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## Beyond Classification

*This reading comes from the Facing History and Ourselves resource Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement.*

Rod Serling used fiction to explore the negative consequences of the labels we attach to ourselves and others. For many Americans, that kind of discrimination is a part of their daily life. Stereotyping obscures the reality of who they are and what they may become.

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According to many psychologists, although it is natural to view others as representatives of groups, stereotypes are offensive. They are more than a label or judgment about an individual based on the characteristics of a group. Stereotyping reduces individuals to categories. Therefore stereotyping can lead to prejudice and discrimination. The word *prejudice* means pre-judge. We prejudge when we have an opinion about a person based on his or her membership in a particular group. A prejudice attaches value to differences to the benefit of one's own group and at the expense of other groups. Discrimination occurs when prejudices are translated into actions. Not every stereotype results in discrimination. But all stereotypes tend to divide a society into *us* and *them*.

Dalton Conley understands the power of stereotypes. He writes:

I am not your typical middle-class white male. I am middle class, despite the fact that my parents had no money; I am white, but I grew up in an inner-city housing project where most everyone was black or Hispanic. I enjoyed a range of privileges that were denied my neighbors but that most Americans take for granted. In fact, my childhood was like a social science experiment: Find out what being middle class really means by raising a kid from a so-called good family in a so-called bad neighborhood. Define whiteness by putting a light-skinned kid in the midst of a community of color. If the exception proves the rule, I'm that exception.

Ask any African American to list the adjectives that describe them and they will likely put black or African American at the top of the list. Ask someone of European descent the same

question and white will be far down the list, if it's there at all. Not so for me. I've studied whiteness the way I would a foreign language. I know its grammar, its parts of speech; I know the subtleties of its idioms, its vernacular words and phrases to which the native speaker has never given a second thought. There's an old saying that you never really know your own language until you study another. It's the same with race and class.

In fact, race and class are nothing more than a set of stories we tell ourselves to get through the world, to organize our reality. . . . One of [my mother's favorite stories] was how I had wanted a baby sister so badly that I kidnapped a black child in the playground of the housing complex. She told this story each time my real sister, Alexandra, and I were standing, arms crossed, facing away from each other after some squabble or fistfight. The moral of the story for my mother was that I should love my sister, since I had wanted to have her so desperately. The message I took away, however, was one of race. I was fascinated that I could have been oblivious to something that years later feels so natural, so innate as race does.<sup>1</sup>