

Just Because I'm Blind Don't Mean I'm Dumb

Mention the name Dave Chappelle to most young people, and they might respond, "I'm Rick James!" Chappelle's hilarious sketches, considered offensive by many, have made fun of individual people, such as R. Kelly and George Bush, as well as groups of people who share some common prejudices. For its very short two- year run on television, "Chappelle's Show" was arguably the hottest show on TV among young adults.

Criticized as politically incorrect and insulting, the first episode of the series, showed Dave performing in a skit about a black man, Clayton Bigsby, who was a white supremacist. A disclaimer at the beginning of the skit noted, "For viewers sensitive to the issues of race, be advised that the following piece contains gratuitous use of the N word, and by the N word I mean Nigger. There, I said it." However, hidden in that first sketch and in subsequent sketches are the following social messages: most people are all blind in their own way; racism and prejudice exist in some form in everyone; and before change can take place, these feelings must be confronted. Chappelle uses humor to make people see themselves as they really are. If one can recognize himself and laugh at himself, one can then be honest with himself and perhaps begin the process of social change.

There is a human tendency for people to see life from their own perspective and to be blind to the point of view of those who "are not like us." In the above mentioned skit, Clayton, as portrayed by Dave Chappelle, spends the first nineteen years of his life at the Wexler Home for the Blind. The people who run the home want to "make things easier for Clayton,"so from birth, they tell him and all of the other kids at the home that he is white. Instead of telling him the truth, the people in his life decide it would be easier to let Clayton continue believing that he is white. So Clayton grows up to be a white supremacist, hidden behind the white hood of the KKK at Klan meetings. Clayton has written several popular books, such as *Dump Truck*, *Nigger Stain*, *I Smell Nigger*, and *Niggerbook*. Despite the popularity of his books, his face has never been seen by the public, so a reporter goes to interview Clayton in the rural area in which he lives. A nearby

sign declares, "Niggers Keep Out!" When the reporter sees Clayton and tries to tell him that he is black, Clayton says, "Sir, I say sir, I am in no way, shape, or form involved in any niggerdom." When the reporter and Clayton pull up next to some white people in a car who are listening to rap music, Clayton calls them "niggers." Throughout this sketch, Chappelle is constantly forcing the audience to face its own misconceptions and prejudices; yet, he softens the reprimand with a shared sense of humor that cuts across ethnic groups. At the end of the skit, when Clayton finds out he is black, he is quickly exiled from his own group and family. Chappelle's politically incorrect humor, considered offensive by some, is a stepping stone to more open and honest communication among the different races in this country.

Throughout time, the most predominant prejudice has been that of skin color. However, what if the human species were sightless? How would people then judge other people? Even without sight, people could still make judgments about others. For example, people could base their prejudices on the way other people smelled. If they smelled good or familiar, then it is likely that people would accept the person as one of their own. However, if they smelled bad or different, people would more than likely want to stay away from them. In Chappelle's skit, Clayton says that the message of his books is simple. He declares, "Niggers, Jews, homosexuals, Arabs, Mexicans, and all kinds of Chinks stink, and I hate them".

People could also judge others on the way their skin or hair or hands felt when touched. Perhaps smooth-skinned or smooth-haired people would have a tendency to want to be around other people with similar skin and hair. People with callused hands or curly hair would more than likely want to be around others whose hands and hair felt the same. The fact of the matter is that, no matter how much people want to believe that skin color is the only thing separating them from one another, people have a natural tendency to group together and see life from their own perspective. They are blind to a point of view different from theirs.

Another good point made in Chappelle's skit is that everyone is a racist on some level. Clayton says that his "problem with black people is that they are crazy, good for nothing tricksters, crack smoking swindlers, big butt having, wide nose breathing up all the white man's air." Here Chappelle is addressing many of the

racist stereotypes that some white people in this country have toward black people. By having a blind black man who thinks he is white put these stereotypes out there in the faces of the people in the audience, Chappelle forces them to acknowledge some level of prejudice. This very idea is currently on the forefront of the news with the debate over the response time to the victims of hurricane Katrina. Some people are now arguing that the reason it has taken the government so long to get help to New Orleans is because the majority of the stranded people are poor African- Americans. Some people may think this argument is unfounded, but is it? If there had been a lot of white, middle- class college students stranded in New Orleans when Katrina hit, then is it likely that there would have been a greater urge to help them more quickly? Is it a natural tendency to feel more compassion and more empathy towards those whose reflections in a mirror are similar to one's own? Irreverent and contemptuous as his show may be, Dave Chappelle's type of humor, however derogatory, is valuable in that it might help to initiate conversations that will fuel social acceptance and, ultimately, social change.

Unless people are willing to admit and to analyze their true feelings regarding the issues of race, then it is difficult to move toward a direction of positive change. At the end of Chappelle's skit, Clayton Bigsby finds out that he is black. Upon taking off his KKK hood, his followers are horrified to see that he is black; one man's head even explodes at the sight. Clayton is immediately exiled by his former friends and family. He even divorces his wife of nineteen years. Because she was married to him, he says, "She is a nigger lover." With this sardonic twist at the end of the sketch, Chappelle succeeds in pointing out the hypocrisy of racism.

On the surface, Chappelle's show is funny and contemptuous; more importantly, it carries with it a commentary on the prejudices that exist in this country today. The politically incorrect humor delivered by Dave Chappelle is perhaps one step toward a change in attitude regarding sensitive topics such as race. Whether or not one considers his comedy to be an affront, it still has the power to make people think about their own prejudices. Perhaps if people can first laugh at themselves, and then at each other, they can then begin the process of acceptance and social change.

