

Fostering Intercultural Relations
using William James' Theories and Ideals as Prescription

by Catherine J. Johnson

William James reminds us that there is not just one truth and that we should look to all possible sources of knowledge—that we should use every method we can to know someone or something. This is entirely relevant when looking at ways to foster harmonious relations between cultures. As was pointed out to me by classmates, it is also completely relevant that I should look to sources other than James, even while writing a paper on him, as I will then be adhering to this basic principle.

James' radical empiricism is an important way of measuring what we see, as the very premise is about evidence that is observable; not on assumptions, pre-judgements, the opinions of others (including media), traditions or gossip. For instance, an oft heard complaint is that new Canadians have brought their problems with them, specifically in the form of gangs. Real evidence shows that this observation is based on fringe groups and is therefore a generalization, perpetuated by sensationalism in the media. Often disregarded in this racist view is gang-related behaviour of some long-time Canadians.

Language is an area where using every method we can to know someone is vitally important. How often do we come across individuals who confuse a new Canadian's lack of language skills with ignorance? Jokes are rife with this. We see it in movies, overhear it in public. It would be interesting to know how many of these prejudiced individuals have achieved a second language themselves. To quote a line in a popular song, "That taxi driver has a PhD."

We do not know another's reality unless we make a conscious effort to search it out, or listen for it. My present ESL student, a sixty-two year old Indian woman, struggles with reading English, but also struggles with her native Punjabi. It was not until two years of tutoring sessions that I learned she had never attended school. Her brothers had done so, but culture dictated she stay home to help her mother with home and garden. My esteem for this woman rose all the more and I feel privileged to be lending a hand to someone with such spark and perseverance.

That the world is hiding from us, a view held by Heraclitus and adopted by William James, is the result of not basing what we see on the observable and diverse cultural

evidence in front of us—hidden is the richness of clothing colour; the unique musicality of language; the grace and statement of architecture. These are absent when we do not embrace difference.

Temples, mosques and other religious structures are viewed by some individuals as “blights” on the landscape. Surely these are an exotic sight, one that many people travel across the world to experience. Many of us look at temples and think of prayer and peacefulness, friendliness and delicious cuisine (often shared publicly), and find it a treat to the senses to catch a glimpse of ceremonial costume. How unfortunate this view is not held by everyone. James put it succinctly with, “The spectator’s judgment is sure to miss the root of the matter, and to possess no truth. The subject judged knows a part of the world of reality which the judging spectator fails to see...”

If we were to use James’ principle of meliorism we would allow people to be. We would not interfere in their lives, but would accept them, just as we would wish them to do for us. There are many places in the world where Christian churches have been erected in non-Christian communities, including all over BC, and acknowledging this could help put the “blight” attitude into perspective. Another Jamesian premise, that we take our homes with us to gain a sense of belonging, is true to some degree for every person, whether we move across town or across the globe. I carted a ridiculous load of old furniture and books with me from place to place for years, confused by my refusal to part with anything, as I put my family through extra work and myself through extra financial burden. I remember the “Ah ha” moment when I realized wanting those items around me was to feel a measure of comfort, a feeling of home, not anything to do with ownership or materialism.

We can only imagine the comfort someone would derive from having a familiar place of worship in a foreign land. Why should we want to deprive another individual of the very feeling that James believes we are all continually seeking, that of belonging. The answer can be found in the following quote of James: “What then is our neighbor? Thou hast regarded his thought, his feeling, as somehow different from thine.” “He seems to thee a little less living than thou; his life is dim, it is cold, it is a pale fire beside thy own burning desires...” James advice is to “have done with this illusion, and simply try to learn the truth. Pain is pain, joy is joy, everywhere, even as in thee.”

It is interesting to consider that prejudice against immigrants and refugees could be rooted in biology and evolution—territorial imperative perhaps, or tribal consciousness. Many slurs against new people coming to Canada are possessive in nature: “This is *our* country. They should go back where they came from.” “They’re taking our jobs.” Territorial or not, James reminds us that instincts are malleable. There is no excuse.

If we could accept wholeheartedly that we live in a pluralistic universe as evidenced by every individual we come across, perhaps cultures other than our own would seem like integral parts of the whole, rather than intrusive elements; this *should* be possible, especially in view of our global community.

Moussa Magassa, University of Victoria's Human Rights Educator, designs and teaches workshops for community agencies on intercultural communication, conflict resolution, anti-racism, diversity, communications and human rights. I attended one of these workshops and was thrilled with Magassa's upbeat and humorous delivery. Participants interacted in fun and non-threatening ways with outcomes of increased awareness of the lives of others. We were also treated to a delicious African dinner and traditional music from Senegal. This type of intercultural education could be worked into school curriculums and workplaces as mandatory for students and employees. It would be a solid starting point for increasing intercultural harmony.

References

Class lecture notes

James, William. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. New York: Holt, (1899).