Growing Up with the Value of Diversity
By Margie S. Heiler, MS, MCC

GROWING UP WITH DIVERSITY
Back then there was one daily newspaper in the city, the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Herb Caen, a columnist for that paper, noted that RC Owens and his wife and children had moved to Belmont, one of three towns within the parish of Trinity Presbyterian Church. Afro-Americans had never been allowed to live in San Mateo County and this broke the barrier. Further, my father invited RC Owens and his family to come to our church. They were not welcomed—in fact, the congregation shunned them. Caen had also noted that people were organizing coffee klatches to devise a plan to get RC and his family out of the county.

Right around the same time, my father was asked to serve as Chairman of the Christian Citizenship Committee of the Council of Churches in that area. He agreed, with the condition that he be given full authority to pick his own committee and select the topic at the annual meeting of the San Mateo County of Churches. My father, Rev. William Summerscales, then went to work to promote what he believed to be the true meaning of Christianity. Under my father’s leadership, the Christian Citizenship group distributed this statement, asking people to sign it: “We welcome into our county good citizens from all nations, color and creeds.” The committee’s plan called for 1500 signatures along with the financing of a two-page spread in the two dailies of the county, the *Redwood City Tribune* and the *San Mateo Times*.

The campaign was underway and a major strategy was to make an appeal at the Sunday Service at Trinity Presbyterian Church. Unbeknownst to my father, a “stringer” from the two county papers had been present at the kick-off meeting. His biased report got front-page coverage on Saturday evening, just before the scheduled appeal to the churchgoers. As a result, the Christian Citizenship Committee lost the support of about 30% of the congregation overnight.

Undaunted, the committee joined forces with the elders and deacons of Trinity Presbyterian, going door-to-door to call on unpledged parishioners and convince them to get on board. Despite the negative impact of the newspaper article, people pledged more money than in any preceding year. It was a huge win for the committee and a major step for diversity in the San Francisco suburbs despite those who closed their doors and minds to the committee’s purpose.

**Internalizing the value of diversity**

My father persisted in living his values, embracing and honoring all people. From the earliest age I can remember, diversity and acceptance had been ingrained in our family culture. My father often shared two brief, but telling, incidents that are very much part of the childhood experiences that helped shape my growth and my understanding of diversity.

The first story was about me. As a 12-year-old, I arrived home from school one afternoon sobbing out loud that some of my schoolmates had followed me, shouting, “Your father is a nigger lover.” As a child, I did not know how to respond to the taunting and I found myself in an uncomfortable conflict between wanting my peers to like me and wanting to uphold my family’s values. It was already a struggle to be accepted as a “preacher’s kid” with its associated pressure to behave perfectly like “Miss Goody Two-shoes.” And on top of that, my father was pro-integration! I had to come to terms with the emotions that were swirling inside of me that day.

My father stood by me—his steady strength, gentle spirit and compassionate wisdom supported me through my confusing feelings of anger, hurt and fear. My value of acceptance was emerging even then—strong and core to who I am. I began to understand my father’s values and to discover my own truth about diversity.
Learning to honor diversity
The other story my father often told is of an attempted pastoral call following the committee campaign. The parishioner answered the door and informed Dad that he could not let him in the house. “What you have done is the right thing, pastor. I know that, but I can’t let you in this house anymore.”

My father’s love of sports was another arena where his value of diversity shone bright. He once gave me his treasured baseball signed by Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in the Major Leagues. To me that baseball was a symbolic gift I have kept all my life, a reminder to appreciate the talents and gifts of all.

Another childhood event contributed to how I came to be so passionate about diversity. When I was 13, we moved from California to Pennsylvania. A couple, friends of my parents, came to visit and I remember hearing their story about how the husband had found a house he wanted to purchase and was eager for his wife to see it before finalizing the deal. Now, this man was a very light-skinned African American and his wife’s skin was much darker. When the sellers met her, they declined selling the house to them. It was obvious that racial prejudice was at work. I remember at the time wondering how such a thing could happen. Once again, I experienced the stirring of my intense desire to appreciate differences and accept everyone.

My father often quoted something I said at an early age, "Dad, everyone is different." I was lucky to have powerful early influences that led me to engage with people in a non-partial, respectful way. I grew up with an open mind. Appreciating, honoring and respecting everyone I meet is part of who I am, one of my Guiding Principles (life rules) and one of my deepest values.

Recognizing the truth of diversity
My passion for diversity grew stronger every time I encountered the reality of prejudiced behaviors or conditions of inequality as I moved through my life. Walking through my neighborhood in North Philadelphia in the late sixties, I was bewildered to see separate entrances for ladies in corner bars or signs that ladies were not allowed at all. When I moved to North Carolina, I was troubled and saddened by billboards denouncing “black” people. One day, I entered a café in Pembroke, North Carolina, to ask where the stores were located so I could buy some soap. Three Native Americans turned around on their stools and stared at me without responding. Once again, my commitment to diversity intensified as I experienced the hostility of their silence.

Responding to the personal challenge of diversity
In the early 1970’s I had my first experience with the Union League in Philadelphia. When, after dinner, men were invited to a room upstairs where they could smoke cigars and women were not allowed, I cringed at the gender-based exclusion, even though I didn’t smoke. The seeds of becoming a women’s rights advocate had been sown.

When I was pregnant with my first child, I remember looking for work after a re-location move. I had to accept the fact that I would not be hired for a fulltime job and worked for a temp agency, riding the bus around town from one place to another. I felt ashamed and discriminated against.

A turning point came when I was ready to go back to work after being a stay-at-home mom for a while. My husband at the time said he would not permit it as he was convinced that I could not earn more money than he did. I sensed his denigration of my ability to make a substantial contribution as a professional. I became more determined than ever to personally overcome the long tradition of gender discrimination. My first step was to enroll in college.
When I received my undergrad degree in the late 1980’s amidst raising four children, I was confident I could move beyond a secretary/office manager job. I knew I had more to offer and was not content to accept the limitations and gender stereotyping so prevalent in those roles at the time. Yet it was not easy. It was clear to me that if I were a male, I would be quickly considered for other positions. My gender was an obstacle to being recognized as a high potential in the workplace. But I pushed back against the status quo. I persistently sought opportunities for advancement and eventually pursued a Master’s Degree, which helped open up a whole new world of possibilities to contribute my skills and wisdom.

**Appreciating the contribution of diversity**

Beyond the obvious diversity of gender, race, age, and geographic culture, what are the other layers of diversity that are more subtle, yet well worth appreciating? There is diversity in thought and perception and culture—in fact, every one of us has a unique set of filters through which we process information and experience life. The results? Different inventions, expressions, opinions, works of art, tastes, preferences, perspectives, interpretations, different forms of creativity, problem solving, learning styles, decision-making, and ways of approaching life. Diversity contributes to our wealth of knowledge, innovation, discovery and understanding. What would make us want to limit that?!

And what about social diversity? This is where we take into account the groups that form based on various political inclinations, ideologies, and religious beliefs. In the age-old game of dominance, groups arbitrarily pit themselves against each other and create turbulence out of otherwise healthy, normal diversity. In his book, *Social Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman says, “Human history chronicles an endless stream of horrors perpetrated by one group that turns viciously against another—even when that other group has far more similarities to than differences from themselves . . . social responsibility begins here and now, when we act in ways that help create optimal states in others, from those we encounter casually to those we love and care about most dearly . . . the crucial challenge for this century will be to expand the circle of those we count among Us, and shrink the numbers we count as Them . . . we need not accept the divisions that hatred breeds, but rather extend our empathy to understand one another despite our differences, and to bridge those divides.”

**Diversity and leadership**

Diversity is very much part of my passion and my purpose. As an executive and leadership coach, I once had the distinct honor and pleasure of working with a diversity team in the US Federal Government. Open and accepting, they helped me expand my awareness about many diversity initiatives we need to support. For example, diversity also applies to physical disabilities. In a course I facilitated there, interpreters signed for students who were hearing-impaired. I asked for a volunteer client to be coached as part of a “demo” coaching exercise and was thrilled to be able to select and coach someone who was hearing impaired. How moving it was for me to connect with this participant and to see the work of the masterful interpreter, so skilled in the craft of signing. At the same time, I admired the courage of this person in stepping up to be vulnerable in front of classmates and coworkers. I will always cherish that memorable experience!

The benefits, then, of diversity? What might we learn from each other by opening our minds, hearts and spirits to diversity? Might we all be strengthened and enriched? Might there be less conflict and war? Might there be more of what we all value most on this planet? I believe that diversity enriches a person’s life and the world community.
Today in my extended family that includes those who are gay, Hispanic, and Filipino, we are a beautiful blend of races, political views, sexual preferences and religions. We love, embrace and appreciate each other as valued family members without distancing or separating ourselves due to differences. This is what it takes to live in harmony with diversity. It requires acceptance, respect and open-mindedness. It beckons us to let go of fear and recognize each other as fellow human beings. It invites us to collaborate and learn from each other. In this way we can honor and encourage diversity every day.

As you will have guessed by now, the topic of diversity is very near and dear to my heart. I have seen the hatred and cruelty of prejudice in many forms. I actually wept when I came out of the polls in November 2008 after voting for Obama, knowing that the election of an Afro-American president would be an important moment in history, not only for the United States, but indeed, for mankind. Electing Obama to be the President of the United States was a metaphor for wide-sweeping changes in how we can view others and embrace our differences.

**Diversity as a coaching skill**

Being a coach has opened me even further to the extraordinary potential that exists in each human being. It affirms my belief in appreciating each person’s strengths, talents, values, and ability to learn and grow. I have always worked with my leadership and coaching clients on values awareness and how to live more fully into values. I also bring the framework of values into conversations about conflict, anger and frustration. Often, the root of these challenging situations and feelings is a difference in values. I work with my clients to see the opportunities in circumstances that seem to be beyond their control: the opportunity to become more aware of the values that are at play and adjust expectations accordingly; the opportunity to appreciate and accept values that are different from one’s own; the opportunity to create healthy boundaries based on respect; the opportunity to see the possibilities for creative solutions, choices and decisions; the opportunity to drop a limiting belief or try a different approach; the opportunity to be open to learning something new; and the opportunity to practice the mindset of diversity.

As a coach, it never fails to amaze me to see the courage, resilience and personal leadership that lie within each person. It invites me to stand in a place of respect and partnership with my clients as they step more fully into their values. Being a coach is an opportunity to live my value of diversity and encourage it in others.

In summary, diversity is about acceptance. It’s about unity, empathy and compassion. It’s about appreciating the full richness of the world in which we live. And it starts with each one of us making choices that serve rather than devalue diversity. It is propelled by a vision of a global community where we stand together as members of the human race.

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*Dedicated to my father, William Summerscales, who not only lived his truth, but also continuously instilled his values in me. I miss him.*