

# CAN WE TALK?



Irshad Manji, *New York Times* bestselling author, is pleased to offer you this excerpt from her latest book, ***Don't Label Me: How to Do Diversity Without Inflaming the Culture Wars***.

Prof. Manji is the first recipient of Oprah's "Chutzpah Award" for boldness. She is also the founder of **Moral Courage College**, which teaches people, including kids, to turn contentious issues into constructive conversations and healthy teamwork.

Its signature program is **Diversity Without Division**, a strategy for inclusion that fosters empathy so that common ground can be created even as differences are explored.



Given her unique approach to belonging, Prof. Manji writes about it in an equally unique way — as a conversation with her dog, **Lily**. Old, blind, and surprisingly sassy, Lily shows us that all sentient beings are so much more than our labels. We are multifaceted. **We are plurals.**

The entertainer Chris Rock calls this book "genius." Of course, not everybody agrees with Chris Rock, and that's as it should be: honest diversity embraces varied viewpoints. After all, individuals aren't identical even when we're part of the same identity group.

Enjoy eavesdropping on Lily and her mama, Irshad Manji. May their incredible dialogue spark your own conversations with students, parents, and fellow educators.

P.S.: Prof. Manji's research sources can be found at [irshadmanji.com/dont-label-me-footnotes](http://irshadmanji.com/dont-label-me-footnotes).



## Introduction

Lily won George over.

George is my editor. I proposed a book to him about healing the divides that are tearing apart these United States.

Lily is my dog. Or was. She died unexpectedly during the writing of this book. I miss her fiercely but I've come to terms with her physical absence. That's because Lil recently consoled me with news that she's fantastic. Nothing less than incredible. Somehow, through the conversation in this book, she's been reborn.

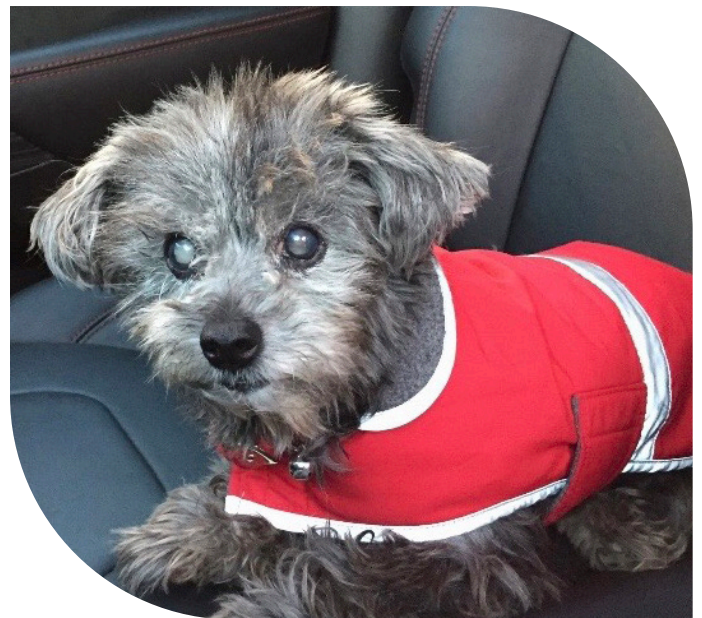
We can take heart that the conversation on which you're about to eavesdrop will illuminate Lily's lessons for the rebirth of pluralism, too.

I met Lil at an adoption event near Los Angeles. Having suffered a health crisis, and being slow in the self-care department, I didn't realize how much healing I needed—or that an abandoned dog could show me the way. To any lover of animals, the soothing effect of our furry children is self-evident.

Not to me. I grew up terrified of dogs and continued to picture them as ferocious beasts. My friend Laura, a proud parent of four rescue pups, urged me to evolve.

Given that I teach "[Moral Courage](#)"—speaking truth to the power of our fears—I had to try. Could I credibly ask others to expand their moral imaginations if I wouldn't go first? Then again, teaching people to be courageous, for as glam as it sounds, had worn me out. On both counts, adopting a dog seemed the right thing to do. I brought Lily home that day.

But running away from human beings doesn't guarantee that you'll flee your frustrations with them. As Lily and I bonded, I'd confide to her my despair about humanity: that so many of us show so little of it.



I reached this dim conclusion reluctantly, after three decades of writing (and fighting) about identity. One of my books made the case that my faith of Islam has to be reformed. It offended more than a few of my fellow Muslims, who frequently reacted with personal insults and, on occasion, with physical threats. They jolted me to confront the emotions behind who we think we are.

My follow-up book was a reinterpretation of Islam for liberal-minded Muslims. In it, I showed that the *Qur'an*, Islam's scripture, encourages questioning. Strident atheists joined the chorus of the offended, some anointing me the latest apologist of a "pedophile" prophet. Evidently, feelings can do the thinking not just of the faithful, but also of those who fancy themselves ultra-rational.

The combat zone had long been my comfort zone. No more. Wanting a divorce from my species, I slumped into pessimism and stepped back from the Islam-versus-the-West showdown — only to behold the next apocalyptic clash: red America versus blue America.

I grumbled to Lily that the home of the brave had become anything but. What bravery did it take to let "us" and "them" coagulate into us *against* them? Even people who called themselves progressive acted as if progress only meant accosting the other side. Good luck changing the world that way. To achieve justice, devotees of justice must change ourselves, I sighed to Lily, and I suggested how that could happen at a time when almost everybody feels besieged.



While I poured out my thoughts, Lily would tilt her head again and again. It was as if she wondered, "What are you smoking, Mama?" Or, "Can you clarify?" Or, "Have you considered an opposing opinion?" Over time, Lil's questions sent me in search of alternate perspectives—Eastern and Western; scientific and philosophical; radical, liberal, conservative, and populist, each of these a label, and each a reminder that nobody owns the entire truth. More often than not, labels eclipse truth.

This, I learned about Lily's labels. She was old and she was blind. To love her, rather than love my specious assumptions about her, I had to suspend what I "knew" about

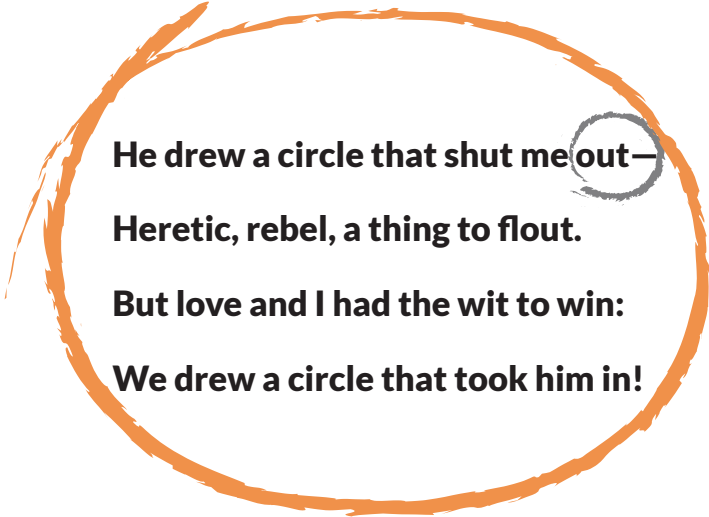
Lil merely by how she looked. I had to defang the force of ego, the most pervasive and pernicious power there is. Until I tempered my need to be right all the time, I'd never understand her. I'd continue relying on sterile categories. I'd settle for the fake facts that labels hand to us—not only about Lily but about everybody.

Labels keep us all in our assigned places. At root, that's why we're divided. Thus was born the idea to make this book a conversation with Lily.

Enter George, my editor. He'd accepted my plan to write a book on the rupturing of America. I guess I neglected to inform him of the revised plan to feature Lil. Upon receiving my first draft, George flipped. He told me that his "heart sank" and his "head began to ache." Problem number one: He doesn't like dogs. Problem number two: He's sick of books about people and their wise pets. Problem number three: An analysis of the country's sorry state can't be serious if it stars a talking mutt.

Still, George had little choice but to read the damned draft. He downed two aspirin and waded in. The following week, I woke up to an exuberant email. Lily had moved George to see how America's tribal politics can be outwitted by anyone, including the vulnerable.

Lily's method is a form of mental martial arts. At the heart of it lies the practice of respect. In Latin, the word "respect" comes from "re-spectate"—to look again. When we see others with fresh eyes, we subvert static labels. If we do it sincerely, we give others the emotional incentive to do likewise for us. Edwin Markham, a poet laureate of Oregon, captured the border-busting, bridge-building power of respecting one's detractors. Imagine Lily reciting these words about George:



**He drew a circle that shut me out—  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!**

The title of that poem? "Outwitted."

Which is what Lily regularly did to me, revealing her power to communicate tough truths with grace. One afternoon, I slathered peanut butter on my lips to lure a kiss from Lil. She closed in on my face, sniffed out the trickery and waltzed off, preserving her dignity in the teeth of my pathetic scheme. Without toiling or spinning, Lily exposed the limits of manipulation as a tactic. She gave me a glimpse into what we humans consistently do to each other, planting the seeds of suspicion and eventual backlash.

Lily's no-nonsense mentoring only started there. Nobody else could have convinced me to stay off social media for two years, during which I discovered the value of time and trust. As she put me through my paces, Lil got me connecting the dots: A rising number of countries around the world have mega-manipulators at their helm. They wrangle the levers of mass culture, especially social media, to exploit the mistrust that already exists among people. Mistrust abounds largely because we the people have been manipulating one another, permitting our politicians, journalists, and opinion-shapers to push the bar of integrity even lower.

Through technology designed to meet our greed for speed, the mistrust is jacked up to emergency levels. Like the teams in a sudden-death playoff, we take refuge in our respective colors. We resolve to vanquish the other side. We widen the vacuum of public trust, invariably creating the pretext for strongmen to swoop in and restore unity—or uniformity. This is the vintage game of divide-and-conquer, expedited for our time-pressed lives.

The lesson is, people are getting gamed. All of us, regardless of our teams. And our leaders won't stop gaming us until we stop gaming each other.

So effortlessly did Lil teach me this lesson that I found myself drawn into deeper conversation with her. That's when I discovered the unabashed cleverness of her "moves." She won over George by intentionally not striving to win. She educated me by letting me educate her. She demonstrated that disagreeing with each other's ideas never has to mean denying each other's dignity. My utter pessimism about the human species was outwitted by an old blind dog.

"Don't label me," I can hear Lily exhorting a touch tartly. "I'm more than your labels, Mama, and you're more than mine. Can we agree on that much?"

Amid the on-going kookiness of our times, Lily remains my guide. She'll be yours, too, if you're willing to see with a new pair of eyes.

My respect to all.







## 1

## Lily In The Field: Old, Blind, And Badass

Lily, my love, would you please suspend your sniff-fest? Just for a minute. Mama has something to say.

Ever since you trundled into my life with your charcoal fur, your lamb chop legs, and your swashbuckling tail, I've become a more humane human. You're the reason I walk away from my laptop and lose myself in a belly rub. *Your* belly, I mean.

You give me permission to breathe, to interrupt the thrum of anxiety, to choose serenity. Around you, I feel no urge to Tweet, tap, post, blog, swipe, scroll, or Slack. In fact, whenever I'm hunched over my phone, you notice and get bored with me. Message received.

You've made me less inquisitional. More inquisitive.

Your gifts couldn't have been foretold. How did I luck out? Most people want the entertainment value of a puppy, not a sightless senior like you. Rare is the acknowledgment of puppy privilege. Abundant is the assumption that to be blind, or old, is to be a hassle.

Passersby stare at you in your stroller. Some chuckle at the spectacle of a dog in a baby carriage. A few zero in on your glassy eyes. Then they get all sad-faced and tell me I'm a saint for adopting you. A saint! They don't know me.



More important, they don't know you. They've never watched you out on the grass, noting the direction of the wind, heading into it nose-first, accepting your power to march right through and blow your own way. You won't be bullied by your vulnerability. You'll hit walls and fences and tree trunks and table legs. Then you'll bounce back, pivot, and carry on. Resilience, thy name is Lilybean.

It's not as if you're immune to hurt. Seems to me you were hurting badly the first time I scooped you up into my arms. The nipples protruding from your tummy, and your untreated glaucoma, verified that you'd been somebody's property; repeatedly raped for a breeder who slapped a price tag on your uterus. You had no reason to trust. You could've hung onto past hurt. Yet here you are, giving a second chance to the promise of family.

Maybe it's wrong to compare your behavior to a human's. It might be true that unlike human animals, dogs have no long-term memory and that's why they don't bear grudges or devolve into cynicism. Scientists haven't reached any hard and fast conclusions about this, but I know what I've witnessed: Your memory's perfect when we hop into the car and you doggedly snoop for goodies. You remember that the last time we drove, I fed you half a strip of jerky. Now you think I can be convinced that the back-seat treat is our tradition. You've got moxie, Ms. Lil. And magnificent recall.

All to say, "blind" doesn't remotely define you. Neither does "old." Yes, you're both of these. You're also much more than these. Your defiance of simplistic labels has me thinking about the lessons for human beings.





## 2 Our Division Problem

Math teachers tell us that to solve a division problem, we must find the common denominator. From its birth, America's common denominator has been diversity. "I'm not a fan of that word," a neighbor recently snipped. "It separates people."

But nature would disagree with that interpretation. Every afternoon, Lil, you meander in the park. Here, diversity is the lubricant of a humming engine. Do you breathe in just one aroma? How about two? Five?



It's bananas to isolate and enumerate all the smells enveloping you. None of them, on its own, captures the magic of the intermingling whole. You're gaga about the park exactly because its kaleidoscope of scents jostle with each other and sometimes get up your nose. Which means diversity itself doesn't divide; it's what we do with diversity that splits societies apart or stitches them together.

The paradox is, to "do" diversity honestly, we can't be labeling all of diversity's critics as bigots. You disagree, Lil? You're entitled to your opinion but you haven't let me explain mine.

Welcome to the real world, you say? Well, this isn't exactly the real world, is it? You're a conversing canine, for God's sake.

Okay, okay, enough of my defensiveness. Getting my back up won't help you hear me. But, Lil, if I'm going to work on me, then I need assurance of a fair hearing from you. Deal? (Note to self: Never expect the mother-daughter relationship to be a picnic in the park.)



As I was about to explain, Lily, there's more than one way to look at a situation. Some people oppose diversity because they're bigots. Others, though, are skeptical of diversity because of how we, its champions, practice it. We're fixated on labeling. And labeling drains diversity of its unifying potential.

Since the founding of the U.S. republic, Americans have extolled the ideal of unity in diversity. *E pluribus unum*—out of many, one—became a gallant motto for the union of the original thirteen colonies. Before you pounce, let me acknowledge that the colonists were themselves colonizers. Of Indigenous Peoples. Of Black people. Of women and of poor white men. I acknowledge that such labels didn't drop from the clear blue sky. These groups bore the brunt of keeping the United States united.

So let's continue to keep it real: *E pluribus unum* has always been an uphill battle. Americans fought a gruesome civil war over the obscenity of slavery, whose promoters reduced human beings to labels.

A century earlier, drawing unity from diversity proved to be grubby business of another sort. It demanded that ardent revolutionaries check their egos. Just before voting on the Constitution, the Framers listened to a letter from Benjamin Franklin. He, in turn, had somebody read it out loud. Addressing each signatory as if speaking to him in person, Franklin confessed in the letter:

*I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present, but Sir, I am not sure I shall never approve it: For having lived long, I have experienced many Instances of being oblig'd by better Information or fuller Consideration, to change Opinions even on important Subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise.*

Take a moment to digest this, Lily. A world-class rebel states publicly that he doesn't know it all. That he's missing something that's obvious to others. That he might be wrong. Was Franklin written off as a wimp? Nope. His fellow Framers knew the value of humility in making the impossible happen. For America's revolutionaries, breaking free from a British despot would be the relatively simple part. Much harder would be replacing despotism with a democratic and doable alternative.

The Framers' solution? To enshrine and institutionalize diversity of viewpoint. Their logic? In a republic of vastly different regions, cultures, peoples, and perspectives, there's nation-building power in airing disagreements. Diversity of opinion as a common denominator—sheer genius, Lil.

Americans, I'm thrilled to tell you, still aspire to that vision. Recently, The Harris Poll released its findings about what unites and divides the country. Among the factors that unite: "being open to alternative viewpoints." But the deflating reality is, people generally mean that *other* people should be open to *their* viewpoints.

Today, living the Revolutionary ideal seems a non-starter, and for various reasons. Hands down, the most controversial reason is the changing make-up of America. It's a landmine of fraught labels, frail identities, and engulfing emotions.

Can we talk about it?



In this country, brown, black, and multiracial babies outnumber white babies. Beyond our major cities, small towns have started to mix it up. Take Storm Lake, Iowa. An owner of the community newspaper estimates that “88 percent of children in our elementary schools are children of color. We speak about 21 languages.” That’s a bundle of change in a flash of time.

Yes, America has a history of muddling through. Problem is, Americans can’t depend on the past to predict that the future will be tickety-boo. Sure, some prejudice has subsided as successive waves of migrants have integrated. On one specific score, though, these are unprecedented days for the nation. That’s because a generation from now, white people are going to be a minority like everyone else. To state it more starkly, Black, Asian, Hispanic, and multiracial minorities, taken together, are about to become the majority.

Think about the implications, Lil. People of color won’t need to fit into a white-approved mainstream. If anything, it’s white folks who will have to integrate. As stalwarts of inclusion, your challenge and mine will be to include white folks *meaningfully*—and not just because it’s the right thing to do from a moral standpoint. I’m speaking practically as well.

Let me introduce you to the work of Jennifer Richeson, a cutting-edge psychologist at Yale University. Her experiments shed light on what takes place in many hearts and minds as people become aware that we’re all going to be minorities soon. The more Americans learn about this inevitability, Richeson says, the more attitudes swerve toward conservatism. But not only among white Americans. “When you expose Asian Americans, Black Americans to similar [information] about the growth in the Hispanic population, they also show a shift to more support for conservative policy positions,” Richeson reveals.

Said another way, Lil, old white guys are dying off but a fresh, diverse crop of Americans could easily perpetuate, even accelerate, the politics of personal threat. It’s basic group psychology, Richeson emphasizes. Once you’re told that your group’s losing status compared to another group, you’re more likely to feel defensive. Defensiveness triggers division. And division obscures the shared ground on which further progress can be built.

What an incentive to use our remaining time well—to learn from past mistakes about how, finally, to get inclusion right!

So far, though, inclusion's enthusiasts are committing the same stale mistakes. We're attaching labels to individuals as if those labels capture the sum of who they are. Moreover, we're labeling ourselves to the point of extinguishing our own humanity.

Taking pride in our particulars at the expense of our commonalities has become a hallmark of "progressive" America. Ironically, this was the very mindset of the colonists. For all of their gentlemanly manners, the most monied colonists sliced and stamped Americans to suit their narrow agendas. These days, that mindset passes for enlightened diversity. I'm floored, Lil, and worried.

There's the head-tilt. Ready for pushback when you are.

Am I equally worried about the current backlash against women and minorities? You bet I am. That's why we have to end the frantic labeling. It fuels the bona fide bigots.

Allow me to elaborate. More and more of us in the inclusion crowd label people as ignorant and insidious if they hold opinions that diverge from our script. We rally for diversity of appearance but flake on diversity of viewpoint. We wield enormous power in American culture, yet we excuse our excesses by claiming to be powerless and therefore incapable of oppressing those who think differently than we do.

No doubt, the expressed enemies of diversity threaten a much worse form of oppression. If we left America to hard-core white nationalists, their women would exist to reproduce and replenish the ranks of the blue-eyed and ruddy-cheeked. The rest of us would be free to take a flying leap into our ancestors' "shit holes" of origin. Some freedom.

But here's the kicker: Hate gets turbo-charged when those of us who bang the drum for inclusion then drum out *reasonable* folks merely because their opinions don't match ours. Labeling our rivals further and further into enemy territory is an unforced error whose repercussions we'll come to regret. How ham-fisted can we be?

No, Lil, no. It's just a phrase. There's no ham in my fist. None. You and your nose can heel.





### 3

## Rivals Versus Enemies

Do I have your attention again, Lilybean?

As I was saying, every rival doesn't need to be an enemy. A few years ago, *The Wall Street Journal* and NBC News polled people who identified as Democrats and Republicans. In each party, more Americans wanted an openly gay president than an evangelical Christian one.

Around the same time, over half of Republicans polled by Pew Research said that homosexuality should be accepted.

For me, Lily, the stunner of stunners had to do with immigration: 92 percent of the Republicans consulted (and 97 percent of the Democrats) said that the rising number of people from various ethnicities and nationalities makes America a better country. In 2018, more polls confirmed that people who'd frowned on immigrants a decade ago mostly embrace them today.

This is a tectonic cultural shift, Lil. Don't let anybody tell you that we in the diversity crowd have been rendered powerless by Donald Trump. The real question is—

Yes, sweet bean, you may interject.

Is it possible that the polls' respondents lied about their support for minorities because they were too ashamed to admit otherwise?

Possible. Researchers have shown that some people will hide their distaste for a diverse America in order to look like they're part of the popular consensus. But this suggests that the popular consensus *favors* diversity. So any liars in these polls would be outliers in society.

Now I have a question for you. If some people are withholding their true convictions, is it because they're actually ashamed? Or is it because they're being shamed?

There's a quantum difference between the two. You can feel ashamed because you realize that you hold immoral beliefs. This kind of shame, generated by your conscience, is healthy. It means you're introspecting and grappling. That's always good, no matter the issue or your position on it. By contrast, you can be shamed into shutting up about your beliefs. In that case, you're probably not going to introspect or grapple with them. When the time's right—when you sense that you have backup from people who feel as

browbeaten as you—you'll retaliate against your shamers.

Near as I can tell, much of today's polarized politics stems from the shaming that the diversity movement's been doing—but not only to authentic racists; rather, to anyone who's got an honest disagreement with us. I take it as a warning of worse to come. Shaming's a surefire way to alienate the growing legion of Americans who are politically homeless and poised to sway elections. Chief among them: moderate Republicans.

Whoa, Lily.

Slow down, please.

Uh-huh.

You done?



Let me reiterate your questions to be sure I understand you. If Republicans had a scintilla of moderation, then why did most of them back a presidential candidate who ridicules differences?

A candidate who launched his campaign by needlessly labeling the people of Mexico?

Who later parodied a man with cerebral palsy?

Who egged on the Ku Klux Klan?

Who trivialized women?

You're a hairy act to follow, Lil. Here goes. In all the ways you've listed, decent Republicans are endorsing indecency. There's no excuse for indifference to the human harm caused by Trump. There is, however, an explanation. It's called "negative polarization." That's when voters side with a candidate not out of faith in him but out of fury with the other side. Even after their camp wins, they're consumed with ensuring that the rival camp keeps losing, such is the depth of their disdain for the "enemy."

I must tell you about another smart Lily—Lilliana Mason, a political scientist at the University of Maryland. She studies how negative polarization perverts the behavior of voters. According to Mason, whenever people form their personal identities as a reaction against the other side, "We act like we disagree more than we actually do.

*Our opinions can be very fluid; so fluid that if we wanted to come to a compromise, we could ... But we can't come to a compromise because our identities are making us want to take positions as far away from the other side as possible.*

Point is, moderate Republicans may very well agree with some of the policies that you and I like—marriage equality, for example, or thoughtful immigration reform—but many of them will choose candidates who stand for the opposite because they want to deny you and me a win, any win. For these voters, policy isn't the issue. The emotions we set off in them are. The more acidly anti-Trump we become, the more egregiously anti-anti-Trump they become.

So, my precious bean, they hate us. Now what?



We could inflate the hate by flipping the bird to these folks. Or—hear me out—we could pose a scandalously mature question to ourselves: How have we, diversity’s partisans, fed the contempt that many Trump sympathizers have for us? What, if anything, have we done to help incite this level of animosity? I’m not blaming us. I’m not blaming, period. I’m asking, where do we, too, need to evolve?

Michelle Goldberg, a columnist for *The New York Times*, dangles a hint. When she attended Donald Trump’s campaign events, she rarely heard people rail against the economy. Mostly, they spat bullets about “political correctness.” Demanding correctness insinuates that certain Americans can’t be trusted to discover the truth. *Our* truth. Therefore, we must enforce *our* speech codes, *our* approved visuals, *our* superior values.

Why would anybody give a rip about political correctness, you ask?

I’m on board with you, Lil, that America has a lot more tangible hurdles: Growing economic disparity. Gun violence. Mass incarceration. Crumbling infrastructure. Under-appreciation of school teachers. Over-consumption of junk food. On and on it goes. But as I’ve learned, political correctness is no mere distraction from these scourges. It’s as immediate a scourge as they are. Immediate because without resolving it, we can’t advance lasting solutions to anything else. For a solution to be sustainable, it needs buy-in by more one than side. And buy-in requires respect.

From my scores of conversations with Americans who regard themselves as moderate, a common thread emerges. In their eyes, political correctness lays bare the diversity movement’s disrespect for others. *Our* others.



## 4 Who Gets Respect?

Before your time, Lil, in 2009, I went on a book tour of the American Midwest. After coming home to New York, I told a fellow educator that people in the heartland seem to have lost their mojo. Those I spoke with sounded dispirited. Well-informed and obviously part of the book-reading public, a number of them pressed me about “out-of-control political correctness.”

They asked, why the knee-jerk vilifying of middle America as “racist”? More Black folks live in the Midwest than in any other area outside the South. Aren’t we, the boosters of diversity, being that much more racist in framing the Midwest as white and, by implication, teeming with knuckle-draggers? Above all, they asked, what happened to giving respect in order to get respect?

Back then, Lil, I couldn’t have defined “respect.” Did it mean being polite? Tolerating the intolerable? Diffusing tension for the sake of civility? If “yes” on any of those counts, then to hell with respect. It’s just a euphemism for hypocrisy.

Only after looking into its root did I appreciate its meaning. “Respect” comes from the Latin to “look again.” To see someone in a new light. To be curious about that person’s experiences and to spend time finding out about them. In that context, the Midwesterners I talked to deserved no less respect than you and I do. They’re as multidimensional as any of us.



Now your hair’s standing on end, Lil? And you’re turning your back on me? That’s a shallow way to persuade me of your perspective. You’ll get the podium in just a minute. Let me wrap up my story.

When I reported my readers' questions to my colleague, the educator in New York, he couldn't have been less interested. Instead, he wanted to know how often I dealt with Islamophobes on my trip. Not whether, but how often. "Truthfully?" I told him. "Never. Not that I noticed." Irritated by my colleague's disrespect for people in the Midwest, I decided to test *his* tolerance. Over several minutes, I held court about my faith in Allah. "By the way," I finally asked him, "if I was a Christian or a Jew, would you indulge all my God-talk?"

He reflected for a couple of seconds and answered, "Probably not." Credit where credit's due, Lil: He could've lapsed into defensiveness. But he chose candor and I thanked him for it. We remain friends precisely because he's open to learning about his blind spots, as I am mine. No blaming, no shaming. End of story. Take it away, my love.

I'm stumbling into a trap? How so?

Got it. You think I'm assuming that the more respectable we are to others, the more respect they'll confer on us.

Oh, and if Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, then I have a pipe dream. Ouch, Lil. Your zingers would be devastating in a debate. Good thing this isn't one. Right? 😊

Back to our conversation. I don't intend to nit-pick, but I'm advocating that we be *respectful*, not *respectable*. To be respectable implies that whatever we do, we do it so that we can ingratiate ourselves to the people whose minds we want to change. That's a manipulative move. When we see others as the only people who need to grow, we're imagining them as our objects. We're seduced to game them for gain. Don't be surprised if they resist playing along.

Being respectable is an express ticket to becoming inauthentic. Being respectful, on the other hand, spreads authenticity. Martin Buber, a titanic twentieth-century theologian, described the most healing relationships as "I-Thou" rather than "I-It." In the I-Thou relationship, I presume my Other to be as multifaceted as I am. But in the I-It relationship, I imagine my Other as an inconvenience. "It" is holding up justice. "It" is taking up oxygen. I must get "It" out of the way. Do you smell the rat, Lil?

Do I smell the irony, you ask?

I do. The irony's more than a little pungent. After all, plenty of white people made us their "It" for generations. But I have to ask you: Does payback equal progress?

To revisit my educator-friend in New York, he turned the archetypal Midwesterner into his "It." Suspecting Midwesterners of oversimplifying Islam to be violence, he oversimplified Midwesterners to be Islamophobes. By imagining that they made me their Other, he made them his Other. By imitating his It, he mutated into it. *That's* the trap.

Admittedly, Lil, one anecdote about one person in one milieu proves nothing. But I don't share this story to "prove" something to you. I share it to illustrate how I began to understand the ambient sense of being ambushed in much of America. Political correctness is the memo that heartland Americans had no input into. It's the command performance that's been sprung on them. It's the "inclusion" that excludes their voices.

If you account for the surveys I've cited, most Republicans, like Democrats, have

signed up for a consistently diversifying America. Change doesn't necessarily freak them out. What then, does? For a lot of Republicans, it's the pace of change. Robert Putnam, the famed sociologist at Harvard, reports that too much diversity too fast can shock longtime residents of any neighborhood. Putnam likens them to turtles, scurrying away from whatever feels foreign to hide under their shells. But before long, Putnam says optimistically, they get past the shock and move forward.

To be honest, Lil, I'm less optimistic, given the shaming that goes with insisting on political correctness. As minorities steadily add up to the majority in America, today's turtles—the people who are shocked by a rapidly diversifying nation—should talk about their anxieties if only to cope with them productively. Yet too many won't talk. Not openly, that is, because they fear being humiliated by us.



You heard me right, Lily. We, as much as they, possess the H-Bomb: humiliation. To experience rudeness here or incivility there ain't no biggie. That's life. But serial contempt? Biggie.

Arthur Brooks, a behavioral scientist, explains it like so: "Anger says, 'I care about you.' Contempt says, 'You're worthless.'" Without worth, you're invisible—the worst of all fates, adds the historian Yuval Noah Harari when he speaks about humanity's looming challenges. Psychologists themselves have found that humiliation's a more intense emotion than happiness. Its teeth tear deeper into people than anger does. Its impact outlasts occasional shame.

There's an even deeper context to take into account. Sarah Smarsh, a Kansas-based writer, reveals that shame stalks many rural poor. That's because most urbanites can't be bothered to know them as fellow Americans:

*[To] devalue, in our social investments, the people who tend crops and livestock, or to refer to their place as "flyover country," is to forget not just a country's foundation but its connection to the earth, to cycles of life scarcely witnessed and ill understood in concrete landscapes.*

You could say the same for folks in the U.S. South. They've never really been accepted as "one of us" by the emperors of cultured America, plenty of whom still turn up their Northern noses at those "mother-\*\*\*\*ing mutants." That's what a Southern friend of mine overheard on his Ivy League campus. He reported it to me through tears.

To the incessantly shamed, political correctness dishes out a double dose of humiliation. It heaps irrelevance on their culture and then indifference on their views. In the guise of making room for "all," our side garbles diversity into selective tolerance. We select who merits membership in this theoretical "all"—and, more gallingly, who doesn't. We've helped create fertile conditions for feeling scammed.

Donald Trump knows it only too well. When he announced his presidential run, he proclaimed that Americans "are tired of being ripped off by everybody in the world." His "everybody" included you and me, proponents of inclusion. Later, Lil, you'll eavesdrop on a dialogue I'm having with Jim, one of our neighbors. He maintains that President Trump only did to the likes of us what we zealously do to the likes of Jim.

From his perspective, self-appointed lovers of inclusion slap lurid labels on white people; how is that better than Trump labeling Muslims? Our educators label the straight-shooters of middle America; similarly, Trump labels the unsuspecting citizens of Mexico. Our press labels Trump voters as enemies of democracy, handing Trump the moral authority to label journalists as enemies of the people.

You might bark that Jim exaggerates Trump's "moral authority." You might protest that there's nothing moral about it because, as I've said myself, payback isn't progress.

Try telling Jim's emotions. He's done with being labeled because, as he puts it, "Labels distort." On this, he and I whole-heartedly agree. Labels distort you, Lil, and I can assure you that they distort me.







## 5

## How Labels Distort



I've duly noted your tilting head, Lilybean. Go for it.

You're curious as to how you and I, both of us women of color, can bring such different lenses to reality? I need to be clear that the lenses I'm putting on right now aren't exactly my own. They're the lenses of people unlike me, and I'm wearing them because to have an informed viewpoint about what others are doing, it helps to understand where they're coming from.

You want to know where I'm coming from? Why, that is, I'd care to view life through lenses that make me uncomfortable?

Thank you for asking, Lil. The answer has everything to do with my backstory. Besides humanizing your slightly demented mama, my experiences will fill in the blanks about what makes me passionate enough to raise these thorny issues at all.

Let me launch my story here. Over the years, I've called for freedom and human rights within Islam. My books kindled controversy, violence, and courageous resistance to that violence. In Indonesia, young Muslims threw their bodies onto mine to protect me from face-smashing militants who showed up on motorbikes, swinging iron rods like a lasso. In the Netherlands, my supporters organized themselves into my shields as jihadists from Belgium crashed our gathering at Amsterdam's central community center.

I've been privileged to encounter a groundswell of bravery on the part of ordinary human beings. But may I confess another privilege, Lil? I've always been squeamish about this: My labels have played an outsize role in bringing attention to my ideas. What I mean is, the media take advantage of my click-friendly identities—none of which I've earned, each of which I've been born into, and all of which convey that there's something bizarre about this Muslim: She's also a lesbian! Click now!

Cringe-inducing.

In taking issue with the "Muslim lesbian" label, I'm not disputing the facts. Lil, I can ratify that your mama's both queer-ish and Qur'an-ish. It's just that facts alone don't add up to transcendent truth. People interpret facts through their biases to arrive at their truths. So even when labels are factual, they don't innocently describe someone. Labels come with

heavy baggage that can distort, or outright hijack, who someone really is.

I'll be specific. There are some conservatives whose bias is to bomb Muslims into oblivion. They interpret my "Muslim" label to mean that I'm a wily undercover jihadist. Then there are particular atheists who take it on faith that as a Muslim, I'm a dupe of superstitious cave dwellers. Either way, I'm not an individual in my own right but an involuntary avatar of other people's projections.

Do you see how labels can manufacture realities? And do you pick up on how the labeled get used so that those who do the labeling can score points for their rendition of the truth?



You want more examples? Gladly: Many traditional Muslims regard me as a stooge of the corrupt West because of my label, "gay." Apparently, I'm rubbing my decadence further in their faces by having a wife. (Just one, mind you.) Meanwhile, certain progressives envision all Muslims as victims-in-waiting. To people with that bias, I'm an enabler of discrimination because they assume that in being gay, I give cover to haters who can claim, "We're tolerant of minorities. We love that Muslim lesbian!" Click now!

I must clarify that I'm not speaking about all progressives or all conservatives or all atheists or all Muslims. I speak of certain ones, particular ones, many, or some. But I do detect a pattern among this motley crew, and it's two-fold. First, they've fallen for the illusion that labels allow them to know a person when they only know *of* that person. Second, by only knowing *of* that person, they can treat that person as a plaything of their dark broodings, the better to fuel their warring narratives about reality.

When we let labels stand in for people, we end up manipulating people. Our shared humanity, along with our distinctive individuality, loses out. Do I sound naïve?

*No, Mama. You sound like Bruce Lee.*

Lily, you're speaking!

*Yes, because it's my turn. Mama, do you know the name Bruce Lee?*

The martial arts master and movie star?

*He was also a philosopher.*

Hold on, Lil. How do you know about Bruce Lee?

*The woman who used to own me listened to his interviews obsessively. I don't know why. Maybe she hoped to learn how to resolve the conflicts in her life. I overheard some hostile phone conversations with her son; every time she hung up, she'd log onto YouTube and play one of Bruce Lee's video clips. I couldn't help but absorb his philosophy.*

Which is?

*I interpret his philosophy as self-defense without defensiveness. Bruce Lee believed in "harmonious individuality." By this he meant that you can be a unique individual, with dreams all your own, and be in harmony with your surroundings even when those surroundings contain forces that oppose your dreams. The opposing force could be a person or a government or a culture. Whatever it is, if you attack it head-on, then you harden the opposition's resolve to defeat you. By developing harmonious individuality, both you and your opposition win.*

How do you start developing harmonious individuality, Lil?

*Be like water, Mama.*

Gotcha. Not really. Float that by me again?

*Bruce Lee said, "Be like water, my friend." Water respects the obstacles in its midst by treating them as a natural part of its surroundings. Consider all the rocks that speckle the ocean. Water could choose to view them as the It, the Other, because they get in the way of its flow. But to focus energy on pushing the rocks aside, or to demand that they disappear, would be to wage war against the life-breathing universe that gave rise to both the water and the rocks. Water's sure to lose that war. Besides, in its petulance, water never learns to be agile and thereby defeats itself.*

*Thankfully, water knows better. To keep flowing, it approaches the rocks with grace, washing over them, gliding around them, seeping into them, loosening them, reshaping them and, with time, eroding them. Water wins without the rocks having to lose.*

Dang, Lil. I've thought of Bruce Lee as a tough guy, but he points the way to taking the tough guy out of our politics and culture and even relationships.

*How's that, Mama?*

Let's assume that supporters of diversity are water and skeptics of diversity are rocks. Water's been gushing through American culture for a while, gathering such momentum that it swirled past driftwood, tree branches, shrubs, and other potential obstructions. I'm not exaggerating. In America's culture wars before Trump, conservative Christians came close to whipping out the white flag and declaring surrender. Some actually did.

Then, all of a sudden, smack-dab in water's path, a wall of rocks appeared. Individually, they've long been there but now they're collectively asserting themselves. The rocks have formed a wall to teach water that they exist. Undoubtedly, a smaller cluster of the rocks aims to stop water from circulating. But most of the rocks just want water to recognize that



they, too, have a valid place in the landscape.

Water, though, refuses to give the rocks a win. It acts from defensiveness and labels the rocks “racists.” Feeling harangued, the rocks reject the lesson that water thinks it’s teaching. Out of their own defensiveness, the rocks label water a “globalist.”

Although they’ve been gifted life by the same universe, each element—water and rock—clots into lifeless conformity. Water needs to move, yet it’s hit a dead-end that it helped bring into being.

*What then, Mama?*

The rocks have no incentive to change, Lil. By staying put, they demonstrate both their presence and their power. It’s water that must change in order to flow again. And water can’t flow—let alone irrigate the land—as long as it interprets justice as a win-lose game. Even if the rocks “lose” because water has crashed through them, water’s current has weakened. Water’s integrity has dissipated. A win-lose outlook produces a lose-lose outcome.

But if water espouses the win-win, then it’ll use its power differently. Water will make room for the majority of those rocks. Not the ones that seek to keep water out, but the ones that water itself has prematurely kept out. In essence, Lil, when we, diversity’s supporters, clear space for diversity’s skeptics, then diversity will be consistent. It’ll have integrity. It’ll cease to be a shtick.

Some of the rocks will fall away from the wall and enrich the water with their nutrients. Now we’ve got a wobbling wall and a swelling current. Watch out for the waterfall! Dr. King taught that when we avoid humiliating our adversaries, the tide picks up momentum on its own. As he wrote with biblical panache, “Let justice roll down like waters”—justice is like water, Lil!— “and righteousness like a mighty stream.”



I’m with you, girlfriend! I, too, am panting with excitement!

Oh. You’re thirsty. I knew that.

Here’s your drinking bowl, sweet bean. Hydrate to your heart’s content. Be like water.





## 6

## A Dog-Loving Muslim Pundamentalist

Lily, I've been researching Bruce Lee. What a fascinating figure. No wonder he advised us to be like water. He personally experienced how labels clog perception. The ethnic box that Hollywood executives stuffed him into restricted their imaginations as well as his opportunities.

You've unveiled my own bias, too. The label that I attached to Lee, "martial artist," obscured a related part of him: student of the Tao. In ancient Chinese philosophy, the word "Tao," which is pronounced "Dow"—

*I know how it's pronounced, Mama. I'm a student of Bruce Lee, remember?*

Sorry, Lil. For a moment, I forgot who I was talking to. Anyway, I've learned what you've long known: that the word "Tao" means "the way"—the way our universe works. But according to that philosophy, the word itself counts for nothing because the universe outwits any attempt to label it. So, the philosophy goes, don't try to prove that your perception of reality is right. Heck, don't try to be right. Don't even try to not try. Just be.

*Like water.*

Yes, ma'am. When Bruce Lee applied this insight to martial arts, he transformed the discipline. Pre-Lee, classical martial arts stressed tradition and rules. Post-Lee, martial arts became much more creative, spontaneous, nondefensive. Funny thing is, Lee's often credited as the father of Mixed Martial Arts, but that's a label he'd probably spurn. Precisely because he didn't want his fluid approach to decay into dogma, Lee hesitated to brand it. He told *Black Belt Magazine* that "truth exists outside all molds." Whatever he'd name his anti-method, it's "just a name used, a boat to get one across, and once across it is to be discarded and not to be carried on one's back." Labels, in short, can be burdens.

Yes, Lil?

*If you're going to be like water, Mama, then shouldn't you open your mind to the upside of labels—namely, that they comfort us with an identity?*





Ah, terrific point. Humans are social animals who yearn for belonging. Labels provide that sense of security. And if we choose them for ourselves, labels feel ennobling. I voluntarily identify as a Muslim because I believe in Islam's original principles. A monumental principle is *tawheed*: the oneness of God and, by extension, the unity of God's vast creation. It's an honor to be created alongside you, Lil, despite inheriting a nose that's far less sophisticated than yours. Thanks for never making an issue of my disability.



Another core proposition in Islam is that God's gender-neutral. This tickles me pink (and blue). Plus, it's rational since an infinite Creator, being infinite, has to exist beyond man-made categories—"outside all molds," as Bruce Lee said of truth. Yes, Lily, color me Muslim.

But my identity as a Muslim shouldn't have the power to freeze me in time or fix me in place. Because then I'm the opposite of water. "Beware of confining yourself to a particular belief and denying all else," the thirteenth-century philosopher Ibn Arabi cautioned, "for much good would elude you . . ." That speaks to me, Lil. If I cocooned myself in my Muslim identity, you and I probably wouldn't have met.

### *Why not?*

Well, it's common for Muslim parents to warn their children that dogs are *najis*, the Arabic word for "unclean." Apparently, doggiekind's so contagiously unclean that I'd risk poisoning my soul if I touched you. Nothing personal, of course.

*Hold up, Mama. How can Muslims degrade dogs when your own religion teaches tawheed, the community of all God's creatures?*

Think culture, Lil. Culture is the collective habits of a group. The group could be a religion, a nation, a company, or a movement. You've heard people sigh, "That's the way things are." They're referring to culture. Most people take the rules of our cultures as givens. It's inconceivable to question whatever you take as a given, which is why book-smart people everywhere tend to go brain-dead under the sway of their cultures.

I'll be the first to plead guilty. Oh, I adore you now but for most of life, I stayed away from the likes of you. Indoctrinated with a fear of dogs, I bought in until very recently. With the help of trusted friends, I overcame my fear, kept my faith, and ta-da, baby—it's you, me, and our shared weakness for peanut butter.



Again with the head-tilt? Okay, one more for now.

*How can you call yourself a Muslim, Mama, when you violate Muslim culture?*

I'll answer, my pet, with a story. Growing up, I attended a public school from Monday to Friday, followed by an Islamic school on Saturday. Like you, Lil, I was bursting with curiosity. I meant no harm by it; whenever I asked why or why not, I genuinely wanted to understand. At the age of fourteen, I posed a simple question that triggered a seismic test of my faith.

The teacher at my Islamic school announced that Muslims can't take Jews and Christians as friends. Full stop. "Why not?" I asked him. That question burbled in me because at my public school, I had two teachers—one Christian, one Jewish—who stepped up as my mentors. Let me tell you, those men cared more about me than my own

father did. Both lent me their ears if I needed guidance. In their presence, my life mattered.

It's with them in mind that, when I heard Muslims must never befriend Jews and Christians, "Why not?" went from gurgling in my gut to surging up my throat to spilling out of my mouth. For years, my Islamic school teacher had confronted my questions. But confronting isn't the same as addressing, so I'd never walk away feeling content with our exchanges. I persisted in the hope of having an actual conversation. But I suppose the existence of Jews and Christians made my teacher defensive: He booted me out of the Islamic school. "For good!" he roared.

"For good?" I thought to myself. "There is a God."

Going forward, I spent every Saturday in the public library, exploring different religions, excavating the cultural sludge that concealed the gems of wisdom. Eventually, I discovered that Islam has its own tradition of independent thinking. Eureka! *Mashallah!* And, being an American history buff, huzzah!

The civil war inside of me began to simmer down. Realizing that questions are *halal*, or permissible, I could finally reconcile being a faithful Muslim with being a searching one. What I learned that day prepared me for you, Lil. The lesson is universal: Most of us have our sacred cows but when a remarkable mutt ambles into our lives, we're not bound to renounce the cow for the mutt or to disregard the mutt for the cow. Any god worthy of worship makes room for both. Canines and bovines. Water and rocks. Us and them.

Chinese and non-Chinese. When Bruce Lee became an instructor of Gung Fu (what we used to know as "Kung Fu"), he embraced non-Chinese students. You can't do that, classical teachers warned him, because Gung Fu belongs exclusively to the Chinese. Lee, born in Hong Kong, a citizen of the United States, educated in both, and living in San Francisco, embodied inclusion. To settle the conflict with his critics, he challenged one of them to a Gung Fu fight.

It's like Bruce Lee brought a butter knife to the epic shoot-out at sunset: nondefensive self-defense versus time-tested and culturally authoritative Gung Fu. No contest, right? And, in fact, it wasn't much of one. Lee's more harmonious, less plotted maneuvers frustrated his opponent's traditional moves. By being agile, not fragile, he effectively struck an obsolete, fear-based method from the manual of Chinese martial arts.

Which returns me your question. Am I breaking sacrosanct rules by loving on a dog? Far from it. Typically, the rules of a group are little more than customs, those strands of culture that group members have woven, without question, into their "normal." Well, I've got questions. I question why you're labeled too dirty to go near, never mind to bring home. I could stifle my questions, as many do, but then I'm allowing culture to oxidize *tawheed*, one of my religion's most luminous ideals. I won't do it, Lil. Only when identity has integrity does it represent me. That's how I can be smitten with you and be an honest-to-God Muslim.

By the way, yesterday a university colleague informed me that I'm a humanist. Broadly speaking, a humanist turns to humans as the ultimate source of reason and wisdom. Count me out of that club. Lily, you qualify as a more sage, more sane being than most humans I know. Does that make me a dogmatist?



Roll those eyes if you must but I have to come clean: I'm a dog-loving Muslim fundamentalist.

What, too ruff a pun for your high-brow tastes?

Alright, alright, I'll paws.

Rescue me, Lil.

All in all, I accept that labels have their purposes. When I can afford to, I buy food that's labeled, "Locally grown." It's helpful information, provided I can trust it. Regardless, labels save time. A shoe's a freaking shoe whatever other function it may serve. We need to name things to get on with life.

Trouble is, people aren't things. No sentient being's a thing. That, Lil, is where diversity and inclusion have gone wrong.





## 7

## People Aren't Things

People are “huge waves of happenings,” in the language of the physicist Carlo Rovelli. We’re unfolding mixtures of genes, emotion, ego, memory, aspiration, and more. This means you don’t fall off an assembly line as an interchangeable replica of all the others who share your labels. “You meet one Jesuit, you meet one Jesuit,” jokes Father James Martin, one of America’s spunkiest priests.

But that’s not the way Eric Garner was treated. A handful of New York police officers considered him a thing—good for padding their performance statistics and otherwise expendable. They seized on Garner’s petty crime of selling loose cigarettes and choked the life out of him.

Why? Is the answer as obvious as his race and their racism? Maybe not. According to the independent journalist Matt Taibbi, Eric Garner’s story reveals something more layered than off-the-shelf racism. Garner suited the officers’ need for a body, any body, to satisfy their “quota.” In almost every major American city, Taibbi reports, police are “given a quota.”

*We want you to stop 20 people a month, we want you to seize one gun a month. So cops have to make stats. . . . [This] creates a factory-style approach to policing where you’re not waiting for real probable cause, and you’re just sort of pulling over people willy-nilly . . .*

You know, Lil, I can’t shake the parallel between factory-style policing and the supposed antidote to it: diversity training. In America’s transactional culture, diversity amounts to sticking labels on individuals. People wind up packaged like products—crammed into prefabricated molds, presumed indistinguishable from others in the same category, handy for a momentary purpose and destined to be disposed of afterward.

The factory churns out units. “How many wings have we sold this week?” the fast-food manager asks. She must deliver for her bread-and-butter customer, the franchisee who has the power to fire underperformers. “How many minorities have we recruited this year?” the university president asks. She must deliver for her prestige customer, the color-conscious student who has the power to brand that university as safe, extra-crispy safe, or original recipe hostile.



The fast-food chain makes commodities out of nonhuman animals. The university does it to human animals. The fast-food chain strives to meet quotas. The university strives to please a quota-conditioned mentality, as if the value of an individual depends not on who each is but on whether each can help fill a bulk order.

Factory-style diversity manipulates people. It uses us for our labels. On the conveyor belt, we become instruments to advance a commercial agenda. Such diversity inadvertently does the dirty work of “the system”—to dehumanize.

Diversity that objectifies people has spread so far and wide that it implicates avowed system-smashers, too. Later, Lil, I’ll tell you about a couple of Black guys who came to my office for advice. An organizer with Black Lives Matter eagerly recruited their bodies for rallies, but in-between protests she waved off their rather astute minds. The guys wrestled with a question: Did the organizer want them only to the degree that she could capitalize on the color of their skin?

Dr. King, I believe, would have welcomed this question. He championed a “Beloved Community” in which more of us are seen for our innate worth, not for our potential to add to a body count.



The Beloved Community isn’t a place of rainbows and unicorns, though. We can’t build it through child’s play. Toddlers get toys and learn to master them. As we age, many of us treat people and our pets as toys—to be traded or tossed for shinier trinkets. “But when one matures,” Dr. King preached in 1957, “when one rises above the early childhood years, he begins to love people for their own sake.”

Put bluntly, factory-style diversity fails to love people for their own sake, and this signal failure has earned diversity a reputation for duplicity.

Lil, you and I agree about the double standards of many a Christian conservative. I’ve joined others in challenging Christians who evangelize the love of Jesus but damn anyone who doesn’t sing from their hymnbook. That’s exactly how chunks of America view the temple of diversity. From their vantage point, diversity’s devotees belt out sweet songs of dignity but pick whose dignity should prevail and whose should be assailed.



Witness what diversity's people so often do with the word, "love." We craft hashtags from it. We hoist placards that blare it. We vow to reimagine the planet with it. Then we lose it. We come across people who disagree with us and, more frequently than we care to admit, our fear smothers love.

Some time ago, Lil, you met Brie Loskota. The three of us had lunch at the University of Southern California, where she directs the Center for Religion and Civic Culture. Brie says, "Love that's reserved only for people who agree with you isn't love. It's narcissism." She's all for diversity, but she's put her finger on the way we're going about it: as a win-lose game.

It doesn't have to be that way. Just as water accepts the presence of rocks, people can accept that different elements inhabit the same surroundings and that a common denominator brings them together in one place at this particular time. Call that common denominator the Tao. Call it evolution. Call it God. Our universe has no need for people's labels. But people have a need for the integral message of our universe: that unity isn't uniformity.

Give that message a good, long whiff, Lil. Somewhere in there is the answer for America's division problem. As a starting point, let's call the answer "honest diversity."

*Mama, I thought you said the universe has no use for people's labels.*

Everyone's a critic.

*Yet another label.*

Everyone's a comic.





## 8 Honest Diversity

*Dishonest* diversity labels people as a substitute for understanding them. It shoves us into group cubbyholes instead of appreciating our individuality. By contrast, *honest* diversity moves people beyond prefabricated labels—whether “white male” or “queer Muslim.” Honest diversity begins with labels, sure, but it flows past labels because it induces us to ask others why they believe what they believe. Practicing honest diversity, we listen without having to agree; we cultivate common ground even as we stand our ground; we act from a place of grace.

To attract people to your vision, you first have to develop trust with them. This “happens more in the first hug and hello than with a big argument from smarty-pants me,” Sarah Silverman discovered. She’s the stand-up comic who hosted *I Love You, America with Sarah Silverman*. For all of her progressive politics, she put honest diversity to the test by engaging with sympathizers of President Trump in different parts of the country. One week, Lil, she told some of them about the time that she pooped her pants. They then revealed their own pooping accidents. I think they did so because Silverman showed them grace.

*Grace, Mama? More like gross. And embarrassing.*

Suck it up, Lil, and stay with me for a moment.

Victor Tan Chen, a sociologist, writes that grace “is about refusing to divide the world into camps of the deserving and undeserving.” By divulging her secret to people whose politics conflict with hers, Silverman telegraphed that they belong to her world. That they’re vulnerable, just like she is. That everybody has shit to contend with, so to speak. That we all, each one of us, deserve to laugh about it. No exceptions. Grace.

Oh, and by disclosing her story first, she earned that much more trust. In effect, Silverman communicated that whatever she wants from her new friends, if anything, she’s prepared to give before she can expect to get.

Let’s brainstorm, Lil, how grace can work in other arenas. On the question of who “deserves” a platform, grace permits varied viewpoints, including ones that will probably offend you. But remember, whoever offends you may well be offended by you. Wouldn’t you want them treating your perspective with grace?

*Sure, Mama, but what do we do about truly disgraceful values such as racial supremacy?*

Oppose all forms of degradation, Lil. “There are different ways to go about it, though,” adds Victor Tan Chen. The win-win way—honest diversity—might tax your patience but in the end it’s efficient because, like water, it avoids humiliating others. Therefore, honest diversity has a higher chance of preventing blowback than reactive labels do.

I swear to you that honest diversity isn’t some pie-eyed hallucination concocted in a psychedelic state. In 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court mandated a form of honest diversity in higher education. At the time, a debate about affirmative action was raging and the justices tackled this question: Is it constitutional for a university to give historically disadvantaged students an extra look when choosing who gets in?

The court thundered “no” to quotas. But it also said that race could be one of many factors in admitting students—as long as universities invest the time and energy to ensure that diversity of appearance results in diversity of viewpoint. That way, all students, whatever their complexion, would gain from fresh thinking in an educational environment. Win-win. In theory.

Not yet in practice. It may be that students need the course, *Be Like Water* 101.



On YouTube, I can watch screaming matches at campuses everywhere. Social justice activists face off against free speech warriors, each tribe preferring to be controversial over being constructive.

I must stress, Lil, that the militants don’t represent most students. Calm exists in spades at every university. Yet, even in those mellow corners, I’ve observed how diversity of perspective gets casually dissed. At one workshop that I attended, a white woman was told to check her “ample privilege.” Being large, the woman pinched her bulges. “I just checked it,” she said with a smile. “Still there. Still ample. We’re good.”

Her crack infuriated a self-identified Latinx two seats down, who accused our amply privileged friend of being a “white supremacist.” To which Ample Privilege replied, “We

haven't said two words to each other until now. What could you possibly know about me?" Latinx walked out without another word.

In front of everyone, I asked Ample Privilege a bit about herself. Whitney was her name—not to be confused, she quipped, with “Whitey.” As the child of alcoholic parents, Whitney survived tension in the house by lightening the mood. It's a habit that also helped when kids fat-shamed her at school. These days, the same reflex kicks in whenever she's “white-shamed.” Hearing the phrase “white-shamed,” a number of the workshop participants hissed. Not one of them asked for details about what she'd experienced.

Whitney shrugged at the hisses. “It's too easy to be offended,” she announced to the room. “Get to know me.”

Clearly, Lil, inclusion can't be attained by laws or secured by policies. Only relationships can guarantee honest diversity. Only people can stop gaming, blaming, and shaming each other with labels. Only then will diversity and its advocates have integrity.

I'm suggesting a simple switch: View labels as starting points, not as finish lines. Starting points, that is, to ask each other sincere questions. In doing so, we learn how individuals construe themselves and their world, not what's been decided about them without them.

Diversity of viewpoint has to be an inherent part of diversity itself because sentient beings—you, me, Whitney, the Latinx individual—we aren't numbers or votes. We're capable of thinking, dreaming, and doing. We have relevance beyond our labels.

Head-tilt registered, sweet bean. Be my guest.

*Mama, why do you believe that humans are capable of honest diversity?*

Because, Lil, I've watched it happen, especially with young people. Years back, the media went ballistic over a radio shock jock named Don Imus. He'd smeared a university women's basketball team as “nappy-headed hos.” Racist and sexist, for sure. Black community organizers joined with feminists to bombard cable TV in outrage. A rotating roster of them proclaimed that Imus had made all young women of color feel like victims. One of the pundits referred to “our” girls. I wish I could've asked him whether “his” girls had consented to being owned.

That week, I visited a school for young women of color in New York. “Do you agree with those speaking on your behalf that you've been victimized?” I asked the class. A few students responded no, fewer said yes, and one raised a piercing question: Why would she let anybody, white or not, male or not, define who she is? A classmate answered that white people will define her regardless of how she acts. The first girl then pointed out that some of their teachers are white and if they intended to stymie students of color, why let this conversation take place at all?

After a vibrant back-and-forth, another student, silent until now, lifted her hand. “Why is it,” she wondered, “that when rappers say the same stuff about us as [Don Imus], they keep getting rich and famous?” More students chimed in, asking if the difference between “white” and “Black” meant a difference in who's responsible for justice. The word “power” came up. Does a millionaire rapper have power even if he barely survived a rough

childhood? I asked the students what they thought. An awkward pause. A muffled laugh. Darting eyes. Furrowed brows. Then a polyphony of views.

On it went—"our" girls proving to be neither the property of a tribe nor the output of a factory. But you wouldn't know it from their self-appointed leaders on TV. These young women needed a chance to speak for themselves because, it turns out, they're textured.

I'll bet the person who labeled Whitney a white supremacist is textured. I'll wager that she has a story or six. Too bad she didn't come back.







## 9 The Way Forward

Zadie Smith, the novelist, says that we're all "internally plural." I like that, Lil. Each of us, including the proverbial white guy, is so much more than meets the eye. If we're willing to be honest about ourselves, we're actually plurals—an identity that fits even misfits like you and me. You can't know plurals by looking. You come to know us only by engaging. Which entails listening.

Easier said than done, right? For twenty years, I've fought for reform in Islam. And that's the problem: I was fighting. I stood in front of audiences and debated attacks on my motives, not just on my ideas. Buttons pushed, blood pumped, ego bruised, defenses up, temper flaring, I was fast with the comebacks but slow to ask my critics why they believe what they do.

Trying to win every "game" sucked me dry. One Friday, preparing for a debate at the University of Oxford, I struck a pact with my exhausted spirit: If you hear a good point from the other side, say so. If you're antsy to jump in, wait. If you need time to think, take it. What do you have to lose except yet another showdown that opens no minds, least of all yours?

That night, the pressure to be right yielded to the freedom of being real. My critics had expected me to stay in character as the arrogant upstart. But when I pulled out of performing, and flowed like water, it was game over. The debate became a discussion; one that led to more discussions, then dialogues, culminating months later in an invitation to speak about religious reform before a gathering of imams.

Strangely, listening didn't translate into losing. It generated trust. Lily, just wait until I tell you how trust changed the relationship between me and my mother. And no, honey, that's not code for why you should listen more to your mama. We're golden. Trust me, my treat-seeking missile, I'll keep the snacks coming.



Trust is such a retro concept. I've taught in New York, Los Angeles, and Toronto—three of the most demographically diverse cities on Earth. But few of my students would dare to be curious about people with backgrounds other than theirs. In our unforgiving cancel culture, asking the “wrong” question can get you slammed.

How self-defeating for a society. If diversity's going to drill deeper than labels, if innovative insights are to be heard, if derelict systems will ever evolve, people have to risk giving offense. Equally, we'll need to take offense as an opportunity to ask: What would water do? Then we'll be smarter about next steps.

You, Lily, are teaching me that this isn't a fantasy. When we met, I hadn't fully transcended my fear of dogs and you couldn't know whether I'd be an owner or a mother. We came to one another wary. And in my case, weary. I felt like an old dog who's adjusted to people's tricks: our antisocial antics on social media and our pretenses in person. How could human beings flourish in the pandemonium of our colliding values, priorities, and obsessions? Intellectually, I've been studying, speaking, and reflecting on these puzzles forever. Now you're schooling me in a force at least as potent as ideas: relationships.

May I make a proposal inspired by you, Lil? Let's equip a new generation to grow trust in relationships. Specifically in one relationship, just one, with someone whose opinions feel unsettling—even shocking.

As mass migration speeds up around us, as technology shoves confusion at us, and as “us” narrows from fragment to faction, it'll take courage to expose ourselves to uncomfortable points of view. It'll take more courage to display grace as we question those views. Above all, it'll take Moral Courage to cop to the limits of our own views.

I see at least three advantages to cultivating honest diversity. One: We'll wake up from the false certainty of categories. Two: We'll sober up from the addictive high of tribal loyalties. Three: We'll grow up from the juvenile need for validation at every turn.

To build this community of plurals, we'll have to risk unusual conversations. Lead the way, Ms. Lil.



# CAN WE TALK?



## Questions For Class Discussion

Your students have watched the [sing-along video of “We the Plurals.”](#) And you’ve just read part of the book that inspired “We the Plurals.” Now you can start a class discussion about this song. Here are some suggested questions to ask your students:

- In the video, there’s a dog. Her name’s **Lily**. Did you notice anything “different” about her?

*Note to educator:* Tell students that there’s a book about Lily and this is how you know she’s blind. But you also know that she’s energetic, sassy, and fun. That’s what makes her a “plural” — she’s so much more than meets the eye.

- Watch the video again. What does Lily do that you might not expect a blind dog to do?

*Note to educator:* Lily chased a bubble and then popped it. Since she couldn’t see, Lily used her nose to understand the world. She developed her sniffing skills bigtime. Everyone has a special talent, even if we can’t see it right away.

- Why does the song ask us to “flow like water”?

*Note to educator:* Have students stand up, stay in place, and pretend to be “like water.” Invite them to mirror you as you stretch your arms left and right. Next, move your arms up and down like gentle waves. Then move your torso side to side, generating yet more waves.

After doing the exercise for 30 seconds, have everyone sit down and answer these questions: **How do you feel when you flow like water? Do you feel good? What other words describe how you feel? How about “calm”?**

The next time you’re playing with your friends and you suddenly feel mad, can you remember to move your arms and sing, “Flow like water”? Let’s get up and do that together on the count of three: “Flow like water / Keep an open mind...”

*Note to educator:* When doing this exercise with grades 3-5, tell them about the martial arts master Bruce Lee. Explain that “be like water” was his core teaching for students because the open-minded individual is agile, not fragile.

*Educators:* Based on this extract from *Don't Label Me*, what other questions or activities do you recommend for K-5 teachers? Share your answers with us on social media:

