

What Colour are You?



By Andrew Purchase

A few days ago, while I was working at my desk, my five-year old daughter, Ella, appeared at my elbow. She had been doing some thinking. She was holding a periscope in her hand. (In her other hand she had her grubby stuffed rabbit).

A toothy grin. A charming smile. Something was on her mind that needed immediate resolution. Deep questions from five-year olds don't wait for convenient moments. It is a child's duty to bring the deep issues of life to the immediate attention of the superintending adult.

Ella had evidently been giving a great deal of thought to something in the adult world above. It was now an urgent issue.

"Daddy," Ella did not wait for the next appropriate gap in my concentration.

"Daddy!" she persisted. Trust me on this one, Daddy, it's extremely important.

"Daddy, I have a question for you." Her third attempt at getting my attention.

"Yes, Ella," I automatically mouthed as the document I was reading continued to detain my full attention.

Same colour

"Daddy," the emboldened little voice chirped. "Is everybody's skeleton the same colour, even for people from different countries who have different skins?"

Through the intense concentration on my thoroughly boring document, I could hear the unmistakable ring of profundity emanating from a child at elbow height.

It was that feeling you get when you are sleeping, enjoying some dream, and your wife prods you in the ribs, prompting you to turn off the ringing alarm clock next to your head. It's like someone in another world is trying to rouse you to reality.

"Say that again, Ella." I looked at her for the first time.

"Is everybody's skeleton the same colour, even for people from different countries who have different skins?"

"I think you just solved global racism," was all I was able to say.

I could only stop and smile. That's it! The utter irony of racism by colour: we all have the same colour deep down. You just have to find it.

Hanging out with children is never a dull affair. Some days they will run you off your feet. Other days they will ask a litany of questions – all of which begin with the dreaded word “Why”.

But every so often, a child will surprise you with a raw diamond, a hidden gem moment that keeps you coming back for more.

Children are simple. Their world is beautiful because it is simple. A child's world is unsullied by the self-interest (and counter self-interest) of the adult world. Their world plays by the rules of simple justice, simple fairness and simple pleasure.

Periscope

Every now and again, from their world, a child will raise a periscope into the world of adults to look at what's above. When they do, I try to be on hand to hear their impressions. It's like getting a reality check from the realm of innocence.

Yes, let's talk about colour. But let's not talk about colour that is skin deep. Let's go a little deeper, go past the immediate and the superficial. Find out what is really beneath.

We are all the same colour, actually. The insight of a five-year old.

Wanting to be respected; the need to be treated as an equal; the fear of being shunned; the desire for dignity; the wish to be accorded worth and value; the need to be loved by family and friends.

All these hopes and fears of the soul bear a particular colour. It's a colour that is universal to us all.

Deep down, we all have the same colour spine.

And so now, every time I am tempted to cast some judgment on a fellow train passenger or bus rider or resident or queue occupier – based primarily on that person's externalities – I remember Ella's theorem.

Ella's theorem states that all people have the same colour skeleton. And that's enough for me to remember. A simple theorem to a complex problem, but it works.

Could it really be that we are all the same colour? That depends on where you look.

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Picture by Tsen-Waye Tay.*