

## *Living with Our Differences*

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IS THERE REALLY ANYTHING MORE TO SAY ABOUT DIVERSITY? We all maintain that diversity is a good thing and that America is enriched by the many different kinds of people living within our borders. We also agree that people should not be discriminated against on the basis of their gender, race, religion, ethnic group, class, sexual orientation, or any other identifying marker. Why, then, focus an entire issue of *The Hedgehog Review* on diversity? The issue is a well-trod path—why go down it again?

While a great deal has been said about diversity, these discussions have often failed to move beyond the mere affirmation of diversity. When we try to do so, we frequently hear little more than nostrums about “the need for civility” or “the importance of tolerance.” Yes, we affirm the tenets of liberal democracy, but one wonders whether we do so a bit too casually. Stanley Fish, after all, is not far off the mark when he argues, in *The Trouble with Principle*, that “openness of mind” often turns out to be closed to any form of thought not committed to its own hegemony, that “mutual respect” is less a formula for ecumenical generosity than the cliché of a self-selected little club of right-minded academics. Liberalism is frequently and ritually affirmed, but is there anything substantive to it?

In our day, the differences we find in our social world are drawn not only along the lines of race, class, and gender but also along the lines of political conviction, moral community, and religious tradition, and, at each point, these lines interconnect and crisscross. While some of these lines are sharper and deeper than others, none are static or stable. The lines shift and change over time. The complexity of the situation reveals the rhetoric of most academic and political discourse to be facile, even hackneyed—certainly inadequate to the task of accounting for the experiences, needs, aspirations, and claims of the complex mosaic that is America.

What complicates matters further, of course, is that each point of difference holds the potential for disagreement, resentment, and outright conflict. These

antagonisms may be closer to the surface of social and political life than any of us care to admit.

But what do we do about it?

In a democracy, we agree not to kill each other over our differences. Instead, we commit ourselves to working with those differences in ways that affirm the highest and noblest ideals of democratic life. Having said that, it is also clear that justice that is genuine, respect that is serious and mutual, tolerance that goes beyond indifference, and civility that seeks the common good require hard work and a persistence unfamiliar to many Americans. And none of these democratic virtues can ever be more than approximate, partial, and imperfect. The work remains forever unfinished.

Yet, if *e pluribus unum* is ever to be more than a simple slogan, it will require constant negotiation and renegotiation. If civil society is to be substantive and robust, it will require social processes that are strong and discursive resources that draw upon ideals of the common good that go beyond factionalizing and personal interests.

At one level, the topic of diversity really has been talked to death, and yet so much of that diversity-talk has been carried out in a way that avoids the depth and complexity of our differences. To live together with our differences fully recognized is the ongoing and messy task of all who call themselves democratic, and new ways of understanding how to do that, which go beyond the weary platitudes of politics, are always welcome.

It is to this end that *The Hedgehog Review* takes up the question of diversity and its challenge. The essays in this issue explore how our understandings of diversity have changed and, beyond this, new avenues of connection between people. What are the social conditions that make trust possible? How might translation from one cultural discourse to another happen so that members of different and opposing groups might come to understand each other's views? Might the expression of gratitude be a means of acknowledging not only the debt we owe to others, but also our common humanity with them?

— T. H. R.