

## On Achieving Multicultural Balance

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For a child, the world can seem so uncomplicated. We are each born into a particular context, innocent and unadorned. Life in its early stages is made up of meeting personal needs—eating, sleeping, exploring, communicating, etc. The young child is surrounded by givens—people and things in the environment. With the passage of time and events, children adjust and adapt their behaviors. They learn a spoken (and later, a written) language for the expression and communication of ideas and feelings. Children confront and respond to a range of events and circumstances, gradually evolving a sense of self—who they feel they are in relation to the flux of experience about them. What children think and how they behave is greatly influenced by the context into which they were born as well as the particular circumstances that make up their experiences.

In today's classrooms it is not at all unusual to have students from differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds enrolled. Children may walk into the same classroom. There may be more uniform learning expectations. However, the challenge for teaching must take into account cultural differences—the dynamics of how students have learned to deal with their experiences.

As I am using the term *culture*, I am referring to the totality of ways of living established by a group (patterns, attitudes, and values) which are then transmitted from one generation or group to another. We learn within a cultural tradition. One's view of oneself (self-image) is inextricably linked with one's view of culture.

Having words that identify a particular phenomenon does not necessarily lead to understanding of that phenomenon. Much has been written using the term *culture*. Nevertheless, the term does not lend itself to precise or fixed definition even when referring to a specific group or geographical area. For purposes of discussion or analysis, it is possible to refer to a group culture based upon shared factors of time or space or explicitly demonstrated values. However, within each cultural group these are individuals with distinctive differences. Even between different cultural groups there are often areas of overlapping and similarities.

In our present time, we are becoming increasingly aware of cultural differences as well as similarities. One's culture serves as an *organizing framework* for making sense of the world. A problem, of course, is that individuals with differing cultural orientations must interact, many times with languages, meanings, and values stemming from different perspectives and presuppositions. The result is a kind of cultural cacophony. The present crisis is one in which individuals in multicultural communities become confused and defensive in seeking the resolution of differences. We have become painfully aware that powerlessness in the face of cultural barriers leads to many problems. The imposition of cultural mandates by one group upon another (cultural imperialism) results in responses of frustration and alienation.

So long as cultural groups have remained contained and isolated with little or no communication outside the groups, there has been minimal cultural conflict. Once cultural groups have developed communications and commerce outside their own boundaries there have been both rewards and new challenges. Rewards have been realized as a result of new understandings and insights, challenges have come about as a result of having to reconcile differences.

Our present time has been characterized as a digital age. With the advent of computers, we are experiencing a dramatic and, sometimes, traumatic shift in the speed, quantity, and quality of information exchange. The media and messages of our time are shaping and restructuring patterns of social, economic, political, and aesthetic interdependence. Fifty years ago, references were being made to a *military-industrial complex*. In today's world, references are being made to a *media-industrial complex* shaping our lives. These far reaching developments are creating havoc with previous systems and patterns for developing and maintaining cultural unity and maintaining a sense of security within one's culture.

Blithely, we make reference to a *multicultural community* within a *global village*. The development of cross-cultural understandings is requisite for the resolution of differences and the avoidance of misunderstandings. Somehow, patterns of thought and ideas of acceptable behavior for one culture need to be reconciled with thought and behavior acceptable to another. In the *long run* the resolutions we seek must balance outside factors with an inner sense for who we are. Our awareness of others, our adherence to cultural values and expectations must be balanced with personal integrity. Life involves an ongoing effort in which we locate ourselves at a crossroad of an ever-changing here and now.

Intelligent action requires the resolution of differences in ways that transcend and expand the limits of individual cultures. Transcending is not discarding, nor is it denying. It should not be a matter of one point of view dominating or removing another; it is not a *win-lose* situation. On the one hand, a culture provides means for rationalizing our experience, on the other, these same means can become traps in that they structure our perceptions and reactions in ways that can limit capacities for grasping new possibilities and responding to circumstances not previously accounted for in that culture's framework. The *unexpected* may go unnoticed or may be rejected because it does not fit our prior expectations. Time and again, we have seen how expected, established paradigms of one culture are seen as being immutable even when confronted with new and sometimes contradictory evidence. In the sciences as well as the arts one can cite examples of stubborn refusals to accept or assimilate ideas that run counter to existing paradigms. Of course, it does not follow that new or different ideas that alter or extend existing paradigms are necessarily an improvement. *Newer* or *different* are not necessarily better.

Returning to the child born into a cultural context, each individual learns to adjust and adapt to that context. This is an ongoing and dynamic process in that individuals act and react to their world. At a very basic level, they act to meet basic physical needs (food, clothing, shelter, security, etc.); also, people strive to meet needs for psychological and social stability or enhancement.

The condition of striving for *balance* has long fascinated physical and social scientists, especially as it applies in human affairs. Balance, as I am using the term, is not referring to balancing forces that are stable and unchanging. Rather, my interest is in a more dynamic and fluid state in which the balancing forces are themselves changing and in tension. Hence, being *in balance* requires ongoing modifications and shifting pressures in order to sustain a state of equilibrium. For humans, dynamic balance or equilibrium is a condition that we seek to maintain. Being alive involves a continuing effort to maintain homeostasis, a condition of physiological and psychological balance maintained by coordinated functioning of various parts of our body. For example, balancing mechanisms are in place to help us maintain a particular body temperature or heart rate. Also, there are delicate balances involving secretions of the endocrine glands. Marvelous and intricate mechanisms are in place to help keep things in balance. Yet, ironically, the mechanisms need to be in tension (slightly *out-of-balance*, with pressures moving *to and fro*). As an example, our ability to stand upright or move about is dependent upon the dynamics of balance. Were we to achieve a fixed and unchanging state of equilibrium, we would doubtless fall over.

All of life's experiences involve tensions and resolutions of tension. The artist and teacher, Hans Hofmann made reference to *push and pull*, the expanding and contracting forces operating in visual expression. In the visual arts, we seek the creation of visual form where meaning and structure are in *tension* within the work as well as between the form created and the viewer. Powerful works resonate as we find particular combinations and resolutions that inform and excite us. Great works invite our coming back for such engagements because the dynamics provide a rich store of perceptual dynamics. The more we look, the more we can discover and realize. Hofmann (1967) observed,

The function of *push* and *pull* in respect to form contains the secret of Michelangelo's monumentality or Rembrandt's universality. At the end of his life and at the height of his capacity, Cezanne understood color as a force of *push* and *pull*. In his pictures he created an enormous sense of volume, breathing, pulsating, expanding, contrasting through his use of color. (p. 45)

Beyond the visual dynamics in painting or sculpture, Hofmann extended his metaphor: "The tension of movement and counter-movement, achieved through plastic order and unity, parallels the artist's life experience and his artistic and human discipline" (p. 67). In the successful artistic encounter, the *push-pull* resolution conveys a sense of fitting; it's *just right*. This is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi referred to as *optimal experience*. We feel that we are in control. There is a sense of exhilaration. He goes on to observe,

contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times—although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3)

It seems to me that these have much to do with how we think about educating students in a multi-cultural context. Each person seeks his or her own *balance* in the world. This state, however, is always dynamic in that an individual deals with tensions (the known and unknown, part and whole, self and other, being and becoming) and seeks resolution of these tensions. We do the best that we can in making sense of our lives. Each culture provides its orientation. Yet, at each point of resolution there are new factors, new entrances, new circumstances calling for some readjustment, some reappraisal in accommodating, balancing, and creating new meanings to meet these new conditions.

Does this place us in a relative position in which we are faced with a constant state of ambiguity where there are no fixed truths and anything goes? This is not quite the case. We act using our existing knowledge and traditions. Our culture provides a framework as well as directions essential for change. At any given moment, we participate in dealing with an evolving reality. Each of us must come to the realization that we have certain responsibilities and opportunities. There are the *pushes* and *pulls* of the known and unknown, the expected and unexpected. Artist and art need to be understood as part of every culture. Our present situation should be seen as inaugurating a new era of freedom and responsibility. If we are freed of the guilt or necessity for arriving at singular, all encompassing, and fixed answers, we can come to the satisfactions of working things through to the best, most informed, most satisfying outcomes. Gone is the feeling that doing away with one style or ideology is a prerequisite for the initiation of another.

At moments of creation or realization we can achieve a new balance point that entails knowing specific qualities or values of a culture and transcending these limits through involvement with new alternatives and ideas. From this perspective, creating and responding to art contributes to honoring, enjoying, and shaping cultural values. It is part of maintaining the balance that brings about greater enjoyment and fulfillment as to what life is about.

## References

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- Hofmann, H. (1967). *Search for the real*. Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press.