“Let’s Talk About Race” is a book written by Julius Lester, university professor and award-winning author, and illustrated by Karen Barbour. Lester (1939 – 2018) converted to Judaism. He has said that his conversion journey began when he was seven and learned that his mothers’ father was a Jewish immigrant from Germany, who married a freed slave.

Julius Lester is outspoken about issues of race and identity. “I am a story,” Lester writes, “So are you. So is everyone. Our race is just one part of our story. To know my story, you have to put together everything I am.”

Julius Lester discusses how each individual’s story has many different elements, from family, to name, to likes and dislikes and even race. Race may be one part of their story but it is not the entire story. Race is just a part of your story, so why do people think it is so important? Like Martin Luther King, he explains that sometimes we get too caught up in race and make assumptions based on skin color.

He shares his own story as he explores what makes each of us special. Everybody is more than just their religion, nationality or race. To know other people, you need to ask them questions about their story and put together everything that they are. There are more commonalities than differences among people. Connecting with our own story helps us to better understand others.
Celebrating MLK Day: Let’s Talk About Race

Discussion

This is a discussion guide for “Let’s Talk About Race” by Julius Lester. In this activity, we will explore our personal stories and share what we have learned. We will reinforce “cultural competence”, the ability to navigate difference.

Materials

1. A copy of “Let’s Talk About Race” by Julius Lester
2. A copy of the worksheet for each participant
3. Pencils

Directions

1. Read the book “Let’s Talk About Race” aloud. Even though it is a book for children, this activity works well for all age groups as the topic is very complex.

2. Print out one worksheet for each participant. Have participants fill out the worksheet (about 10-15 min). It helps them to tell their story. Note: Participants sometimes need to define and/or discuss “nationality” and “race.” This is a good opportunity to take the time to have a discussion. Nationality is the country you are from or live in. And since race is often a taboo subject, reinforce that it’s important that we all can acknowledge and talk about race.

3. Discuss the answers on the worksheet using the discussion questions below. Here is an option for a group: Break participants into pairs. Ask the first two discussion questions aloud and give participants time to share their answers with one another. Pose question 3 to the entire group so that participants can share their ideas for the best way to learn about other people. At the end, reinforce that the best way to ask another person about themselves is to be willing to share your story.
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Discussion Questions

1. After Julius Lester told us more about himself, do you feel like you know him better? What more would you want to know?

2. What can we learn about the way Julius Lester talked about himself? Did it make you feel more comfortable talking about yourself?

3. When people see you, what do they know about you? What don’t they know about you? What are the things that make you unique and different from other people? What are the things that make you the same? What is the best way to learn about another person?