

## **“Echoes of the Heart”**

*Reflections on Life and Community Living*

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**Beyond stereotypes.** As *election 2008* marches on, I saw a poll recently that was stunning in its findings. The poll dealt with the *electability* of the three presidential candidates, always a critical concern. *Electability* in many ways has to do with stereotypes and the *way* we think about people.

Essentially, the poll results suggested that (these are approximate numbers) 74% of those polled would have no problem voting for a black man, 62%—no problem casting their vote for a woman, while only 60% would have no problem voting for a person over seventy years old.

It’s interesting how the categories of race, gender and age continue to be major barometers by which we measure people.

With regard to any categories that set us apart (i.e., race, gender and age), to some extent, we can’t help but stereotype can we? We’ve been acculturated to think in particular ways. We think one thing about women and men, another thing about ethnicity, and still another about young versus old.

Stereotyping is natural, to be sure. It’s the way we sort out our world. Early on, we learn to put people in one category or another. If you’re tall, we assume you play basketball. If you’re smart and geeky, we assume you’re a computer nut or a technology buff. If you’re churchy, we’re not surprised if you’re Pollyannish and reflect high moral standards.

**The problem.** The obvious problem in all of this is that, much of the time, our stereotypes are wrong, sometimes egregiously so.

At best, a stereotype gives us only a superficial reading of a real person. Therefore, when meeting a person for the first time, while we can’t help but hold some stereotypes in mind, we have to be *ready* to move beyond these stereotypes at any point.

For example, a three hundred pound defensive lineman for the Dolphins—while appearing fearsome on the outside—might, in fact, be a teddy bear on the inside. Conversely, a proper woman, who might be gentle and kind in most respects, at the same time, might be capable of a fierce mental toughness and *bottom line* spirit in job performance.

Over the years, I can’t tell you how wrong I’ve been, time and time again, in my preliminary assessments of people (i.e., first impressions). Over time, we learn to withhold our judgments and to give people the benefit of the doubt, a consideration we hope they will extend to us as well.

**Stereotypes and the golden rule.** A good corrective in our rush to stereotype is to keep the *golden rule* close to our heart: *do to others as we want them to do to us*. It's revealing how much wisdom this timeless teaching holds for each of us.

For example, since 9/11, understandably (to a point), Arabs in our country have been stereotyped something awful—particularly at airports. I have a close friend who heads CAIR (Council on American/ Islamic Relations) here in South Florida; much of his time, he tells me, is spent dealing with the wearying consequences of stereotyping and profiling.

We might well ask ourselves—us non-Arabs—how would it wear on us if we were the ethnic group on the hot seat—victims, every day, of widespread suspicion about what nefarious activity we might be up to?

When we seek to *do to others as we want them do to us*, it gives us pause to rethink the way we relate to a whole range of persons or situations.

Just because a person is old chronologically doesn't mean he/she can't still make a vital contribution to any number of causes and projects. And just as some women make outstanding leaders in virtually any field, at the same time, some men are nurturing, kind and notably sensitive and compassionate—traits normally associated with women.

For me, personally, relationships are more about spirit than any other unifying category. While age and personal interests are important, to a point, they're never the primary determinant of who I value spending time with.

As globalization increasingly defines the world we live in, making choices that are *beyond stereotypes* becomes—every day—more important.