

## Labels Take Away Our Human Potential

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Labels are one of my least favorite things. I don't mean the kind of labels that list the ingredients in a specific food item at the grocery store, although those can be frustrating as well. I'm talking about the kinds of labels that we apply to fellow human beings on a regular basis. The kinds of labels that I've discussed before when I recalled feeling as though "white trash" was written on my forehead in indelible ink, following me from the place where I grew up into my adulthood. Personally, I have carried many different labels throughout my lifetime, and I am sorry to say that I have labeled others on many occasions, sometimes without even realizing I was doing it.

I'm sure that all of us can relate to this experience. After all, it's human nature to attempt to categorize, or define, people and things. Somehow, we think we feel more comfortable when we are able to neatly pigeonhole stuff. But I truly believe that, once we become aware of this tendency, we are better able to free ourselves and others from its narrowing limits.

Over my years in the mental health field, I have noticed that "helping professionals" can be notorious for labeling others. In fact, we have a guide for doing just that, called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM IV-TR). Of course, diagnosis of mental health issues can be extremely important when it directs treatment effectively and enables individuals to obtain the necessary care. In my work at Prince Street Academy (Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network's school for emotionally disturbed children) I always watch for the dangerous tendency to compartmentalize young people before they have even walked through the front door, in a figurative sense. Labeling a kid almost immediately as "oppositional," "manipulative," "dangerous," or just plain "bad" rapidly decreases that particular kid's ability to grow and improve in our minds. In instantaneously pigeonholing young people who are in need of help, we also excuse ourselves from providing that help when the labels that are applied imply hopelessness. Besides, most people, kids included, have a way of living up to what is expected of them, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Since categorizing of people, things and experiences is a part of human nature, the caveat of avoiding labeling applies to the larger social world as well. When we judge others quickly, as we are often prone to do, we could be missing out on countless opportunities to help others, be helped by them, form friendships or alliances, learn new things or expand our horizons. When we assume we

know a person in their entirety simply because we know that they are Republican or Democrat, Christian or Atheist, pro-war or anti-war, we are missing out on many chapters. The first step is recognizing that we, as humans, do this. The second step involves catching ourselves and stopping the initial urge to label. The third, and final, step includes remaining open to the limitless possibilities that emerge from a person once that chance is provided. Strangely enough, when we conscientiously avoid labeling others, we are less likely to be stuck with them ourselves.

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