn't going to change. My aunt asked me to help out with Ruba when I had the chance, and because she knew I could handle the responsibility. As a few years went by I had been spending a lot of time with my aunt and Ruba during the summers. I would go with my aunt to run all her errands, which included taking Ruba to different physical therapy sessions and classes. The places we went to for Ruba's classes had people who were extremely kind and cheerful toward her, they loved her, it's somewhat impossible not to. When we picked her up from physical therapy we would usually go grocery shopping or grab a bite to eat. It's hard not to notice, even at age eleven, that people are

staring. Quick glances from the corner of their eyes to full-on examinations, I could feel people looking. I always found it so odd how people acted, it was like they lost all sense of how to live in civil society. I found myself resisting the urge to scream in their faces and not make a scene myself. How could people be so cruel? Do they not have a sense of common courtesy? People stare for many reasons jealousy, amusement, curiosity and even disapproval. It doesn't feel welcoming to be scrutinized; it feels like you are a lab animal being put under a vicious experiment. I truly didn't understand it. Some people were worse than others, and there were people who thought they were doing the right thing by staring with pity and empathy. When people looked at Ruba, I looked at her too; all she had was a smile on her face, bright blue happy eyes and a bounce to her walk. She didn't seem to mind others, and as I looked at my aunt she had the same look on her face: happy as could be. This all just made me confused, so I went to my mother for advice. I asked her why people stared at Ruba, and she said because people don't know her situation and when people see something they're unaware of it brings to them a sense of fear. My mom made it clear to me that people weren't afraid of Ruba; they were just unfamiliar with the way she appeared and acted. Then she asked me why I cared so much about what people thought and I guess I didn't have an answer. What I began to understand after that talk with my mom was, "who cares if people stared?" "Who cares if people felt sympathy or even pity for Ruba?" They will never know what that beautiful girl is fighting for and they will never come to know who that girl is. She's one of the brightest and strongest people I know and if anyone knows Ruba as a person they will say the same. The truth is it doesn't matter what a person appears to be from the outside, because assuming and judging to an unreasonable extent is counter productive to getting closer to an individual. I once saw this man with his son, my family and I were in a long line waiting to board a boat to see the Statue of Liberty in New York, and the man was in line ahead of me. As I was observing this man I noticed that he could not help, but to twitch and flail his arms, my initial thought was that there was something wrong with. I had now been staring at this man absent-mindedly for a while now and forced myself to turn around because I understand what it feels like to be stared at. Before, when I saw the man I was surprised that he was jumping around, but when I turned around to look again it occurred to me that this man had a syndrome along the lines of Turrets. Now I was feeling something new, a feeling of guilt. I was upset at myself for staring at this man because he looked different. I began to think of Ruba and what made the situation that I was in then different than when I would go out with her. There was no difference; I was acting as a hypocrite who'd been looking in from the outside. It's hard to be someone who doesn't believe in judging another being based on appearance, but it's even harder to not engage in this act, because the truth of the matter is everyone does it; whether we realize it or not. Which is why in order for humans to co-exist with one another we must educate ourselves about people's differences.

Wade Davis, an educated anthropologist and botanist whom has traveled the world and has lived among fifteen indigenous groups in eight Latin American nations, believes that the world in which we live in is one model of reality, and does not exist in the absolute sense¹. Meaning that we are not something that can only depend on itself in order to survive. We are the opposite, we rely on each other to teach and learn from one another. The way we live is just a consequence of a set of particular sequence of choices that we have adopted over the years, which would mean various cultures and various places on the globe would differ greatly from

¹ "Wade Davis: Dreams from Endangered Cultures." *TED: Ideas worth Spreading*. Web. 06 May 2012. <http://www.ted.com/talks/wade_davis_on_endangered_cultures.html>.

one another. In fact we are all diverse people with different ways of being that make up the sum total of the world's cultures. Davis poses a question of, "Do we want to live in a monochromatic world of monotony or do we want to embrace a polychromatic world of diversity?" This question bares an obvious answer, but do our daily behavior reflect that? When we walk down the street and see a young man with a different colored skin tone as us, we immediately cross the street to the other side. Does that send a message that we welcome difference, or just show the truth of how we forbid it? The fear of "The Other," also known as Xenophobia², is discrimination against and hatred of foreigners. *Xeno-* meaning "alien," "strange," "guest," and *Phobia-* a persistent, irrational fear of a specific object that leads to a compelling desire to avoid it; targets outsiders often those who are in effect part of one's own society but are perceived as different from the majority of the population. Rather than exiling difference between individuals we should embrace our rich *ethnosphere*³ in order to learn from one another and, as a result, understand one another. "*Ethnosphere*" is Wade Davis's word for the imaginative contributions of humanity to the planet.

We all view the world through the lens of our personal biases and stereotypes; it is an unavoidable fact of our nature as human beings. Although there are extents to where these assumptions can be hurtful, there is indeed truth in our biases and stereotypes. We have the power as individuals to make these personal sets of values based on our assumptions in order to make sense of this ever-expanding world we live in. Despite the fact that at times our assumptions can be off and perceptions can be skewed, it is part of the predicament of being human. We cannot avoid the fact that each and every one of us engages in forming biases and stereotypes based on our experiences. We are allowed to form perceptions, but not to jump to make conclusions about a person's innate value. It is in our power to seek to understand how others are different and why; and we should be able to leave enough space for our perceptions to change where and when it is right to do so.⁴ A great part of making assumptions is based on the fact that we do not understand the subject completely and in order to coexist we should make it a point to hear the other person's perspective, and learn from them. Start by asking yourself if you are truly listening to the other person, or if you are hearing just enough to make a rebuttal. Ask yourself what you are not hearing, then suspend judgments. Ask clarifying questions when you don't understand, and give respect to everyone. When confronted with someone who has a very different worldview, giving him or her respect may challenge us in a way that could make us uncomfortable; regardless, maintain an open mind and acknowledge his or her perspective. Last, embrace change; do not fear it. If you find yourself shying away from it, ask yourself how it can be transformed into a positive.

We live in a world of diversity, which will continue to change in ways we cannot fathom. We are all different in an unimaginable number of ways, but we all aim toward one goal: To exist in a world where everyone is accepted and appreciated. We wish to exist in a world that is not centered on hate, but revolves around acceptance. It is the best thing each and every one of us can contribute to in order to coexist peacefully because, as Vincent Van Gough once said, "there is nothing more truly artistic than to love people."

² "Xenophobia." *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. 2008. *Encyclopedia.com*. 6 May. 2012 <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

³ "Tales of the Ethnosphere." *Utne Reader*. Web. 06 May 2012. <<http://www.utne.com/2004-03-01/Tales-of-the-Ethnosphere.aspx>>.

⁴ "Perceptions, Biases, & Stereotypes: Accepting Differences in Thinking in Business & Life." *The Frugal Entrepreneur*. Web. 06 May 2012.