Cultural Self-Study

Multi-Cultural Education 380

Jacob Newton

University of Alaska Southeast

Abstract:

 This essay will give reflection on how various influences have formed the cultural identity that defines me today. Through various stories and insights into the complex socio and cultural influences a narrative of identity will arise. It will explore my heritage along with other family identities. Various personal accounts and recollections of things that happened to me from childhood to adulthood will be discussed. Geographical location and friendships made along the way will also be described. Description of cultural-self and how I use this to view the world and other cultures is at the core of this text.

When looking within one’s cultural-self we need to ask ‘how has the culture I have been exposed to make me into the person I am today?’ Culture can derive from very large scale influences all the way down to individuals. I believe that we are shaped into who we are from all of these outside forces; Family, friends, teachers, coaches, famous idols, religion, etc... What is the strongest force on us as individuals? That would probably depend upon how we see our own core values and beliefs. Here are some stories related to how I became me.

 I grew up in a very small town in North-central Wisconsin where cultural diversity meant; were you Catholic or Baptist? White or maybe off-white? German or Polish? As I have immersed myself into other parts of the world, I have come to know that the culture in which I was raised was not a diverse one. Not to say that it was a bad one, just that the people of this area settled there to be close to what is familiar to them. Humans in general get a great sense of comfort out of being surrounded by familiarity.

Two of the biggest festivals that the town had were Polish-Fest in the summer and Oktoberfest in the fall. I bet you can guess which festival the Germans attended. The local churches put on these festivals and I remember people of the opposite heritage saying things behind the others backs like “Oh, those Pollock’s are having another Drink-for-Jesus event” or “Germans sure can drink for the cause”. I was caught in the middle being Polish, Irish and German. I would usually just smile and nod uncomfortably wondering if they heard themselves the same way that I did.

 Growing up in the Midwest did come with many advantages, however. I was raised by an amazing mother and father despite the fact that they divorced when I was only three years old. They chose to live only two blocks apart from each other so that their four children could have both parents in our lives. This really shaped the way I look at family and sacrifice. By the time I was six or seven, both of my parents were remarried and I suddenly had two blood brothers, one half-brother, one step brother and four step sisters. That’s right, nine of us all together, it displayed the perfect definition of a modern family. Yet, when I look back, I thought we were normal. Because my parents did everything in their power to ensure that we were happy, taken care of, and most importantly that we had better opportunities than they did.

 Stemming from my family values came my work ethic. I’ve always said my parents ruled with iron fists and velvet hearts. When it came to the work that needed to be done there was no excuse for laziness. For punishment, my mom would make my brothers or I dig four foot by four foot holes with a shovel out in the back garden. Then she would come measure the holes with a tape measure. If they were incomplete then we would continue digging. If they were to ‘specs’, then she’d say, “Good job, now fill it in.” My dad was not far off from that philosophy. When I was a sophomore in high school I went to work for my dad as an apprentice electrician. Some people think that working for a family business comes with all sorts of perks. They’ve obviously never worked for my father. I was working a night shift one summer re-lighting a Target store when I heard through the foreman that all electricians get a twenty percent pay increase for working nights. I thought, well my checks have been staying the same… So, asked my dad. He responded sharply with, “Don’t worry what I pay you, just be thankful you have a job!” We never discussed the issue of money again to this day.

 Aside from my family, I feel that my friends played a huge role in shaping who I am. Rural Northern Wisconsin was the type of place where I didn’t have the opportunity to have very many friends of different ethnicity. Not because I didn’t want to, but just a lack there of. There were however, two Korean students my age and one black student a couple years older than me. We all played hockey in the winters and played outside all summer. It didn’t matter what it was, but it seemed like every kid I knew wanted to be outside. I had a friend in the 5th grade that was getting into more trouble than the rest of my friends; lying, stealing, cheating, etc… I remember being on the playground one day at school and looking at the different bikes kids had. I saw a set of chrome valve stem caps that I really liked and that same friend encouraged me to just take them. So I did. When my mom found out she took me into the police station to give me a good scare. After, she said I couldn’t be friends with him anymore. I was furious! In hindsight, that was probably the best thing for me. Last I heard that same child is now an adult serving time in prison for grand theft auto.

 Moving ahead to more recent influences on my cultural self I would like to talk about my wife. Chelsea is an amazing woman with a zest for life and a passion for teaching. She has always pushed me to be the best in whatever I do and always lives life guided by a good moral compass. As a middle school math teacher, Chelsea works extremely hard to build a great relationship with all of her students. A few winters ago I was not working much after the guiding season slowed down. Chelsea said, “Why don’t you substitute teach?” I had never even thought about it. So, I started the process to become a certified substitute. After working with kids in the classroom I knew I had found a new calling in my life. I may have never considered this path without the support of my wife. As an educator, she is the embodiment of everything I aspire to be. She has opened my life to the most rewarding and fulfilling career.

 Although, I may not be the most culturally diverse person in the world, I believe I was raised to be empathetic to the differences and challenges across cultures. I always try to approach everything and everyone with an open mind and open arms. I have been told that I am too nice by more than one person. However, I do not believe there to be such a thing as too nice. Trust is a very important part of my cultural-self. I know there may be a time when it will do me a disservice, but I’ll cross that bridge when I get there. I have a belief that life is too short to pass judgment or hold a grudge.

We are all moving down this path we call life. This path is filled with twists and turns, forks and crossroads, speed bumps and dead ends. Although we may feel that we are fully in control of our own destiny, we have to accept the notion of outside influences impacting who we become. Some of the influencing factors in our lives are not chosen by us. We cannot choose where we are born or who are mother and father are. We can, however, choose who our friends are and what we do for social interaction. All of these things play a pivotal role in shaping our cultural-self. Sometimes the path is chosen for us and sometimes we choose. It’s not about what path you are on, but about what you are doing along the way.