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MY DIVERSITY

by Danny Alexander



As the white male program director of the diversity initiative at JCCC, I should be a clue to the complexity of the term diversity, although (from what I hear) it's not apparent. For starters, the absence of a minority ethnic or gender or sexual orientation does not put me outside of the bounds of diversity.

When I was a kid, I was the only asthmatic (aside from a cousin in a different state) I knew, and I was the only kid I knew sexually abused by his pediatrician. I was the only kid at my school who had parents involved in a religion-based movement based in some variant of liberation theology. We were the only folks with a McGovern sign in our yard in my neighborhood in the corporate-run Oklahoma oil town where I grew up, so I spent a lot of time in 2nd grade defending the idea that we could withdraw from a war without dishonor. I was the only kid I knew until 6th grade with divorced parents. That other child of divorced parents I met in 6th grade was the only horror geek I knew. We were the only people I knew making monster movies on a Green Stamp Standard 8-millimeter wind-up camera when we were 11 years old. We were the only kids I knew who made money around Halloween by running a spook house in my best friend's ancient alley garage. We charged the neighborhood kids to experience the pedestrian fruits of our creativity.

In college, I was the only person I knew who learned everything in my classes through the filter of my record collection. I wanted to be a rock musician and felt terribly out of place in the sterile environment in school, but my music actually gave me an edge. In fact, all of these things that made me different when I was young came to play a role in my job as interim multicultural center program director this year.

I noticed it at one of our first events, the Hispanic Experience at JCCC, when the participants on the panel talked about expressions of affection and concepts of time misunderstood in white culture. Two decades back, music led me into involvement with Mexican-American movement leaders who taught me to hug as an expression of brotherhood and sisterhood and American Indian Movement folk who taught me that a meeting should begin when people were gathered, and the light was just right, and the room felt ready.

When the same panelists and members of the audience talked about the importance of multicultural events, memories flashed through my mind of the first time I tasted mole at an organizing party or those many nights when I was one of only two or three white faces in a Black or Latino music club – instead of alienation, feeling an intense connection to humanity.

My colleague Shaun Harris has articulated many of my thoughts on this semester's Deaf Awareness Week. I would add that I was particularly taken with the beauty and irony of the Deaf band Beethoven's Nightmare. But I also had similar revelations with the autism conference, in which I learned to recognize what I had in common with the autism self-advocates, those things that put me on the spectrum (I've always seen fluorescent lights as strobes for instance) as well as the ways in which many of the most creative writers, artists and musicians I know make sense in terms of





characteristics associated with the spectrum.

Then there was the visit by Eddie Daniels, a “coloured” South African who rejected the fact that he could pass for “white” and self-identified as “black.” The cost of that and his war against the Apartheid government was that he spent 15 years in South Africa’s “Devil’s Island,” Robben Island, along with Nelson Mandela and Walter Sissulu, among others. He told of the night Nelson Mandela took care of his slop bucket when he was sick, and I thought of how I first learned of Nelson Mandela. It was through music – as a child knowing the Beatles wouldn’t play Sun City, when I got older, through records by Stetsasonic, Peter Gabriel and Artists United Against Apartheid. They drew me into the fight against apartheid and other world issues like the Iran-Contra Scandal. Meeting political prisoner Daniels, I felt I was reckoning with a spiritual father. He treated me with the respect due a peer, undeservedly, but overturning that

notion seemed part of the point. Twenty years and half a world collapsed into an embrace of solidarity.

Now I meet with a group of students planning the first of a series of multicultural nights, this one a fundraiser for Invisible Children (which combats the destruction caused by the civil war in Northern Uganda). They remind me of my college self with a difference. These students come from a variety of places, including Mongolia, Iran, Colombia, Sudan, Ghana and Overland Park, Kansas. They inspire one another, and they fill my heart with a sense of promise. To be human is to be diverse, and on this level of difference, we can all find a way to connect and enrich one another. My job’s to make that goal clear. The joy of it is that its truth makes itself plain to me every day.

