

It Isn't Easy...
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This article was inspired by a letter in the World Tribune from Robin Azi of Richmond, Calif. ("Mailbox," March 7). She questioned the absence of published experiences by Caucasian and Japanese members about overcoming their biases against people with other ethnic backgrounds. I appreciate and respect her sincere expression of concern and offer this experience in response.

Speaking publicly about bigotry can be very difficult for Caucasians. We experience guilt about the past treatment of minorities in this country. It's hard not to feel that most minorities are viewing us with a certain amount of anger and suspicion.

Who are we to speak about such a subject? What do we know about being persecuted? About being followed around in a store because of our skin color?

We're also afraid of being misunderstood or accidentally saying something wrong. For instance, we're not sure if we should say "African-American" or "Black," "Chinese American" or "Chinese." Or even what we should call ourselves!

Hopefully, all of us can use our Buddhist organization as a place to explore and then overcome these fears. A place where we can discuss our differences, appreciate our similarities and learn how to encourage — as opposed to discourage — each other. It's hard work.

But we'll never create a peaceful world or even achieve our individual happiness if we avoid communicating with people from different backgrounds. That's really avoiding our human revolution.

I've thought a lot over the years about ethnic and racial prejudice. My Jewish parents, to my sorrow, sometimes behaved in a racist manner. This is ironic considering that the Jewish people have suffered much persecution themselves.

My parents never admitted they were prejudiced. I specifically recall confronting them in the late '60s about the way they viewed people of other ethnic backgrounds. They took exception to my accusations, insisting that they treated all people with respect. And, intellectually, I'm sure they believed this to be true. But their actions betrayed them.

In 1966, I had a crush on a girl named Teresa. We were in the 10th grade. She was a statuesque black girl with big, beautiful eyes. We flirted for a few months until I got up the courage to ask her out. I decided it would be a great idea for Teresa to meet my mother.

My mother was so excited that I finally had a girlfriend and that I wanted them to meet. So in we walked. I called out to my mother, "Mom." She came into the living room, took one look at Terry's color and ran into her bedroom crying hysterically. Terry was, justifiably so, extremely upset and had me take her home.

Both my parents have died, so I can't ask them why they thought the way they did. My mother grew up in New York and was one of the Radio City Hall Rockette dancers. The daughter of an immigrant carpenter, she had this obsessive vision of me, her youngest son, growing up to be a successful eye doctor with a Caucasian-Jewish wife. So I guess the thought of me with someone from a different background was more than she could handle.

My father grew up in the South and, like his father, held a very narrow view of the world. He didn't trust people who were different. And he disguised his fear with thinly veiled humor. Of course, ethnic jokes have been around since before I was born. But I've come to realize that this insidious humor can subconsciously contribute to impressionable children growing into prejudiced adults.

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When my mom died in the mid-'80s, my father moved from Los Angeles to Richmond, Va. I can vividly remember taking him to see a movie a few years ago. He made a derogatory remark as we passed a mixed-race couple. And my daughters were incredulous. But he couldn't understand their discomfort. While I respected him as a human being and my father, his attitude towards minorities left a lot to be desired and little to emulate.

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is based on the premise that all human beings are essentially equal and deserving of the utmost respect. I firmly believe this to be true. One of Shakyamuni Buddha's most impressive disciples was Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. He spent almost his entire life greeting every person he encountered with complete respect, regardless of their condition or how they might have treated him. In my ideal world, we would all be race- and color-blind. Yet, in my real world, I have had to confront and overcome many of my own stereotypes of people of other races.

About two years ago, I finally determined to stop disparaging Japanese members. That wasn't easy. Members who joined the SGI in Japan seemed to have a different perspective on the practice than I did. Their approach to dealing with issues was more indirect than mine.

And I viewed their tendency toward formality and rigid interpretation of certain aspects of the practice as incompatible with my more laissez-faire approach. Eventually, I came to realize that my concept of laissez-faire too often meant lazy-fair and that the reason I was practicing with them was because there was much for us to learn from one another.

My co-district leader, Michiko, and I have made significant progress in developing a deep respect for each other. This was only accomplished through painful dialogue and abundant chanting. I really had to want to change for this to happen. I had always felt that Japanese-born women's division members believed Americans to have weak faith, that our suffering and dedication for world peace were somehow less severe or sincere than theirs.

They also seemed unable to be flexible in different situations, giving strict guidance at every occasion. On the other hand, their dedication to helping every member, even ones who didn't want to be helped, was inspiring. My lack of consistency in helping others caused me to be uncomfortable with this...to feel pressured.

From the beginning of my practice, I have sensed an invisible wall between the Japanese- and American-born members. And though the wall has become thinner over the years, I was still afraid to discuss these issues. It was much easier to believe it was her fault, that I was too busy or that she would be angry with me if I told her how I really felt.

It was only after we spent many hours together appreciating each other's struggles and sincerity that we transcended our differences and misunderstandings and developed strong unity. I discovered, to my surprise, that she was just as frustrated as I was. And, that like me, she really wanted to change. Once we deeply realized that we both had faced difficulties in our lives, that both of us had sincere intentions, we could begin to concentrate on our common goals and dreams and less on our differences.

Our closeness has resulted in measurable growth in our district. My faith is much stronger because of her. Now I can truly say she is a friend for life. A few years ago I would have declared this impossible.

I think perhaps the only way to really overcome our fear of others is to get to know one another as individuals...to understand our differences and similarities, our sufferings and dreams, and, yes, even our weaknesses. This takes real effort. But most meaningful things do.

SGI President Ikeda has pointed out that while destruction can take place in only a moment, construction requires a tremendous struggle. The same can be said for overcoming prejudice. Taking the time to communicate honestly with the people around us is essential to our human development. So is working on becoming more like Bodhisattva Never Disparaging — it isn't easy, but it's definitely worth doing.

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