

Is the 'intolerance boot' now on the other foot?



BARB GUY

Once, when I was maybe 20 years old, I was browsing at a jewelry counter. When I chose a bracelet, a delicate chain with a small clasp, the equally young sales clerk offered to fasten it for me. I told her I needed to be able to do it myself since I lived alone.

I can still hear the young woman's gasp, followed by, "Oh no, what happened?"

What happened was I had grown up and moved out.

I am a non-Mormon, Utah native, only child. When I was very young we lived on a street mainly full of older people, but one family had kids, including a girl my age. We became great friends, but she was a Latter-day Saint so she couldn't play on Sunday.

I went to church, too, but Methodist kids are allowed to play afterward, at least I was. My friend also couldn't play on Monday because of Family Home Evening and she couldn't play on Tuesday because of Primary. It could be lonely for a non-Mormon kid.

At elementary school, I was constantly coached by other kids about how great Mormons are and how they have "the one true church." Little phrases peppered my childhood: "Mormons don't bet," "Mormons don't swear," "Mormons don't drink coffee," "Mormons don't play on Sunday," "Which ward are you in?" . . . and on and on.

I felt these maxims were aimed right at me, pointing out how different I was.

Then a new girl joined our class. Her clothes were funny, she had the longest, blue-blackest hair I'd ever seen, and her skin was brown. She wore necklaces made of apple seeds and brightly colored beaded medallions. She was Navajo.

No one else in the whole school had brown skin, and I was still a decade from meeting a black person. This girl was so different.

Our teacher, whom I already hated because she constantly singled me out as the non-

Mormon who could stay late and clean erasers on Primary days, and because she tricked me into outing myself as the only non-Mormon in our class on the first day of school, introduced the new girl to us.

"Class, today we have a new student joining us, a Lamanite." Kids snickered.

At recess I asked someone what a Lamanite was and they said God hated her so he turned her brown. I thought that skin color had to do with how long a person spent in the sun, so this was a shock. I remember asking my mom about it that night and she told me God loved all children and paid no attention to what color they were.

I'd like to say that the new girl and I formed a friendship that overshadowed the cruelties perpetrated on us, and that together we learned the joys of diversity. The truth is that I was relieved to have someone in class who was different, even more different than I. I'm ashamed to say I mostly avoided her.

On the day my grandmother died, a neighborhood friend, whom I know had true sympathy in her heart, told me that she was very sad for me because, "At this very moment your grandma is on her way to [hell] and you'll never be together as a family again, ever."

The Salt Lake Tribune

In junior high, I got a U on my report card for bad citizenship, and my friend Linda joked that it stood for "UnMormonlike." Sometimes that was all it took.

The Great Divide is full of stories like these.

Utah has grown and changed substantially since those days. To some degree we have joined the world. I'm an adult now and I've happily chosen to stay here. I know so many dear, lovely Mormons and I am well aware that within any group, individuals are as different as snowflakes.

I would never dislike a whole group just because a couple of people within it behave badly. I've made my peace with Utah.

I recently watched a brave Utah native, a daughter of Iranian parents, tell about her experience growing up here a generation after me. I ached to hear the trials she faced in her neighborhood and her public school.

I'm so proud of her for sharing her story, for speaking truth to power, as they say. I'm also impressed with the LDS man in our group who arranged for us to hear her presentation. He's a good snowflake.

I don't want to burst anyone's Days of '47 balloon, and I salute the pioneers, I really do. They took tremendous risks to escape terrible religious bigotry that no one should encounter. But

perhaps we should check which foot the prairie boot is on today.

Too often, modern-day pioneers come to Utah and face religious persecution. Maybe we can all mull that over on Pioneer Day.

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.