

Acutely Color Conscious – An Atlanta Solution, by Bret Williams (BRWforATL.com)

The television show “The Voice” is an apt metaphor about the effect of color on all of us. On the show, contestants vocally perform for judges, who have their chairs turned so that they are unable to view the contestants. The judges only hear the voice and are not influenced by what they see – it is a pure singing competition. The idea is that all that matters is the voice, not the appearance or age or sex or color of the person singing. The radical nature of the show is revealed when the contestant is shown to be wildly different than imagined. (And for those who say they can tell a person’s color or ethnicity by the sound and cadence of their voice, that is just a testament to how deep the rabbit hole goes!)

Skin color is that way. The color we see determines our perceptions about who a person is, e.g. the phrase “seeing is believing.” But seeing can be deceiving and reinforce our misconceptions. Most interactions are fleeting and during our encounters with others we do not close our eyes. So, our visual perceptions color (no pun intended) and often determine what we think about a person. And visual perceptions can be so dominant that they overbear other, more accurate cues to the real person.

What can we do to more clearly see the content of someone’s character, to borrow a phrase? Here’s one solution – a solution out of Atlanta, the jewel of the South and the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. Since it is not possible to be colorblind, we must be acutely color conscious. (And the same concept applies to biases based on gender, religion, sexuality, etc., by the way.) Let us not pretend to ignore a central aspect of the other person – their color. Instead, heighten our awareness of it and thereby make it less relevant.

I began to learn this lesson as a boy. At the all-black middle school I attended in Memphis, Tennessee, one of my classmates was a very attractive girl with dark skin. A lighter-skinned, less attractive girl, however, received all the boys’ attention, including mine. Also, the lighter-skinned girl lacked personality. Nevertheless, by the standards at the time, she was the prize because she was fair. I later realized that I, too, a dark-skinned black boy, had unwittingly fallen victim to societal bias based on color. I thought about this for a long time and eventually conducted a mental exercise where in my mind I painted everyone the same shade of black. Then, I determined who was friend or foe, smart or average. And I gained a whole new insight. Much like the television show “The Voice,” the color of a person’s skin (how they look) does not tell you anything about the content of their character (the beauty of their voice).

This acutely color conscious approach served me well in the all-black, subsidized housing tenements of Memphis and the multi-ethnic/multi-colored halls of Harvard and beyond. Just because someone looks like me does not make him or her my friend; alternatively, just because we differ in color does not make us enemies. A black person is not necessarily my friend, and a white person is not necessarily my enemy. I count acute color consciousness as a source of my personal and professional success and happiness.

So, paint everyone whatever color (black, brown, or white) you are most familiar with and then try to gauge the content of their character. I suspect it will provoke a change in you. Although we cannot close our eyes and just hear the voice, we can mentally place everyone on the same footing to more accurately judge their character. And maybe, just maybe, we Atlantans can work together to attain the beloved community and set an example for others while doing so.