Columns
Social Justice



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by Julie A. Ferraro

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In the mid-1990s, while I worked as a staff assistant in the biological sciences department at the University of Notre Dame, I also wrote a biweekly column for the student newspaper, The Observer. My column was titled "God 'n Life."

What I did in those columns, primarily, was take random sights around the campus — a T-shirt slogan, ducks on the lake, student events — and bind them together with spirituality.

I gained a lot of insight from those reflections, on a personal level.

One insight applies to the situation in which the world as a whole and Americans in particular find themselves today.

Some might view my simplistic concept as naive or outright ridiculous, but it is a feasible starting point to deal with prejudice in general and, more specifically, systemic racism.

Stop labeling people.

As an example of how common it is for human beings to create a list of labels upon meeting any new person, I cite a scene from the 1957 Spencer Tracy/Katharine Hepburn film "Desk Set." (Yes, I am a classic movie geek.)

Tracy portrays an efficiency expert who is interviewing a large television conglomerate's research department supervisor, played by Hepburn.

Tracy states, "Often when we meet people for the first time, some physical characteristic strikes us. Now, what is the first thing you notice in a person?"

Matter-of-factly, Hepburn replies, "Whether the person is male or female."

The exchange might seem quite normal and ordinary, and in that lies the inherent flaw in human perception.

As in some applications for college, or employment applications where demographic data determines eligibility for government assistance — where it is required to place check marks beside our race or other details — we have trained ourselves to assess newcomers in our lives by a list scrolling through our own brains.

We each need to ask ourselves the question Tracy asked Hepburn, to gain an awareness of the ways we label every single individual we meet.

It's amazing — and pathetic — the criteria humans use to categorize each other. It starts with seemingly innocuous standards: height, weight, hair color/style, complexion, tattoos, clothes or jewelry.

The evaluation delves deeper from there: race, skin color, the neighborhood where one lives, the job one holds, gender issues, political leanings, even the car one drives ... ad infinitum.

(I will admit I'm partial to classic Mustangs and the sweet muscle cars of the 1960s and '70s, but if an old beater gets the driver from point A to point B without breaking down, who should care?)

Tack on religion as another source of division, even among Christians. What church one attends also can be used for or against a person when "rating" them as suitable companions, or even when offering services such as financial assistance, shelter or food.

For each one who diligently strives to avoid such labels, there is another who will take undue advantage of the situation. An example can be found in the 1963 film "Heavens Above!" Peter Sellers portrays a minister with a truly Christian heart in a small English town, who opens a food pantry and thrift shop for all in need, regardless of their standing in the community.

One scene shows the chauffeur of a wealthy matron removing his uniform cap in order to look "common," collecting some goods, then hurrying back to his employer's limousine with the sacks.

My heart ached the first time I watched it, and every time since.

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Preventing such abuses is an excuse for some institutions to implement verification processes that include proof of identity, residency and income, for starters.

If people would just be honest, and not hoard what others truly need, there would be enough food, housing and necessities for everyone!

Labels such as "us" and "them" run beyond the personal into the public sector. One of my columns for Notre Dame's Observer was inspired by the slogan, "Don't hate us, 'cause you ain't us" that I'd seen in passing on a young woman's T-shirt. She had erected invisible barriers — even before any meaningful conversation could take place — separating her from the chance of getting to know the thousands of wonderful people outside her self-established group.

I wanted to shout from the rooftops how she was missing out on vast opportunities to learn far more than she would gain from any book in a classroom!

Some people, admittedly, prefer to keep others at arm's length. Two decades before working at Notre Dame, I was a high school sophomore, studying Latin. The university offered a daylong program meant to bring the old "dead" languages to life, and my school participated.

The junior class president — smart as a whip, kind, caring and always ready with a joke — was in the same class. On our lunch break, he and I walked arm-in-arm together to the South Dining Hall, good friends who happened to be of different races.

Two women I recognized from working at the campus bookstore during the previous football season, fell in behind us on the sidewalk, heading the same direction. When they saw us — mistaking us for college age — they exchanged very racist remarks.

Once our initial shock passed, we pitied the women for their narrow view of life. Had they bothered to ask, we could have told them we were just two teenagers having fun on a bright spring day.

It is pitiful when Christians refuse to live the faith they publicly profess, claiming to believe in scriptural passages showing how much God loves every single creature on earth, yet ostracizing people who are different according to their own set of labels.

The current trend in this era when racism is a prime talking point includes analyzing and labeling classic films — and other programming — for unacceptable content. On streaming platforms, disclaimers warn viewers that the depictions on the screen were wrong at the time the film was released, and wrong now.

A lot of time, effort and money is being spent on such projects, but are those who are objectively viewing the stories also rooting out racist attitudes in their own

hearts? Does rehashing past wrongs over and over really help create a better future?

Couldn't the funds involved be better used to create intercultural programs that gather young and old so they can learn from each other, and come to see that, without the labels we like to impose on each other, we're really more alike than different?

Eliminating racism starts with the individual, changing a heart set in a pattern of thought and behavior that runs contrary to God's love. Once a person decides to see all people simply as human beings, worthy of respect and love, the tide begins to shift.

In offices and institutions, having the courage to stand up and say, "I won't calculate this demographic data, because it's prejudicial," or "I won't deny a person services because their religious practices differ from mine," may put a person's job at risk, but the martyrs were willing to die for their faith.

A greater impact will be if the executives of those offices and institutions change their own hearts and policies to dispense with labels and inequality, making it possible for every person to enjoy life as God's precious children.