



Consider what it's like to be the 'other'

From the time he was a first-grader who followed his older brother and friends on an unofficial “field trip” out of their Catholic New York City neighborhood because he was promised he could peek through a fence at children who would look excitingly odd, Ed Ray has instead seen plenty to fix about the way a dominant culture tends to see and react to the many smaller cultures it encounters.

During his tenure as OSU president, Ray has often supported efforts to get people on campus to talk openly about prejudice and discrimination. In 2009, when he proudly accepted an award in Portland for the university’s “relentless efforts” to make the campus more inclusive, he was careful to note that while that effort had indeed been relentless, more relentlessness was needed to make OSU more welcoming to everyone.

More recently, Ray was instrumental in raising money to have OSU’s four main ethnic cultural centers rebuilt or renovated, a process which has begun with work on a new Native American Cultural Center. Even while the effort flourished, familiar whispers were heard, including some from the alumni community, asking why students from minority groups needed special programs or special places to gather. Never one to dodge a sensitive subject, Ray agreed to use this issue’s “Ed Said” to explore the topic:

“I think a lot of people, who are actually very good and caring people, say things like ‘Why do they need their own place?’ Well that really misses two important points. One point that most white people miss is that most of us never have the experience of always being the ‘other,’ and an understanding of what it means, every

day, to not be part of the dominant culture.

“When we grow up, most of us know about the ‘in’ crowd at school, the clique, and most of us — because those cliques tend to be pretty small — know what it means to be shunned or to be outside the group. It’s not something you like very much and it can hurt a lot, but you go

through it for a few years and then you’re an adult and it doesn’t matter anymore.

“Think about going through your whole life that way, feeling like the ‘other.’

“What white people hear very often, and it’s a correct term although it sometimes puts them off, is this notion of white privilege. And they think, ‘God, I’m killing myself here. Everything I have, I’ve worked hard for. What the heck is this ‘white privilege’ stuff and how do I get some?’

“I think, at the very least, the white privilege issue is about not being the ‘other.’ You are the dominant culture. You can navigate the world in a way that people who feel like the ‘other’ can’t, whether it’s because of a disability, or because of attitudes toward veterans of particular wars or because of the color of their skin or their religion or whatever.

“Life is a lot harder when you’re the ‘other’ because you’ve got to deal with that while you also face the same challenges everybody else faces, and maybe more. Certainly socioeconomic data suggest that if you’re the ‘other,’ you’ve got more real social and economic disadvantages to overcome to be successful.

“I had some very good lessons in my early life. I started out in a very ethnic neighborhood, Jackson Heights in Queens. I went to Blessed Sacrament Catholic School. This was the early 1950s, and it was a predominantly eastern

European, southern European, Irish neighborhood. I don't think I was particularly sensitive to others, or insightful, but I did pay attention and try to learn from what I observed.

"This must have been on a religious holiday, because we were out of school and the public schools were still in session. This whole group of kids, including my brother who was three years older than me, all decided we were going to walk to this public school in another neighborhood and see Jews.

"I was just six years old, and I'm like, 'Wow, what's a Jew?' I had no idea. So we're walking there, and it couldn't have been more than a mile and a half, but if you're a little kid a mile and a half is forever, and these jerks are talking about how we're going to go see Jews and about what they were going to look like and blah, blah, blah. I'm thinking, 'This better be pretty damn good, because it is taking forever to get there.'

"We got there, and here's just a bunch of kids playing! They all looked like kids to me. One jerk with us would say, 'Oh, look at the curly hair on that one,' and I'd say, 'Well, Tony's hair's as curly as that guy's,' and another of our guys would say, 'Look at the nose on that guy!' and I'd say, 'Well, Joey's nose is even bigger than his nose.'

"I wasn't buying any of it, and I was ticked off that I had walked so far to see a bunch of kids that just looked like a bunch of kids.

"It was a big bust. So, fast forward to when I'm about 10 and we moved to a another New York neighborhood, Flushing Jamaica, and at the time, it was mostly Jewish. Now I'm the 'other,' the Catholic kid in the Jewish neighborhood.

"There I had friends whose families had lost friends and relatives in the Holocaust. I'm talking brothers and sisters, because this was the 1950s. Yet, they would be talking about social issues and they would talk about the blacks and 'the Spanish' in really negative, hateful terms.

"I wasn't a deep thinker, but it just seemed unbelievable to me, and profoundly sad, that, given the history that they insisted on recalling for all the right reasons, they hadn't learned any of its lessons. That struck me as very profound. How could the Holocaust be part of your life experience and you missed the whole point about the blinding power of hate and prejudice?

"I can remember dating a girl who was Jewish, and I really liked her, and her mother sits

down with me one day and explains that it's really not personal, but she wants her Jewish daughter to marry a Jewish man. ... It wasn't personal, she insisted, since she liked me a lot. But it was personal and based on nothing I could change. I argued with her."

He also spoke of a high school friend, Mary. Out of 1,230 graduates, she was 10th in the class, which was quite an accomplishment in young Ed's peer group.

"We teased her by just calling her 'Number 10,'" he recalled. They went off to their respective colleges — she to Wellesley — and crossed paths again in a library during December of their senior year, where they discovered they were both applying to some big-name graduate schools in economics.

"She said she'd already heard back from Princeton. 'They rejected me,' she said. And I thought, 'Oh, crap. If they rejected Number 10 I haven't got a chance to get into any of those places.' I told her, 'Geez, I'm dead then. Why did they reject you?' She said they'd sent a letter back saying they didn't accept women in their graduate program. I was stunned by that. It was just implausible that Harvard, Yale, Princeton ... that they could be so unfair."

Bringing those lessons forward to his present role, Ray says that if people don't intuitively get the importance of a place like OSU being as inclusive as possible, there's also a practical mandate for it.

"For the dominant culture, it's important because the more your perceptions of the world are bounded by ignorance or prejudice, the more that cordons off the possibility that you could come to understand and appreciate the world.

"I believe that our whole sense of what we can accomplish — even what we can dream about accomplishing — is directly related to the height of the walls we put up, or allow other people to put up around us.

"Conversely, the more we can be open and receptive, the more we can try to comprehend very different perspectives, lifestyles, cultures and ways of thinking, the more fully we're likely to realize what our capabilities and possibilities are.

"This is it, you know. We don't get another shot at life.

"And this community we are building at Oregon State is our last, best chance to change the way our next generation of leaders see themselves and others in the world." 🍌