

Hi All! Welcome back to *This is Berthoud*. I am Amie, your local librarian, and this is the podcast where I get to talk about all of the things that you are talking about so that together we have something new to think about. I'm getting right into it today. Most of you know by now that we've been working for a while on getting the library a building that is properly sized for the community we serve—we love our little library, but it is just plain too little—and I was mentioning to someone recently that we're working on creating a building plan that fits all of the needs of our diverse community.

This is the response I got: "Diverse? Amie, Berthoud is not diverse! We are whiter than a shelf full of Wonder Bread."

Now, I love a good metaphor, and "whiter than a shelf full of Wonder Bread" is a good metaphor, but I thought, oh boy, have we got some work to do when it comes to understanding diversity.

If I were to tell you that the majority of the people in Berthoud are not white you would probably need to look at having me removed from this position because that would be a pretty obvious lie. Especially when you consider that the word "majority" simply means more than half, yes, it is absolutely true that more than half of the people who live or work in Berthoud are white, Caucasian, whatever word you want to use. But to claim "whiter than a shelf of Wonder Bread" is equally as bad. We have people here whose ancestors or even immediate relatives are from Asia, or Africa, or Central or South America. We talk with people here who, if you told them your relatives came over on the Mayflower, would be able to say "Oh, that recently?" because their ancestors were here long before the first white person ever set foot on the continent. If you want to find people in Berthoud whose ancestry is not white European, you only need to look around.

But, but but but, I'd be doing all of you a huge disservice if I pretended that the only kind of diversity we think about here at the library is racial diversity, or skin color, or ancestry, whatever you want to call it. We have a community that is diverse in any number of ways, so let me tell you about a few others.

Closely related to, but not the same as ancestry, is diversity of language. I sincerely hope that at some point in the next year or two I'll have enough funding here to be able to hire the additional staff that we need, and you'd better believe that speaking more than one language will give any applicant an edge. The most obvious fluency that we would find useful is Spanish—we are a community in northern Colorado, after all. But we also have community members who would appreciate it if we were to hire someone fluent in German, or Russian, or even Japanese. All of those languages are spoken right here in Berthoud.

Let's move a little bit further away from the obvious ones. We have a lot of diversity of family structure here. We have people who are single, people who are married, people who never intend to be married ever. Some people are sharing a house with roommates or renting out their basement to others. We have people who are living with others who aren't their family because their actual family members are not safe people to live with. We have foster families, adoptive families, blended families. Some people here are raising their grandchildren, others are raising their children and caring for elderly relatives at the same time. Some of you are like me and don't have kids of your own but are rocking it as the cool aunt or uncle. If diverse family structures are a commodity, we are a very, very wealthy community.

Okay, what else? How about economic diversity? Yes, we have some people here in Berthoud who were able to afford to build a second home for themselves on the TPC golf course, and we have others

who are barely making it by with assistance from friends or family or services from House of Neighborly Service. Some people are buried in debt, some are excited to start investing, some are teaching their teenage children how to create a budget, some are receiving free meals from the School District, some are volunteering their time and vehicles and a gas money to drive strangers to doctor appointments. People are living on social security money or living it up in retirement. But even so, our economic diversity here isn't just about how much people do or do not have, it's also about attitude. How much money do you need to have in savings in order to feel comfortable? It depends on who you ask. Is the goal to earn as much money as possible? Is the goal to break even? Do you want to leave money to your kids or spend it all just before you die? How much responsibility do we have for people who are struggling? Do you need to own your own books or is borrowing them from the library a great way to save some cash? Small business purchase where you might pay more, or big box store purchase that'll net you the lowest price? Certainly the accumulation of economic wealth varies from family to family and person to person, but we've got an even greater diversity of economic attitudes here.

And politics—I suppose we've come to know all too well that people in Berthoud hold a diverse range of political views. If there is a political opinion to be held, someone here holds it, just as someone here holds its opposite. One thing we do know from working here at the library, however, is that there are not only two political camps—there are thousands and thousands. And when people are willing to listen to others, we can make our political camps welcoming instead of isolating. Are there more than two possible views on any political issue? You betcha. I'll leave that one there for now.

Let's consider social diversity instead. Sometimes this one is hard to see, because we can get so caught up in what is considered normal from a social standpoint and only focus on what we think of as weird, so let's flip the script for a moment. Pretend you've never been to Berthoud before, but you've just spent the day out on your boat on Carter Lake and now you need snacks. Yes, I know, it's winter right now—work with me people! So you need snacks, you drive into town to find a store, and you realize that every car in the Hays parking lot is the same—same make, same model, same color. And then you look around at the people, and you see that everyone is the same gender, has the same haircut, is wearing identical clothing. Everyone has the same mannerisms, says the same thing to you when you catch their eye, has the same items in their grocery basket—how long would it take for you to be completely creeped out and decide to go elsewhere for your snacks? I'm fairly certain I wouldn't make it into the store, because that would be freaky, people. So yes, social norms are good because it's easier to create community when we can agree on certain behaviors, but social diversity is great too, not to mention an indication that things are normal. We can have different opinions on what it means to be masculine or feminine, or how to behave in a group when someone says something that embarrassed you, or whether ambition is a positive or negative personality trait. That's social diversity, folks, and it's a good thing we've got it, because no one wants to conform that much! Be you, be confident being you, and help others be confident being them too.

Which kind of brings me to the point of all this. Sometimes people ask me why I would spend so much time focusing on our differences. Wouldn't it be better to focus on what we have in common than on what we don't?

It depends.

I think that's my favorite answer to complex questions—it depends—and I'm sure there are some of you out there thinking, "ugh, Amie, not another 'it depends.'" I'll explain, like I always do. It depends on what? It depends on intent.

If someone comes into the library and I see that he's wearing a hearing aid and leaning toward me more than usual when I speak, I will probably raise the volume of my voice a bit and try to enunciate more clearly. If someone else comes in and she speaks with an accent and seems to be struggling to find words, I will probably slow down my speech, try to separate individual words, and only choose common words in our talk so that she can understand me. If I used these same tactics with everyone who came into the library, thereby treating everyone equally, I would probably annoy a bunch of you. If I notice, however, that someone seems to be hard of hearing or to have learned to speak a different language before learning English, working a little harder to make myself understood could only be considered good customer service.

If, on the other hand, someone comes into the library and he's wearing clothes clearly purchased second-hand, and I treat him differently from the man who comes in wearing a full three-piece suit, we have some here, that would be considered poor customer service, regardless of which of them I favored. Likewise, we fax documents to the unemployment office using the same procedure as we fax documents to the VA hospital, and it looks exactly like when we fax documents to investment advisors. Sometimes the only way to provide good service is to provide equal, identical service.

Is the intent to include more voices, or to exclude them? It's sort of easy in our society today to assume that "different" is the same as "dangerous." Sometimes it can be, true, true, but more often than not different is simply different, not something to fear. Some people cautioned me about taking on this topic at a time when our country is so divided, but I think it's worth talking about now. Can we use our ability to point out differences as a method to exclude people from our community life? Certainly we can. Can we use recognizing diversity as a method to include people in our community life? Yes, absolutely. When we stay curious about what other people need, what they feel, what they like and don't like, we're able to open up a spot at the table. And a diverse table, we've found, always makes for more interesting conversation and more creative solutions to the problems we face. Listening to others—simply listening—is a skill we all can learn, and our community here will only be better if we all get good at it.

As usual, if you want to talk to me about this or really any other topic, you can get in touch by calling me, Amie, at the library, 970-532-2757, or emailing me at podcast.bclcd@gmail.com. Also as always, if you need medical advice or legal advice or tax advice, go find a professional in that field instead of asking me—we do information, not surgery. We're always happy to help you—and in case you didn't know, our building has been open for some time now, so come on in, wear your mask—and I'm always proud to say, this is diverse Berthoud.