

“On Second Thought” column
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Teach empathy, and save lives

Prejudice wastes potential and drives some to suicide: inclusive values will prevent that

Li Ching was an achiever. She excelled in her studies, won international recognition as a chess player, and looked forward to starting her career. But despite her qualifications and determination, potential employers would send her away from job interviews as soon as they found out about her hearing impairment.

After having overcome so many barriers in her life, she must have despaired at the seemingly endless prejudice and discrimination she faced. In March 2008, she took her own life.

Today is World Suicide Prevention Day. It provides an opportunity for us as a society to reflect on how such tragedies can be averted. Indeed, "Suicide prevention across the globe: strengthening protective factors and instilling hope" is the theme this year.

I learned about Li when I first joined the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). Her father had been interviewed for one of our documentaries, and I was struck by the starkness of his grief on the screen. The anguish he felt from the loss of his daughter, who had fought so hard and accomplished so much, was plain to see. “I’d rather not have brought her up to be so outstanding,” he said. “What use is that now?”

Discrimination hurts. The American civil rights activist, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., once described discrimination as a “hellhound” that gnawed at its victims in every moment of their lives. At times, and over time, the pain and indignity can build to the point of hopelessness, with no end apparently in sight.

It is not uncommon for those who suffer relentlessly from discrimination to contemplate suicide as a way out from the humiliation. According to a study in the United States last year, perceived discrimination was associated with over five times higher odds of a suicide attempt among emerging adults.

Over recent years, we have seen media reports of those who have taken their own lives in Hong Kong because they were stigmatized, discriminated or harassed over factors like their disability and gender. In each case, a promising future was cut off. We are left with the lingering thought that we had failed, as a society, to fulfill our core values of social justice and equality.

We must do better. We must instil hope. We must begin to teach empathy and introduce positive values to our children from a young age. According to a study the EOC commissioned last year, discriminatory attitudes can develop from even the age of three, but early education could lessen its effects.

Many people who have faced discrimination have recounted to us how they faced bullying and harassment as children because they were, somehow, different. The wounds from such taunts and japes, however mindless, can last a lifetime. By cultivating inclusive values in our young children, we can raise a generation of considerate and open-minded adults to the benefit of the entire society.

We must also change our attitude. Prejudice and stereotyping remain prevalent, to the detriment of us all. Discrimination, more often than not, arises out of an assumption, and a person is deemed less capable because of factors like their race, gender or disability.

When we discriminate, we forget our shared humanity. As former US President John F. Kennedy said, "For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet, we all cherish our children's future, and we are all mortal."

By giving someone the opportunity to participate as equals, prove their mettle and build a life of dignity, we can indeed instil hope.

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