

Amy Helmendach

Diversity Contest

Implicit Bias

Entwined

When I was a child, I was in the kitchen exploring and learning while my mom was cooking. I curiously reached my hands above my head to the counter top and pulled a cup toward the edge of the surface. The cup edged closer and closer to the border of the countertop until pummeling down on my bare unscathed chest. This cup was full of scorching hot water my mom was using for dinner. Much like being submerged in sweltering hot water, implicit bias is there before we can even see it, and just like that water burns red hot, we all are subject to experience the pain from it. While implicit bias is alive and well in America, we have the ability to change the course of our future by our capacity to love, as well as honestly examining our deep-seated beliefs about others and ourselves.

We are all “entwined.” Implicit is derived from the Latin word “implicatus” which means “entwined.” To feel is to be human, and to be human is to be “entwined” in this culturally diverse, ever-evolving, and yet sometimes stagnantly progressing impression of how we view others. We can weave our diverse characters into an array of colorful patterns, welcoming the uniqueness of our individual existences; or we can create “tangled” webs in which our uniqueness goes awry when fear overrides love in the name of unfamiliarity, or contempt prior to investigation. While I am passionate about embracing diversity, I am just as susceptible to implicit bias as the next person. Much about the world and our belief systems are foreign to me, but what I do understand is the human capacity to love and find connection despite apparent differences. What I do understand is that people reverberate what they believe about themselves and others, true or not. Human experience shapes and entwines us and the world we live in.

I am a woman. I am a mother to a biracial son. I am a recovering drug addict. All of these classifications identify me and comfort me when finding my place in this world; however, they do not

define me much at all. They don't explain what kind of student I am, they don't elaborate on my work ethic, or my free-spirited, open personality. My identity doesn't explain how I like to listen to memoirs on the way to work, or salsa dance on Tuesdays, or my vigilance concerning my health. Six years ago, I was an entirely different person and I owe that to my own belief system. It wasn't a conscious thought but more of a practical understanding that I would live the rest of my life as a drug addict because I was incapable of amounting to anything more. A flaw in my belief system, I was incapacitated. It took other people believing in me, to have the self-realization that I could get clean; believing that they believed in me led me to find a life in recovery. My implicit bias against myself was broken and that gives me profound hope for all of us. I want you to know sometimes I fail. Sometimes I am beyond offended by the proverbial box I am placed in by others because of my gender, my history of drug abuse, or because I am a single mom to a mixed race boy. In turn, I often become the oppressor stereotyping my fellow man, caucasian, or even black person without realizing it until further investigation within myself.

You may be a fifty year old white man who lives in the South and drinks tequila daily. I may assume you're a Donald Trump fan with a social bias against black people and women. That you own twenty plus guns and drive a sleek sports car while on the verge of a midlife crisis, denying your ever closing proximity toward liver disease and kidney failure. I don't say this to incriminate, but to paint a picture of someone entirely different from me in terms of identity classification.

That man is my boyfriend and what you don't see is that in spite of our differences love prevails. What you don't see is that he's a dreamer, a creator, and has a heart of gold, and that we have more similarities than we do differences; at forty-four he went back to school earning a degree, and he is one of the most diligent employees I know. While our differences are challenging at times, it doesn't disqualify our mutual humanness, ability to connect, and capacity to love in the face of adversity. We are "entwined" in an evolving culture.

I don't want this to be a love story about a man and a woman, but I want you to understand that

limiting ourselves to people who are like us or even hold the same beliefs will not evoke change, and will stunt our growth in breaking the ties that implicit bias holds on this country.

I'll never forget the first time I asked my son his favorite color. He told me "black and white." I thought how fitting that his favorite colors weave together two beautiful races that make up a large part of American history. How beautiful it is to hope, instead of fear, what this country could become if we open our eyes to what we are often afraid to look at within ourselves. We all have our prejudices, but how many of us can see them? While there are factors that may predict an image of who we are, we're only seeing the outcome of our societal beliefs about a person, compartmentalizing the way in which we must be. Often, a thorough self-evaluation of one's attitudes and beliefs can be the jolting breathe of life a community needs to ignite change in a positive way. Sometimes it is simply love that has the power to unify our future generations, and untangle the web of categorizing people out of our unrealized fears. Weaving together our delightful cultures and appreciating each other for all our differences, that is my hope.

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background or his religion. People learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

- Nelson Mandela