YOUTH FOR UNDERSTANDING
Intercultural Exchange Programs

Horizons: How to Learn About a New Culture

A Definition of Culture

Many people who travel abroad carry a camera and take lots of pictures. They return with photographs of cathedrals, castles, people in bright costumes, quaint village streets, and smiling children. Unfortunately, many of these people think that they have photographed the culture of the lands they have visited. This could not be. One cannot photograph a culture because culture is not a physical thing. What we see with our camera are reflections of culture or products of culture.

Simply stated, culture is the attitudes, beliefs, values, ideas, and assumptions that a group of people hold in common.

There are many cultures or subcultures. Hippies are a "culture" because they have attitudes, beliefs, values, ideas, and assumptions in common. Think of the thousands of cultures that exist - youth, businessmen, farmers, etc. These are all cultures. There are national cultures too, because a country can also be seen as a group of people with certain common attitudes, beliefs, values, ideas, and assumptions.

Culture as an Invisible Prison

For people moving between cultures, it is very important to understand the idea
of "ethnocentrism," which simply means the attitude that one's culture is superior to others.

Many of our attitudes, values, beliefs are so taken for granted by most of us that we would probably accept them as givens about all of mankind. We may assume that all people are created equal, that hard work and competition is good, that it's better to do things than sit around, that change and improvements should be sought, that it's not good to "waste time," that people are individuals and should independently seek their own goals instead of working in a communal group.

The Sunglass Analogy

Here is a simple fable to explore. It clearly helps us to understand what culture is, how our culture is like an invisible prison, and how we can free ourselves from that prison so we can learn and understand about other cultures.

Imagine, if you will, that in your own country, from the time of the first people, today, and far into the future, everyone that was ever born or will be born, was born with two legs, two arms, two eyes, a nose, a mouth and a pair of sunglasses. The color of the lens in the sunglasses is yellow. No one has ever thought it strange that the sunglasses are there because they've always been there and they are part of the human body. Everyone has them.

Take the yellow sunglasses off and look at them. What makes them yellow are the values, attitudes, ideas, beliefs and assumptions that American people have in common. Everything that Americans have seen, learned, or experienced (past, present and future) has entered into the brain through the yellow lens. Everything has been filtered and interpreted through all these values and ideas that have made the lenses yellow. The yellow lens thus represents our attitudes, beliefs, values, and represents our "Americanness."

Thousands of miles away in another country (Japan for example) from the time-of the first people, today, and far into the future, everyone that was ever born or will be born, was born with two legs, two arms, two eyes, a nose, a mouth and a pair of sunglasses. The color of the lens in the sunglasses is blue. No one has ever thought it strange that the sunglasses are there because they've always been there and they are part of the human body. Everyone has them. Everything that the Japanese people see, learn, and experience is filtered through their blue lenses.

A traveler who wants to go to Japan may have enough sense to realize that to learn about Japan more thoroughly he will have to acquire some Japanese sunglasses so that he can "see" Japan. When the traveler arrives in Japan, he wears the Japanese sunglasses, stays for two months and feels he really is learning about the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the people of Japan. He actually "sees" Japan wearing their sunglasses. He comes home to his own country and declares that he is now an "expert" on Japan and that the culture of Japan is green!

What happened? He didn't remove his own American filters of yellow. The moral of this fable is: Before we are open and free to learn about another culture (and put on their sunglasses) we have to remove our own, so that our interpretation of the new culture will not be "colored" or filtered by our own values, attitudes, and beliefs. We are not there to judge another culture, but to learn about it. We need to develop "double vision" or the ability to see more than one side of an idea.

How do you remove the yellow sunglasses? It's simple. By being able to understand and describe the values, attitudes, beliefs, ideas and assumptions of American culture, the lighter the yellow color becomes and the more blue the other culture becomes. The more we can verbalize and really understand what it is that makes us American, the easier it becomes to lighten the yellow filters, and put the blue lenses on, and see a truer shade of blue.