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"What Kind of Name is That?"

by T. Chedgszey Smith

In discussing being "different," I always find the best place to begin is with my name; it is Chedgszey (pronounced "ched-zee") Smith. When I'm asked my name, my response is always met with either a chuckle or the question, "What kind of name is that?" I guess that it was about the time I was able to answer the question "What's your name?" that I began to understand that I was "different," at least in the perception of most others.

I am biracial. My mother is of Russian and Welsh decent. The name Chedgzsey is her mother's maiden name. My father is African American. My name, in many ways, represents who I am and how I think of myself: in some respects very unusual, and in others quite ordinary.

I come from a family in which diversity is the norm. My only cousins are biracial: White/Japanese. There are Christians and Jews, Mormons and Buddhists, not to mention a few agnostics and atheists in my immediate family. I was raised eating borscht, with cornbread and tofu on the side. As a child growing up, I was surrounded by, and imbued with, the idea that differences are something to be celebrated and treasured. I love this about myself, my family, and who I am. I have come to see this "difference" as a great advantage I have in life. There is a certain freedom in not having to worry about being the same or fitting in. Who else is there like me? Who is really that different? I have been in a room with a hundred other people and felt absolutely comfortable being the only person who was not Asian. What I have come to understand through my early life experiences is that, while I am different from others in a variety of ways, as human beings we share many things as well. My aunt, my cousins, my family are Japanese; they are a part of me and I of them. While I may have been different in appearance in that room, I shared something with the people there.

This is not to say that there have not been times when I wished I weren't different, when sameness was a utopian fantasy for me. As a college freshman, I was confronted with the difficulty of being a minority student on a predominately White campus, in a predominately White area. During my first week on campus, as I walked down the street, a car drove by. The inhabitants leaned out the window and yelled "Nigger." I looked around and realized I was the only person on the street — and that they were talking to me. Once my initial shock subsided, I became angry. It is painful to me that, in this country, it is almost un-American to feel good about being, or to respect and admire, an African American. When I think of this incident now, I am pleased with the fact that my initial response to this experience was to look around and wonder whom these roving racists were talking to. I am pleased that my mother raised me in such a way that I in no way identified with their racist view of African Americans.

As I have grown (and supposedly matured), I have come to realize that the American view of difference is to see it as a deficit. Most of us are inculturated to believe that being like the "majority" is better than anything else. For people who have adopted this way of thinking, a variety of "sins" result. For such people, the only way to feel good about themselves is to stand on the perceived differences of others. I am better because I am White (racism). I am better because I am male (sexism). I am better because I am young (ageism). I am better because I am rich, able-bodied, heterosexual, beautiful.... I am better than someone else, so now I can feel good about being me. Consequently, those of us who are labeled "different" may have a harder time in life. Perhaps holding another view of differences is what makes me most different. If so, it is a difference I am most thankful for. I can feel good about being me, free from the need to denigrate others in order to support myself. When asked, "What kind of name is that?" I say, "It's mine and I like to think I'm as unique as it is."

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