

For everything there is a season and for everything there is a norm. That which becomes the “norm” is what becomes normative ...all else, by definition then, becomes other. There is nothing inherently wrong with that which is other. Other simply means separate and distinct, not the same, different. One could say: “I want the other one,” a simple straight forward statement.

A mother is different from a father, a son different from a daughter. A man, different from a woman. No value statements here. Just identification of difference. As far as it goes, there is nothing wrong with difference, or otherness. Small is different from large, up different from down. There is no evaluation in these juxtapositions.

However, once you add human beings into the equation, things can turn ugly in a moment’s time. Human beings often bring judgment and evaluation with them. That which is merely other or different can quickly become something that is good or bad. We have an uncanny ability to take that which is normative and make it better, not merely different.

I’ve invented the word otherization to denote the process by which something or someone becomes otherized (another word I made up). Its the result of negative evaluation of that which is simply other. It’s a dynamic where relatively small differences are heightened to create maximum separation; a separation that inevitably leaves the speaker in the one-up position.

Otherization appears in so many spheres of our lives. We can think of one person as being a cuddly bear; while someone else is a pig. In our work-a-day world, those in a different department or different job functions are often otherized. The guys that work on the shipping dock are knuckle draggers. Someone else is “just a secretary” or just “a number cruncher”.

There are “used car salesmen”, and politicians, gays, the disabled, ex-cons, and gangbangers. All are perceived as “less than”, by many in our society.

Melinda Henneberger, a Washington Post political writer, says “the G.O.P.’s Southern strategy to capitalize on racial animus has now worked so completely that it’s turned back to bite Republicans, with Romney overwhelmingly losing the growing share of America’s minority voters.” She said Romney “carefully alienate(d) Latinos with talk of “self-deportation” and promises to veto the DREAM act.” He “call(ed) those in this country without papers “illegals” every chance” he got.

“And while behind closed doors, [he] told donors he’d written off nearly half of America from the start — assuming that those who did not support him weren’t interested in his tax plan because they don’t pay any.” Romney and his cohorts were talking about the “takers” not the “makers”.

This is not about politics folks. This is the process of otherization. On the other side of the aisle, there are climate deniers, right-wing conservatives, and southern evangelicals. We can find otherization almost anywhere we look.

The President of the United States, the so-called leader of the free world has been otherized in ways both amusing and horrid. He's been called a Muslim, a socialist, a Marxist and is seen by some as illegitimate, because they choose to believe he was born in another country.

In reference to his reelection, a radio commentator said "we will not accept a fate that is alien to the legacy we inherited." (He didn't explain who the "we" was). John Sununu, an ex-governor of New Hampshire said he believed Colin Powell's endorsement of the president was a case of "ring-knocking within the black brotherhood." Apparently, the Black Brotherhood crosses political parties!

The otherization of political enemies is nothing new. Remember Yanks, and Johnny Reb? And before that there were savages to be fought. In addition to being ugly, war almost always requires otherization. I came to understand this during the Vietnam War.

As I waited to see if my relatively low number would be called for enlistment, I contemplated life away from family if I fled to Canada. And I wondered about the ugliness of the word Gooks. At the age of 18, I understood it was easier to kill Gooks than it would be to shot and kill other human beings.

That learning was not hard to come by. I guess I had been sensitized to otherization from an early age. I remember running home at lunch time, we used to go home for lunch in elementary school. I ran home in tears of shame and humiliation. I was ashamed that I had not stood my ground and fought the five or seven white kids who were chasing me and calling me nigger. I was humiliated by being denigrated.

My mom, always the wise woman, comforted me by telling me it was much better to put up a good run, than a bad stand. I don't remember her, putting salve, on the humiliation. It was a humiliation that I thought only had to do with me.

I learned otherwise however, when I visited my uncle in Mobile. I've always had an affinity for fish and the water. Flipper, the dolphin, was popular then. I asked to go see the movie Flipper and was told that I couldn't. I couldn't understand why, I had eaten all my peas. He told me I couldn't go to that theatre because it was for whites only. It was this northern boy's first experience with institutional racism.

I am sensitive to otherization. I've come by that sensitivity honestly, by life experience. Lots of it; both major and minor, in many different forms.

Other, simply means separate and distinct, not the same, different. Its what we do with “different” that matters. Is “different” treated merely as “other” or, does different become otherization? Martin Luther King Jr. said there are things to which we all should be maladjusted.

He said, “there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things.”

This maladjustment was the basis from which Martin waged a war against what has been called the triple evils of racism, poverty and militarism.

I will end with the words Martin spoke, when talking about how he wished to be remembered after his death.

“I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. And I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major. Say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.”

May we ingest his wisdom. May we ingest his determination. May we be equally maladjusted to bigotry, poverty and injustice? Indeed, I hope we will.