

SPECIAL SECTION--
MULTICULTURAL
TEACHING AND LEARNING

BUILDING COMMUNITY OUT OF DIVERSITY

BY LOURDES E. MORALES-GUDMUNDSSON

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A white preacher was invited to speak at a black church and desperately wanted to make a good first impression. He noticed that the ushers, both men and women, were neatly dressed in white and wore white gloves.

With this in mind, he stood up, smiled at the black congregation, and said: "Everyone looks so nice this morning. White is my favorite color."

This well-intentioned preacher faced a challenge all of us must confront at one time or another: dealing with those who are different from us. Have you ever sat in a committee and found yourself annoyed by someone because he didn't think like you? Or remember when you were young. If a new student possessed qualities others admired or aspired to, the kids gawked in amazement. If not, he or she was mocked. People who are different from us tend to be viewed as somehow deficient just because they're *not* like us. We assume that we are the norm, and they are the exception, the aberration. One is reminded of that wonderfully chauvinistic song in *My Fair Lady* when Mr. Higgins laments, "Why can't a woman be more like a man!"

Reading the Book of Genesis helps us discover that diversity is God-ordained! The first biblical reference to diversity occurs in the first chapter: And God said, "Let there be light." We are told that the light was separated from the darkness. Prior to Creation, everything was the same—nothing was distinguishable. Suddenly, God broke into that sea of sameness and declared "diversity." Diversity is what Creation is all about. When we get to the end of the first chapter, the Trinity in their hunger for giving of Themselves decided to make creatures that would be Their very image. "So God created man: male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:27). Diversity, then, is a divine gift, not only in our male and female human condition, but also in our personalities and viewpoints, our talents and gifts. Diversity is the normal state of things. It's the way God meant all His creation to be.

Beyond Diversity to Cooperation

But there was also a clear intention of complementarity in the creation of all things: Sky was to complement the earth, and earth the sea. All things diverse were to cooperate through their unique contribution to make a whole community. There is no truth more fundamental than this as we read that first chapter of Genesis.

Science is beginning to catch up with this Genesis view of the same and the different. Yale University biologist Jonathan Marks says: "Race has no basic biological reality. The human species simply doesn't come packaged that way."¹ In other words, race is not a valid way of dividing human beings, according to Marks and a majority of biologists and anthropologists, drawing from an increasing body of evidence that has been accumulating since the 1970s. Race is a social, cultural, and political concept, not a biological reality. Luigi Cavalli-Sforza, professor of genetics at Stanford University, puts it this way: "The characteristics that we see with the naked eye that help us to distinguish individuals from different continents are, in reality, skin-deep. Whenever we look under the veneer, we find that the differences that seem so conspicuous to us are really trivial."²

This assertion brings to mind, in a new light, that text that declares that God made of one blood all the nations of the earth (Acts 17:26). And yet, the wars that are being waged because of intolerance of differences are spilling brotherly and sisterly blood all over the world. Paul's radical statement in the face of exclusivist Greek philosophy points to the fundamental inclusivity of

the Christian gospel. If the gospel we preach is inclusive, this should say something about the people who preach it.

A Great Experiment—At Risk?

The United States was founded on Christian principles that have made it open to all people, particularly "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."³ The U.S. has a unique history because it has taken on an experiment that has failed miserably in other nations. A look at Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia or even the recent flare-ups between Israelis and Palestinians are ever-present reminders of how ancient and deeply rooted are the hatreds between those perceived as different.

But is this great experiment in danger of failing now as we approach the 21st century and draw ever nearer to the coming of our Lord? And, more importantly, are we as religious people following the beat of a different drummer, or are we unwittingly following the rhythm of the times? It seems to me that Adventism is at a new crossroads: the intersection where diversity and unity meet. It is time for the church, individually and corporately, to learn strategies that will take us beyond mere tolerance of differences to a true respect for them. Worldwide, this is the only hope for unity.

What is diversity, and how does it relate to unity? Diversity is an international

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festival of nations and a variety of foods from around the world. But it isn't *just* that—and merely celebrating our diversity will not bring true unity. Diversity is people of different cultures, races, and classes, coexisting—but that isn't unity, either. Unity assumes that I have looked at and listened so carefully to what is different from me that I now understand what is there. I also understand what I have in common with what I once thought was so different from me. Until we have sat down to not only talk but also to *listen* to one another, *unity* will remain a beautiful but useless word.

I think many Americans are beginning to understand this. For American Adventists, it is not a matter of whether we should participate in earthly discussions about getting along with people who don't look and talk and act and believe as we do—it is, it seems to me, rather an inevitable matter of *when* we do so. Many Americans are being proactive about issues of diversity and community. Cities across the nation are coming to grips, both reactively and proactively, with these issues. Shouldn't Seventh-day Adventists be doing the same? Indeed, plans are in the making for a summit on racism within the North American church.

This is heartening news, for we too must learn to listen to each other as a key to understanding.

That such understanding is much needed became evident to me in the

July 25, 1996, issue of the *Adventist Review*. Calvin Rock, in his question-and-answer column, responded to a writer who identified himself as a white male who was not angry with anybody, but sincerely wanted to know why we had to give so much attention to black Americans and have a Black History Month, and so forth. Why, he asked, didn't they just fit in and work hard like all the rest of us and pull their weight?

That anybody in the 1990s would pose such a question should once again remind us of how much work is left to do within our church, how much listening and learning is needed. Dr. Rock, in his inimitably kind, tactful, and intelligent manner, reminded the questioner of historical and economic realities that make and will always make the African-American a unique minority. And not just African-Americans. In Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, there are museums documenting the horrors of the Holocaust to keep us from forgetting what can happen when we don't talk to one another or when, talking, we don't listen.

Looking at the Issues

To help us understand the challenges of creating community out of our diversity, the following situations (based on true stories) illustrate some of the issues involved.⁴

1. An East Indian woman has assumed the chairmanship

of a college biology department. The members of her department notice that she is wearing a sari, which seems quaint to them. But after the end of the first quarter, they begin to feel uncomfortable and resentful about her insistence on choosing non-mainstream dress.

2. A woman professor with a newly acquired doctorate is struggling to get her colleagues to address her by her title. She decides to speak to each one individually and ask, "How do you want me to address you?" Once she has determined what everyone else wants from her, she feels she can ask them to address her as she chooses.

3. A diverse group of Japanese—professionals and non-professionals, young people and retirees—are touring Hawaii. The Hawaiians separate the Japanese in groups according to who wants to go to different tourist sites on the islands. They organize the groups by assigning them different colored caps—the yellows to Diamondhead, the greens to Pearl Harbor, and so forth. What would have seemed strange to a similar group of American university professors, lawyers, doctors, and the like was perfectly comfortable for people from a culture where fitting into the group is important.

The Core of Diversity

These situations deal with tolerance of differences and the ability to respect the cultural habits of others. In fact, at the core of diversity lies the fundamental question of whether we are willing

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to accept behaviors and values that are different from our own. And if we are willing, how can we educate ourselves to achieve that worthy goal?

It seems to me that understanding our own cultural habits of thinking will help us see more clearly how we can honor those of other groups. Since I am American, I contrast my culture with that of other countries. First, it is important to acknowledge that American culture has very strongly ingrained characteristics that separate it even from its cultural antecedents in England. U.S. culture is unique. In many ways, the nation's greatness can be attributed to the characteristics of that culture. Yet, like other world cultures, the virtues of a culture can also be the source of its most unfortunate vices. Acknowledging this from the outset provides the perspective needed to build community out of diversity. Here are the principal areas in which "mainstream" American culture differs from most other cultures:⁵

Communication

Americans value direct communication. They associate honesty with forthrightness of speech. Being explicit about what one means is highly valued. In other cultures, subtlety and

indirect communication are seen as communicating respect. It is easy to see how mainstream Americans might interpret implicit modes of communication as a sign of dishonesty or even subterfuge. What's for one a sign of courtesy, for the other is a motive for suspicion.

Eye contact is another example of Americans' need for direct communication. Latinos, for example, consider direct eye contact between a student and a teacher as a lack of respect by the student. When disciplining Latino children, American teachers often insist on their looking the adult "straight in the eye" as an indication that the child is listening—but the child will lower his or her head as a sign of respect.

Time

Time for Americans is like capital—it is something you possess and use as a form of investment. If you invest it wisely, you will prosper; if not, you will suffer the consequences. Time is linear and quantifiable in exact terms. In other cultures, time is relative and at the service of human beings, rather than the other way around. When time is at the service of humans, people need not feel pressured by time limits, a concept that is nearly intolerable to Americans, who relate tardiness to a defective moral character. The relationship between morality and the use of time

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is fundamental to mainstream American thinking.

Individuality

From an American perspective, one of the most basic concepts of human existence is each person's inalienable right to individual freedom and accomplishment. This grows out of the Protestant understanding of individual responsibility in personal salvation. Americans admire the self-reliant, self-made person who overcomes obstacles to achieve success. Success, in turn, is measured by the individual's ability to earn money (ideally by dint of hard, honest labor, and clever money management) or to acquire high levels of education. On the other hand, many other cultures encourage

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commitment to the group and subordination of the individual to the whole. Success in these contexts is measured in terms of the individual's willingness and ability to bring honor and good repute to the group.

Egalitarian Versus Hierarchical

Whereas most other cultures are established on the assumption that some kind of hierarchy is necessary for the management and survival of the group, American culture insists, at least conceptually, in the equal rights of every individual. Even though there are American heroes who stand out for their valor and achievements, such men are also valued for their preservation of equality: Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. exemplify this cultural value.

Locus of Control

Since individual rights are central to the American value system, this leads to a strongly entrenched belief that the individual has control over his or her destiny. Many other cultural value systems place the locus of control outside the individual, usually in some divine entity. In Latino culture, that external source of control is the Christian God. Expressions such as "Si Dios quiere" ("If God wills it") carry a strong suggestion that it is God who manages human life, not the human will. This belief in an external center of control creates a kind of passive fatalism that contrasts with the active role of the individual in molding destiny.

Confrontation Versus Harmony

In solving conflict, Americans prefer

direct confrontation to oblique strategies that preserve harmony. Other cultures favor non-confrontational ways of dealing with conflict. Even if the end product is war, the actual conversational mode will involve indirect references to conflicting positions.

Task Orientation Versus Relationships

It is acceptable within the American value system to telephone a person and immediately begin to discuss the business at hand. In other cultures, the caller is required to nurture the relationship first by asking about the individual's health and family before addressing matters of business.

Content Versus Context

Americans tend to separate the person from the task to such an extent that the person becomes less important than the content of the message. In other cultures, the message is always taken within a context of that person's whole self—the messenger and the message are never separated.

Space

Interrelated with Americans' valuing of the individual is the strong sense of private space that sets them apart from other cultures. This is evident in Americans' tendency to stand physically apart from those to whom they speak. In other cultures, maintaining physical distance can convey anything from contempt to an unwillingness to communicate.

An analysis of these elements of American culture makes it clear that there is more than one way to perceive and organize human experience. It should also teach us that there is much for us to learn from others—as much as there is for others to learn from us. A further analysis of the values Americans hold dear will also reveal that not all Americans are allowed to enjoy the rights and privileges of individual freedom, egalitarian treatment, and internal control of their destiny. American women and children (regardless of ethnicity) continue to be the principal butt of physical and sexual abuse because they are not perceived to have the right to their own bodies and to individual freedoms. In fact, the

terminology applied to those groups who are assumed not to have access to the rights and privileges assigned to the American white male are called "minorities." The term is not so much a reference to quantity (less versus more) as to quality (privilege versus non-privilege). The term *diversity* assumes that there is a norm to which we compare people. People who are "diverse" (diverted from the acceptable path) do not fit that norm.

If it is true that there is a fixed norm by which groups of people are judged, it is important to understand that norm and find ways of bringing more possibilities of being and doing to it so that the norm makes room for more kinds of human experience.

Diversity—Part of Being Human

This review of American cultural values can serve as a point of departure for talking and listening to one another as the diverse members of the Adventist Church family, as well as citizens of a diverse

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nation and world. The challenge is to see diversity and community as part of being human, not as the obsession of minority groups with a vested interest in seeing “their agenda” come to the table. Since getting along is a human problem, the responsibility for initiating dialogue begins with *me*—no matter what my ethnicity or gender or physical ability.

One final point. True respect for difference is not the same as missionary outreach. Adventists have a strong tradition of mission service that grows out of our passion for proselytizing. Historically, we have shared our religion as well as the cultural values that sustain it. As beneficial as the service model has been, it cannot replace the talking and listening that it will require for people of all “diverse” kinds to truly respect one another. Service has always been at its best when the server respected the served. Nor can a zeal for changing what we perceive to be primitive or unacceptable customs replace efforts to understand where these habits of

being and doing come from. Respect means that I entertain the possibility at all times that I can learn something from those I serve or who don’t look and think and act as I do. Respect that grows out of love is our challenge if we are to draw community out of our diversity.

Moving From Diversity to Community


Learning to move from diversity to community is not an event; it is a process calling for us to apply our highest Christian virtues. My brother had just given a seminar on diversity in Chicago when a delighted participant came up to congratulate him on his presentation. She then tried to impress him with how culturally sensitive she really was: “Dr. Morales, I want you to know that I am very sensitive to diversity. I LOVE Mexican food.” She stopped and thought a minute, then declared: “In fact, my maid is Mexican!”

Taken aback by her guileless sincerity, my brother simply answered: “Well, you know, this is a good beginning. Just keep

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up the good work!” All of us are at different stages in this process of respectful understanding, and we all need to be patient with one another as we travel this pathway together.

As Christians, we must listen and learn from what we hear and see. It will be a multicultural and diverse society that will inhabit the earth made new. This society begins now and is based on daily choices here on earth. As we consider this matter, let it be said of us, as goes this fragment of poem quoted from the 1996 Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet, Wislawa Szymborska:

With smiles and kisses,
we prefer to seek accord beneath our
star,
although we’re different (we concur)
just as two drops of water are. 

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REFERENCES

1. *Press Enterprise*, Riverside, California (October 13, 1996), p. 8.
2. Cited in *ibid.*
3. Quoted from Emma Lazarus’ sonnet “The New Colossus” on the Statue of Liberty on an island in Upper New York Bay.
4. My thanks to my brother, Dr. Ralph Morales, Jr., for these examples.
5. With the exception of “Space,” these categories are taken from Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe, *Managing Diversity* (Homewood Il.: Business One Irwin, 1993).
6. From “Nothing Twice (*Calling Out to Yeti*)” in *Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh, trans. (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1993).