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Labels

He is crippled. She is old. He is homosexual. She is not Christian. They are Jews. We give labels to people as if they were spice jars on a kitchen shelf. Simple, incomplete, and discriminating. We make it so easy to choose between what we like and what we do not like, it is no wonder prejudice comes so easily. You think we would have learned that labels are wrong after years of labeling people and then repealing those labels and apologizing. But can an apology make up for what was done? Can an apology fool us into thinking we will not be mistaken again? When will it stop?

The most infamous labeling in history is undoubtedly agreed to be the Holocaust. Adolf Hitler labeled Aryans as the pure race. Hitler labeled Jews as the reason for Germany's problems. Hitler labeled Jehovah Witnesses, Gypsies, homosexuals, Slavs and handicapped people as undesirables. Where did these labels lead? These labels led to the murder of 11 million innocent people. Other countries were horrified by the labeling, the cruelty and the deaths of the Holocaust. How could the Nazis persecute others for no reason? This question is so juvenile in only blaming the "bad guys", the Nazis. Although, it may not be juvenile at all if almost every adult throughout time has failed to realize the hypocrisy in that question.

Even my own country, America, has been hypocritical of the Nazis and the Holocaust. We wonder why no one rescued the millions of victims of the Holocaust, yet we turned away the MS St. Louis, a ship full of 900 Jewish refugees, when it came to US shores. We are amazed at the 400,000 "unfit" people who were forced to undergo eugenic sterilization in order to preserve a pure race, yet it was America who pioneered eugenic sterilization by sterilizing over 65,000 "unfit" persons, providing a model and inspiration to the Nazis. We were shocked that the Nazis would force innocent people into concentration camps, yet America forced Japanese Americans into internment camps at the same time for no other reason except we were scared of them. We

criticize the Nazis for labeling based on race, specifically the Jewish race, yet again and again Americans label and persecute based on race; Native Americans were thrown *off their* land by early American settlers, Africans were taken from their homes and abused through slavery, African Americans were segregated for years, Japanese Americans were put in internment camps, Chinese Americans were targets of exclusion and riots, and recently Latin Americans were segregated. All of these people fell under American persecution, segregation, cruelty and even death because of labeling them by their race. How can the children in America be expected to be tolerant when the adults all throughout our history cannot be tolerant? If the children are really the future, then we children have to change our intolerant ways in order to create a tolerant future.

We children have to stop labeling. We have seen the cruelty that labeling causes, so are we going to follow in history's footsteps or finally learn? I am sure I am not alone in the observation that my own school thrives on labels. We have areas on campus where students group by race. Our school groups us into classes by labeling our intelligence. I have seen quite closely the hurt that comes from labeling the mentally and physically disabled, much like Hitler did. A club at my school works to pair general education students with special needs students in an attempt to end the segregation. Despite the hundred students that are involved, I still see thousands of other students ignore, taunt, avoid and mock these special needs students. They do not choose to be different, society labeled them as different. We do not choose to be different races, but society labels us as different. We do not ask to be classified with different intelligences, but society labels us as different. What is the common tie between the intolerance? The labels.

Labels have been around for so long we grow numb to them. We are able to identify the problem with labels only when social catastrophes occur, such as the Holocaust. But after the

catastrophes end, we start to forget the harm of labels and grow numb to them again. It would be terrible for there to constantly have to be such catastrophes in order to keep us aware of the harm of labels, but how do we stop growing numb to labels without constant catastrophes?

Remembering. We need to constantly remember past catastrophes in order to avoid future ones.

What can we remember about the Holocaust? The history: but history can become empty names, numbers and places. Adolf Hitler, 11 million deaths, Auschwitz. The stories: but stories are hard to envision and sympathize with since we have never faced such horror ourselves. And what happens when the survivors who tell these stories are no longer around? Are written memoirs persuasive enough? Perhaps, but only to those truly dedicated to remembering. The pictures: pictures can create a lasting memory for anyone. After I saw the pictures of the Holocaust I knew I would never forget what labeling can do, but one person remembering is not enough.

The pictures. The pictures are what struck me the hardest. The living skeletons, the piles of bodies, the tortured children, the broken lives. The pictures force us to see these humans, these sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, children and grandparents, and visualize ourselves in their position. We are forced to realize that these are people, with faces, with personalities, with lives. People try to deny that the Holocaust even happened, but who can deny the pain on the faces of these people?

Once we have educated ourselves about Holocaust, once we see the pictures and will always remember what labels can do, what then? We have to change our own ways. I believe a fifteen-year old, who witnessed the harm of labels first hand, figured out the best solution.

"How wonderful it is that no one has to wait, but can start right now to gradually change the world! How wonderful it is that everyone, great and small, can

immediately help bring about justice by giving of themselves! -

Anne Frank "Give " March 26, 1944

Give of ourselves. All it takes is to personally give one act of kindness to break the labels. Compliment someone who you label. Join a group with people who you label. Have a conversation with someone you label. Smile at someone you label. By being kind to someone you label, soon those labels will not mean as much to you anymore. Soon those labels will start to disappear. The "gradual change" that will soon change your mindset can influence others to follow your lead. Won't it be great to live in a world where the only label is human?

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