

Senior Essay
Honorable Mention
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Needing Open-Mindedness, Not Neutrality

The lens through which a person views the world is completely unique to each and every individual. These perspectives are shaped by environments and life experiences. Due to an inability to share every developmental and formative experience with one another, everyone has bias. While some may hold biases that make open-mindedness somewhat of a challenge, others may completely fail to seek out and understand other perspectives because of their bias. These individuals are the ones that tend to hold unnecessary prejudices and bigotry. And while neutrality often seems to be a happy medium when it comes to conflicting perspectives, it is no solution. True neutrality isn't even possible when humans are inherently biased.

Lack of action is often confused as a lack of opinion or side. It is often thought to be neutral. But any lack of action is also an action. It is the active decision to be silent, to be a bystander. There have been many times in my life when I chose to not act or speak up. I simply allowed things to happen. Strangely, all of these instances were when prejudice was aimed at me, not others. I have born witness to plenty of ugly comments. I've been shoved aside at the water fountain, and I've even had a girl jokingly wrap her hands around my neck. There was a period of time when I endured a massively confusing and somewhat catastrophic identity crisis. All of these humiliations were the product of living as a biracial child. The list of times I was my own silent bystander goes on and on. Yet, there is one particular experience that shifted my perspective of the world, including my bias, in a fundamental way.

In elementary school, I was accused by my fellow classmates of being racist, for when it was my turn to pass out markers, I just so happened to give an African-American classmate a black marker and a Hispanic classmate a brown one. Of course, I didn't put any thought into

passing out the markers. All I knew was that I wanted the pink one and the only two other colors left were black and brown. Both kids looked at the colors I had given them and called me a racist, point-blank. They then proceeded to tell all of the other kids around our table that I was a racist. Both of them knew that I was no racist and that the colors they were given were completely coincidental. Even at the time, I knew that they understood this, but that wasn't the point of their accusation. Their intent was to humiliate the girl who walked a fine line when it came to racial and cultural identity. The girl that was almost like them, but not quite. The girl who was deemed a cultural outcast.

Naturally, all the other fifth graders jumped on their accusatory bandwagon. I suffered through dirty looks and harsh comments for the rest of the class. Knowing that I did nothing wrong, I said and did nothing in response. Now, looking back, I realize that I desperately needed someone to see me not for my mixed ethnicity but my humanity. All the difference would have been made if someone was willing to be open-minded enough to see me as a human, not only as my ethnic background. All I wanted was to be viewed as a person who had thoughts, opinions, and an individual personality. I didn't want to be treated any differently than my peers. However, nobody's perspective left room for me to simply be human.

My personal bias was shifted by this experience. It is because of this event that I don't behave differently towards people of different backgrounds. I treat everyone how I needed to be treated back in that fifth-grade classroom. My perspective of a person starts with viewing them as human, and it grows as I get to know them as a person. There is also room in my perspective to receive and acknowledge other important parts of a person's identity. But my bias strictly sees a person for who they are. For their likes and dislikes. For the choices they make when a decision is hard. Not for stereotypes or the inability to seek an understanding of them. I face the world

with an open mind and heart and will continue to do so, no matter what bigotry lurks in the shadows.

The lens with which I see the world is constantly refocusing so that I may have the opportunity to see the bigger pictures in life. Uprooting bigotry, and the silence that accompanies it, is possible when others are open-minded enough to refocus the lens through which they view the world. When stumbling across hate in life, which is all too common, taking a stand can significantly empower and support the target of that hate. And though those who refuse to show empathy and open-mindedness may never listen when someone speaks up, it is better to try and fail than to never try at all. At least then there wasn't a lack of action, which is the closest thing to neutrality. Keeping an open mind and perspective are active decisions. When making these decisions, it is impossible to be a neutral observer of hate. Interference can be speaking up for a victim, as Elie Wiesel suggests. Or it can be an interference of self, where someone moves past their bias to better understand another. "Sometimes we must interfere," Wiesel said, and there are many ways in which that can be accomplished.