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Crossing Cultures: From Conversation to Participation
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Good morning. You know, Washington DC may not be another country but Northern Virginia is a part of the South, and in Northern Virginia audiences respond when you say “good morning,” while in much of the North of the country people don’t respond; they just sit there. Bear that in mind because I want to focus today on the word participation, which involves interaction. Many of you are professors and teachers, so you stand up in front of classes. How interactive is that? How participative is that? Do we teach our students to engage and participate? Or do we mainly teach them to be involved in one-sided exchanges since that is what we tend to model?

I thought I would start with some stories from the early years of my marriage, since marriage is one of those relationships where it really does help to have a two-way interaction. Reciprocity? Mutuality? Not everybody thinks of marriage that way. I met my husband because I wanted to learn Arabic and he had grown up in Aleppo, Syria, and so he was someone I was going to practice Arabic with. Turned out he was Armenian and we fell in love in my freshman year and we decided that I would accelerate and graduate in three years so we could get married. And in that time I set out to learn Armenian and, what was much more essential, Armenian cooking. How do you connect across cultures? You talk and you eat. So as I learned Armenian, I wrote letters to my future in-laws in Armenian, which has its own beautiful alphabet. Well, after this long engagement, we finally got married and headed for Beirut on our honeymoon. And after all that, they all spoke English to me. This was a highly educated family and their English was very good, but it was infuriating. This is an experience that many of us have when we learn a language and we prepare to go abroad. People either want to practice their English or they just don’t believe you could possibly speak it. They look at you and know that you can’t speak that language. That’s what happens to me in the Middle East. (What’s worse, I have blue eyes, which are

associated with the evil eye. I can cause bad luck, just by looking at people's babies.) So after we had been there four or five days as guests – a homestay if you like! – my mother-in-law went into the kitchen to prepare a dish that both Western Armenians and Arabs eat, kibbeh niyyeh, lean raw lamb that has been kneaded with cracked wheat and water. It is very personal. This is raw meat that you work with your hands for half an hour or forty minutes and then you serve it in little handfuls with the imprint of your fingers shaping it. It's kind of an intimate thing to be eating and it's one of those dishes about which men say they want to eat it the way their mothers make it. Well, in my frustration I walked into the kitchen, where my mother in law was preparing to make this dish, and I said, "I'll do it" (in Armenian of course) and I dug in. A miracle! From that moment on, everyone in the family spoke Armenian to me. Now, I knew the language perfectly well before this little presumptuous display on my part, but somehow that changed the relationship dramatically and they believed that I could speak the language. Somehow their taste buds convinced them when their ears did not. The transformed me from an outsider to a participant.

A second story from the same period. Armenians are Christians, by definition. My husband's family, who are Protestants, had a grace that they said, a prayer before meals, and I learned to say it although they mumbled. When we came back to the United States we continued the prayer as a family tradition and we still say grace in Armenian when we sit down to dinner. Sometimes guests would say, "okay, and what does that mean?" And my husband would tell me to translate but he wouldn't listen because he knew what I was saying, so it was ten years before I learned that I had misheard some words of the prayer. The words that I thought I had heard, that I had said for ten years and translated for ten years, were "give us your love." But in fact what the prayer said was, "give us contented hearts," which just happened to be phonetically very similar -- the words "heart" and "love" are from the same root. And I thought, this is what children do all the time. They are involved in adult events that they don't fully understand, they haven't mastered the culture, they don't know all the vocabulary but they find

ways to engage and participate. Sometimes when I give talks I say I am accompanied by my assistant, Gladly. You see her beside me, don't you? Gladly is a bear, and she is cross eyed. And then I explain that Gladly is the totem animal of every child who has ever sat through an evangelical church service, hearing the adults singing, "Gladly the cross I'd bear." The point is that it's okay. That's not a theological comment; it's a sociological comment. The point is that it is more important to participate than to be word perfect. And we tend to teach just the opposite.

Look at me. I am up here doing all the talking, it shouldn't be that way. How can we teach participation when what we model so often is a one-sided interaction? Let's consider what children teach their parents. Try asking a room full of twelve year-olds what they've taught their parents. They've been teaching them since they were born. That's a characteristic of the species, that we come with the capacity to turn two basically incompetent adults into fairly adequate parents. But if you try asking 12-year olds what they've taught their parents, they have trouble responding because they have been taught that they are the learners and that the parents and other adults are the teachers. They don't know that they teach their parents, their professors, and their physicians, and all these adults that they deal with. Ah, but nowadays it does occur to them that they have taught at least one adult how to use at least one piece of technology. If you pursue the conversation, it goes from the VCR and the cell phone and the Internet to appreciating rap music. In other words, aspects of popular culture. From there however, the conversation moves on to teaching their parents real ethical change going on in the society. We mostly don't notice it. Environmentalism? It's the seven-year olds teaching their parents how to recycle and why it matters. The kids and the little old ladies in tennis shoes. Don't forget us. That used to be a way of dismissing the whole issue of the Environment – it's just little old ladies in tennis shoes.

One girl said to me, for example, “I taught my dad not to interrupt.” Think about that. Adults have interrupting rights on children. Males have interrupting rights on females. This kid, she was 12 or so, she actually taught her father to listen to her. That’s an ethical breakthrough. Not to mention another child who said, “I taught my mom not to make cracks about gays,” for instance. When kids hear bits of racism or sexism around the family home, they are there saying, “I don’t like it when you talk like that.”

Lynne just quoted this motto that I have on my website: “You are not what you know but what you are willing to learn’. Participation means that as much as possible of the relationship is going in two directions. It isn’t that one person is there with all the answers and the other is gratefully receiving these truths. It’s a two-way relationship. In order to do that—this is where willingness to learn is so critical—you have to have the assumption that the other person has something to teach you. Right? When I stop talking, and invite you to ask questions, I hope you ask questions that I have not previously thought about. And then I can have fun trying to think about them and learn from your questions, without worrying that I haven’t got a polished answer all ready. I’m not running for the Senate, so I don’t have a coach who has given me a handful of prepared sound bites.

This can be fairly complicated for someone involved in foreign aid or technology transfer. Oh the terrible examples of mistakes made by USAID my husband and I collected in the Philippines! In the Philippines, people don’t like to tell you that you are wrong. So a US AID worker would come along and say, “what you really need, to develop industry in this province, is a sardine canning plant. You’ll catch the sardines and can them and sell them.” And then they discover, after building the factory, wrong size sardines, wrong size cans. And nobody told them. It turns out that if you are a prestigious foreign expert with money to spread around, it takes some imagination to get people to tell you “you are talking

nonsense.” You have to be really willing to learn. And you have to ask very different questions. Throw out the yes-no questions because people will say “yes” to be polite and it may not be true.

Here is an exercise I’ve sometimes used with people who are going abroad that you can do at home though it’s more interesting with a couple of companions. Take a piece of paper and write down the names of five people that you have learned from in different ways. It can be teachers, professors, colleagues, family members, any one you have met. And then write down the names of five people who have learned from you, again, in different ways. And then reverse them. Take the list of people you learned from and ask yourself what they got out of the relationship, what they learned from you. And for the ones that you mentored or taught, ask what you learned from them about the subject matter, about being a teacher, about being a caring human being. And compare them. You see, we put our students in the position of being performers who are being evaluated, which by definition moves them away from being participants who are reciprocating – giving and receiving at the same time. Particularly when we are asking people to go into a household or into a community where there are organic patterns of interaction, if they are feeling that they need to get everything right all the time they will be in a defensive mode, which is what our civilization has been teaching them since first grade. Anthropologists talk about reciprocity and gift exchange as the way in which whole societies are held together by the awareness of giving and receiving.

I was thinking about this this morning and I thought of a famous prayer of St Francis of Assisi. I’m sure a lot of you know it. It starts out, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,” and then in the second half of it he says, “grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, not so much to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, and so on.” Right? Now, he’s saying it is better to love than to be loved, it is better to understand than to be understood. I’m saying something a little bit different. I’m saying, make sure that it is happening in both directions. That there

is both giving and receiving. That you are talking about interdependence, reciprocity, and mutuality. That the outsider coming in is not a teacher with all the answers, but is also a learner, so there is something to be offered in both directions. I can't resist mentioning something very few people know that is worth remembering these days, which is that when Pope Innocent III declared the Fifth Crusade to recapture the holy places, St Francis went to try to talk him out of it. And then one last interesting thing about St. Francis is that he said in his rule, "Always preach the Gospel, with words *if necessary.*" What he is really saying is that it's not in what you say it's in **how you are** with people. It's this combination of what you would have to offer with the knowledge that as people listen to you, spend time with you, open their houses, talk to you about their children, they are giving you a gift. If I had my druthers, I'd like to see all teaching in the United States reshaped on a concept of interdependence, on a concept of reciprocity, on awareness of learning going in two directions. In the days of No Child Left Behind, that's a remote goal. But as we prepare individual young Americans to go abroad and encounter other cultures, this is the model that has to go with them. It sounds to me as if this is implicitly part of what you all do to prepare and support people going into cross-cultural situations, but it is something that needs to be modeled in the way we teach. It's got to be moving in two directions, even though it can't ever be perfectly symmetrical. You always have to believe that the other person has something to offer you that you need and that you have something to offer the other person which that person needs. What's passed back and forth is not identical. "Respect" is part of it, but there has to be an exchange with a difference in it, that uses the fact of cultural difference, racial difference, religious difference, age difference, whatever it is, to make the interaction beneficial in both directions, starting with new-born babies.

When you think of the environment, sympiosis is the term for when two different species are mutually benefiting from their relationship to each other. You then get co-evolution, where the species adapt over time to increase their benefit to and from each other, as opposed to parasitism and

exploitation and pillage, and all of these other problems. If we could model that relationship in all of our teaching, in our child rearing, in the way we run businesses we could go much further in this direction than we now do as a way of thinking about what it is to be part of the same community, the same nation, and now part of an interdependent globalized world. We would be in a much better position to think about the way we relate to the planet, the benefits we draw from the planet, the environmental services as they now talk about them, and the responsibility that we have to protect and restore environmental damages. Everything flowing in two directions. And I'm still married to my husband!