



Speaking of Difference: Reflections on the Possibility of Culturally Competent Conversation*

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But once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful, living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky! ... All companionship can consist only in the strengthening of two neighboring solitudes.

--- Rainer Maria Rilke

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There seem to be at least two schools of thought, two separate realms of rhetoric whenever well-intentioned discussions of multicultural issues emerge. One school opts for sameness and emphasizes commonalities. "I don't see color." "We're all alike." "Cut the skin and we all bleed red." "There's only one race -- the human race." "Why do some people insist on hyphenated identities -- can't we all just be Americans?"

The other end of the rhetorical spectrum weighs in on issues of difference and emphasizes the distance between us. "If you don't see color, you don't see me." "As long as there's racism, we have to talk about race." "My race is who I am." "I am both Asian and American." "Until you acknowledge my difference from you, you can never know me."

Our attempts to have honest and courageous conversations on topics of difference often become polarized by these two worldviews. We seem to be able to talk forever without getting anywhere. If we define cultural competence as the ability to form authentic relationships across our differences, then a beginning point in the journey toward cultural competence would surely require us to find a way to talk productively with one another about issues of race, culture, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and the many other dimensions of difference.

There is shallowness in the rhetoric that divides us, whether from the purveyors of sameness or from the champions of difference. This shallowness is born from our unreflective certainty, each of us steeped in images of our own rightness, blind to the nuance and complexity of our actual lived experience of both difference and connection.

There are no easy answers or magic elixirs for the kind of growth that would allow us greater ease, competence, and effectiveness in the multicultural conversation. Neither are there any quick fixes for transforming our schools to be more user-friendly for the diverse people who inhabit these spaces.

The "river of diversity and healing" that serves as the central metaphor in my book, We Can't Teach What We Don't Know, is a long river of learning, whereupon, if we are fortunate and strong, we can encounter one another in the clear reflection of shared honesty, eyes wide open to both our infinite oneness as well as our equally unfathomable difference. Both sides of the rhetorical polarity are true. At times I can know you and connect with you in such a deep commonality that it may seem as though there is no difference between us as we swim together in the flow of our human beingness. Yet, at other times, if I am awake and conscious of you in your full reality, I am pierced by the otherness, which I can never fully know and certainly never be.

Both are true, and herein exists the problem with any simplistic rhetoric of difference. We are forever and inextricably one and united in our humanness, and at the same time unavoidably and irreconcilably other. I am simultaneously you and not-you, as you are both me and not-me. Together we are the dance of unity and diversity. With the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, perhaps the best we can do for and with each other is to respectfully stand guard at the door of one another's solitude, defending and honoring the otherness of the other, while always ready to join as one when we emerge from this solitude to meet on the threshold of our separate realities.

This is the appropriate context in which to speak of cultural competence and authentic relationship across our differences. This place of meeting, which I refer to as "la tierra transformativa", is a place of deep respect for differences and equally intentional openness to the possibility of connection. It is a place where neither of us loses anything of value to us. We are only asked to sacrifice our proprietary assumptions of our own rightness and our unreflective grip on our own certainty. It is a place of ambiguity as well as certainty, of solitude as well as community, and a place of knowing as well as never-knowing.

Those of us who would hope to lead others to this place must ourselves have spent some time there, facing our own issues of sameness and difference. We must have made a home for ourselves in the space of our own identity and solitude, and emerged to meet the other (student, parent, colleague) in full honesty, yielding our arrogance in the spirit of humility and real connection.

This dissolution of the rhetorical either-or-dichotomy of sameness and difference is the key to dissolving that other classroom conundrum, the achievement gap. Without clear connection and conversation across differences, we have little hope of building the respectful relationships upon which equitable learning depends.

We earn our way to cultural competence one rapid at a time, feeling the full force of the river, giving ourselves to its power, and discovering our way in its flow. It is a life-long adventure worthy of our full attention. For the sake of the richly diverse children, families, communities, and schools that we serve, it is imperative that some of us in the vocation of education find our way to this place of authentic engagement within and across our differences. Testing will surely never take us there, but love might.