

Narrative on culture

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

CultureCrossing Do you ever look at a complete stranger and immediately categorize that person? I will be the first to admit that I have done so more than I would care to acknowledge. I was definitely raised to look down upon people, especially the Jewish, in spite of what my parents will tell you.

Although I was never actually told not to like or associate with a Jewish person, the adults in my family made it known that it was unacceptable by saying unpleasant things about them. I heard the Jewish would come to nice neighborhoods, take them over, and ruin them.

I also heard that they killed Jesus. It was inevitable that I too would see Jewish people as inferior to me. With all the bad things I heard, it only seemed natural. I thought Jewish people were arrogant, greedy, conniving, and uneducated. I thought they should leave our country because their religion and cultural beliefs were un-American. From the time I was a little girl through my early twenties I looked down upon Jewish people until I met Joel one day while I was working. It was a typical Friday at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

It was fifteen minutes until closing time and the place was packed. I was about to call my next customer when a short man dressed in black and white from head to toe with long chin-brushing curls as sideburns wearing a black hat approached my window. He was a Hasidic Jew and I was not happy. I acknowledged him. " Yes? " " Are you going to call this ticket number? " " Nope. Have a seat," I said annoyed. " I'm sorry to have bothered you. " As he was sitting back down I noticed the ticket number he had in his hands. It was a dealer ticket. We stop calling dealers at 4: 30 p. m because it's time consuming.

I was contemplating if I was going to tell him this or let him find out the hard way. There was a big sign by the ticket machine that clearly states that we don't accept dealer paperwork after 4: 30 p. m. Some of my coworkers noticed him and started making fun of his clothes, yiddish accent and, stupidity for not reading the sign. Although I tended to agree with them, I decided to be nice and help this man because I was sick and tired of hearing my coworkers ridiculing him. He was, after all, in hearing distance. I motioned the Hasidic man up to my window with my index finger. Sir, I normally would not help you because we don't accept dealers after 4: 30 p. m but, I see you only have one deal so I will help you just this one time. " He smiled from ear to ear and thanked me. I knew from experience that Hasidic men are not allowed to touch an object at the same time as someone from the opposite sex so, I was very surprised when he handed me the papers through the bars rather than sliding them underneath the window barrier. I didn't know what to do. Should I let the papers fall to the desk? I did not want to be impolite so I took the papers from him.

After looking at his papers I soon realized that I would be unable to process the transaction and I delivered the bad news to him. Expecting the worst, I was ready for the hostile reply I usually get from anyone I give unpleasant news to. Instead, he was polite and humble. He thanked me over and over for taking him. I was pleasantly surprised and smiled. I told him the additional papers he needed and even wished him a good evening. He was walking away when he turned and asked, " What is your name? " " Ann" I suspiciously replied. " My name is Joel. Have a great weekend Ann!

I will see you first thing on Monday," he said cheerfully as he walked towards the door. I wondered what was wrong with him. I had never come across a Hasidic man like him. As the metal gates lifted to the D. M. V entrance Monday morning, I noticed Joel was the first in line. He waved. Oh, geez. That was weird. My coworkers took notice of him and started to tease me. " Look, there's Annie's special friend," said one. " Annie's curly locks is here," snorted another. I chose to ignore their snide remarks and called him up to my window. " Good Morning Ann! How was your weekend? " Joel asked.

He placed a small tin of cookies on the counter. " These are for you. They are from my brother's bakery in Brooklyn," he joyfully said as he slid the tin underneath the window bars. I told him that I couldn't accept them and thanked him. " You have kids? Yes? Please take them home to your children then," he insisted. I took the cookies and hid them in my desk draw. " Thank you Joel, that was very kind of you. My children will love the cookies. " I hoped no one noticed the exchange. I did not want to be teased my coworkers. While editing and processing his paperwork, Joel started telling me jokes.

They were funny but I didn't dare laugh because they were about the Jewish. " Not all Hasidic's are extremists, Ann," he laughed. I didn't know how to respond. I never met a Hasidic man that was as friendly and talkative as Joel. I wondered if he was from Kiryas Joel, the village within the town of Monroe where it's residents strictly observe the Torah and its commandments. If he is, I'm thinking he shouldn't be talking to me like this. Hasidic men are proscribed from associating with woman who are not their wives or relatives. What if another Hasidic witnessed him talking to me? Joel, do you live in

Kiryas Joel? " I shyly asked. " Yes, I do. Why do you ask? " " Um, can't you get in trouble for talking to me? " I had a hard time getting the words out. I was embarrassed. " I have many rules but it doesn't mean that I follow them to a T? " I was intrigued. I knew little about Hasidism. I determined this would be an excellent opportunity to learn. " Would you mind if I asked you questions about your religion? " I quietly asked. Joel gave me permission to ask him anything. As time went on, I called him right up to my window.

None of my coworkers wanted to help him anyway and, I looked forward to our conversations. I asked him questions about everything from having sex through a hole in the sheet to having a holiday that they are ordered to get drunk. Joel eagerly shared his experiences in detail leaving nothing out. He explained holidays, the importance of tradition, and beliefs. I learned the life of a Hasidic from birth through marriage. Joel educated me on why they dress all in black, what kind of education they receive, gender roles, acceptable entertainment, and any other aspect that I thought to ask him about.

He explained the discipline involved to abstain mainstream American culture. When he spoke about his arranged marriage, I began to understand and respect the idea behind it. It did seem safer in the big picture because partners were picked that were good for a lifetime not short infatuations. I was amazed how open-minded I was becoming. I had gained respect for his religion and became quite fond of Joel. I saw him as a whole person rather than the Hasidic Jew I once seen. My religious and cultural upbringing fostered my ignorance.

I grew up feeling superior to people outside my culture and religion because I simply didn't know any better. Meeting Joel changed my view on culture and religion. Through sharing his traditions and beliefs, I realized that other cultures interact differently and it's often misconceived as rudeness, anger and, foolishness. Getting to know Joel made me see that our cultural and religious beliefs didn't make us any less or any more of a person. Based on our common humanity, I learned to respect cultural and religious diversity.