How racial colorblindness goes wrong

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In Greenville, the colorblindness mistake was made. Two years ago, with worldwide reaction, the board of Congregation Bayt Shalom hired Rabbi Alysa Stanton. That decision was significant because that meant that Ms. Alysa Stanton became the world's first black rabbi.

Now, two years down the road that same congregation has voted not to renew her contract. Such decisions about a pastor can occur for any number of reasons, whether the congregation is Jewish or Christian. But I was struck by a statement about the relevance of race in hiring Rabbi Stanton. The article in the News & Observer indicated that "Members of Bayt Shalom said race was never discussed when Stanton interviewed for the job." Apparently, a past president of the synagogue board said that her race "was a non-issue."

If that was the case, the synagogue board was working way too hard not to see her race. Keep in mind that as soon as she was hired to be the congregation's Rabbi, the world came to attention, because a white, Jewish synagogue had taken a black female as their spiritual leader. Yet the synagogue board says they gave race no thought in making their decision. That took a lot of psychological work to pull off.

I don't know, but one of the problems with that racial colorblindness could have been that the board did nothing to prepare the congregation for this dramatic change. In fact, a leading member of the synagogue now says "she wasn't a good fit for the congregation." Since there was no discussion of race when she was hired, the synagogue board's gargantuan effort not to see Ms. Stanton's dark skin left it to the congregation to adjust. As noble and mature as some think it sounds, we have not come far enough in this nation to say that "I don't see color" and to assume that means skin color doesn't matter.

One semester, for my "Interpersonal Relationships and Race" course, an African-American male wrote about being invited to a N.C. State fraternity party during rush. Knowing that the fraternity was all white, to be clear with the student-friend who invited him, my student asked if members of the fraternity would be alright with a dark-skinned black male coming to their rush party. He wrote that his friend said, "...he had told his fraternity brothers stories about me and they were all interested in meeting me. After hearing all of that I felt reassured and comfortable [and excited] to attend this band party."

At the party, my student wrote that he was talking sports with one of the fraternity members who suddenly asked, "Who are you again? And who invited you?" So my student gave his name and the name of the person who had invited him. Then the fraternity brother said, "oh, so you're him. [Our fraternity brother] never said you were black." Naturally, my student was feeling confused. He asked "...is that a problem?" The fraternity brother said "...no offense but I don't think we're interested in having you as a part of this fraternity, you don't embody what we stand for, but we're glad to have you at the party."

Imagine living that moment. Naively, the friend of my student had set this up. It seems that my student's friend didn't think he saw my student's skin color and that his fraternity brothers would also not see my student's skin color.

To not see skin color is impossible. Our sensory systems are designed to make sure we see color variations in our environments. So no one should pretend to be colorblind because in America people still give skin-color social meaning. That is why the pretense of colorblindness can only lead to interracial trouble in any social circle.

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