

ON DIVERSITY: A Partial and Incomplete Wish List
http://www.tolerance.org/news/article_tol.jsp?id=680

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Jan. 17, 2003 -- The business of "diversity" has become quite a complicated thing, and frustrating, too, I am sometimes told. When in the company of those who don't know me, these complications and frustrations are reduced to hurt — hurt at the betrayal by those for whom enough has been done.

Where, I am asked, is that glow of perpetual gratitude that is supposed to shine off the sweat of our happy brows as we work the fields of academic life? We have been rewarded with entree into the now diverse academy. Equilibrium has been achieved. Why can't we act the part and just quiet down?

Sigh. I keep forgetting how important it is to play the role of the grateful on the stage of academic opportunity. Especially for the well meaning majority folks who in their own well intentioned way are always trying to help ... in my case with my spoken English, my expectations, my understanding of how things work — for everybody, all alike, all the same.

That is, until it's time to bring out the usual motley cast of diverse characters to perform for the institution's well meaning hosts. Even that is well intentioned. Who knew that as part of our duties in academia we were to meant to serve as resident members of our institution's "ballet folklorico?"

So, for this holiday season, I have decided to take to heart the message of the man who currently occupies the Presidency of the United States. He recently urged all of us to make the holidays a "season of service."

My service: a partial and incomplete list of instructions for our "mentors," "sponsors," "liberators," "helpers," "counselors" and "friends" who identify as members of groups who "open" the "door" to "diversity" "for" us:

- * "Diversity" is not a task one completes with the hire of a few darker-complected faces or off-accented voices; don't expect ever to finish the job.

- * The task of "diversity" is not yours to control; it is all of ours to share; please don't dictate terms to me or anyone.

- * Diversity is not limited to those communities favored or known by you; yesterday's slogans or political set speeches are not enough; there are a large number of vibrant,

growing, different and important communities now all part of the American family, all of whom must be acknowledged.

* Don't try to get into my head and on that basis make decisions as if you know what's in there; you do not know what I am thinking, what my ancestors went through, what I went through; however, you may listen.

* Don't ignore me; I am not an organ grinder's monkey hired to perform for you or for the entertainment of your friends, clients and customers.

* Don't presume that your language, cultural, educational or life skills are better; they are different.

* I am not a "but for" — but for "diversity" I would not be here; "but for" lack of diversity you might not be here.

* Reciting the appropriate mantras of diversity is not enough; if you tell me of your concern about the lack of sensitivity to issues of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. in (a) casebooks, (b) teaching, (c) writing, (d) whatever, and do nothing to change things, even only the things you control, what do you expect me to think? And don't be surprised if I think it out loud.

* Gender matters; numbers matter; especially where historical patterns suggest that what you say and what you are doing are not the same; if they didn't you wouldn't spend so much time counting us; the "laws" of "tipping" have been repealed.

* Look deep in your heart and stare at your face when you say things like, "I apply the same standards to all my colleagues," because if you don't believe it don't expect us to.

* Recite often: "This is not my father's law school." We may not write what you want to read, say things the way you want to hear them, teach things the way you were taught them, harvest knowledge in those fields you and your ancestors thought defined the entire universe of the possible; difference is not a proxy for lack of quality or merit.

* Help us teach our students the sort of mutual respect you insist is the basis of your relationship with us.

* Diversity is not merely our task, it is yours as well; don't run away when things happen or someone has been targeted on the basis of their race, sex, ethnicity, or when it is time to volunteer for some activity tinged with diversity "issues."

* We are eager to share; don't you be greedy; don't think to play one of us against another.

* All of us must be willing to practice what we preach; we want you to, just as we embrace this responsibility willingly, too.

* Be aware: Judging and evaluating is a two way street; we have been judging you, too.

Sigh, sigh, sigh, sigh.

I know I've missed something. Maybe you can help. Send me your suggestions and I will add them to the list. Share these with your friends.

If these simple rules were even partially internalized by our friends, there would be more progress made than possible in a whole book of reported cases and a mountain of judicial orders and legislative acts.

Here is something we can all do to serve our friends in a more useful way: Let's all vow that, starting with the new year, we will designate one or more days a month as "Take A Colleague to Lunch Day."

On those days, and in a spirit far more charitable than those in which such lunches were sometimes spread for many of us, we could offer to help our friends become all that they can be ... starting with the items on this list.

>> What are your wishes?

Professor Backer invites readers to share their own wish-list wishes.

E-mail him your ideas.