
Discrimination in Stranger in the Village and On Being a Cripple

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, people were born different; everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, but some flaws are seen worse than others; discrimination, therefore, becomes a common occurrence. In the essays, "Stranger in the Village" and "On Being a Cripple", two types of discrimination have been mentioned.

Stranger in the Village

"Stranger in the Village" was an essay written by James Baldwin. It was included in *Notes of a Native Son* in 1955. The main discussion was about racial discrimination. Baldwin was an African-American author who wrote about his experience visiting a small Swiss village, Leukerbad in the year 1951. The village had a small population of merely six hundred people, all of them Catholic; mountains surround the whole place with snow and ice covering all exposed surfaces. Being in such a conservative area gave him, the first dark-skinned man to visit, a rather special experience.

The physical appearance of Baldwin sparked the Leukerbad villagers' curiosity, since images are the first thing people judge each other by. He discussed this topic saying, "All of the physical characteristics of the Negro which had caused me, in America, a very different and almost forgotten pain were nothing less than miraculous—or infernal—in the eyes of the village people." Back in America, the whites see dark-skinned people on a daily basis, therefore, would not think to stop and stare; in the small village, however, they would think they had just spotted a different species walking pass them, which the author had to get used to all over again. About the clueless whites' assumption on his smile, he wrote, "My smile was simply another unheard-of phenomenon which allowed them to see my teeth", he then explained further, "they did not, really, see my smile and I began to think that, should I take to snarling, no one would notice any difference." With this quote, it's obvious he knows what they think of him—a wild animal that, probably, needs to be tamed; it also hints that he finds no reason to smile when he was barely treated like an individual. About his hair, they would compare it to wire or cotton, and even went up to him on a sunny day to stroke the strands, just to see if they would get electrified. They would also touch his hand to see if the color was removable.

The native Swiss living in the small village naturally had their naiveté when it came to racism; their unknowingly offensive actions could not be blamed, but Baldwin still felt intense waves of uncomfortableness and shock. The ignorance that the villagers treated him with, especially the younger ones, made him take a step back to think about the various ways he had been treated by different people. The children in the village would shout "Neger! Neger!". This disgraceful word was, and still is, considered a critical racial slur that would have been triggering to everyone, including whites, in the States. He never thought he would be addressed so directly by the unethical terminology. Baldwin said, "The children who shout Neger! have no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in me", knowing that they did not have the intention to

offend anyone.

Objectification was another problem Baldwin pointed out in this essay; another side of racial discrimination that people needed to face. There was a custom in Leukerbad to "buy" African natives in order to convert them to Christianity. Although this type of action was common in the past, it violates the principle of human rights. The villagers thought, naturally, that because the skin color is different, they're suddenly not human, but creatures who had to obey their commands and think the same way. People were "bought" at unreasonable prices, to be brainwashed and treated horribly. Baldwin realized that no matter the justice or injustice, white people refuse to face the reality because they want to keep their superiority and privilege. He also went ahead to talk about his own father's experience of Christianity conversion, and how he never forgave "the white world" for it.

Coming from the United States to a small village in Switzerland, Baldwin compared the two ordeals and used them to reflect each other. Leukerbad was quite the contrast from New York, especially the people's knowledge on races. Toward the previously mentioned situation where children called him Neger! or Nigger!, he said, "I am a stranger here. But I am not a stranger in America and the same syllable riding on the American air expresses the war my presence has occasioned in the American soul." With this, he is stating the different approaches he had received from the two sides of the pond. Judging the American and European history, he pointed out that the Europeans lack the African-American portion. It was impossible for the villagers to know what can be said and not said, done and not done, without the education Americans receive.

The fairness between the two races — whites and blacks — was undeniably a crucial issue. Baldwin wrote paragraphs after paragraphs noting his thoughts of it. One line said, "There is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites." The mentioned "difference" indicates the disrespectfulness he felt when he arrived at the small Swiss village. He felt as though he was not treated as a "stranger", but something not even human; as though he was an exotic creature, alienated from those around him. In another one of James Baldwin's books, *The Fire Next Time*, he said that he believes "people can renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives", meaning that people from anywhere, with any skin color and backgrounds will eventually come to an understanding; to finally end racial discrimination.

On Being a Cripple

Other than discrimination of the races, another big topic is the respects toward the "disabled". In Nancy Mairs "On Being a Cripple", this was the main issue she discussed. Nancy Mairs woman who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) before she hit her thirties. It caused the left side of her body to weaken to the point she has to walk with a cane in order to stay standing. She cherishes the time which she has lived since she found out about the brain tumor; she has taken the days as gifts. With this disease affecting her life, she calls herself a "cripple".

At the very start of the essay, she very clearly pointed out that she gave her the word "cripple" to name herself; the only word she considers precise enough to describe her condition. She despises the more common words used to describe people like her, such as "disabled" or "handicapped". They give her the feeling that she has something worse than MS; perhaps a

mental problem or put at a disadvantage. About this, she said, "Some realities do not obey the dictates of language.", because to her, the wrongly used words widen the gap between their definitions and reality.

As someone who was diagnosed, Mairs says she hates it. She hates that she cannot have the energy she used to have, instead, she wakes up feeling fatigue. She can't walk, run, play the piano, do her hair, pick up babies, do fine stitchery anymore. Understandably, being a cripple is not easy; it requires strength and acceptance. The thought of committing suicide has haunted her before and she knew that one day, she would be unable to do so due to physical weakness. As the time goes by, she gradually overcame the darker thoughts; knowing that the present Nancy cannot make decisions to live or not for future Nancy. After years of her incapability being part of her, Mairs has accepted her clumsiness. She said that compared to others, she finds it easier to amuse herself and acknowledge the amusement of those around her. She wrote, "What I hate is not me but a disease. I am not a disease.", and adds, "A disease is not—at least not singlehandedly—going to determine who I am, though at first it seemed to be going to." This quote shows that she does not blame herself for having to live the way she does; it is the disease that has to be blamed.

One thing that Mairs is always grateful is her family: her husband and children. The extra work, dismay, and burden of having a cripple as a partner or parent is hard, but the people she loves, nevertheless, loves her back. To show her gratitude, she mentioned that the society that we live in often link fun with physical performances, which in return, offers little encouragement to the crippled and those around them. Speaking of society, there are a few aspects that she is not satisfied with. One of them being "faking"; she is afraid that people act differently just because she is different. Her mother once said, "We all have to make allowances for you, of course, because of the way you are.", while seeing red. This line hurt Mairs badly and has left a scar ever since, for she does not want others to fake fondness in front of her while silently putting up with her diversity. Another one being "expectation". She compared cripples to overweight people; fat people are expected to be happy and bubbly, while cripples should remain cheerful, both in spite of their insecurities.

At the end of the essay, Mairs said that she might have suffered a lot, but she would not dare have it any other way. Because she knew that if she was not the one with the disease, nobody else would want to be put in her place anyway. She concluded by saying, "I might as well do the job myself. Now that I'm getting the hang of it." Despite the discrimination that comes with the pain, she has squared up and gotten used to it.