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The Importance of Diversity:

The Truth Beyond the Walls.

“When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.” – James Joyce. In my opinion, James Joyce is stating it is hard to escape the values of one’s country. Living in the cultural melting-pot that is America, we come across a wide variety of nationalities, languages, and religions. In an interview with Paul Johnston, an Irish-Protestant immigrant, the diversities will be explored: the history of his cultural group and their values; the differences between our two backgrounds; and how America has managed to break the net Ireland had flung onto him.

I met with Paul one day while he was working. I had the experience of following him around while he conducted business in a topical manner: instructing employees on what to do; given customers guidance; and writing up paper work. This gave me the opportunity to observe and analyze him; he is a complex man: He has a brash temperament that is fused with the rhythmic charm that is commonly associated with the Irish brogue; he is the type of man that can call a person a profanity and not offend them; he can be very stern but droll. I was then able to ask him questions about his life before he came to America and after he arrived.

Prior to his arrival in America Paul is from Belfast, Northern Ireland. Belfast is the largest city in Northern Ireland, and according to 2010 census was the first time the Protestant population has fallen below 50 percent. This is contrary to how Paul remembers his motherland, “growing up everything was Protestant, including the government. The Catholics normally stuck to their side, because if they didn’t, all hell would break lose.” Life was very difficult for him even though he grow up in an affluent family. His life was surrounded by violence, and those events affected his values greatly. He doesn’t recall a time in his life back home that wasn’t flooded with hostility. “One time I was working at a store back home, decorating a window front. The next thing I knew a noise overtook the store, a giant flash of light, then everything kind of went blank. I was tossed out of the window and there was blood and glass everywhere. The only think I could think of, amongst all that devastation, was that I was fine. It seems wrong now, but, in all honesty, that’s what it’s like.” Mentally this way of life seems very foreign to our way of life here in the United States.

Being of Irish decent doesn’t even put Paul in the same ball park: my family isn’t from Northern Ireland nor is my family Protestants, and the fact that I am from America is like I’m a different breed compared to him. Our cultures differ drastically: Northern Ireland is still under British rule, and has been fighting to keep their government that way. “This civil war has been around longer than any of us, and we most likely be around after.” This regilous brutality isn’t new to Americans, because we are a nation founded by people who were trying to escape the regilous persecution of the English. However, it isn’t apart of today’s culture like it was for Paul. I grew up in a heterogeneous world. America plays host for most of the religions around the world. I never judged a peer off of their spiritual beliefs or felt the need to do so, but in Paul’s world, that was almost a mandatory in befriending a person at a young age. “It was instilled with us at a young age by our families. I had a buddy back home that I was friends with since we were kids, he was a Catholic. This was frowned upon greatly, so whenever we went out with him we would lie about him being Catholic. We knew if anyone found out we’d get our asses kicked, and he would probably be killed.” In the past, there have been infamous racial issues that occurred between the African-Americans and the Caucasian population and there are still a lot of inequalities today, but we our segregation never had a dividing wall, literally. In Ireland there is an actual wall that stands in East Belfast that is used to maintain “peace.” Again, I couldn’t imagine what it was like to live in such fear of my fellow countrymen. I have seen acts of terror at a young age, such as, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, but I have never had the imminent fear of domestic terrorism that would call for a peace wall like 3rd century China. As much as violence is a part of Ireland’s history, it doesn’t make it as significant to Paul’s history.

Paul became tired of all the violence that consumed Ireland, so he moved to America to live with his sister whom was married to a New Jerseyan. “After almost dying countless times it wasn’t a hard choice. I left my family behind, but it wasn’t to leave them; that’s what dying would have accomplished.” After living here for over 30 years he has assimilated well: his accent is slight and only strong on some words, even though he does code switch when he encounters a countrymen. The most shocking of his divergence from his life back him is in his personal life: his girlfriend is catholic and he actually attends church with her on Sundays. “At this point in my life, after everything I seen, it isn’t about your church; it’s about your faith not the setting in which you pray.”

After concluding this interview I was left with one question, how different are we? There have been civil wars in Greece, there have been civil wars in Ireland, there have been civil wars here, and this is just the peak of the mountain. We speak different languages, we worship different gods, and we different colors; but we all hate, we all love, and we all believe. How much of what we do is our nature, and how much of it is our nurture?

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