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The Joys of the Intuitive Mind

From time to time, we meet a person with an intuitive grasp of things, someone who always seems to be in the rhythm of the moment and whose words illuminate that moment. But why do some attain a kind of inherent understanding and others not? Research tells us that intuitive people focus their attention on the here and now, which allows them to see beyond themselves and fall into the rhythms of life. Another insight comes from Steve Jobs: “The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t settle.”

Those two viewpoints summarize the character of Sylvia Schroll-Machl, one of the leading interculturalists in the German-speaking world and our interviewee for this issue. Following her innate curiosity, she spent years studying religion, history, and psychology in order to discover the interactions of life, in particular those which foster group-cohesion between cultures. Connecting the dots, she has, not surprisingly, been able to capture in her own holistic way what intercultural communication is all about. Read her interview (page 3) as well as her observations on how joint German-American teams go about resolving problems (page 8).

In “I’m the creator and destroyer of worlds—and so are you!” (page 11), Sietar-member George Simons writes about the relationship of our identity and inner self-talk. He explores the term “culture” in the broadest sense of the word and provides a fascinating take on the stories we tell ourselves.

Using Russia’s blatant anti-gay legislation and the Sochi Olympics as a backdrop (page 15), columnist Dan MacLeod superimposes ethnicity and sexuality and finds that a minority is a minority.

And, last but not least, if you haven’t registered for the upcoming SIETAR Congress in Tallinn, Estonia (September 17 – 21), we urged to do so now. It’s going to be an awesome experience. More information on page 20.
Sylvia Schroll-Machl

An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture

As its citizens are proud to tell you, Bavaria is a “free state”, one of the oldest in Europe, and “Bavarians first, Germans second” describes the sentiment. However this once rural kingdom has transformed itself into one of Germany’s most dynamic high-tech centers, making it a curious combination of “laptops and Lederhosen.”

The need to be different — and apart — goes back millennia; a Roman writer called the Bavarians “a stubborn mountain folk”, a portrait expounded on by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. That stubbornness has generated a strong creative pulse, perhaps best exemplified by King Ludwig II, the reclusive and eccentric monarch who provided the world with the splendid, fairy-tale Neuschwanstein castle. Ludwig was also one of the first who saw Richard Wagner’s genius, supporting him lavishly and sponsoring Bayreuth’s Festspielhaus. For music lovers, Bavaria remains the land of Wagner.

The Bavarian attitude is still alive and kicking today and a good example is Dr. Sylvia Schroll-Machl, one of the most original thinkers to have come onto the intercultural scene in years. Born and raised in Lower Bavaria, she went on to study religion, history and psychology in Munich and Regensburg.

Her widely-acclaimed book “Die Deutschen—Wir Deutsche” (published in English as “Doing Business with Germans — Their Perception, Our Perception”) is an audacious attempt to understand the German mindset. Deeply intuitive, but strictly adhering to empirical research, she amazes the reader by really explaining what it means to be German. Her direct, personal style makes for a book that’s different from anything you have ever read. Her intercultural training sessions are like that too — very personal and authentically German.

Perhaps you can start by talking about the turning points in your life that led you to become an interculturalist.

I was born in Deggendorf and have lived here all my life; my family has been here since the early 1600s, which makes me very proud. I feel attached to my town and comfortable with my surroundings. For this reason, when I list the five things that led me to became an interculturalist, my upbringing takes on the least importance.

Nonetheless, during my youth, my family and I visited relatives in the former German Democratic Republic every year. And because Deggendorf is near the Czech border, I developed a relationship with being on the periphery, curious and fascinated about who lived on the other side.

When the Wall fell in 1989, it was a liberation for me: finally I could get to know these people! This is when I started to do a large research project on cultural comparisons in post-Communist countries at the Economic University of Vienna.
The second factor is that I’m deeply Christian, which means I have a strong wish to do something worthwhile in life. After my Abitur, I studied Catholic theology in Munich, then began work as a counselor in a Catholic youth center in Passau. I was very involved with the German-Israeli youth exchange and visited Israel several times. I now realize my theological studies not only helped me understand my own culture, but allowed me access to other cultures in a beautiful way. For example, when I tell people of the Muslim faith that I’m a Catholic theologian, their respect for me increases enormously. This is because their culture teaches them that any religious person is a decent person.

The third factor is my tremendous interest in psychology. Issues like managing inter-group relations or how values, standards and norms come into being fascinate me. They go with my philosophy of trying to understand people, how to get access to a person. I thought it would be fascinating to do basic research in the social-psychological aspects that make people tick. Psychology represents no great ideology and allows you to live with the principles of humanism. So after six years of working with young people, I went back to do study psychology, and later specialized with Professor Alexander Thomas at the University of Regensburg.

Now, if I were to arrange the pillars in the order that led to my profession, first would be psychology, second religion, and third Alexander Thomas, a great and lovable man, a human being. Although I did parallel work in clinical psychology and passed my exams to become a psychotherapist, I chose to go the route of intercultural psychology because of Professor Thomas. He introduced me to the research of cultural standards theory, which I did my dissertation on. It’s about perception, thinking, values, actions, a typology which means so much to me. Everything that I’ve done up to now revolves almost exclusively around the cultural standard approach.

I’ve observed how often these cultural standards as well as Thomas are unfairly criticized. I think it is everyone’s right to make critical points but many of those who criticize don’t possess the background in psychology necessary to understand the concepts. Furthermore, I believe it is counterproductive to play one intercultural approach against another and to make an ideology out of it. Each one has his or her epistemological and legitimate approach with its strengths and weaknesses. Everyone is struggling to generate the best possible work. It hurts me to read again and again the prejudices others have against ‘culture standards’. All models have advantages and disadvantages.

The fourth pillar was my husband, Reinhold. When I finished studies in intercultural communications in 1992, there was no general awareness of the field, let alone the importance of training. So, when I went for a job interview at companies like BMW, they would say “intercultural what?”
Although I knew my subject well, I wasn’t at all skilled at persuading companies of its importance. So my husband, also a psychologist in therapeutic practice, said, “If you can’t find a permanent position, why don’t you become freelance? I’ll sponsor you.” That’s how I launched my career.

My husband, who has since passed away, took care of everything, the home, garden and household, so that I could devote myself fully to my profession. It took almost three years until I began to earn a living. I am very grateful to him. Without his support my career would have never taken off. But looking back now, this difficult time had less to do with my inexperience than the fact that the field of intercultural training was in its pioneer period.

When I speak to you or read your books and articles, you somehow perfectly incarnate the German soul. Could you explain how you do this so well?

Here, I have to say two things. First, I feel very “rooted” in my Bavarian and German culture, which allows me to be acutely aware of the German reality. My German customers who have not lived abroad and have to be sensitive to international markets feel I understand them. And if I do a Germany seminar for non-Germans, I always get feedback about being “authentic” and witty. This is what I call positive self-confidence and it’s important for intercultural competence. It includes learning to be alone and being satisfied with yourself, your roots.

Second, my love for cultural and historical references is based on my studies of history and religion, which are important in understanding mentality imprinting. When long historic causes are explained, people feel they understand others better. They realize that a value that’s 500 years old won’t change in two months and this makes them open to other solutions. Participants often say, “Our foreign partners have to see our way.” I answer, “Your partners have been using this method for 500 years and they think their way’s okay.” It’s then they say, “Oh yeah, you’re right.”

Are there other aspects of your training that make your seminars so popular?

Well, in every seminar, I try to do a lot of coaching. That is, work with the issues and questions of the participants, and that’s when I really feel I’m in my element. My training as a psychologist comes into play, I ask in what kind of situations they have difficulties, where they have inhibitions, when they’re uncomfortable. I then ask them to explain the reasons why in detail and have them adopt their behavior accordingly. That’s what I love to do and I have the feeling that people appreciate it.

For example, I had a seminar recently where I had a couple of people adjust their role-play so they could appreciate the German way better. The participants were deeply moved by this mind-shifting and said, “My God, I understand them now.”
I’ve always felt that people benefit from this sort of coaching and also feel more comfortable. It’s the sort of learning that doesn’t go through the head but through the heart. This is far more effective than having participants do a couple of games, which only leads to a small transfer.

**Are there situations that you find difficult in training?**

Yes, ethical issues. I should point out that in 80% of the seminars I conduct, there are no ethical problems; it’s just those other 20% related to globalization that put me in an awkward position. I can’t ignore the fact that we are living in a globalized world. On one hand, it’s beautiful; on the other hand, parts of it can be cruel.

This is where dilemmas present themselves: bribery, discrimination, wage-dumping, prostitution, human rights violations. Take child labor. People say, “The state must make sure that children don’t work” but when subcontractors use child labor, we look the other way and pay for the goods. I often sit and think to myself, “Careful, careful, Sylvia, you wanted to do something meaningful in your life. What are you supporting now?”

I often can sense when a person who is being forced by management to do something unethical and is telling me indirectly: “How can I look at myself in the mirror?” I’m ready to talk with those people, acknowledge their feelings, and encourage them to give critical feedback to top management. If, however, I sense the person sitting in front of me wants to learn tricks to exploit counterparts in an elegant intercultural way — or be involved in a process of transferring jobs abroad, whereby the local people have to give away their know-how to others, which eventually leads to their unemployment. The question I always must ask myself is: “How is the dignity of these people maintained? How is the local management dealing with these people?”

**Does it work?**

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. And if not, I try to help people to think about and question unethical practices. Sometimes I get into trouble with the client. But if a seminar is to be fruitful for both sides, it must be based on mutual respect. This is the principle in my seminars, to create esteem not only for other cultures but also for oneself.

There are, of course, companies that have developed good guidelines regarding the moral dilemmas. I find this to be more often the case with mid-size companies than your large corporations, which are more anonymous. And when I read the literature and intercultural management concepts, I often have the feeling that it doesn’t at all reflect ethical behavior. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not against globalization, I see and understand the problems. But there are times when I say to management, “Wait a minute here. I’m not sure this is the right way.”
In your book “Die Deutschen–Wir Deutsche”, you point out the cultural standard of separation of personal and public domain. Everyone in the world makes this distinction but it seems Germany is where it’s carried to the extreme, resulting in Germans being seen as too formal and serious. Could you give the historical reasons why this is so?

This separation of the personal and public domains, I would think, is due to two historical events. First, in the centuries of German territorial fragmentation, restrictions and confinement were everyday experiences. Boundaries of daily reality increasingly became “boundaries of the mind” as well. By the middle of the 18th century, there were approximately 1600 different territories on German soil, and even at the beginning of the 19th century some 1000 still existed, the boundaries of which could not be easily crossed.

Additionally, the separation of internal and external areas provided important protection against falling into the clutches of the reigning absolute ruler. People learned to lead a confined life-style in a small circle of close friends as a natural reaction to the adverse political circumstances.

The second point to remember is the teachings of Martin Luther. He preached that the church needed to remove emotional and irrational elements from religious ceremonies -- feelings were not a necessary part of faith. An intellectual, rational connection to God was far more solid. And, if you look closely, Protestantism lacks a cultish aspect in the form of worship or spiritual sacrifice. As a result people related less passionately to religion and became more intellectual. Catholicism is simply more emotional, exemplified by festivals, processions, theater, carnival.

Over generations, the Protestant approach led to a clear emphasis on objectivity and rationality. In fact, you could say modern Germany was largely molded by Protestant theology. Furthermore, the Lutheran faith emphasizes a separation of life-spheres, which eventually led to task-orientation (concentration on the task at hand) and toward a richness of spirit (the individual inner life).

Then why don’t Lutheran countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark make a strong distinction between public and private?

Because they didn’t suffer from all the wars. Germany has the misfortune of being “Das Land der Mitte”; pan-European conflicts often took place on German territory, such as the Thirty Years War, followed by many others and ending with WWII. The separation between public and private can be seen as a protective mechanism.

After WWII, Germans had to learn how to deal with their feelings of sorrow, guilt and disaster and they did this by separating their feelings from the awful reality. Otherwise, they would...
have all had to commit collective suicide. Redemption was found in perfectionist behavior, absolute correctness to counteract their feelings of worthlessness in an environment of total chaos.

Another point to consider is the relative lack of social mobility of Germans. During the lengthy period in which small German states predominated, citizens had a stable social fabric and relative immobility. It also implied relationships didn’t have to be re-negotiated. Consequently, it was much easier to concentrate on common objectives or tasks. Take me, I know all the people in my town from birth, I don’t need to develop behavior for contact with strangers. This is different from people in Holland or the city-state Hamburg. Their commercial tradition forced them to talk to foreigners. Something quite different from a town in Bavaria or Baden-Württemburg where you almost always found your relationships in the local tavern.

What I have just told you is known as the history of mentalities, generated from historical research. It’s based on extreme hypothetical thinking that seems very logical and consistent but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s the absolute truth. If a real historian were to question me, he could tear my points apart. What I want to say is that they are meaningful and useful and we use them to help people in accepting cultural differences more easily.

Fascinating. Now, to end this interview, what would be your advice for a successful international cooperation? You need to, above all, accept diversity and work with it. Of course, there’s no “one and only” strategy for handling all international cooperation — the appropriate strategy depends mainly upon three factors, what I describe as a triangle. First there’s the situation, that is the task at hand or the context of the intercultural interaction. Then there’s the people involved and lastly their culture. Furthermore, if an intercultural exchange is to be fruitful for both sides, it must be based on mutual respect, even — and especially — when the other person does not live up to our own expectations and values.

In my seminars, I always strive to supply the participants with the tools for understanding why Germans behave the way they do, but also to give them an insight into how this is seen by an outsider to the culture, whose definition of what is normal and expected behavior is different. The easiest response to intercultural misunderstandings is avoidance; the most dangerous is to dominate the intercultural situation through, for example, economic power. The most challenging is to understand the differences and their causes. Without a doubt, this last option is slow, strenuous and difficult. But it is the only one that guarantees continuous, mutually satisfying relations between citizens of different nations.

Interviewed by Patrick Schmidt
In 1995, German psychologist Sylvia Schroll-Machl examined the reasons American-German projects often fail. A German multinational brought her in to evaluate how American and German engineers and researchers interacted. It became clear early on that problems were due, in large part, to misunderstanding each other’s way of problem-solving.

Schroll-Machl noticed that, at the outset of a project, Germans showed a greater need for detailed information and discussion. They tended to see the process from an engineering point of view, considering all of the difficulties that might arise, planning hypothetical solutions. The goal was to make sure everything would be done correctly, every element possible kept “under control”. Avoiding uncertainty means avoiding anxiety.

During the initial discussion-phase, the Germans expected all team members to share knowledge by sketching out their previous experiences. Reaching a consensus (which, they argued, permits the rapid implementation of any strategy) was essential. Schroll-Machl concluded that German decision-making concentrated on identifying problems, their history and components. Less emphasis was placed on results.

The action-oriented Americans found these discussions trying, often outright boring. The exchange of too much information felt like a waste of time, “paralysis through analysis”. No matter how good a plan is, the thinking goes, it will be modified along the way. The Americans didn’t speak up at this stage; by not saying anything, they hoped to speed up the process and get down to work. In their minds, problem-solving started out with a short brainstorming session to define goals and establish a series of approximate milestones.

In their minds, problem-solving started out with a short brainstorming session to define goals or mission. They would devise a series of approximate milestones. Efficiency and creativity were the watchwords. The Americans wanted to “keep all options open”, perceiving any project as a trial-and-error process. Schroll-Machl found their decision-making to be more open-ended, concentrating on a mission, a vision.

The Germans felt that with this sort of approach, the Americans were acting without fully understanding the problem: a cowboy mentality of shooting first and asking questions later.” On the other hand, the Americans fell obsession with plans, and sticking to them, meant being locked into a rigid pattern, with no flexibility during the implementation-phase.

Once a plan was established, German team members...
Problem-solving... — continued

were able to work relatively independently. Americans expected further group meetings and informal communication throughout. The Germans complained that the Americans asked about issues which had already been discussed at length.

Basic philosophies — “going on a mission” vs “minding the shop” — were only part of the equation, though. Americans are often given tasks for which they have not been thoroughly trained. Frequent job-rotation leads to a “learn-by-doing” attitude. With this attitude, they automatically communicates more with superiors, as well as with other team members. Germans are, on the whole, better trained. Mechanics, machinists and the like go through the famous “Dualsystem” but even engineers and executives receive a holistic mix of the practical and the theoretical. And, of course, the rules for doing business in Germany are stricter: whether it’s cars, cosmetics or cold cuts, there are norms, guidelines, documentation which one actually has to read.

Germans also assume decisions made at group meetings are binding. Americans see them as guidelines which change when the need arises or a better solution presents itself. And Americans expect these changes to take place; it’s part of the adventure!

Lastly, because Americans instinctively emphasize the relationship side when communicating, they have a tendency to share more of their personality with co-workers. Germans, who by nature wish to remain credible and objective when communicating, tend to maintain a more impersonal “work only” relationship with colleagues. This explains, in large part, why Americans complain that Germans don’t seem to be very open in conversing about a project during the implementation phase.

It is interesting that the nationality of the leader generated different internal dynamics. If the leader is German, the group is more like a coalition. The leader is both an expert and a mediator (expected to convince, not order) who tends to vote with the group. During the implementation phase, there’s little interaction with individual group members. “Distant” and “difficult to reach out to” was the way the Americans put it. The American leader defines goals, makes decisions, distributes tasks and makes sure they’re done. Motivation and coaching are part of the chain-of-command style.

Schroll-Machl’s study makes clear that if these differences are explained at the beginning, i.e. through intercultural training, chances for success increase enormously. However, if cultural awareness is not made a priority and the different communication styles are not understood, German-American projects often fail, causing both financial loss and hurt feelings.
I’m the creator and destroyer of worlds — and so are you!

by George Simons

How we construct culture & reality

We are forever talking to ourselves. Everything we create including our own identities is a result of this inner self-talk, this discourse. Talking to ourselves is our way of listening to the world about us and to ourselves, and what we make them to be, as well as what we make them. So, those things that we popularly call “culture,” in the broad sense of the word, arts, music, industry, all are products of the stories we tell ourselves.

I grew up in the USA. My father was a second-generation immigrant, which often meant trying to be “more American than the Americans” because it wasn’t okay to be “too immigrant.” My father would tell me again and again, “You can be anybody you want to be. It’s up to you.” “You have to take charge of your life.” “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Such maxims and counsel that were repeated over and over again and modeled in my family, during my education, among my peers, in the groups I belonged to, became my outlook, my world, the cultural discourse that still flows in me.

Cultural discourse takes the form of memories, stories in our heads and hearts that guide us about how to act, what to think. They shape our attitudes, provide our norms. They are the raw material of our culture. Even if, and especially if these pass into the background of our minds and we no longer explicitly hear them, the ideas and feelings contained in these memories still resonate with us and lead us on.

How do we construct a dynamic definition of culture?

My very favorite definition of culture doesn’t come from a text-book. It comes from a children’s book called Crow and Weasel by Barry Lopez. His is the most disarming definition of culture I’ve ever laid eyes on:

“The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. So, if stories come to you, care for them, and learn to give them away where they are needed.”

from the book ‘Crow and Weasel’

Lopez furnishes us with a powerful, very powerful statement about how and why we create and pass on culture. Stories are told and retold in such a way as to shape us, giving us a common memory, common values and behavioral, even moral imperatives “for our own good.” Seeing culture this way, as the ongoing tale of adaptation to our environment, challenges our more static definitions.

Once upon a time, an anthropologist pitched tent in Borneo. With an interpreter, he interviewed locals, looking for insight into the life and culture of the tribes native to the place. One day, questioning a tribal chieftain, the anthropologist couldn’t
I’m the creator...  
— continued

help noticing that the chieftain couldn’t take his eyes off a camp chair—a century ago these were simply canvas stretched on fold-up wooden frames. Finally, the anthropologist prompted the interpreter to ask about the chieftain’s fixation on the chair. The interpreter asked, “Why do you keep looking at the chair?” The chieftain replied quizically, “Why do you stack your firewood that way?”

Who creates?
In our times, realities, different from and deadly to each other, run rampant. Like it or not, we are challenged to understand our culture, other people’s culture, become familiar with the discourse that drives our behavior, our creativity, and could perhaps bring us together in new and different ways that allow us to peacefully cohabit the planet.

So we must ask, where do our realities, where does this “culture” come from? Well, since culture is a conversation, since it’s discourse, it’s coming from you and me! It’s coming from everybody within earshot, from every handheld device connected to ours. Discourse requires people. It’s going on all the time, and, whether we intentionally listen to it or not, it seduces us with its themes and memes.

Sometimes, probably more often than we think, we deliberately attempt to create realities for ourselves and others. We work on shaping a reality that serves our purposes through the stories we tell in social media, traditional media, conversations with others, as we rehearse and repeat these stories in our own heads. We are as much the creators of these discourses of culture as GM and Volkswagen are designers and manufacturers of automobiles. Like the family car, some discourses can be very helpful and humane. We may save somebody’s life by rushing them to the emergency ward. Other discourses can be quite ugly.

If you don’t have a use for something, you may not have a discourse for it. It may not even exist for you, or not exist in the way it exists for others. One of the critical tasks of living in a multicultural world is learning how to look at what we’ve never seen before. Things we’ve never “seen” before may not be just physical artifacts. They may be feelings and perceptions. They may be opinions, judgments. They may even be colors – not every culture sees or names colors in the same way.

We miss out on discourses that drive other people in ways they would never drive us, or in ways that might “drive us crazy!” These are not easy to discover, certainly not as simple as exploring puzzlement over a camp chair. Still, ask we must. We are embedded within a cultural discourse that we treat as real, but that is created by, as well as limited to what our own stories have to tell us.
Like a fast set of wheels, you can use your inner discourse to rob a bank or bankers can use their discourse to rob us. This quote from US academic Roger Peterson is quite telling:

“The collective memory [the discourse that we share] is systematically unfaithful to the past in order to satisfy the needs of the present. In other words, we attempt to address the present by reconstructing the past as if it always existed in the way we now adopt it.”

Through the stories we tell ourselves we produce a discourse. This discourse is the dynamic way we collectively create the cultural constructs that put our diverse realities, our cultures together. These constructs may be the bearers of mythology, fictional imagination, or as we all know too well, political propaganda. People compete with their stories to create the realities they want for themselves and for others. For the sake of consistency and credibility we try to present our new story as the true, right, and even eternal story.

**Enter the discourse of new media**

How do new media affect, construct this flow of discourse? It may be too early to tell, but certainly not too early to pay attention. For sure, they are being used both in traditional and novel ways.

New media have multiplied by a factor of Xx the sheer volume and range of participation within one generation. They can be the conveyors of the traditional discourse which we consider wisdom, discourses that certain of us would like to impart to the rest of us, philosophical and religious, or New Age ideals; at the same time they are also the tools of revolution and the conveyors of revolutionary values, often drawn from the same sources, but re-expressed and broadcast in nanoseconds in a volume that hitherto would have been deemed sorcery.

How do we sort out what is new and fresh from what is newly or freshly restated to fulfill a desire or to meet a contemporary challenge? The wish to “sort out” in some definitive way is perhaps a false aspiration, a question to which there is no answer, a cul-de-sac, whose only real alternative is ongoing reflection on our reality construction process. In new media, as in any other media that we use to create reality by discourse, these fresh tools are appropriated to change and introduce the realities that its authors, consciously or unconsciously, wish to disseminate.

We all know that the Internet allows us to create reality *ex nihilo*. Fake user names create “people,” as do avatars of “aliens.” We even build virtual worlds that allow people to accept a second and a third and perhaps an infinite number of lives and realities.
I’m the creator…  
— continued

If you can imagine it, say it, you can be it. Yea, “Ye are gods.” Like the Jehovah of Genesis, we say, “Let there be…” And behold, there it is! And, if we are the ones who said it, we are also likely to proclaim that it is good. Like Shiva of old, “I am the creator and destroyer of worlds” — and so are you!

Charlatans, con men, name changers, shapeshifters and princes donning pauper’s clothing are not new to our human story. But the possibility and the temptation to creation on a quasi-divine level, and the consequences for doing so have never been so available and up for grabs.

Even so, we like to imagine the world as somehow stable and static, at least in our desire to create something solid and lasting, even or perhaps especially in a slippery virtual environment. Our human minds and hearts, even in intangible media, are inclined to treat our creations, our culture as real, not constructed.

Meanwhile, how do you react to this fearful relativity of reality, or to the multiplicity of realities that new media have put at our disposal and which often invade our stability while we are trying to use them to shape it? What have you created as real for you? Are there real worlds, or only virtual ones…?

In my writing and my workshops, I often include pictures extracted from my own past. This is not an exercise in nostalgia or ego promotion, but a suggestion that you might also explore the images and sounds of the past to bring the sources of your cultural discourse into focus.

The above article is reflective of work I have done in creating the Cultural Detective: Self Discovery®, which offers some exercises to help you listen to your inner conversations and stories. These are only starting points.

Note about the Author: George Simons is Treasurer of SIETAR France. He will be offering a workshop at the coming SIETAR Europa Congress in Tallinn to help you do hands-on exploration of the challenges of cultural identity formation in individuals and groups, as we seek to succeed and survive as settlers in the new environment of media technology.
Of gays and lesbians...

by Dan MacLeod

Look at Vlad!

There he is, on the judo mat, or landing a fish bare-chested, or shooting a bear in the wilderness.

As interculturalists will tell you, he comes from a tradition of Cossacks and hearty peasant farmers seasoned by centuries of tsars and four generations of Soviet rule.

What looks ludicrous to the rest of the world is actually a solidly-crafted hero-image (accompanied by strong-arm political, judicial and police repression) and it’s tailor-made for Russian consumption. Men want to look like him and women want to sleep with him, at least according to Putin’s media strategists.

But it goes farther than that, is far more elemental. The same Americans who carry guns and think Obama is a socialist are able to forget their politics when they see Putin in his skin-diving suit on tv: wow, he’s just about the coolest world-leader they’ve ever seen!

Especially now that left-wing intellectuals from New York and Boston and San Francisco are talking about how athletes should boycott next year’s Sochi Games. Especially now that Obama went on tv and defended all the gays and lesbians and even the “trans-gendered” — boy, talk about weirdos!

Call it “pan-cultural” or “supra-cultural”, it all comes down to our inherent refusal to accept difference, whether in perception or the expression of that perception. Societal rejection of minorities is almost organic, ironically enough, be they from within the tribe or without.

It’s what intellectuals call “visceral”, meaning you think you’re going to be sick to your stomach. And it works every bit as well in Canada—just like Vlad in Moscow, Toronto mayor Rob Ford gains bushels of votes every time he refuses to attend his city’s Gay Pride Parade. And, just like with Vlad, the people who are outraged weren’t ever going to vote for him anyway.

When I was a kid in Boston in the ’70s, homosexuals were called fags, faggots, fruits and queers. Linguists point out that, the more menacing and/or “repulsive” a minority is, the more nicknames they have. (When I was a kid in Boston in
Of gays and lesbians ... — continued

As if being homosexual wasn’t bad enough, gays make a point of expressing their difference.

the ’70s, Italian-Americans were called guineas, wops, dago and spaghetti-benders. My mother is half-Italian; a lot of my relatives had accents.)

When I graduated high school, I travelled 625 miles north to play Junior hockey in Canada. In the spring of that first year in small-town northern New Brunswick, I found myself between an under-the-table job as a doorman in a bar and another under-the-table job as a waiter in a tavern.

I was playing guitar with a lot of the French crowd (Dalhousie-population 6,500 — and the surrounding region was about 65% francophone) and one of them spoke to a gay friend who had a spare room where I could live rent-free for a while. My reaction was to move my few belongings to his place, then try to make enough money so as to leave as soon as possible — I was incredibly uncomfortable at the idea of living with a fag.

Except I quickly came to like the guy, he was very interested in music, helped me record a few of the tunes I’d begun writing. And he was incredibly nice to my new girlfriend, was kind of like an older brother to both of us. I began to realize that I could get beyond my absolute repulsion (as a 19-year-old jock) at his idea of sex and...relate to him as himself, as a person. To the point that, the following summer when I had money and could have roomed elsewhere, I went back to his place and paid $35 a week.

It’s not like I’d never met homosexuals; I spent a year as a dishwasher, busboy and (finally) short-order cook at a restaurant in Harvard Square during my last year of high school. One of my two bosses was gay and so was a busboy I became friends with before I knew. Some of their gay friends came by the restaurant, even one of the first trans-gendered people in the city, probably, it being 1975. But lines were drawn and, in fact, it made for good relationships—the busboy and I smoked pot in the big fridge where we kept meat and eggs and dairy products. The lines that were drawn were simple: once we left the restaurant, we lived in separate worlds.

Living at Michel’s was different, I was sleeping in the same house as a homosexual. Luckily, his boyfriends were in far-off Montreal and he slept alone—I didn’t have to think about what those guys actually did because he wasn’t doing it. What’s funny is it’s only now, writing about it, that I realize how tolerant he was of me. I knew he was doing me a tremendous favor but I would have been disgusted had he walked around hugging and kissing his boyfriend all day...the way my girlfriend and I did.
All that to say it’s a gradual process of proximity. At Université de Moncton, I studied Music and French Lit, both of which have a higher proportion of gay men than, say, Business Administration. When I ran the student paper, my best two writers were gay. (I also wound up sleeping with a lesbian, although neither she nor I knew she was a lesbian at the time—more about her in a minute.)

One of those gay writers was from Montreal and, when I moved there do a Composition degree two years later, he talked his landlady into giving me a really cheap basement apartment. And, since I didn’t have furniture, I spent the year doing harmony exercises on his dining-room table while witnessing a carousel of gay lovers come and go, a few tear-filled, drama-queen scenes, even flowers being delivered by way of apology...

The strangest thing was that, after a while, I hardly even noticed it; I was too busy trying to write music.

... 

What I think?

I think any minority which lives oppression will reach out to ward others who need help. Part of it is the need to make allies in a world of ignorance and anonymous “enemies”. Part is the fact that, a marginal myself, I was perceived as a kindred spirit and, in fact, was...am. Familiarity breeds comprehension, not contempt.

A few years ago I went back to Moncton to write a report on French-English relations. One of the first people I called was that lesbian I mentioned earlier, Johanne. We’d played music together but it had been a dozen years since we’d seen each other. She’d gone on to become a tv host and now she was studying law.

I interviewed her over lunch in a restaurant we’d gone to as students, then we went back to her house. Where I met another law student, a 19-year-old, who immediately told me, when Johanne went to the kitchen for beers, “By the way, I’m not a lesbian...”

Johanne broke out the guitars then, we played songs we’d sung together once upon a time. She asked if I was still playing for money, or at all. I said my guitar had been stolen a couple of years before. She gave me her spare guitar. And, the next day, she picked me up at my motel and drove me to the train station.

Ties that bind.
Book Review
Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communications
Paradigms, Principles and Practices - Second edition
by Milton J. Bennett
U.S. $ 25, 334 pages
Published by Intercultural Press

In his new book, Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communications, Milton Bennett sets himself the ambitious goal of conveying the essence of intercultural theory. It is a thought-provoking compendium of 13 texts, providing a concise and coherent overview. Bennett's profound love for intercultural issues comes through clearly in this updated second edition. Six chapters are from his own writings and the others are from time-tested classics that every interculturalist should know.

As with the first edition 15 years ago, he dissects intercultural communication from the early days of relativism to the constructivist nature of the field today. What's different are the first five chapters, major additions that take into account today's fast-evolving multicultural societies and reconcile the basic principles of intercultural communication with current applications in education and business.

Like his DMIS model, he sequences the texts in terms of complexity, ensuring that the reader progressively attains the level of competent understanding. What I enjoyed most was Bennett's first chapter, A Constructivist Frame for Intercultural Communication. Drawing from the theories of Kelly, Brown and von Foerster, he writes that we don't perceive events directly; our experiences are, instead, built through templates, a set of categories with which we organize our perception.

Striving to fully understand the constructivist approach, I read this chapter again and again. All the while, as constructivist theory states, my mind was constructing new templates which I then used to arrange and widen my awareness. Or, to put it in another way, I became increasingly sensitive to the constructive explanation of intercultural relationships. I couldn't help but feel the very real joy of learning, the "ecstasy" of finally comprehending!

Bennett distinctly points out that obtaining intellectual understanding is not in an end in itself; its purpose is to generate an alternative experience, that of becoming sensitive to the feeling of appropriateness that accompanies a new template. This intuitive grasp provides a deeper intercultural experience for trainers, who can then facilitate others in acquiring their own experiences.

Without condescension or false complexity, he concludes the chapter eloquently. "Then, and only then, can we truly consider ourselves capable of exercising and teaching intercultural competence."

In his second chapter, Intercultural Epistemology and Paradigmatic Confusion, he develops his leitmotiv, "coherent theory generates powerful practice". This is where Bennett's intellectual brilliance shines, as he systematically describes the epistemological assumptions of the positivist, relativist and constructivist paradigms, and what their implications mean for intercultural theory.
Book Review

‘Basic Concepts...’ continued

Briefly, the positivist treats culture as having a static existence, which can be observed objectively. The relativist thinks of culture as a closed system with a set of roles and rules used as a frame of reference in understanding other cultures. And the constructivist sees culture as built on social foundations necessitating a dialectic “other perspective”.

A stickler for coherent, logical analysis, Bennett points out that if the paradigm underlying a practice is different than that of the claimed outcome, the resulting incoherence weakens the practice and harms the overall credibility of the field. Bennett makes his point with the popular iceberg metaphor many practitioners use to describe culture.

Although the vast majority of intercultural facilitators understand culture as a dynamic process, generating artifacts and patterns of behavior, many still insist on comparing culture to the static iceberg, a positivist notion. Students are told that what we see is the tip of the iceberg. Ninety percent of the culture lies beneath the surface, where invisible assumptions and values are waiting to surprise and trap the unsuspecting foreign sojourner.

It’s a clever comparison and provokes lively images of a Titanic-like disaster but it’s essentially transmitting the wrong message. One comes away with the idea that culture is a ‘thing’, a stationary object. Yet if one accepts the constructivist approach, that culture is a dialectic process, coordinating meanings and actions, then the positivist iceberg contradicts the inherently complex nature of culture.

Other parts of the book add new perspectives, such as Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication, an excellent primer on the ins and outs of intercultural education by LaRay M. Barna. Taking a constructivist perspective, the author sees “assumption of similarity” as the most difficult obstacle to overcome when people of different backgrounds interact. Effective intercultural relations come from the ability to see and construe relevant cultural differences.

What struck throughout was Bennett’s overwhelming desire to provide selective writings which build a coherent framework. Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication is an exacting work that challenges our thoughts and inclinations. Illuminating the subject in unexpected ways, it develops the mind and serves to provide a new view of things through renovated eyes.

Milton Bennett is an educator (from the Latin educatio: to bring up). A groomer of talent, one who has the gift to impart a deeper understanding of things and supplies the tools with which to increase that understanding. Explaining without being heavy-handed, exposing without imposing, his work brings the mind to full flower and offers readers fulfillment they might not find otherwise. The book is demanding but, at the same time, of lasting substance. An outstanding achievement.

Reviewed by Patrick Schmidt
Key Note Speakers

H.E. Katalyn Bogyay, President of the General Council, UNESCO
Prof Carolyn Cooper, University of the West Indies, Jamaica
Dr Frank Salter, University of Sydney Australia
Prof Robert Schreiter, Catholic Theological Union, USA
Dr Janiel Gautier, Laval University, Québec, Canada
Dr Phuong Mai Nguyen, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

The congress programme is divided into four tracks to give visibility to cutting-edge issues and ensure in-depth analysis of community and identity, interconnectivity, constructing culture and working virtually.

In addition to standard presentations, the exciting film festival and workshops, there will be live streaming of TED-style presentations.

With an eye on strengthening this and future generation of interculturalists, there will be the usual pre-congress workshops and the newly added “How to” sessions to stimulate the development of knowledge and skills in the use of modern technology and the application of intercultural learning.

The congress will provide several opportunities for engaging the local Estonia culture and will end with the usual Gala-Dinner and launch of an Awards programme for excellence in the intercultural field. It promises to be superb and should not be missed!

Register at: http://www.sietareu.org/tallinn_register_form/index.php
Travel tips and accommodations: http://sietareu.org/congress2013/plan-your-trip

www.sietareu.org
office@sietar-europa.org
Events, workshops, congresses

Tallinn, Estonia
18-21 September, 2013
‘Global Reach, Local Touch’ is the theme of the upcoming SIETAR Europa congress. It will be a ‘glocal’ event, using the latest technology with live presentations from partner organisations across the globe, via Twitter, Facebook, etc. There will be plenary sessions, conferences as well as TED-style presentations and workshops. More information at: http://www.sietareuropacongress.org

Sienna, Italy
7-9 October, 2013
Intercultural Competence: Key to the New Multicultural Societies of the Globalized World This conference engages educators and experts in examining intercultural competence development and civic engagement. For those in intercultural education, language instruction, intercultural communication and training, cross-cultural psychology. More information at http://www.ticfie.com/intercultural-horizons/

Milan, Italy
13-26 November, 2013

Taufkirchen Vils (near Munich), Germany
16-21 October, 2013
The Artistry of Personal Leadership Learn to deepen your Personal Leadership practice. The seminar is geared towards trainers, facilitators and consultants working in the areas of intercultural communication, organizational development, or change management who are interested in learning a new tool for personal and professional effectiveness Discount for SIETAR members. More information at: http://www.pl-seminars.com/documents/PLToF-Germany2013.pdf

All over Europe
8 consecutive Monday evenings, starting Sept. 23, 2013
Virtual Facilitation Skills training programme Learn how to design and facilitate interactive online training sessions with this ICF and BCC accredited programme. SIETAR members enjoy a discount! Find out more on www.virtualteamtraining.net/virtual-facilitation-skills/

Bath, U.K.
30 Sept. - 4 Oct., 2-6 Dec. 2013
Developing Intercultural Training Skills This 5-day course is for experienced trainers in language and management training, who want to further develop their skills in course design and delivery or integrate cross-cultural topics into their current courses. The facilitators are Adrian Pilbeam and Phil O’Connor. More information at www.lts-training.com/ICTTcourse.htm

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