

The Name Game

I am reminded of an experience from 6th grade in the 50s at a St. Louis suburban public school. Sometimes we cannot understand that something we are doing is wrong or hurtful if everyone participates and the action seems part of daily life. For years one boy in our class, Billy Meixner I believe, admittedly from the "wrong" side of the tracks, ill-dressed and slovenly as I recall, was persecuted by everyone in our grade through a game in which, whenever Billy appeared, someone would yell out, "MEIXNER-itis!! TOUCH BLACK!!" Everyone within earshot would scramble to touch something black. How did this terrible "game" commence? I remember this occurring year after year and didn't think much about it till along in 6th grade I began wondering what it was like from the boy's point of view.

I was rather shy and quiet and certainly would never confront the rest of the class whenever this happened, as it did several times each day. Finally I devised variations on the game which I thought remove some of the stigma. For myself, I declared, "Nyberg-itis! Touch silver!!", and assigned various colors to other members in the class. For a few days we were amused to hear our names called, attached to, usually, our favorite colors. Of course, we lost interest after a few days.

I was relieved to hear that when our class moved on to junior high, one teacher kept poor Billy Meixner back and helped him get some new friends -- let's hope he was not marked for life by our cruel antics.

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