

Black, Blue, Green and White

Category: Race

written by Jeff Hutchinson | July 30, 2016

My life and experiences have been defined by contrasts. I am a physician and a military officer. Yet, in my presence and out of ear shot, I have been called such names as Nigger, Oreo, Tutsoon and Spear Chucker.

When I speak to young people, either as a specialist in adolescent medicine or as recruiter for medical school, I often start by showing them a graphic of overlapping circles. When I click a button the graphic changes: the circles are populated with such adjectives such as compassionate, gentle, protective and caring. I tell them these circles represent deeper qualities I have that cannot be discerned by any superficial means. I ask the young people to write down their deeper qualities—the qualities that are only evident to those who know them.

I then hit the button again, and a new set of circles appear, populated with words like male, officer, tall, doctor and black. The second list allows me to remind students that all of these external qualities are small parts of who we are, even though some would use these to define us. In my case, I am a black man, son of a retired LAPD officer (blue), who proudly wears Army green and the white coat of a doctor.

I have found Damon Tweedy's *Black Man in a White Coat* to be the best narrative description of the life of contrasts as a black, male doctor. For me, the contrasts have been damped by my experience in the military, because there is more unity when you are on the same team.

But still they are there. After more than 30 years wearing this uniform, I recognize the delayed salute signaling an initial assumption that I am not an officer. When I am asked to move equipment, this betrays the assumption that I am a respiratory therapist, not a physician.

I know that the path to inclusiveness is formidable, but I also know that when climbing a cliff you focus on each hand and foothold, one at a time.

I always conclude my talks to students with the same message: "We have to treat everyone like we are related." I believe this is the only way to bring us to where we need to be. A palpable shift that takes place when we recognize the person we are interacting with as part of our family. This recognition transforms our talking into communicating.

Jeff Hutchinson
Columbia, Maryland