

Second Place Essay by Nathan French

Rochester, as many cities in New York and the United States are, is known to contain a myriad of ethnicities from all countries in the world. According to the 2000 Census, Rochester has more diversity and ethnic groups than any of the surrounding metropolitan areas (ERsys). This coming together of so many different backgrounds and cultures is bound to create tensions if there is no understanding; it is bound to create opposition if there is no cooperation; and tensions and opposition are bound to engender hatred if there is no change. But what is the change that is needed? What does it mean to “bridge” our differences? Is that what we really want, or is it just a temporary fix to a greater problem? I assert that is not the permanent change that is needed to help Rochester get over its cultural astigmatism. It is a start, however, what we really need in our community is not “bridging” of ethnicities’ differences, but celebration of those differences.

Let’s start with a definition of these terms, “bridging” and celebrating. “Bridging” is an interesting euphemism. I like to think that it means not truly good relations between the ethnic groups, but an acceptance of their presence. Two ethnicities whose differences have been “bridged” would not be openly antagonistic to each other, but would also feel no sense of camaraderie or friendship. This should not be the goal of those who wish to attain cooperation among the community. Rather, the goal should be to achieve a sense among these groups that while they have different cultures and backgrounds, they have one thing that is similar: they are Americans. Furthermore, they can celebrate their differences together as Americans, and recognize that it is this cultural mismatch that makes this country what it is. One opinion that substantiates this theme is a quote by Eric Liu in *Notes of a Native Speaker*: “America is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” The point he is elucidating here is that America is not the colonists who came here from England; America is the citizens that are now present, those of all nationalities and ethnic groups. Celebrate, then, is a more apt term to describe what is necessary in our community. It means not accepting that someone else is a citizen, but feeling a sense of connection with them. It is diversity that makes America what it is, so it should be diversity that makes people celebrate their differences and work together as one.

I myself have learned that celebrating differences is the only way to achieve a sense of community. Though I was born and raised in Boston for the first 6 years of my life, I spent the next 5 years in South Africa. This experience shaped my opinions of race, ethnicities, and cooperation among both of those. When I went to school, I experienced a sense of unity with the children of all the colors and origins. Perhaps it was simply that I felt nothing against any group, but it has always seemed odd to me that people would fight among themselves because of ethnicity or race. However, though I experienced this sense of unity with those children who I played with, I also saw the history of hatred etched in the countryside. Whites in South Africa, who come from Dutch descent, make up a tiny portion of the population. However, they still control about 80% of the farmland, 12 years after the end of the Apartheid (Wikipedia). A great legacy echoes throughout the land of an injustice that lasted far too long. The separation still exists, not legally, but in the townships, the population distribution, and simply the attitudes.

However, this legacy could only be seen among the adults. The children, who had never been taught to hate any of the other children, felt a sense of community and strength together as one. I remember one day sitting on a hill looking over a poverty-stricken black neighborhood and reflecting on the immense waste of life and happiness that was rooted in baseless hatred of one another. I decided that it would not be me who made these mistakes over again. From that day on, I was always friendly and amiable to all groups and races. For after all, when it comes to groups of people, the whole body when they cooperate is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

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Perhaps my experiences were not with an ethnic group, but it was certainly two groups that had no reason not to work together. It is the same idea here as it was there; it is the same idea with ethnicities as it was with race in post-Apartheid South Africa. It is only through strength together, not strength against one another, that a sense of community can be felt.

Rochester must start accepting what I have learned, that though ethnic groups have differences, they are all people, and so should feel a connection. They can feel this connection by admitting this fact and perhaps learning something of the other group's history. Since "bridging" differences is most likely the first step to celebrating them, this idea would help in that. Understanding would lead to this bridge in the differences. How this could be accomplished is perhaps museums and exhibits that hold answers about all cultures. However, from my experiences, the best approach would be education in acceptance. Children are innocent, and feel for the most part no hatred for others based on ethnicity. If this attitude could be harvested and encouraged, it might be that the next generation in Rochester is from a diverse array of backgrounds, but feels a strong sense of community nonetheless. It could even be that the children's attitudes, could lead to a change in the adults. Perhaps education of this type could go beyond just helping the children. If a child is friends with someone of a different ethnicity, it could create some understanding and cooperation between the parents. And every person that can be converted to this way of thinking is a battle won.

I therefore give forth my practical solution: education. Children are the key to a better future. It is our responsibility to educate them well and let them know how to deal with a world that is changing and evolving. America becomes increasingly ethnic and diverse day by day as immigrants pour into the country. They must be taught that this is not a time to separate, but a time to unite and feel togetherness with all other cultures. This sense of togetherness will not come overnight. It will be a long and possibly arduous, because there is no quick-fix solution to this problem. However, it is something that Rochester must go through if it is ever to feel a sense of community, celebrate its diversity as one, and build a stronger city that will be an example for others to follow.

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Sources

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