

LIVING LIFE IN COLOR

*Iris Hill Crabtree**

When I was younger, there was a particular phrase that used to make me feel at ease with my blackness: “I don’t see color.” I was raised in the Deep, Deep South, where there were plenty of people who looked like me, but not enough in positions that I aspired to. I also spent a few formative years in the Way, Way Up North where we were the only black family in town. In these environments, “I don’t see color” was a warm welcome when offered. To me, it meant “You will be judged by your actions and not by the color of your skin” and “You will be treated equally with everyone else.” These were the well-intentioned words of friends, mentors, and teachers to promote a sense of fairness. To hear these words was to feel like I had found an ally.

The legal system has a similar mantra: “Justice is blind.” Lady Justice is blindfolded; she does not see a person’s color, her wealth, his social status, or their age. The well-intentioned Lady promises that the judicial system is impartial, that justice will be rendered without passion or prejudice. The sightless Lady is supposed to make you feel good about your chances when entering the legal system. Her presence implies, “You will be treated equally and judged fairly.” If you find yourself in a courtroom, Lady Justice should be an ally.

After events of late, I have come to realize that there is one central issue with both of these well-intentioned proverbs about living a monochrome life—neither is universally followed. The ill-intentioned and intention-less do not begin each day with a commitment to fairness and impartiality. We see it in the news; many experience it first-hand. People of all colors face deep-rooted disadvantages as they walk through life. We live life in color. So,

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the valiant efforts of the allies to remain objective do nothing to combat the negative impact of the misguided actions of others. In effect, “I don’t see color” does not fulfill its promise. “Justice is blind” does not ring true.

To live a monochrome life is to live a life of neutrality—not making an impact, neither positive nor negative. Living life in color is anything but neutral. On the negative side, the comments, attitudes, and overt acts of a few can serve to discourage or even prevent someone from chasing their dreams. On the opposite end of the spectrum, one positive moment of understanding or encouragement could be enough to change the trajectory of someone’s life or to keep them on their chosen path. These opposing external forces can have a profound impact and often lead to inequitable results for people of color when the negative outweighs the positive.

In order to achieve the goal of justice and equitable treatment for all, the monochrome approach should be revisited. While being a noble position, “I will not judge you based on the color of your skin” is no longer enough. To passively refrain from letting a person’s color influence how you treat them is simply not sufficient to outweigh those times when a person’s color is used as an excuse to treat them poorly. Instead of choosing not to see color, we should compassionately embrace color. Rather than ignoring color, we ought to seek out and encourage it. For every disadvantage inflicted, we must look to create a just advantage. This is living life in color.

No doubt, this is one of those things that is easy to talk and write about, but difficult to put into practice. I believe that the stage for experimentation in *seeing color* is our individual interactions with the people we encounter in our day-to-day lives. It starts with a conscious decision to acknowledge color. Begin by lifting the blindfold a bit, see people for who they are and what they might have been through to get to where they are. Then, do what you can to help them get to where they are going.