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The identical - but different - twins | Opinion

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Phillip Dukes and Steve West (Judy West / Courtesy)

Phillip Dukes and I are not just brothers from another mother — we’re identical twins. Even our mom has trouble telling us apart. We possess identical hearts, even if we might have slightly different looks and backgrounds.

We were separated at birth by two decades. He towers over me by 8 inches. My upbringing was in a secure Long Island lower middle-class family. He was raised by his mom, aunt and grandma in a poor black ghetto. I’ve had two wives to his five. I’m non-religious, he’s a bishop who talks directly to God. He’s an accomplished musician while I can’t carry a tune. I struggled to get through college, he dropped out of public school but later got his doctorate. I served in the Army Reserve, he served time in prison. I started a few businesses and social justice organizations while he spent years debauched on the street.

While my life’s been kind of steady, my twin lived a life of extremes. His mom’s family picked cotton on a Georgia plantation before emigrating to Florida. He was reared with a strong ethical grounding. However, at 14 his uncle recruited him into the world of prostitution and drug dealing. Phillip’s church-based morality instantly surrendered to the seduction of money, women and status. He became a legendary drug dealer.

Until his arrest at 20, he was cemented into his anti-social lifestyle. Facing 15 years in jail, Dukes’ lawyer was able to obtain a mere one-year sentence.

While in prison he received advice directly from the God of the Hebrews. The lord instructed him to return to the righteous ways of his upbringing — and he committed to do so.

After release he still had a problem with the crack cocaine that had overwhelmed him during his dealer days. It took a decade and the loving help of friends to pull him out of a life of debauchery living on the streets or on borrowed mattresses.

This unpromising start portended little hope for his future. However, today Dr. Dukes, of Riviera Beach, is a bishop in the Messianic Christian Church where he mentors youngsters to reject the regrettable path that he walked in his own youth.

That this 6-foot-5-inch man is alive today is a miracle. His body has paid dearly for his past bad choices. This includes a heart transplant along with a plethora of serious bodily malfunctions.

So where is our commonality? With such different backgrounds, how can we be the identical twins? Simple, underneath the histories and the physical differences, we connect at our human core.

We ignore our irrelevant variations knowing that all humans have 99.1% of the same genetic makeup. We simply connect at our essence as members of the one human race.

Martin Luther King Jr. advised us not to judge or be judged by the color of one's skin but by the content of one's character. Differences exist only in the eye of the beholder — as do our similarities. With overwhelming data bombarding us from every direction, we unconsciously or consciously choose what we perceive and how we process it. Unfortunately, it's easier to notice the hues of the wrapping than to make the effort to know its contents.

If we choose our friends based on actual experience rather than false preconceived bias, we might all find more identical twins.

Steve West is a social justice advocate and entrepreneur living in Delray Beach.