

## **On Being Different: A Reflection**

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*Prepared for Somervell College Contemplation 23 November 2025*

Have you ever felt - different?  
Different, in what ways?  
And how did that make you feel?

Maybe some of you have felt different, because of the way you look, speak, think, live, or dream.

Or because your ambition was never fully understood.

Because your grief felt bigger than the room allowed.

Because what you value is deemed meaningless by others.

Or because you were seen as too sensitive, too rigid, too gentle, too critical, too loud, too quiet, too much, or, on the contrary, never enough.

Whatever it is, you are not alone in this.

Tonight, I invite you to pause and dwell with difference, in all its stances.

As someone who is always navigating different worlds, material, cultural, linguistic, emotional... I embody, experience, witness, and feel differences every day.

Sometimes, difference feels delightful and exciting; as when I meet someone who sees and understands the world differently, and that opens up brand-new landscapes and possibilities.

Sometimes, difference feels empowering, as when I offer a way of thinking that others have not considered but found helpful. That moment of surprise and gratitude – ‘Thank you, I’ve never thought about it that way’ – lights up something in me.

Sometimes, difference feels embarrassing, as when I cannot quite translate a joke rooted in Chinese context fast enough in my head, from Chinese to English. English is a language I have used most of my life. And yet, if you speak Chinese, you will meet a slightly different version of me when I speak Chinese, my mother tongue.

Sometimes, difference feels terrifying. I still remember being in my early 20s, riding a tram in Europe with a friend. We were the only foreign-looking women onboard, surrounded by a group of drunk white young men. They started approaching us, laughing, and shouting fake, Japanese-sounding words. We jumped off the tram just before it began to move. Trembling. Not quite sure what exactly had happened at that moment, but later

realised, how things like that happen every day to people who are seen as different, or rather, quote-unquote, exotic.

Sometimes, difference feels confrontational and uncomfortable. It shakes our certainty. It asks us to step outside our comfort zones, stretch beyond what feels normal and safe, admit our privileges, display our vulnerabilities, or behave in ways we never thought we would. Sometimes, witnessing difference reopens old wounds – the sting of being excluded, marginalised, unheard, unseen.

And sometimes, difference turns brutal. We see this in the language and actions of war and attacks, where difference becomes a weapon. A reason to fear. A reason to hate. A reason to destroy. And in those moments, we are left grieving, asking: how did we let it get this far?

And I will be honest. To say it out loud ‘I feel different’, feels vulnerable too. Because difference, when spoken, can be misunderstood:  
as deficit,  
as weakness,  
as blame,  
as unwillingness to ‘fit in’,  
as rejection of generous invites to ‘join us, and... become just like us’.

And yet, there is a quiet violence in always downplaying our difference to make others more comfortable.

It takes courage to acknowledge and honor difference.

So, what might it look like to name our difference with love, not accusation? And to receive someone else’s difference as a gift, not a threat?

After all, aren’t all of us different in some way?

Every human being holds difference within ourselves. Difference in how we think, feel, live, pray, love, remember, and hope.

Some difference, silenced in one environment, can suddenly become pronounced in another. We do not realise how different we are, until we move, until we meet others, until we step in a different world.

But, not all differences are treated the same.

Some are celebrated.

Some are privileged.

Some are tolerated.

Some are erased.

Some are feared.  
And some become othered.  
Maybe, that is also part of being human, the beautiful, the ugly, and the in-between.  
In a world full of difference, we each respond to it differently.

Being different does not mean we cannot be together.  
Difference does not always divide.  
Sometimes, it brings depth, texture, and colour.  
Think of walking down a mountain trail in autumn.  
People rarely marvel at just one shade of colour.  
What stops us is the range: crimson, amber, orange, rust.  
It is the diversity of difference that takes our breath away.  
Nature does not flatten difference.  
It allows it, nurtures it, celebrates it, lets it blaze for a season.  
What if we could do the same?  
What if we could see one another not as strangers to be feared, but as colours in a shared landscape - each vivid, each changing, each part of the whole?

Finally, difference can be about *being*, but it can also be about *doing*.  
When we say someone or something is 'different', it always whispers a comparison: different from what? From whom?  
The 'what' is often just what's common, what's familiar, and what's been called the 'norm'. But norms are not always fixed. They are made. And they can be remade.  
Whenever I revisit my original motivations, to live the life I'm living, help the people I'm helping, do the research I'm doing, and teach the subject I'm teaching, the purpose has always been – to make a difference.  
Even if just to one person, even if just in one small way.

So tonight, if this sharing made a small difference to you, in whatever way, it has served its living.  
I hope, that we can make more space for difference, in our institutions, our homes, our relations, our minds, and our hearts.  
I hope, that we can learn more about differences that are silenced, oppressed, and manipulated; and unlearn differences that have been taken for granted as privileges.  
I hope, that we can make more difference to the world, individually and collectively.

And in a space like this, where different faiths, lives, and longings meet, maybe we can be reminded that even if we are not the same, we can still be together.

Quietly.

Fully.  
Differently.

Thank you.