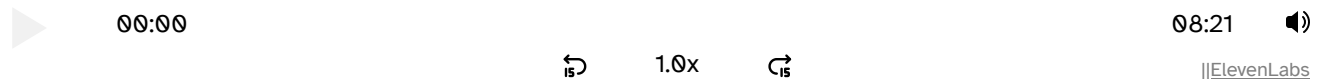


Opinion: Diversity matters in almost everything we do

By [G. Scott Morris](#), Special to The Daily Memphian

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SPECIAL TO THE DAILY MEMPHIAN

G. Scott Morris



The Rev. Dr. G. Scott Morris, M.D., is founder of Church Health. He is a regular contributor to The Daily Memphian.

A dean of admissions at a Memphis higher education school recently told me, “We are no longer allowed to look at a photograph of a prospective student.”

I practice medicine in a place where human stories walk into exam rooms long before the symptoms do. When a young Black woman sits before me, I’m acutely aware that there are entire dimensions of her lived experience that I’ll never fully know.

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Not because I don’t care, but because I haven’t even remotely lived her life. I haven’t navigated the same systems, carried the same burdens, or made the same quiet

calculations that shape how she moves through the world.

The intent of the no-photographs admissions process, of course, is fairness — remove implicit biases we all have and create a system that judges merit without unconscious interference of race, gender or appearance.

In many ways, it's a noble instinct. At the same time, I find myself unsettled. In my life as a physician, and in my life beyond medicine, I've learned that what you can't see, or refuse to see, can matter just as much as what you can.

When that Black woman is in my exam room, I can't imagine pretending those differences don't exist. If I practice a colorblind medicine, I risk missing the very things that matter most to her health.

It wasn't that long ago in our country that schools and employers weren't trying to ignore differences; in fact, they were enforcing them.

Opinion: Presidents Day is a good time to commit to your most deeply held beliefs

Black students were legally barred from attending the same schools as white students, a system upheld by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 under the doctrine of "separate but equal."

That decision gave legal cover to segregation for decades, shaping not only education but nearly every aspect of public life.

Many workplaces openly refused to hire Black Americans or confined them to the lowest-paying, least secure jobs. Black people did not live in white neighborhoods. They didn't use the same entrances or see the same doctors.

It took generations to begin to undo that system. In 1954, the Supreme Court's decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that segregated schools were inherently unequal, marking a turning point in how the law understood equality.

A decade later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal to discriminate in hiring based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

Opinion: Like Minneapolis, Memphis doesn't have an 'immigration problem'

I grew up in Atlanta and was in fourth grade in 1964. We had segregated drinking fountains until the Civil Rights Act, but I never realized Black children had to look for “their” drinking fountains.

As many people didn't understand what was wrong with “separate but equal,” now the law did. And the landscape shifted.

Ignoring injustice was not the same as being fair.

Out of those efforts came more intentionality to consider diversity in decision-making, not as a preference, but as a corrective.

Colleges began looking more carefully at who was being admitted and who wasn't. Employers started asking whether their workplaces reflected the communities they served.

Opinion: What makes a life worth living?

Policies that many now group under “affirmative action” or “DEI” didn't appear out of nowhere. They were thoughtful responses to systems that had long been tilted oppressively in one direction. How long can such a ship stay afloat?

Over time, efforts to right the ship expanded in ways that made many people uncomfortable, especially people who — like me — had long benefited from systems they didn't have to think about.

They never had to consider whether they had been benefiting while others, equally deserving, were left out. And now, the shift is toward removing explicit consideration of identity altogether. Everyone is the same.

This brings me back to the dean of admissions to ask: What does it mean to be fair? And what do we lose when we decide not to see? I can't *not* think about that through physician eyes.

Health is never just the absence of disease. It's the presence of stability, dignity, safety and hope. It's shaped by where you live, how you're treated, what you've been taught to expect from institutions, and whether you believe those institutions will listen to you at all.

Opinion: Rising health care costs will be breaking point for many Memphians

To be a good physician isn't simply to diagnose and prescribe. It's to guide. And you can't guide someone well if you don't understand the terrain they're walking through. That terrain is often cultural. It's historical. It's deeply personal.

The longer I've practiced medicine, the more I've come to understand that this truth doesn't stop at the clinic door.

Diversity matters in almost everything we do.

It matters in our schools, where students learn not only from books but from one another's experiences. It matters in hiring, where better decisions are at the table. It matters in leadership, where blind spots shrink when voices expand. And it matters in our civic life, where communities are stronger when more people are seen and heard.

And it matters on the weekend, in our houses of worship.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul writes that we "see through a glass darkly." I've come to believe that this is both a theological statement and a human reality.

None of us sees clearly. None of us has all the answers. Each of us is limited by our own experience, our own upbringing, our own assumptions.

We need each other.

We need people who've lived different lives than we have. We need people who'll challenge what we think we know. We need people who'll help us see what we've missed.

Diversity in all its forms isn't a problem to solve; rather, it's a strength to embrace.

Unfortunately, in the last few years, efforts at diversity, equity and inclusion, DEI, have felt to people who look like me as if those efforts have gone too far. I've heard that concern. At times, I've even felt it myself, if I'm honest.

I've also listened to patients, colleagues and friends who are part of minority communities. What I've heard from them is something very different.

For many, those same efforts felt like the first time people in positions of power were willing to take their concerns seriously, not as anecdotes, but as realities that required action.

Discomfort doesn't invalidate necessity for action.

In medicine, we're trained to sit with complexity. A patient can be both anxious and brave. Treatment can be both effective and imperfect. A system can be both well-intentioned and in need of reform. The same is true in our broader lives.

If we remove the ability to "see" entirely, whether in admissions, in hiring, or in our daily interactions, we risk losing essential context. But if we rely only on what we see without humility, we risk imposing assumptions that harm.

The work, then, isn't to turn the photograph face down and become blind. It's to become better at seeing, better at being curious, better at listening.

On Sunday morning, that may mean worshiping alongside people whose lives look very different from our own. On Monday morning, it may mean sitting at a table where not everyone agrees with us and choosing to listen anyway.

When the young woman is across from me in the clinic, I don't need to fully understand her experience to care for her well. But I do need to recognize that my understanding is incomplete. I need to ask better questions. I need to listen longer. I need to learn from her even as I'm trying to help her.

That's not just a medical posture. It's a way of living. At the end of the day, whether we're in a clinic, a classroom, a boardroom, or a church pew, we're all looking through a glass darkly. And the only way any of us sees more clearly is when our separate visions meet and make the image whole.

TOPICS

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