



2016

Changing Perceptions

Kateri Vaughn
Butler University

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Recommended Citation

Vaughn, Kateri, "Changing Perceptions" (2016). *Kristi Schultz Broughton Liberal Arts Essay Contest*. 11.
https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/las_essays/11

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Changing Perceptions

Written by: Kateri Vaughn

"If my parents ever said that to me, I would feel so unloved; like what?" my friend said, chuckling, not realizing the gravity of her words. The laughter echoed off each wall in the dorm room, before dying down to a muffled giggle. It was only the second week of school, and we had just become what seemed like very close friends. She had just seen the note my mother left on my dresser. My friend, unlike myself, was atheist. The note read, "Keep the Lord close - as difficult as it is to believe, he loves you much more than we do." This discovery led to an in-depth conversation about atheism and Catholicism; eventually she asked me what stance I had on gay rights and marriage, and my voice caught in my throat. I knew my parents were against gay marriage... Only one week away from the nest and I had been struck by the recognition that I had been seeing everything, while not necessarily wrong, from a very slanted perspective.

Upon arrival at Butler I was blissfully overwhelmed, surrounded constantly by innumerable students who were different than myself. However, I soon began to realize the extent and reality of the sheltered, Catholic, and conservative life I had previously led. I felt as though I had to unlearn looking at everything from a Catholic, conservative perspective. The whole situation felt awkward to me - like I was backtracking instead of moving forward like I thought I would. I felt displaced - the values I believed to be the very fabric of who I was, were not the immovable foundation I thought them to be. Having to unsee what I had seen my entire life was difficult. I was embarrassed by my lack of knowledge, my background, and chose not to talk about it.

I felt ashamed when speaking with others who possessed different beliefs on religion and sexual preferences than I did. I simply did not know enough on the matter, did not know the multiple views that were available and openly discussed in this new setting; I had only been educated in one way my entire life. Growing up, people who believed in God and the teachings of the Catholic faith surrounded me. I lived with a lingering, unshakable guilt that my religion, which I prized and took comfort in, had strict notions against gay marriage - which is why I, initially, chose not to speak about my background.

Thus, I turned to my education. The discussions in class or with peers, the books I read, the new, radical ideas I was exposed to, all required me to do more than parrot the ideologies that I had grown up with - to learn how to think for myself. I looked at these controversial issues through someone else's point of view; saw how it affected them, how it hurt them, how it helped them. It made me question myself, who I am and who I wanted to be, placing me in the, honestly, frightening position of trying to define myself, on my own, for the first time. I realized that I could either obliviously remain in my comfort zone, ignorant to these groups of diverse individuals, or I could let my struggles with faith and

reason shape me into a more progressive, well rounded individual. An individual I wanted to become.

Butler's education introduced me to this struggle, challenged me to confront myself, and I am eternally grateful. I never would have dared to question my own personal beliefs or religion without my Liberal Arts Education. In high school, along with the majority of my peers, I simply followed the crowd. It seemed as though my ideas, opinions, and beliefs were made for me; my path was already chosen. I never questioned anything, largely because everyone seemed to believe the same thing. I was ignorant to my own strength to form opinions and think for myself. Whereas, when I came to Butler, I was exposed to a multitude of diverse people and was granted the freedom to explore my own ideals and personal beliefs. I was challenged at Butler. Challenged to think creatively and critically about the things that made me uncomfortable, to question myself and what was intrinsically right in this world. Where do I stand? What do I believe?

I can't say that my struggles are finished; I still grapple with the ideals of gay marriage and atheism, and do not have any concrete opinions formed. However, my perspective and attitude has changed completely. The importance of my Liberal Arts Education lies in the education - the introduction and growth of deep thought. Being exposed to such different people and seeing both hatred and compassion towards them, I've realized the worth of a kind and understanding individual who accepts others despite the differences between them. Who am I, another simple college student, to judge anyone else for whom they want to love or marry? While others may see kindness and empathy as a weakness in the face of adversity, I view it as the ultimate strength. It takes courage to remain so empathetic and considerate in a world that can be so cruel.

Essentially, the education at Butler introduced me to a world of creative thinking I was initially deprived of. It forced me to step outside my comfort zone and think critically about the issues at hand, instead of sheepishly following the herd. Butler forces me, in a necessary way, to bypass ignorance in order to further my education and my own person, now and after college. Understanding others and being able to empathize with them is my education, in a way. It transformed me into a more understanding and accepting person. And, as I said before - the transformation is not complete, and likely never will be. I am a work in progress, and excited to see the end result, thanks to my Liberal Arts Education.