(1) Memory, then, is not like a single filing cabinet. It is more like Velcro. If you look at the two sides of Velcro material, you’ll see that one is covered with thousands of tiny hooks and the other is covered with thousands of tiny loops. When you press the two sides together, a huge number of hooks get snagged inside the loops, and that’s what causes Velcro to seal.

(2) Your brain hosts a truly staggering number of loops. The more hooks an idea has, the better it will cling to memory. Your childhood home has a gazillion hooks in your brain. A new credit card number has one, if it’s lucky.

(3) Great teachers have a knack for multiplying the hooks in a particular idea. A teacher from Iowa named Jane Elliott once designed a message so powerful – tapping into so many different aspects of emotion and memory – that, twenty years later, her students still remember it vividly.

(4) Brown Eyes, Blue Eyes
Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968. The next day, Jane Elliott, an elementary-school teacher in Iowa, found herself trying to explain his death to her classroom of third-graders. In the all-white town of Riceville, Iowa, students were familiar with King but could not understand who would want him dead, or why.

(5) Elliott said, “I knew it was time to deal with this in a concrete way, because we’d talked about discrimination since the first day of school. But the shooting of Martin Luther King, one of our ‘Heroes of the Month’ two months earlier, couldn’t be explained to little third-graders in Riceville, Iowa.”

(6) She came to class the next day with a plan: She aimed to make prejudice tangible to her students. At the start of class, she divided the students into two groups: brown-eyed kids and blue-eyed kids. She then made a shocking announcement: Brown-eyed kids were
superior to blue-eyed kids—“They’re the better people in this room.” (7) The groups were separated: Blue-eyed kids were forced to sit at the back of the classroom. Brown-eyed kids were told that they were smarter. They were given extra time at recess. The blue-eyed kids had to wear special collars, so that everyone would know their eye color from a distance. The two groups were not allowed to mix at recess.

(8) Elliott was shocked at how quickly the class was transformed. “I watched those kids turn into nasty, vicious, discriminating third-graders…it was ghastly,” she said. “Friendships seemed to dissolve instantly, as brown-eyed kids taunted their blue-eyed former friends. One brown-eyed student asked Elliott how she could be the teacher “if you’ve got dem blue eyes.”

(9) At the start of class the following day, Elliott walked in and announced that she had been wrong. It was actually the brown-eyed children who were inferior. This reversal of fortune was embraced instantly. A shout of glee went up from the blue-eyed kids as they ran to place their collars on their lesser, brown-eyed counterparts.

(10) On the day when they were in the inferior group, students described themselves as sad, bad, stupid and mean. “When we were down,” one boy said, his voice cracking, “it felt like everything bad was happening to us.” When they were on the top, the students felt happy, good, and smart.

(11) Even their performance on academic tasks changed. One of the reading exercises was a phonics card pack that the kids were supposed to go through as quickly as possible. The first day, when the blue-eyed kids were on the bottom, it took them 5.5 minutes. On the second day, when they were on top, it took 2.5 minutes. (12) “Why couldn’t you go this fast yesterday?” Elliott asked. One blue-eyed girl said, “We had those collars on…” Another student chimed in, “We couldn’t stop thinking about those collars.”

(13) Elliott’s simulation made prejudice concrete—brutally concrete. It also had an enduring impact on the students’ lives. Studies conducted ten and twenty years later showed that Elliott’s students were significantly less prejudiced than their peers who had not been through the exercise.

(14) Students still remember the simulation vividly. A fifteen-year reunion of Elliott’s students broadcast on the PBS series Frontline revealed how deeply it had moved them. Ray Hansen, remembering the way his understanding changed from one day to the next, said, “It was one of the most profound learning experiences I’ve ever had.” (15) Sue Ginder Rolland said, “Prejudice has to be worked out young or it will be with you all your life. Sometimes I catch myself [discriminating], stop myself, think back to the third grade, and remember what it was like to be put down.”

(16) Jane Elliott put hooks into the idea of prejudice. It would have been easy for her to treat the idea of prejudice the way other classroom ideas were treated—as an important but abstract bit of knowledge, like the capital of Kansas or the definition of “truth”. She could have treated prejudice as something to be learned, like the story of a World War II battle. Instead, Elliott turned prejudice into an experience. Think of the “hooks” involved: The sight of a friend suddenly sneering at you. The feel of a collar around your neck. The despair at feeling inferior. This experience put so many hooks into the students’ memories that, decades later, it could not be forgotten.