

An Invitation to Intercultural Competency
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I don't know
if humankind understands
culture: the act
of being human
is not easy knowledge.

Well, ain't that the truth?
The act of being human is not easy knowledge.

The saying goes that culture is like water to a fish –
the fish has no idea it is in water.
It's just all around us.

But that's not quite right, is it?
All living cultures are outcomes of intercultural
communication.

I want you to think back to an experience,
probably when you were a child or a young adult,
when you became really aware of cultural diversity.
Maybe a new family moved nearby,
or maybe you moved to a new city yourself,
maybe it was something on TV or in a book,
maybe it was at a new school,
or a trip you took across town or across the world.

Are you thinking of a moment when this happened?
Do you remember how that felt?
Did you have the shyness of encounter - I'm not sure about
this?

Or were you very curious?

Was it frightening? Disorienting?

Did the adults or other people in your life help you navigate this encounter?

Did they try to explain difference, or did they leave you confused?

Did they help you feel pride in your own culture, or was there some kind of shame or embarrassment that you weren't like "them"?

For some of you, I'm sure, you don't remember this moment because you always existed in more than one culture - maybe you grew up in an immigrant family, or as part of a culturally or religiously different group than the majority around you, so you knew before you could swim what it meant to move between different kinds of water.

I had lots of moments like this growing up, when I noticed the differences in culture.

As I was thinking about the message this week, I remembered a cross-cultural encounter from my youth, one that I think is illustrative about culture and diversity.

I grew up in the Seattle area, and our Unitarian Universalist youth conferences — 300 or more high school kids gathered at a campsite -- included people from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and British Columbia.

Canada.

And Canadians are different, eh?

After a weekend with a bunch of them,
most of the Americans would come back with a slight accent

-

including saying "eh."

We'd all be a little more polite.

The culture is very close — but it's just different enough to
notice.

Like 10% off center, or, I should say, 10% off what I was
used to.

And that's the key insight. What I was used to.

I'll come back to this.

The biggest cross-cultural encounter I've had was moving to
the south side of Chicago.

So many of my assumptions were challenged,
so many of thoughts had to be rethought.

After a few years,

I noticed just how white the undergraduates at the
University of Chicago were –

I saw them, acting like they owned the sidewalk,
talking to each other on the train,
assuming their centrality in whatever story was happening.

I remember a moment, observing them,
thinking, god, they are so white!

And then, looking at my own hands.

Huh.

A friend of mine studied abroad in the Dominican Republic, and then did 2 years of Peace Corps in Uzbekistan.

Did any of you study abroad or do Peace Corps?

After you've been there a while, she told me, you see the other Americans in a very different light - and you start to see yourself in a very different light. You start to see your own culture.

When you come home, there's a reverse culture shock.

"Intercultural competences aim at freeing people from their own logic and cultural idioms in order to engage with others and listen to their ideas."

White is a color - which none of us, really, is - we're all different shades and hues of brown, from the very light to the very dark.

White is a color, but whiteness is a culture.

A way of being in the world.

And some folks - some of you and some of your families - have found ways to enter that culture:

the Irish, the Italian, the Bohemian, the Jew -

none of these cultures were considered white 150 years ago.

Whiteness assimilates and homogenizes.

It bleaches.

And, it tries to act like it is normal.

And everyone else is "different."

A burger joint is American. Everything else is ethnic.
Whiteness is the majority. Everyone else is the “minority.”

I said before that my first instinct
as a teenager, encountering the Canadians,
was to say they were 10% off center.
That assumes of course that I was in the center - a false
assumption.
So now I say something different —
that some elements of one of the prominent cultures in
Canada is similar to,
but just different enough to catch you up,
some elements in one of the prominent cultures in America.

There’s no single American culture, and no single Canadian
culture, either.
Because a member of the First Nations is different than a
Quebecois is different from an Icelandic immigrant family in
Manitoba or a second-generation Taiwanese family in
Vancouver.

The culture I grew up in -
suburban, white, liberal, Pacific Northwestern - isn’t center.

My culture isn’t normal.
It’s one culture — one strand in a vast tapestry of human
existence.
My culture, that strand, is made up of many threads -

German and Scandinavian immigrants, naturalists and engineers,
some appropriated native cultural elements, and the
idiosyncrasies that grow up in any place.

When I moved to Chicago, I had to learn to cross against
the light and carry an umbrella –
because people in Seattle never ever do those things.
That's just within one dominant culture in one country!

Some of you have made much larger cultural leaps,
and there is so much to learn.
"These opportunities sometimes lead to rediscovering one's
own identity under the deciphered forms of the 'other'."
When we talk about intercultural competency, this is part of
what we're talking about.

The old saying goes that you don't really know your own
language
unless you can read, write, and speak a second one.

And if we just swim in our own culture,
we don't realize that it's just one kind of water.
And if we happen to be in the majority culture,
if we happen to be in the culture of whiteness in America,
then we can be tempted to think that we are normal,
that we are the center.
This is both false and harmful.

The invitation to intercultural competency is an invitation to justice, to curiosity, to love, to depth, to truth, and to wonder.

To understand that there are many, many cultures;
that each one of them is constantly changing,
is interacting with other cultures;
that no culture is "normal" or "center;"
to become aware of your own culture,
and thus able to critique it and appreciate it;
to know the stories of other cultures;
to know enough about other cultures that we can be good
citizens of our own city,
let alone our own country, let alone the world;
to work against those elements of our culture that are
imperialistic and warlike;
to form new collages, new patterns, new art of the mixing
of culture -
this is the journey of intercultural competency.

Folks who work on intercultural competency speak of stages of development.

You start, usually, in denial.

Thinking that your water is the only water.

Second, defense - my culture is the best one, the normal one.

Most people are in this place. We're right, they should be more like us.

Third, minimization. We're all the same, aren't we? Just human?

The differences aren't important, really. This is where you will find many Unitarian Universalists.

It's ok, it's a journey, and if you're here, I invite you to the next step.

Fourth, acceptance. We see that there are lots of cultures, and ours is just one of them, and we're OK with that.

We could avoid a lot of conflict in our world if more folks were here.

Fifth, adaption and integration.

We know enough about our own culture and others that we can adapt,

can adjust the frame. Like fluency in another language, we can code-switch, and shed some of our own cultural skin.

I invite you to move along on this journey.

Part of the work is figuring out where you are - just beginning to explore diversity?

Or ready to take a deeper look at your own culture?

Or starting to move into a more world-inclusive way of life?

You have to walk before you can run.

Fundamentally, the journey of intercultural competency is about openness - it is a heart journey, a spiritual journey.

It is about suspending judgement,
it is about laying aside feelings of superiority and of shame,
and moving into genuine curiosity and a spirit of love.

Here are some ideas, some concrete things you can do
to expand your intercultural competency.

Read more widely.

Read authors, listen to music, discover the history
outside your own culture — and also things about your
culture

from folks outside it,

so you can get that experience of looking in the mirror.

If you need a suggestion, I recommend "Between the World
and Me" by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

But start wherever you like.

Pick a thread and follow it.

Over the next few months, I'll be co-leading a class here at
church on anti-racism where we'll do this work,
and I encourage each of you to sign up today for that - we
start next week.

In this work, you'll have moments of resistance, of
exhaustion, of challenge —
this isn't easy!

So it's better to have company, make a commitment in your
family,
with others here at church,
to walk in the ways of understanding together.

Learn the stories that they don't always teach in school.
In some history textbooks, there's only a page or two about
the great migration -
some folks never learn what this is,
and the reason Kimberlee read *This is the Rope*
is to share this vital story with you.
You can't understand Rockford, or America, without
knowing about the great migration.
This is the rope,
this is the thread,
that connects the stories together,
that holds families together.

The cultural rituals - the family reunion - which isn't just for
blood relatives
(though, truth be told, we're all blood relatives, right?) -
the ways folks pass on from generation to generation
the passwords and habits that make a people,
that hold memory and hope and power.

Learn the stories, this history -
the values, the experiences.
These stories are never simple -
so a huge part of the work of intercultural competency is
avoiding stereotypes,
getting under the surface.
There are cultural modes and methods,
but every person is still their own person,

and you know what they say about assumptions.

As we each move along on our journey,
it is also my hope that we will build a church
that becomes more and more culturally adaptable.
It isn't just people who can be inter-culturally competent,
institutions can be there too.
We're going to tell stories, use metaphors,
and yes, make music,
from a wider and wider circle of humanity.
Draw that circle wide.
We're going to practice and practice until we can clap
together on the downbeats;
and we're going to have some drums sometimes;
and we're going to sing in Spanish every once in a while;
we're going to stretch our muscles until we can do more of
the heavy lifting,
until we can better answer our calling to be a reflection of
this great and beautiful world.

We are our grandmother's prayers and our grandfather's
dreamings.

We are in our own culture, each of us,
our ways and patterns.

This song, *We Are*, is by the Unitarian Universalist African-
American composer and musician

Yayse Barnwell:

"We are our grandmother's prayers and our grandfather's
dreamings,
we are the breathe of our ancestors.
And we are the spirit of God.
the lovers of life and the builders of nations.
We stop.

Lean into me.

The universe
sings in quiet meditation.
And the stone wall
I lean upon spins me
wordless and silent
to the reach of stars
and to the heavens within.

It's not humankind after all
nor is it culture
that limits us.
It is the vastness
we do not enter.
It is the stars
we do not let own us.

We are star dust.
Each of us.
All of us.
One universe.

The stone wall, the rising moon, the stars,
the skin of the drum and the string of the piano key,
the sounds of our voice,
all the colors in all of their beauty.
One universe.”

This is not minimization.

We come not to erase our differences in a spiritual unity,
but to dance between the celebration of our diversity and
the knowledge of our oneness.

We come not with bleach but with a rainbow of paints and
fabrics.

All of the colors abound for the whole world around and for
everyone under the sun.

Many windows, one light.

My prayer, our work, our calling:

to get woke and stay woke.

To know that we each have a culture, maybe more than
one, that this is one of many;

that each one is different and connected;

to see the variety as beautiful;

to be curious and to creative;

to try as best we can to be gentle with each other;

to sing even when we don't know the words;

to reach out and to keep on;

to remember the stars and the canyon wall;

to weave the thread and embrace the tapestry;

to love and live and wonder;

to sing, to sing, to sing.