

## Article III

### Beyond Tourist Approach to Deeper Understanding

Ethnic fests may be fun, appetizing, and entertaining. But sharing ethnic foods, music, dance, and costumes breaks few cross-cultural barriers. It creates few jobs, improves few schools, and evaporates few ghettos of impoverishment.

We already know what soul sounds like, what egg rolls or pizza taste like, and we already enjoy watching or doing Latin dances. We eat bananas from Guatemala, tomatoes from Mexico, pineapple from Hawaii, cacao (chocolate) from in Africa, and we drink coffee from Brazil or Columbia and tea from India. But most of us are oblivious to plantation-worker pay or working conditions as we sip our morning cup of coffee. In fact, interethnic trade over the millennia has not precluded war or interethnic hate.

Over 40,000 Chinese restaurants around the country (more than all McDonald's, Wendy's, Taco Bells, Pizza Huts, and KFC's combined) have not prevented anti-Asian hate crimes either. Despite wild multi-racial popularity on the charts and tens of millions of records and performances of Black-inspired music genres of soul, hip hop, jazz, R & B, gospel, doo wop, pop, rock, and rap, they have been inadequate to quell violence against Blacks. (America's Black music has, however, done wonders for America's reputation abroad. For another article.) Books on indigenous American folklore has not dispelled reservation ghettoization. American tourists to foreign countries are notorious for being insensitive to local people and for cocooning themselves in American-class hotels in tourist towns where they spend extravagantly, by local standards, and expect to

be treated as the (spoiled) rich, privileged Americans that we are.

*We pride ourselves in parts of Chicago and in other big cities as ports-of-entry with ethnically diverse populations. Our diverse school populations we believe will rather automatically bring children together harmoniously. But we fail to recognize the ethnic racial cliques as in the lunchroom and on the playground.*

All of the above examples, typify a mostly well-meaning, but disingenuously superficial approach to building interethnic, interracial bridges. But, one might correctly argue that we may have had even more racism and cross-cultural insensitivity without such superficial exposures to different cultures. Agreed; but to a degree and also at times with unanticipated consequences. So – what can we do better?

One method – understanding – *deep understanding* of both ourselves and others. Contrary to deep understanding, most of what we do is reflexive rather than reflective, habitual rather innovational. Of course, we could not function if we had to figure out from scratch every day how to walk, talk, or do our job at work. We do not revisit daily what religion we profess, what political party we belong to, or who our friends are. In fact, these decisions evolve over time and in response to our environment. Whether we are flaming liberals, White supremacists, Saudi royalty,

Taliban, **Potawatomi**, suburban New Yorkers, or south-side Chicagoans, we are all a product of our environment and sub-environment down to family role.

“Don’t tell me I don’t understand myself, or where I come from, and how I was influenced by that environment,” I can hear you saying. Yes, all well-taken – to a degree. But how many of us know if we had lead in the paint or pipes of our homes that affected our development? Did we have a healthy diet, and, if not, how did it affect us? And can you explain, although you speak quite fluently, why you grammatically put the words together in that proper order? OK, so we don’t know quite as much about ourselves as we may have thought. Likewise, we don’t know as much as we thought about our character, thinking, biases, etc. As Thomas Gilovich explains it in his *How We Know What Isn’t So: The Fallibility of Human Reason*, we start with a gut feeling of what is right, and then use our brain to lawyer for our gut.



Culture fests, ethnic histories, and other generally superficial renditions of what makes us feel good, may in the worst case, long run divide us. Only deeper inspection and social science insight will reveal how and why we are trapped in a never-ending cycle of victims

becoming predators and then vice versa and how we can be simultaneously both victim and predator.

We don’t need to throw the baby out with the bath water. A starter solution -- utilize that draw of food and fun. Make the fest more like a museum to spark curiosity and insight, e.g., signage and big-screen clips on how the world works and why. Food stands may spark interest in who grew and harvested the food, coffee or iced tea served, or why did Jews historically avoid pork, Hindus beef, and Jains and some Buddhists and Hindus forgo all meat? Ethnic fashion shows might delve into the common historical roots, but different styles of shoes, headscarves, and veils throughout the world. Music venues might direct our attention to where that American music originates (often from Africa, etc.), and how it got here and mixed with other cultural influences. Then hawk or give away carefully selected children’s or adult-level books or brochures – *not* glorifying or inadvertently stereotyping any ethnicity, but rather to beginning the process of deeper understanding of how the world and its cultures work and evolve. Superficial and stereotypical images of cultures often portrayed in culture fests can be supplanted by docu-clips, banners, pictures, and signage all piquing interest, heightening awareness, deepening understanding, and interlacing links with one another.

Media can play a role in covering such events, or any events, for that matter. The journalist mantra of “who, when, why, what, how” is not enough. Journalists can help to connect the dots, look deeper below the surface, explore the implications, explain the history, pique public curiosity, and stimulate thinking. Some investigative reporters are already good at this and need to play a larger role. The formula of what will happen, what’s happening, and what just happened might become what are the

implications of what might happen, the larger picture of the event happening, and discussion of what we might do better. Opinion editorials and commentary can sell, but so can unbiased, empirical, logic-based commentary sell. Reality and epistemological finesse is no less, if not much more, riveting than fiction if well presented.



Clergy also can play a huge role in promoting love, caring, healing, bridge building, and *why* these are important. We can get our flocks to follow only so long. To preserve the role of religion we must *lead* those followers to think for themselves, understand the secular world, not just the spiritual world. We must empower our flock through enhancing thinking skills and reality connection. Thinking, logic, and reality are not a threat to religion, but a rescue buoy. We must choose to be relevant, constructive, and empowering, or we will continue to lose followers and die a slow death.

I attended a sermon in a Protestant church a couple of years ago about the Christian woman offering water to a Muslim woman in distress. The Christian woman was tried for heresy. The teaching moment was lost and became instead a wall-building moment. How could the preacher have used “love,” also his theme, to help people understand cross-cultural issues and how we might begin to bridge the divide? How can we understand our own religion in

relation to others with universally common roots.

Years ago, I went to a very effective workshop held in a local Jewish synagogue. A random audience of people of different religions, ethnicities, and races attended. (Good start right there.) The facilitator called an equally random group of volunteers from the audience asking them about their families’ and ancestors’ experiences with discrimination, oppression, victimization and related abject hardship. No shortage of stories came pouring out. What this facilitator accomplished was to help us all recognize that our experience of victimization and hardship was not just ours, but shared by others. I believe this revelation is transformative for many of us.

Scratching below the surface, we find that we all have been victimized and many of us still bear open wounds or scars. White Appalachian, Black migrants from the South, indigenous peoples, or immigrants and refugees from strife-torn Viet Nam, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Central America, or Mexico, have similar stories to tell. Armenians, Cambodians, Chinese, Congolese, Rwandans, and many others can each tell stories of genocide, starvation, oppression, and hopelessness that drove their families to migrate. Opioid victims, LGBTQ’s, and mentally or physically challenged come from all races, ethnicities and walks of life. We must see that our antagonists also have felt marginalized, wronged, and or oppressed. Scratching deeper, and sometimes painfully, we find that we were all perpetrators as well as victims at times. In fact, we may be perpetrators and victims of discord and strife simultaneously.

Schools and childcares may be our most crucial chance to preserve and enhance open hearts and open minds. Preschool ethnic clothes, ethnic dolls, “welcome” in three languages, books about cultures represented in the

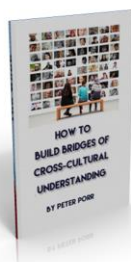
classroom again are a superficial double-edged sword unless implemented with some deeper thought. Are the clothes stereotypical or celebratory dress not worn commonly by everyday people? Do most indigenous people wear feathers every day? Do female clothes or dolls relegate women to objects of beauty rather than opening minds to women's intellectual capacity and professional abilities? Are *the* three languages all Romance-Germanic? And if three words are all the study of languages we do, it is not nearly enough when this is the age (or even earlier) that brains in their formative stages are most receptive to new language acquisition. This window of golden opportunity of learning to communicate with cultures different than our own must not be squandered. Books and languages only of those students enrolled can be narrowing and promote glorified and us-vs.-them world views.

An emphasis on competitive, zero-sum, or even violent sports mandating that 50% of us must lose and encouraging celebration of the defeat of others is perhaps as American as apple pie. It is unfortunately a zero-sum pie. Such well-intentioned, but unwittingly divisive education runs throughout school and college with insidious repercussions throughout adulthood. Why not dancing, gardening, Good Samaritan activities that also be enjoyable while informing young minds and hearts that there is a kind, cooperative, communicative, even socially productive part of humanity?



We need to break the senseless, suicidal multi-millennia-long cycle of our Hatfield's-and-McCoy's feuds: Shia v. Sunni, Christians v. Muslims v. Jews, Blacks v. Whites, Chinese v. Chinese v. neighbors, indigenous or native-born vs. newer populations, class v. class, tribe v. tribe, etc. We can by the means above step back, look outward, dig deeper, and see the unwitting nonsensical carnage. We can by such means recognize the human links that can bind us in harmony or shackle and hobble us. We can through our various professional capacities ask ourselves, how can cooperation of the above peoples make us all better off?

Who can help us to stand back, dig deeper, and ask these questions about ourselves? The most powerful 3,000 people in Illinois can. Those are the 3,000 megaphones -- teachers, legislators, media, clergy, and CBO's -- receiving this missive. Harness the methods in this eight-article series, and Illinois will radiate a message to the world !



This article is part of an 8 part series by Peter Porr that can be downloaded as an e-book.

<https://se-asiacenter.org/index.php/healing-illinois/>