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The old homogeneity is dead! Long live the new homogeneity?

Homogeneity. It isn't a word we use very much. In the 1980's, for anyone studying the history of immigration, urban studies or even church growth, it was a word used with regularity. It referred to like attracting like, people preferring to be with people who held many of life's dimensions in common. At the time, homogeneity still meant people who shared ethnic or cultural heritage, a common standard of income, or similar interests. More often than not, all three came together. Hence, suburban country clubs for whites, inner-urban Spanish speaking churches, and Community Centers built in African American neighborhoods.

As a young adult at the time, my experience already didn't correspond to the homogeneity principle. Neither did it for most of my peers--even though our mentors thought it to be gospel. The reason is that we were the first generation of children to experience inter-gendered little league, school busing, and the implementation of civil rights legislation. Even my private school classroom was a mix of African-American, Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Euro-descended families--and those of us with Euro ancestry knew whether it was Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, Great Britain or France that our grandparents or great grandparents came from. But as we grew up and married, we blurred those lines further and so have our children after us. For example, my Vincent nieces and nephews can identify themselves as Hispanic when they fill out the census. They would also be justified to call themselves Caucasian. Somehow, I don't think they will care very much which it is because so much of the old homogeneity is dead.

Homogeneity is not gone. It simply took a new shape. Many among our younger generations prefer to be with others who are malleable, perceived as tolerant and unconcerned about stereotypes, just as they claim to be. They connect across political and social platforms more readily than they do ethnic or religious ones. They seem more concerned with the community supporting the individual than they are the individual supporting the homogeneous strength of a community.

Of course this is not true for everyone. Enclaves still exist. They are smaller and less influential, however. Those who try to live inside them are perceived as out of touch or unrealistic. And yet, much of the generosity and nation-building that sustains us came and comes from them.

The agenda in front of us in this election cycle, and in the decade to come, is to bring the strengths of these old and new expressions of homogeneity together into a new democratic and civic commitment, rather than setting ourselves up for two or even three distinct and parallel societies--one of urban individuals, the other of small town or rural extended families, and a possible third of distinctive ethnic groups that see no appeal to assimilate inside a divided culture.

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