

## ON BECOMING CULTURALLY COMPETENT

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### Abstract

*The need to be aware of diversity, to have open attitudes and perspectives toward difference, to have knowledge of other cultures and to possess the skills to navigate in multi-cultural and global settings is increasingly important in a diverse, multi-cultural, and global society. The development of cultural competence is essential for working effectively in the world today. Cultural competence is a developmental process of transformation of self that is not easy, quick or intuitive. This paper discusses one journey toward developing cultural competence.*

In May 2012, I returned from a 4½ month, sabbatical journey to Seaton's Village on the island of Antigua in the West Indies. Seaton's Village is on the northeast part of the island, about as far as one can get from, St. John's, the one city in Antigua. I wanted to live in a community to meet people who live on the island and to share in their community lives. I had a number of goals in going to Antigua. I wanted to observe the English language learning of children in first grade, to improve my cultural competency, and provide whatever services I could to the Antiguan people. In this article I will explore cultural competency.

My understanding of cultural competency continues to morph as I re-explore my experiences in Antigua. There is a wealth of definitions of cultural competency, each with its own nuance. At first I thought about cultural competence as developing a new attitude toward difference, understanding a culture different from my own, and being able to put my value judgments aside. I wanted to write about Antigua in a value-neutral way. I also wanted to increase my ability to help my pre-service educators develop their own capacities to function effectively with children and families of other cultures. I wanted to understand and react to the cultural practices of Antiguan teachers and children so that they would trust me, my motives, and take from me whatever it was that I had to give. I wanted to refresh my wonder of the world, to slow down and see amazing new images, taste new foods, experience life on a West Indian island. And that I did. I didn't want to present as an "ugly American," but at times, I must admit I did, especially when I first arrived on the island.

I wasn't used to seeing insects as big as my pointer finger on my kitchen floor in the mornings, belly-up with little legs dancing in the air. I wasn't used to lizards living in my house, though they really didn't bother me at all. I didn't enjoy getting up in the morning to see my face covered with little "bite" marks from what, I wasn't sure. I was leery about eating a food named *fungee* or a stew called goat's milk. I wasn't sure about eating the grilled corn, cooked on a grill that didn't look as clean as my gas grill at home. I had to learn to drive on the left side of the road in a car with the steering wheel on the right. I had to drive on roads where open sewers and drainage ditches ran along the side of the road, without, mind you, any barrier to keep your car from plunging into them. I had to learn the rules of the right of way on a road where only one vehicle could pass at a time. That I must admit, led to costly mistakes. But getting used to the insects, and the food, and the driving was the easy part. Learning about

a culture with an eye that was value-free was much more difficult. A month or so after I arrived in Antigua, something wonderful happened. I wrote a story in my blog about American dogs and the privileges that they enjoy. I discovered, perhaps not for the first time, but in a very poignant way that part of developing cultural competence was also being able to see one's own culture in a distinctive way.

One of the first signs that I was seeing things a bit differently had to do with dogs. At first, it seemed that the dogs in the neighborhood waited for me to go to bed to begin to bark. One dog would bark and another would pick it up, and then another. The dogs kept me from sleeping. I did wonder why folks didn't try to shut them up, but after awhile, like living near the train tracks in the South End of Boston just after I was married, I didn't hear them anymore. I remember asking my Antigua State College students about the dogs and they just nodded and said, "Yes, they do bark." Many dogs in Antigua roam the streets and they look a bit mangy. However, most of the dogs in my village were kept in their owner's yards. Dogs generally do not live inside houses, but have dog houses or other types of shelter in the yard. Most every house is surrounded by a fence to keep out the wandering goats, sheep and horses that meander their way around the villages. As the goats and sheep travel their daily routes which seem to be quite predictable, the dogs would begin to bark as the herds approached their homes.

One day at school Mrs. Joseph, one of the teachers with whom I worked, brought her little three-year old to school. She wasn't happy because he had contracted some kind of skin condition which she believed he caught from a dog at his day care. That morning she talked at length with the children about not handling the dogs they met in the community. She reminded them that the dogs they saw on US television were well cared for, had shots to keep them free from diseases, and were clean. However, she said, the dogs in Antigua were not. "You cannot touch them; they will give you disease," she told them.

This made me think about the dogs where I live in the US and how differently we viewed them. So, while in Antigua I wrote the following article. I couldn't help but think of what my students at State College would say about this piece of US culture:

Dogs in Antigua do not enjoy the status that they have in the US. I live in a very dog-friendly community. It seems that many people in my community have more than one dog. I think this is because the owners don't want their dogs to be lonely during the day. If the owner cares to socialize their dogs while they are at work, there are doggy day cares. There are also dog walkers...someone you pay to have your dog taken on a walk while you away.

There are big dogs and small dogs, pretty dogs and ugly dogs, and friendly dogs and unfriendly dogs. The dogs in my community are "special" dogs...they are pure bred, expensive dogs that come with papers that certify that they are who you think they are. There are some dogs that have been fortunate to have been adopted from shelters. Most dogs are very clean and don't smell too badly. There are dog spas where you can take your dog to get washed, combed, manicured, and have their teeth brushed. After a visit at the spa, your dog is good to go.

Dogs see their doctors for regular visits. There they are routinely given vaccinations, treated for parasites such as fleas, get dental checks and made sure that they are overweight. Dogs can be treated for any disease that they can get, if you want to pay for it. You can buy medical insurance for your dog to cover costly cancer treatments, reconstructive surgeries, allergies, etc. You can take your dog to a dog psychologist to find out why he is sad, or bad, or mad. There are even TV shows that help owners train dogs that are out of control.

Dogs in my community usually do not bark in public. They seem to know that this would be in bad taste. Dogs are walked by their owners, though some owners seem to be walked by their dogs. Dogs are not allowed out in public by themselves. They must be put on a leash, as there are "leash laws". If your dog runs away, he may be caught by an animal control officer, and you may have to pay a large fine to

get him back. There are three parks in my community that are open to unleashed dogs just a few times each day. Here dogs can run after each other, while their owners socialize or throw balls for them to fetch.

When you are out and want to pet a dog, it is courtesy to ask the dog owners if you can. Most owners love to show off their dogs, so usually you can pet the dog. However, sometimes the owners are not interested in slowing down their walk or sometimes their dogs aren't friendly and the owners decline your advances.

Some of the storefront owners in Newburyport put out a water dish for dogs that are out and about on their daily jaunts and need to quench their thirst. There are now three "specialty" dog-supply stores in my community. But I think they are called boutiques, with "cute" names. In these stores you can buy anything you could imagine a dog might want: a new collar, a new outfit, or a new toy. There is even a gourmet dog food store that just opened. Here you can purchase sumptuous snacks and food for your dog. In the winter, dogs are outfitted with coats, sweaters, and scarves to keep them warm. Sometimes owners carry them bundled up in dog carriages.

Dogs in my community do not pee or poop inside their homes. They are trained to go outside. This is a milestone for a dog. When dogs poop, their owners are obliged to clean up after them. There are laws about this. To clean up after a dog, the owners walk around with a plastic bag from which they scoop the poop.

We are so fortunate to have the resources to treat dogs in this way. I wonder what many people around the world think about dogs and how they are treated in the US. In places around the world where people are hungry, have little resources with which to change their situation, or live in fear of soldiers coming to wreck havoc in their lives, how we think about pets may not match our own. A part of becoming culturally competent is to be able to see your own culture in ways that other people might. When this happens, your outlook about yourself, how you see others, and the world you live in changes a bit. The journey continues. ■

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