



Thoughts on diversity. Harmony Day, 2016

This week in Australia we celebrate “Harmony Day.” To quote the official government website, “Harmony Day celebrates Australia’s cultural diversity. It’s about inclusiveness, respect and a sense of belonging for everyone. It is a day for all Australians to embrace cultural diversity and to share what we have in common.”

It sounds really ideal. Intuitively it seems right. But why?

I’ve been giving this a bit of thought this week, particularly as I read an article that said: “The concept of diversity only exists if there is an assumed neutral point from which ‘others’ are ‘diverse’.” (MediaDiversified, December 2015).

For me, traditionally, Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (where I made my promise) has been a bit this way. The neutral point was the Girl Guide who looked and acted very much like the middle-class white English girl in 1909 where Guiding started, and everyone else was ‘diverse’ from her. I write this while noting the irony that I’m sure for the group of girls who ‘gatecrashed’ the first Boy Scout Rally at Crystal Palace, they were motivated by a bit of a need for diversity in their own context – boys can’t have it all! And of course we as Guides are now in 146 countries. That’s ‘diverse’ in the World Guiding sense. And we love getting together internationally and seeing how cool Guiding is all over the world.

But what about the Diversity *within* and not *across*. Why is Diversity inside Girl Guides in Australia important? Last spring, a group of nearly 70 Girl Guides from across the state joined together on the steps on Parliament to receive a grant from the State Government. One of the young girls from our Guiding in Schools program at Dandenong said first when she arrived “I had no idea how many Girl Guides there were in the world” (cute – let me tell you about the other 10 million!) and then she asked “Are all Girl Guides white?” (hmmmm).

I stood with her, spending some time, imagining how she must have felt. We had invited the school because the State Grant pays for the programs there, and we wanted the girls there to have a chance to join in. But perhaps she felt used for the photo op. Or just out of place. I don’t really know. But it seemed tokenistic.

Similarly, when we were designing the biscuit packaging for the new line (coming soon!) all the cartoons on the front cover were of obviously Caucasian girls. The New Yorker in me slowly laid my head on the table in frustration. I didn’t want to see a Guide in a wheelchair and a Guide with dark skin for ‘appearances’ sake but at the same time, we were reinforcing our own stereotypes in our biggest marketing device! Not helpful. (I was pleased to see Ollie and Aggie in their final form).



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Do we really want it to be more than tokenistic, more than a few photos of girls from obviously diverse backgrounds or abilities in our brochure? What do we really value about Diversity as an organisation? Diversity of course can be of thought, experience, race, economic circumstance, religion, education, or myriad other things. What's the value in that?

Here's my brief answer. On a personal level, as a mum, the value for me is in raising children who do not operate from a place of fear. I want my children to seek out the perspectives of others when solving problems and creating new things. I want them to naturally, intuitively consider the context their friends and others around them are coming from and never question the legitimacy or necessity of a product, service, event or piece of art that meets a need or speaks of someone's experience. That can be called "Cultural intelligence" and the ability to create and work across cultures fosters deep learning and it's wondrous and exciting. It is, frankly, pretty limited in its power however if the "others" around you have very similar cultural, spiritual, economic, moral and physical backgrounds. The world is fairly one dimensional and the learning and creating fairly shallow.

More importantly, though, on a leadership level as your CEO, I want Guides to actually deliver to its mission and calling: We are for girls. All...girls... The experiences and perspectives of girls bind us together first. Our ability to then understand, empathise with and leverage our cultural, physical, sexual, spiritual and moral backgrounds then gives us power. To become Authentic Advocates. Policy makers. Change Agents. Leaders. And in our "Girl-Led" way – help girls self develop into a generation of women who foster the rights and capabilities of the next generation of girls. Once again, a one-dimensional Girl Guides will be completely unable to deliver on its mission if we only engage with and foster the development of a limited type or background of girl.

My challenge to you is to engage in that authentic discussion with your girls. If you want to challenge your own head before you do, read Ellen Berry, a sociology professor, talking about it in the starkest of terms:

http://www.salon.com/2015/10/26/diversity_is_for_white_people_the_big_lie_behind_a_well_intended_word/. Or do some googling on it yourself. This is just one perspective – that's the point, right?

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