

Beyond the Pale:

A Response to “Identity in a Multicultural World: Who Am I?”

By Michael Paul Maupin

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The quest of identity is a singular thread running through the fabric of the American character. This thread, at times, is pure tinsel. It shines with a reflectivity that illuminates the surface of characteristics taken for granted, and often vilified. Skin that is black is violent and wayward. Skin that is a deep tan threatens to usurp the dream of prosperity. Dark eyes hold their own shade of oppression set behind lids that lack the fairness of both skin tone and equality. Yet, sometimes the thread is filament. Its fibers elongate under the stress of insensitivity, pathos, and myth. For those of us cognizant of this common thread, we bide our time in protection, in the realization that we must preserve this sacred ligature. We know that if it were ever to give way under its enormous duty, the fabric of society would unravel.

Who am I in a multicultural world and where is my place along the continuum of this thread? Outwardly, I am anchored in privilege. The dark hairs that sprout along my arms and legs are set against a Caucasian contrast. I am a man, I am white, I am the majority. But inside, I am the Irish immigrant of Hell's Kitchen. You can see it in the summer when my beard casts a red tint and my face becomes ruddy from the heat. You can see it in my work ethic as I try to build a life for my wife and daughter. The sweat of my brow drips down and catches the suggestion of a man who kicks against the goads of an impoverished childhood and the voices of indignation spat by a family who doesn't understand the want for something more. Above all, I am nonconformity.

But a darker side still dwells in the basement of my reason. My mind entangles in the stereotypical nuances of racism. I see a handful of black men standing on a corner and assume they are engaged in a drug deal and not merely having a discussion or fellowshipping with peers.

I see a van with several Hispanic men riding on the interstate and presume they are illegal immigrants and have no right to share in my capitalism. I become a Grand Wizard born of the Southern Reconstruction. I exert my superiority through an internal monologue I would be mortified for anyone to hear. An archetypical revulsion awakens an odious tenant in my heart that is quick to pass judgment against those who are different. I forget that there could be a small fragment of my own Hell's Kitchen in the people I see living their lives under the cloud of my apathy. I am the man who wields the sword intent on severing the thread I feel such an intrinsic desire to protect. And as a result, I become a product of shame and embarrassment.

The duplicity of my character suggests a pathological illness in my soul. I often wonder if others have this same malaise, or if I am alone as a person who decries my follies in the hopes others can understand the struggle for being well-adjusted in a multicultural world starts with the acknowledgement of my own shortcoming in understanding the benefits of a diverse ethnic landscape. I can't remember ever feeling the condemnation I have as an adult when I was a child. I don't know the point in my life I lost the innocence of adolescence; where everyone had the same opportunity for happiness in my eyes. Somewhere along my journey, I left the tracks as an adult and derailed into the same conjecture I demonize as the media and politics bend my ear in such a racist way that I am repulsed. I am the person I hate.

Every day I secretly struggle with an ethnocentrism not far removed from Nazi Germany. Although I would never hurt another person based on the fact that our ethnic or cultural differences separate us, I know the seed of racism is there and it unnerves me. I've often asked the people closest to me if they think I am a bigoted person, and have been fortunate enough to never have my fears qualified with a curt answer. Maybe the consciousness that I could be the antithesis of my truest beliefs is the result of having grown up in a multicultural and forced

politically correct world. I am thankful that I am reticent in most of my carnal thinking when it comes to diversity. Should I ever drop my self-censoring temperament, the thin membrane of decorum that separates the me I am from the me I could be would surly rupture.

Being a member of a multicultural generation has bred in me the understanding that tolerance is a learned attribute. I was formed in an environment that suggests a tendency to manifest my majority dominance in stupidity. I may always have a modicum of unrest in my desire to be a better person in the absence of interior racial conflict, but I understand living in a multicultural world is about adaptation for the betterment of all that cling to the common thread. Should my hands bloody from grasping the thread too tightly, I will count these wounds as a societal stigmata. I will never allow myself to be found beyond the pale. Who am I in a multicultural world? I am a man who realizes the difference between struggle and regression.