

A PIECE OF MY MIND

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The Nod

Our ward team was big that month—two interns, three medical students, and a senior resident. The gender mix was surprisingly balanced; nearly half women and half men, which was kind of unusual because, for whatever reason, I've often found myself with nearly all of one or the other. What wasn't unusual, however, was that I was the only black person on our team. Despite the outward phenotypic homogeneity of our team, culturally we couldn't have been more different.

One person was from the Middle East. Another had one white parent and one East Asian parent. Two were of Jewish faith but with wide variation in their levels of observance. There was even a Southern-born and -bred resident on the team who described himself as "Just a good ol' country boy." Last, there was a medical student who, after hearing of all these assorted backgrounds, shrugged and said, "I guess I'm a regular white girl from the Midwest."

And we all agreed that this was cool too.

In addition to the individuals with whom I worked that month, there was one particular day on rounds that I will never forget. I'd just entered the emergency department with the team to see the last of our new admissions on a busy call day. Out of habit more than anything else, my eyes scanned the area as we walked. One of the first people I noticed was a nurse with striking brown skin contrasted by nearly all white hair. She appeared to be quite busy, yet instinctively she paused when she saw me. In those fleeting seconds, her face became warm and familiar and then—just like that—she offered me a tiny head dip of salutation. I returned the gesture. And that was that.

A few steps later I noticed an elderly man leaning on a gurney with an old four-prong cane. Though his complexion was fair and smattered with freckles, his facial features were distinctly Afrocentric. His broad nose and wiry hair were my initial clues of his race, but later it was his throaty laugh that gave it away. He sounded like he could have been any one of my uncles. Although he was in the middle of conversing with his doctor, he darted his eyes in my direction and shot me the tiniest downward nod of his head. It was so subtle that I'd have missed it unless I'd understood to expect it. But I *did*—so well that my own nod in his direction occurred in near perfect synchrony with his.

As we headed out, that same thing happened at least three more times. Once with the man mopping the floors in the hallway. Another time with a cocoa-complexioned surgery intern several feet across the room in a trauma bay. It even happened with a lady who'd just rolled by on a stretcher. Understated head salutes left and right. And somewhere in all of this, the Midwesterner took notice.

After rounds we convened in the team room to recap our management plans. For the entire time, the Mid-

westerner watched me intently—almost uncomfortably so. We drew to a close and I pushed my hands down onto the table preparing to stand and leave. "What questions do you all have before I go?" I turned my head toward her when I said that, hoping she'd tell me what was on her mind. Fortunately, she did.

"Dr Manning? Did you ... like ... *know* all of those people today?"

Her voice was quiet and careful, but her eyes didn't flinch. The rest of the team looked puzzled, since no one even knew to what she was referring. But I did.

In that moment, I reflected on a story my father once shared with me about when he was a young engineer at Hughes Aircraft in the late 1960s. He described walking through a plant and how, in that sea of strangers, those who looked like him were scattered like specks of pepper in white country gravy. Afterward, someone asked him a similar question. "How do you know so many people at this plant?" My dad simply smiled in response; he had never been to that facility in his life. With that story in mind, I knew *exactly* what my student meant by her fearless question. She was asking about one of the most universal yet untaught gestures of black American culture—"the nod."

Growing up in my inner-city neighborhood, I always saw young brothers tipping their chins upward at one another, a friendly and familiar greeting between acquaintances. However, that hypermasculine "up-nod" wasn't what I was doing that day. My nod—the tiny downward head bow witnessed by my student—was gender neutral and typically reserved for those I didn't know at all.

How did I learn to do this? Was it like a Southerner's "Yes, ma'am" or "No, sir," a habit that came after some older family member admonished me early and often? That answer is firmly no. No one ever told or taught me to do this; it was just one of those things that intuitively happened as I grew older.

Let me explain: In my experience, the black-on-black nod of acknowledgment is usually given in situations where only a few other black people are sprinkled through an environment together. For example—when I enter a PTA meeting at my sons' school (where the attendees are predominantly nonblack), without fail the handful of ethnically similar parents in the room automatically exchange nods with me. The other frequent time this happens is when someone notes me as the only black person in a group—which, on that day, was my ward team. Conversely, when I find myself in settings where African Americans are in the *majority*—such as my church or a homecoming weekend at the historically black college I attended, for example—it doesn't happen at all. And let me be clear; this is *distinctly* different than the hospitable salutations I receive from friendly strangers now that I live in

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Georgia. While it may *appear* similar, for reasons that are difficult to explain, it simply is not.

One might wonder: Why is this? What did this even come from? My best guess is that it goes back to some of the darker times in US history where a quiet nod was the safest bet between blacks. I imagine a pecan-colored house servant quietly walking down the street with her employer. Across the road she spots a tall, dark driver opening the door for a nattily dressed fellow with porcelain skin. Wrapped in an unfortunate reality that included longstanding oppression and often being deemed invisible, a lightning speed nod from someone who could empathize with those caged-bird emotions assured that they weren't alone. It also served as an affirmation that no, they weren't invisible.

We're in a different era now, but there are still many situations where it's easy to feel either invisible or like that speck of pepper. Given that truth, "the nod" is really just this subtle way of saying to that other lone face in the room or in that group what others' actions sometimes neglect to say: "I see you." Even if someone else doesn't, *I see you and you aren't invisible.*

As for my student, finally I answered her bold question. "No. I didn't know any of them personally." I paused for a moment while my eyes fixed on hers. "But I guess, in a way, I knew them all."

"Wow. I think that's *beautiful*," she whispered. And though I'd never given it much thought before then, I realized that I agreed with her.

Next, the entire team openly discussed what she'd seen. They asked me questions and I gave uncensored answers. It morphed into one of the most poignant teachable moments in cultural competency I've ever had. That discussion encouraged us to knock down even more of those walls and step over those lines that society has drawn in the sand. That month I learned about different forms of ob-

servation in Judaism and Islam. We chatted about things like maintaining a kosher kitchen and details of halal meat preparation. I was also taught all about hunting season by the self-described "good ol' country boy" and learned that the best Christmas he'd ever had involved a brand new bow and arrow. The biracial white/Chinese woman described how some of her Chinese family wasn't sure what to do with her siblings and her since they looked different and didn't speak fluent Mandarin. Our team opened up about cultural nuances that can't be found in books. As a result, we gleaned those things that can only be learned when given the climate to ask, understand, and embrace. In a way, we gave each other nods every single day.

As for the universal nod of acknowledgment between black people—is it still necessary? My guess is that, if it weren't, we wouldn't keep instinctively doing it. I was initially conflicted about writing about this publicly. I feared that it would seem like some blasphemous betrayal; unlocking a long-hidden secret privy only to other African Americans. But if that month taught me nothing else, it underscored how powerful it can be when we grant each other *this* kind of access to our cultural mysteries. Creating space to give each other these metaphorical nods breaks down barriers and, as health care professionals, ultimately helps us better relate to our patients and to each other.

I will always believe that the innate cultural nods I give to my people each day don't polarize; they instead unify. Like most things I do instinctively, I will likely continue to do this whether I'm thinking about it or not. Even still, with all people I will also consciously strive to have my actions and reactions affirm those simple words that I now know are not a unique necessity to my race alone:

"I see you."

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