

Chapel Address  
Will Speers  
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Multi-Cultural Week

When I was 8 years old, my family went to the World's Fair in New York City. I remember little except that there were thousands of people milling around. At one exhibition, I have fleeting memories of looking up some stairs behind a stage, where some Watusi dancers stood, holding long spears and shields, with red cloaks wrapped tightly around their deep black and muscle-bound skin. My younger brother, braver than I, answered their entreaties to join them for an impromptu dance. We did not speak any common language, but my brother was able to bridge the cultural gap through his curiosity and their openness to share.

In hindsight, this was my first multi-cultural experience, of seeing people who lived and dressed differently than I had, yet whom I could understand and interact with. I think I've remembered it so distinctly for nearly 30 years because it was such a new moment, an event that let me, even as a passive observer, connect, see how the world I thought I knew was indeed larger, richer, certainly uncertain, unpredictable, but surely exciting.

The issues of cultural diversity and multi-culturalism today are far more fractious and confusing. Most of us played a "game" about cultural diversity this weekend, but the conflicts in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Mexico and South Africa are deep, violent, fatal. The United States, while spared internal wars, continues to battle across these diverse cultures and races: a white high school principal in Alabama tried to prevent interracial couples from attending the prom this spring, calling a child of racial mixed parents "a mistake"; there are still scars in Los Angeles; the mantle of "political correctness" has made it increasingly difficult for us to talk seriously and openly about important issues; a major TV journalistic show recently documented how whites were able to make better deals on cars, homes, even secure tennis courts at a public club than blacks who dealt with the same employers.

One of the real problems of multi-culturalism is the conflict between pride and destructive nationalism, between co-existence and the fear of assimilation. We are all clearly living in a shrinking world, a world where knowledge of and interaction with people from different walks of life is now the norm, rather than the exception. We've heard the buzz words of "global economy," "global marketplace" in all the major political campaigns. Trade talks with Europe, Japan, China, the NAFTA debate illustrate how interdependent we are in this modern world. Yet for a country founded on the principles of cultural diversity, religious and intellectual freedom, our tolerance, our ability to meet this rich challenge of multi-culturalism, has been sorely tested. It's very hard for cultural diversity to be seen in the United States as an opportunity for growth and new awareness; instead, it is often perceived as "more of them," a need to talk again about stricter immigration laws, or a desire to return to the 1950's when all was well in the world, with an implicit statement that people who were different at least knew where they were supposed to be. Rather than a mixed salad, we are still a melting pot which boils away differences, distinctions, unique flavors.

The problem and challenge of our world today, and you experienced this during World Games, is that it's harder to live the old way -- it's harder for everyone to live the old way. Indeed, none of us can live the old way, but we don't have too many working, successful models in place for the new way. The problems that arise from different cultures rubbing together should be ones which, even in friction, create sparks of insight and understanding, not of gunfire, hatred, ignorance. Such isolationism, as what this country practiced after World War I, lead instead to World War II, not world peace. "No man is an island unto himself," wrote John Donne 300 years ago; Janie Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reveals she's "been a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life...de big convention of livin'...[But] It's a known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there." Only when we recognize Janie's edict to go "there", to connect, to travel, to listen and share and interact, do we ever gain knowledge, do we ever join the "big 'ssociation of life." "In diversity is our humanity."

Now I don't pretend for a moment this is easy, nor can I speak to you with a lot of credibility. I have three crippling disabilities: one, my knowledge of any foreign country is limited by my inability to speak a second language -- I sympathize with Steve Martin who said the French were so rude because they had a different word for everything. You remember the quote from the World Games slide show: "If you know three languages, you're trilingual. If you know two languages, you're bilingual. If you know one language, you're American." Ask your history teachers who was the last bilingual President of the United States: in embarrassing contrast, look at how many other world leaders are at least bilingual. We're isolated by our own ignorance.

Two, I come from deep WASP-ish roots. I've tried to read as much as possible about and by Native Americans, Afro-Americans, Russians, South Africans. Hispanic writers and learning the Spanish language are the next goals. Yet these books are a poor substitute for people and travel; I envy those of you who've gone to soils different than your own, and really learned a new language; I'm especially jealous of those who will go with Ms. Brown to Mexico this summer, or will teach in South Africa next year. You will truly see how small the world is, how similar our diversity is, how much the arms of the human family have to embrace.

And three, in all honesty, in all my humanity, I possess racist feelings, although I'm sure I'm not a racist. How can there be any understanding, any bridging, with that fear within me? I can't give you an easy, comforting answer, because these issues are complex, paradoxical, painful, new. I live a very comfortable upper-middle class life, with a summer retreat in a state with the lowest person of color population in America; yet one of my two dearest friends, who will be the graduation speaker here next month, is the country's chief law enforcement officer for civil rights. How do I deal with these contradictions? How do I move beyond these clichés? My only hope is that by admitting whom I am--by each of us revealing whom we are, what we don't know, what we fear (and fear usually springs from ignorance), what we need to learn--then, maybe then, as individuals, as a school, as a school in Middletown, as a country, as a world, maybe then we can take steps forward. T.S. Eliot saw that

...perhaps what we call change,  
Is understanding better what one really is.  
And the reason why that comes about, perhaps,  
Is, beginning to understand another person.

For the rest of us, I have two particular goals for this week focusing on cultural diversity. The first is that we talk a lot about it. One of my heroes, Senator Bill Bradley, remarked that very few of us ever talk about race or cultural diversity with someone of a different race or ethnic heritage or culture. That's the discussion which matters. But only such a conversation, such a mutual sharing, engenders recognition of the real issues, acknowledgment of the shared humanity, and the hope of any solution and understanding. A friend told me that "consciousness-raising about racism and race is not merely talk, talk, talk, and no action, but the essential talking that will make action possible." So talk and listen in the supper discussion groups this week on political correctness, people of color at St. Andrew's, international students at St. Andrew's; respond to Rev. Kirk on Wednesday, to Dr. Schiesler on Friday. We can't live alone, isolated, afraid, huddled in homogeneous circles. Years ago my family spent a summer in Africa. One day in Accra, the capital of Ghana, we took a walk through the city, around its parks, thoroughfares and outdoor restaurants. We must have walked for six hours through this large city, yet we never saw another white person. It was scary, disturbing, eye-opening; it made me partially realize what it's like to be a person of color in America, or at St. Andrew's. As we have begun to do at this school with gender, we must also do with diversity -- we must talk and listen with people who are different from us; otherwise, we stagnate.

My other goal is that we don't let this focus last a week, but ideally a lifetime. Soon, very soon, 50% of this country will be people of color: how are we, individuals of color, individuals who are in the so-called majority white race, readying ourselves to work within this eclectic community? The skills you can acquire at St. Andrew's about how to be sensitive, how to recognize, how to co-exist, how to respect and honor differences will be invaluable as you move into larger communities. That is the school's challenge this week, this term, your lifetime: the issue is not our differences, but what we

do with these differences. The education you receive here, in the words of an American citizen of Indian heritage, "should help us make leaps; to navigate across cultural boundaries; to put ourselves in the place of others who are not like us..." Then we can aspire to the hope of Martin Luther King Jr., who asked that people be judged "not on the color of their skin but on the content of their character."

Are you prepared for this education?

Are you willing to listen and talk?

Are you ready for that leap?

Who will help you land?