

**Be Cautious about First Impressions: The Case of Susan Boyle
(and Many Others)**

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My wife Marilyn suggested that I write this website article about Susan Boyle. I have always welcomed Marilyn's advice about topics for my monthly columns, including two of my favorites—the 2004 Red Sox after they won the team's first World Series in 86 years and Billy Crystal's play "700 Sundays." Why an article devoted to Susan Boyle?

Marilyn and I had just watched one of the most viewed videos posted on YouTube during the past month, which if you have not seen it you may wish to do so before reading further (simply go to YouTube and type in "Susan Boyle"). Susan was a contestant on the television show "Britain's Got Talent," similar to "American Idol" in the United States. The three judges were Simon Cowell (well-known to viewers in the States for his often harsh, acerbic feedback on "American Idol"), Amanda Holden, and Piers Morgan.

Susan walked on the stage and was described in one article as heavy and frumpy looking. She immediately had difficulty thinking of the word "villages" when asked where she lived. Simon questioned how old she was and Susan responded 47. In learning of her age, Simon rolled his eyes as if to suggest that a 47-year-old woman was past her prime, seemingly questioning why her talent had not been discovered at an earlier age. Susan countered that her age was "just one side of me." Upon offering this comment she swayed her hips in a somewhat suggestive fashion, prompting both Simon and Piers to roll their eyes once again. Susan continued that she had not had an opportunity earlier in her life to display her talent and that was why she auditioned for this show. It was evident that Simon and Piers had significant doubts about Susan's singing ability.

The camera scanned the reactions of people in the audience as Susan engaged in this initial dialogue with the judges. There was laughter that seemed directed more at Susan than with her. The expression of one young woman in the audience captured what many others seemed to feel—she looked in disbelief at Susan's audacity to suggest that

she possessed talent. Obviously, to the judges and audience Susan did not fit a preconceived picture of a singing “idol.”

Everyone’s skepticism was heightened when Susan announced that she had selected to sing “I Have a Dream,” a beautiful, poignant, and challenging piece from the play *Les Miserables*. If anyone had interviewed those in the theater just before Susan began to sing, I think that there would have been a large consensus that she was about to embarrass herself. I wondered if they would have had the same prediction of failure had Susan not looked “frumpy” or been 47-years-old. What if her physical appearance rivaled that of the judge Amanda, a very attractive young woman? Would our expectations for success have been much different?

Possessed by a noticeable air of confidence Susan began to sing. Within the first few seconds the mouths of the judges fell open in utter surprise. The audience soon began to clap and cheer wildly. Susan’s rendition of “I Have a Dream” was breathtaking and as she continued, the audience rose before she ended to offer a standing ovation. Perhaps their enthusiasm was even more pronounced than it might have been given their initial expectations. At the conclusion of the song Susan bowed and then actually began to walk off the stage, before being reminded that she had not yet received feedback from the judges. She was certainly lost in the moment. She returned to face the judges and hear their comments about her performance.

Piers began, “Without a doubt this is the biggest surprise I have had in three years on this show.” He noted the laughter that had been present when she first came on stage and said, “No one is laughing now.” He used words such as “stunning” and “incredible” to describe her performance and added, “I’m reeling from shock.”

Amanda, whose facial expressions did not reveal the skepticism displayed earlier by her male counterparts, offered an insightful appraisal of what had transpired during the past few minutes. “I’m so thrilled because I know everybody was against you. I honestly think we were all being very cynical and that was the biggest wake-up call ever and it was a complete privilege listening to that.”

I was genuinely moved by what Amanda said. It touched something in me that prompted my eyes to tear. Marilyn had a similar reaction to what we were watching. I thought about how quickly we judge people, how quickly we make assumptions. Susan

at least had an opportunity to prove all of the doubters wrong, but often such an opportunity is not present for others who are prejudged and cast in stereotypes that determine our reactions towards them.

Simon added levity to the situation by telling Susan that from the moment she walked on stage he knew that something special was about to happen and he was right. With an impish smile and a glint in his eye Simon poked fun at himself and all of the others who were not expecting the stirring rendition of “I Have a Dream” they had just heard. Susan’s performance was memorable, but equally so was the lesson to be learned, a lesson summarized in Amanda’s observation, “I honestly think we were all being very cynical and that was the biggest wake-up call ever.” If only such a wake-up call had a long-lasting effect on our perceptions and behaviors!

Emotions Evoked, Impressions Formed

I know that I tend to be sentimental, more so as I get older. Tears appear more frequently than in the past in response to a scene in a movie. Thus, I was not surprised when I became teary watching Susan’s performance and the reaction of the audience both before she began to sing and once they heard her beautiful voice. Marilyn was similarly touched by the event. We talked about how quick we are to judge and how if someone doesn’t fall into a preconceived image that we hold of what a certain person should look like, we dismiss or don’t expect much of them. This can occur in any situation or any relationship.

In thinking of Susan’s experience I was flooded by many thoughts and memories. I reflected upon how quickly racial and ethnic prejudices rear their ugly head, even among those who might believe they are free of such prejudices. I recently spent a day visiting a school in New York City. I spoke with faculty and parents as well as a small group of sixth-graders in a “Life Skills” class. The students were a delightful, articulate group, posing thoughtful questions, and providing some impressive insights. They wondered about the different roles that psychologists assumed, with one student asking if any psychologists studied issues of prejudice and discrimination. The question was especially relevant for several of the students who had recently visited a museum dedicated to the Holocaust.

I told the class that in fact there were psychologists who studied these issues and they were typically referred to as social psychologists. In discussing research related to prejudice, I mentioned a study I had read years earlier that examined how our preconceived ideas—ideas about which we were often unaware—impacted on our perception of people. Researchers showed individuals a drawing of a bus filled with people. One man was standing and held a long object that was not clearly defined. There were two versions of the drawing. In one, the man holding the object was white while in the other the man was black. Instruments assessing prejudice were administered to the subjects in the study. The main finding was that the more prejudiced the individuals studying the drawing, the more likely they were to perceive the long object as a gun when held by a black man and as an umbrella when held by a white man. The sixth-grade students were intrigued by this research and the manner in which our prejudices played a role in influencing our perceptions.

Another memory that was evoked while watching the initial reaction to Susan Boyle was of a television segment I did years ago while appearing as a regular guest on a local talk show in the Boston area. In planning possible topics that I might address on the show, the producer gave me an article and wondered if I thought it would be of interest to the viewers. She said the article examined the ways in which we interpreted the physical attributes of other people and how these interpretations impacted on our initial impression of and reaction to them. The article specifically looked at the differential response to shorter versus taller individuals.

Years later I still remember several of the key findings. One concerned salaries. The starting salary of men who were 6-feet or taller was significantly higher than the starting salary of men below that height for similar jobs in which there was no advantage to being taller. Another finding was that if two people of the same gender entered a store simultaneously, almost invariably the taller person was waited upon first. It was not clear if the salesperson was even aware of this response. The host of the show voiced surprise at these findings, but advocated that the more aware we are of the prejudices we hold—prejudices that are likely to find expression in discrimination—the more we can challenge and remedy them.

After the show aired, I received several letters of appreciation from viewers for discussing this topic. One memorable note was penned by a woman who described herself as a “4 foot 10 inch charge nurse.” She recounted that it was not unusual when visitors came on her hospital floor to ask her where the head nurse was, assuming that someone of her height could not possibly hold such a position. In addition, she wrote with a hint of humor that although she had two biological children, a few obviously insensitive people had questioned how she was able to give birth given her size. She thanked me for bringing to light the existence of false first impressions based on physical characteristics, noting that small stature was just one of many prejudices that could be identified.

Most, if not all of us, are vulnerable at times to the emergence of distorted impressions and assumptions based on the physical appearance of others. I think it is imperative that we not only become increasingly aware of the existence of these prejudices in order that we correct them, but that we also actively teach our children to recognize and safeguard against them. Any steps we can take to lessen prejudice, discrimination, and hatred are worth our time and effort.

To Susan Boyle I offer appreciation for performing so admirably after hearing the snickers of a crowd not expecting much from you. As Amanda noted, this was a wake-up call for all of us.