

Empathy -- The Thread That Connects Us

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When I was a child, my family participated in a program that hosted international university students over holidays. We celebrated Christmas with Mr. Ogot from Kenya and another holiday with Mr. Irie Hiroshi from Japan. My dad recently reminded me how we had prepared for one of the student visitors from Nigeria, Mr. Azum Agbim.

In preparation for his visit, we looked up Nigeria in our World Book to learn about his country and culture. My parents helped me to think of questions that I could ask him to know more about him. It must have been Easter because I have a photo of my sisters and I dying eggs together with him (below.) Although I don't remember many details of Mr. Agbim's visit, my dad says that at one point, I asked him quietly, "How come he's so . . . tall?" As I was asking the question, my father said that he was wondering how the sentence would end.

He said, "Never once in our preparations did we discuss the fact that his skin would be darker than ours. When we went with me to the university campus in Corvallis, we picked him up at his dorm, and realized that he was a very tall young man - well over six feet. I guess we hadn't picked up from World Book that the native persons of Nigeria are often quite tall. He was a delightful visitor for our family."

Empathy is the thread that connects us to other humans. When empathy is used in everyday life, it makes us feel more connected to one another. And when we feel that connection, we are better, more compassionate people. I am grateful that my parents were intentional in giving us experiences that fostered that connection. It is my desire to daily nourish empathy in myself and others.