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**“Diversity Dissected; Human Commonalities
and Cultural Differences”**

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I taught French in high schools in Iowa for years. Every Parents’ Night I would be approached by a smiling dad who would invariably make the same old comment: “I took two years of French myself, but I can’t speak a word of it.” Then he would hurry on to say, “But you know, the wife and I, we’ve traveled to a lot of countries, and we never had any trouble. All it takes is goodwill. If you’ve got the goodwill, you can get along with anybody.”

This rather naïve assumption was mirrored at a more elegant level by the President of an international organization whose annual meeting I attended years ago. She began her welcome address with these words: “People everywhere are alike. They are all made up of flesh and bones and dinners. Only the dinners are different.” To my surprise, the huge audience burst into applause.

It’s true that anatomically all people are very much alike. Only 2% of our genes create visible differences such as skin pigmentation and shape of eyelid. We are all made up of flesh and bones—but it’s the difference in dinners that is crucial. They represent the differences in world views, in value systems, in ideas of right and wrong. They are the differences that lead to intercultural misunderstandings. They are the differences that lead to war.

Human beings, like most animals, are suspicious—even afraid—of differences and change. Now at UGA we are advocating increased diversity on our campus, and thereby asking to change the composition of our student body and our instructional and administrative staffs. The question is, will goodwill be enough to make these changes successful?

I came to UGA in the fall of 1968. Even back in those days, the President hosted a reception for new faculty members. To be truthful, I didn’t want to go. But I dressed in whatever finery I could muster after three years in graduate school and I went. You know how it is when you arrive at a festivity alone: everyone else is mingling gaily—everybody else is best friends with

somebody.. I made my way uneasily around the edges, and then I spied—standing alone off in a corner—a kindred soul. He looked easy to talk to, and I introduced myself. He said he was brand new on campus.. He had come to join the music faculty, and his name was Richard Graham. We were well into a very enjoyable conversation when I glanced up and saw a phalanx of dignitaries headed straight for us. To my delight I recognized the President of the university in the lead, followed closely by a wedge of Vice Presidents, assorted Deans, and a Provost or two. They had their hands outstretched; they had radiant smiles on their faces; and I stood there in a glow, smiling back at them...until I realized that they weren't looking at me. They were making a beeline for my new friend and I actually had to flounder back against the wall to get out of the way of all that vigorous goodwill. Richard disappeared in a whirl of genial administrators. They were saying warm and wonderful things. They were assuring him that UGA was now his academic home. They were all shaking his hand---two or three times apiece. And then, with incredible precision, they launched their final smiles, reformed their wedge, and disappeared as rapidly as they had come. I was stupefied. I looked across the vacuum to see if my friend was still standing. He was, and though 36 years have gone by, I remember his exact words. He grinned at me and said, "Now don't you wish that you were Black?"

Remember, this was 1968. Dick Graham was the first African American to join the faculty of a non-Black college or university in the State of Georgia. The motives of the President and his retinue were good ones. They were sincere in wanting this distinguished new professor to feel welcome on this campus. It's just that—for lack of practice—they didn't know quite how to do it. Goodwill wasn't enough.

As a more recent example, one day in my class on cross-cultural understanding, a young Asian woman admitted that she almost walked out of her interview for admission to Language Education because of a terrible experience. I was stunned because I knew that the interviewer was our Graduate Coordinator, Jo Beth Allen—a very compassionate woman. I asked the student what had transpired, and she said, "I knew right away that she did not like me. She kept asking me questions. And every time I looked at her, she was trying to see into my eyes!" Two women of goodwill. One trying to establish eye contact to indicate receptive interest; the other perceiving this as a hostile invasion of privacy. When there are differences across cultures, goodwill can be dangerously misinterpreted.

It would seem that in our quest for greater diversity there are two main goals:

1. To educate our students and faculty in the area of multi cultural awareness, so that they can interact intelligently and sensitively with students, faculty, and staff from diverse cultural backgrounds.
2. To educate our students and faculty who participate in study abroad programs and exchanges so that they can interact intelligently and sensitively with foreign nationals.

But acquiring even a minimal grasp of another culture is difficult. The National Foreign Language Standards suggest that every culture consists of three components: perspectives, practices, and products. “Perspectives” include the world view, the beliefs, the mind sets, the values: in short,, the philosophical essence of a culture. “Practices” designate the everyday patterns of living, the social do’s and don’ts, the culturally accepted ways of doing things. “Products” of a culture are both tangible and intangible. Tangible products would include such items as food, clothing, cars, books, and tools.. Intangible products would include oral tales, songs, dances, laws and language.

These three aspects of culture interact constantly with each other and they change over time. When the University of Georgia was founded back in 1785 there was little if any cultural diversity on campus. Professors and students were all males of the species. They were all of the same social class. Professors and students shared the same perspectives, engaged in the same practices, used the same products; and everybody on campus was White. Our quest for diversity on campus in 2004 is much more complicated. The perspectives, practices, and products of students from cultures which are markedly different pose a real challenge to harmonious diversity.

Can we fall back on goodwill? Common sense tells us that a smile communicates goodwill in every culture. But does it? The American smile—to cheer, to encourage, to simply acknowledge another human being—is difficult for many cultures to understand. The French have a special term for the American smile: *le sourire américain*—a smile which they perceive to be a superficial bid for acceptance on the part of the childish, culturally insecure American. In the Middle East, the man who smiles without apparent motivation is viewed as mentally unbalanced. The woman who smiles on the street is a prostitute. In Asian cultures it is considered poor manners to display any emotion in public. It must be a shock for Asian students to see American professors smiling, frowning, and laughing in class. In fact, a student from China told me that in her culture a professor who used humor in his lectures “would not be considered a very good professor.

In Japan, if you smile when you are being photographed for a driver’s license, the picture must be retaken with a properly serious expression. I once made a grave mistake when reading the test paper of an African student from Burkina Fasa . Wishing to indicate my appreciation of a witty answer he had given to a question, I hurriedly sketched a little smiley face in the margin by his response.. When I returned the test papers, the student came to me after class and was obviously angry. He pointed to the smiley face and said, “Why do you think that?” Startled, I replied that I had drawn the face because I thought his answer was not only correct but very clever. Somewhat mollified, he said that he had felt insulted when he saw it, and explained that in his country a smiley face would symbolize a silly, stupid person. Believe me, I never went the smiley-face-in-the-margin route again. So much for smiles as a guaranteed indication of goodwill. What you don’t know can hurt you—and others.

Our students need a deeper understanding of how cultures perceive differences. Let’s look at “world views”, for example.

Psychologist Howard Gardner tells of a research trip he made to China with his wife and two-year-old son. Their hotel supplied them with a room key tied to a large plastic block with the room number on it. When leaving the hotel, they were required to drop the key into a box in the lobby. This involved aligning the plastic block with the drop slot in such a way that both the key and the plastic block could pass through. Gardner's little boy was enchanted with that room key. He loved to carry it down to the lobby, and then try to push it through the slot. Of course, with the eye-hand coordination of a two year old, he invariably failed.. This seemed to distress the Chinese adults standing around in the lobby. Eventually, one of them would go to the little boy, take his hand, and gently guide the key and the block into the slot. Then they would turn to Gardner and either smile and bow, pleased that they had done a good deed, or they would glance disdainfully at the American who had refused to help his own child. Gardner asked a Chinese friend why the adults in the lobby found the little boy's efforts so disturbing. The friend replied: "That is a difference between your culture and ours. You believe that discovering solutions by trial and error will develop initiative and self-confidence. We believe in teaching by holding the hand." Two contrasting world views—both based on the desire of loving parents to do what is best for their child.

This example of the value Americans place on individualism is in sharp contrast to the value placed on group identity by both Japanese and Chinese cultures. Richard Hartzell points out that a growing child in every culture has two competing needs: one is to be independent, the other is to be included. Westerners seem to have a 30% need to be part of a group, and a 70% need to be independent. For the Chinese, the numbers are reversed: a child feels a 70% need to be included in a group, and only a 30% need to be independent. This is often reflected in their classroom behavior. Japanese school children are taught not to "make waves and wind." Even as adult students they may be reluctant to stand out in a classroom situation. They take notes on what the teacher says; but they rarely ask questions; they seldom raise their hand to volunteer. American professors often misinterpret this, assuming that the students are either disinterested or not prepared. In reality it is a difference in cultural values, illustrated by the familiar Japanese warning: "The nail that sticks up will be hammered down."

What do we do when confronted with students whose cultural expectations clash with ours in a negative way? One time a student from an Eastern European country arrived a few minutes late to my cross-culture class. She was in a state of near apoplexy, and I asked her why. Shaking with rage, she replied, "I have just come from taking a test, and I am furious with these American students. They refuse to help when you don't know the answer!" This startled me, and I asked if she would share her perspectives on this with the class. She eagerly agreed, and told the class that she had studied hard for that test and knew almost every one of the answers. She just couldn't remember a certain important name—and when she had looked across the aisle to copy a fellow student's answer, the girl had shielded the answer with her hand and even curved her body around so that her test paper was invisible! To the foreign student, this was the height of unacceptable conduct. Her summation was: "I will never respect that girl again!" The rest of the class—aware of the Honor Code and of the university policies on cheating—were as flabbergasted as I was. The ensuing discussion, however, was cross-culturally enlightening. In

the student's East European homeland, higher education was free—paid for by the government. At the universities there was no need to maintain a B average; no need to compete for scholarships. In fact, students openly banded together against the faculty to help each other succeed. If a test answer was requested, it was freely given. I could tell that the class realized this was a case where an international student had to be made aware of totally different expectations in culture. I let them explain, and I'm glad to say, the students in the class accomplished this with commendable diplomacy.

Setting aside examples for a moment, let's take a few minutes to consider some statistics. A year ago, in the fall of 2002, the freshman class at UGA included 566 minority students. This year, the freshman class included 800 minority students, which comprise 15% of this year's 5,175 freshmen. Of those 800 minority students, we are told that 273 are African American—an increase that is definitely good news. That leaves 527 freshmen from other minority groups. Why are we not informed of their race or group of origin? Are these 527 minority freshmen Native Americans? Latinos? Asian? Middle Eastern? European? Yankees? Whichever, we also welcome their contribution to the diversity on campus. As someone once put it, "Diversity is not simply a matter of black and white. Hopefully, it is more of a tasteful herringbone tweed."

The November 3 issue of the University of Georgia Columns reported the results of a national survey of freshmen and seniors at 437 colleges and universities across America.. At UGA, a total of 3,000 randomly selected freshmen and seniors participated. The results of the survey indicated that UGA students have a strong interest in international studies. They enroll in foreign language classes at a higher rate than their national counterparts (UGA offers courses in 25 foreign languages); and they participate frequently in UGA's 75 study abroad and 45 exchange programs. In fact, among all American universities, UGA ranks 12th in study abroad participation.

These glowing survey results would seem to place UGA near the top when it comes to international education. But something is wrong. Survey responses from UGA freshmen and seniors indicated that both groups are less likely than students on other campuses to "have had a serious conversation with a person of another race or ethnicity." And disturbingly, UGA students are less positive than students elsewhere as to whether their university helps them understand "people of other ethnic and racial backgrounds." That is the very goal which is frequently cited as the ultimate reason for increasing cultural diversity on our campus. Something is wrong.

In her book "Intercultural Friendship" based on research conducted at the University of Georgia, Elisabeth Gareis discusses the struggle students from diverse backgrounds have in making solid friendships. To cite a brief example, she interviewed a young man from Taiwan who was a graduate assistant in mathematics and had been on campus over a year. He told her that he had made three American friends. One was his office mate in the math department, of whom he said, "The most time we talk is about mathematics. He never tell me anything about his family and his life." The second friend was his landlady, described as "an old widow who is very kind." His third American "friend" was a student who had moved into an adjacent room six weeks ago.

The Taiwanese student conceded that he had only seen this third friend twice. “The first time I met him, he was moving in...and he just introduced himself. The second time is one week ago. It’s late night. I didn’t close my door. When he came back, he just say, ‘Hi, hello.’ That’s all.” Granted, this is the experience of only one student, but it indicates that the cross cultural enrichment so often cited as the benefit of cultural diversity does not flourish automatically.

Certainly we have culture specific student organizations on campus which offer important opportunities for in-group friendships and support. But do they foster tolerance and understanding of other cultures? To benefit from cultural diversity, we need in-depth cross cultural experiences. The International Coffee Hour provides a wonderful opportunity to meet students from other cultures. Actually, my son met his wonderful Taiwanese wife there over a cup of coffee. But an hour for meeting and greeting offers only a beginning. We must devise opportunities on campus—intellectual as well as social—in which students can encounter and explore, in a non threatening way, differing world views and unfamiliar expectations and practices.

We also need to enable our students to become actively involved in diversity. In a course I taught in Language Education, students were required to tape record their interviews with members of other cultures. One student, with Spanish language skills, chose to interview expectant mothers among the Hispanic population in Gainesville. She gained the confidence of the group and conducted her interviews. The mothers-to-be were sometimes joined in the sessions by their mothers or grandmothers, who contributed to a fascinating body of beliefs regarding the do’s and don’ts of pregnancy, birth, and care of the newborn. With the informants’ permission, the student organized these beliefs into pamphlet form and shared them with the nursing staff of the local maternity clinic. This collected folk wisdom regarding childbirth enabled the nurses to understand formerly baffling expectations held by their Hispanic patients. This was an example of a win/win/win situation: the student participated in a valuable cross-cultural interaction; the Hispanic women felt valued and appreciated; and the OB/GYN nursing staff gained important insights that helped them interact more effectively with their Hispanic patients.

A position paper on International Education written by ten UGA scholars at the Unicoi Faculty Symposium last April indicated that the goal of cross cultural diversity is not being met here. Among the suggestions for improvement made in this position paper was the recommendation for a new program that would provide for welcoming and mentoring international students. Every in-coming international student would be paired with an American student “diplomat” who would introduce the newcomer to campus culture in particular and to American culture in general. . In turn, the American student “diplomat” would get to know the international student well and learn more about that student’s culture. This seems to me to be a wonderfully innovative idea. I hope it is being seriously pursued.

The same position paper, dealing with global intercultural issues, recommended “that the university develop more outreach programs for educating elementary and high school teachers...” Good things have already been happening here. In fact, a decade ago the College

of Education formed a Task Force for Multi cultural Education (recently re-named “The Dean’s Council on Diversity”), By 1999, according to Jenny Oliver, Director of Academic Initiatives, more than 80 courses dealing with diversity were being taught in the College of Education. And the university’s cultural diversity requirement for undergraduates was extended by the College of Education to its graduate curriculum as well. Most recently, the College received a commendation from the Georgia School Boards Association for its work in the Partnership for Community Learning Centers –an initiative which aligns teaching and research professionals from the university with those of two Clarke County elementary schools—a most successful example of educational outreach .

At present, the College of Education is seeking support from private foundations to create a Center for the Study of Culture, Equity and Diversity in Education. To quote briefly from the proposal, “The Center will focus on regional, national, and global diversity issues...thus enabling faculty and students from a variety of fields, as well as members of community organizations interested in social action and cultural diversity, to work on collaborative and individual projects that address issues of culture ...An important goal of the Center will be to “bring the knowledge of the academy to the community as well as to bring the knowledge of the community back to the academy. Additionally, the Center would represent the only entity in the entire university system of Georgia dedicated specifically to research, pedagogy, and outreach around issues of diversity

The Unicoi position paper also recommended that we “prepare our students for today’s dynamic international involvement.” What kind of preparation do we give our students before they go abroad? How well prepared are they to understand the perspectives, practices, and products of the country in which they will be staying? Can they speak the language well enough to meet everyday needs? Can they participate in the daily activities of the culture without unwittingly giving offense? Are they aware of the stereotypes they hold in regard to the culture visited, and of the stereotypes of Americans held by the citizens of the country in which they I sojourn? Are they familiar with the current sociopolitical scene and have an understanding of the historical frame which shapes it? Do they have some familiarity with the literature, the visual and performing arts, and the folklore of the country --all areas of culture which reflect aspects of world view.

I doubt if the answer to all of these questions is “Yes.” Such pre-travel education would be demanding, but it would equip the student to profit maximally from a summer abroad, whether for a business internship, a sociopolitical workshop, a course of language study, or a cultural immersion experience in the visual or performing arts. Without in-depth preparation , students enrolled in overseas programs are simply tourists, not scholars.

Let’s face it. The university curriculum requirement of one class with intercultural content is better than nothing, but we dare not be satisfied with “better than nothing.” In an era when the seemingly preferred response to social interactions in our nation is “outrage!”; when negativity is the requisite stance for gaining admission to the ingroup; when insults and rudeness are accepted

as “the way it is these days,” and when Americans are no longer looked upon with favor from abroad—we need to concentrate on educating for intercultural intelligence and sensitivity.

When I first started organizing this talk in my head, I had a conversation with my daughter—an actor for many years in west coast regional theater. While I was enumerating a long list of potentially dangerous cultural differences, she said, “Maybe you are obsessing on differences. They are real—but don’t forget the human commonalities.” She used the plays of Shakespeare to make the point that “they endure and reach across the barriers of time, language and culture, because the Bard addresses the complexities of what being human entails: from tyranny and treachery through despair and degradation toward the compassionate and courageous acts of which human beings are capable. Shakespeare, “ she reminded me, “is performed in Russia, enjoyed in Bolivia, and respected in Asia. His work endures because he speaks to the bedrock of our existence as human beings. We know what he is saying because it is reflected in the world around us, in our own lives, in our own hearts”

For some reason this reminded me of the most dramatic class period I ever had in 28 years at UGA. It was a cross-culture class of roughly 30 students, three of whom were young African American women. That day, at the beginning of class, I asked the students if they had opportunities in their other classes to frankly discuss Black/White student relations on campus. They said they never had been in a class where that was a topic of open discussion. A few days before, I had attended a meeting of some College of Education faculty members who had come together in the evening to explore how to enrich the cross-cultural contacts among students and professors in the College. The meeting was well underway when some comment—intended as benign—sparked a negative reaction which ignited a dramatically hostile response. The spirit of goodwill in the room was shattered . We were all shocked, and the meeting quickly came to an end.

Something prompted me to share the outlines of this disturbing experience with the class. It intrigued them that professors—intent on creating goodwill—could fail so dramatically. For the next hour those students—black and white—shared openly their own experiences. There was no prompting by me. They asked the questions. They answered the questions. They shared and revealed and spoke with a courtesy and a generosity which was heartwarming. When the bell rang to end the period, the students looked at each other and the whole class burst spontaneously into applause.. They were not clapping for me. They were clapping for themselves. They had discovered their human commonalities. It was the most memorable class I had ever not taught in my life.

Years ago Joel Taxel walked into my office and handed me a quotation on diversity. You probably know it . I use it now to introduce a final anecdote.

We are for difference.
For respecting difference,
For allowing difference,
Until difference

Doesn't make any difference. (Cole, 1991)

Several years ago a young man was doing his student teaching in a kindergarten class here in Athens. One day he was sitting on the floor with a little boy—Bobby—putting together a puzzle. While they were puzzling, the little boy said, “You know, I don't like Black people. I don't want to play with them ever again.” This surprised the student teacher and he said, “Why don't you want to play with them?”

“Oh, you know. You know what they're like.”

“No, Bobby. I don't know what they're like. Please tell me.”

“Well, they play rough, and they might hit you, and they say bad words. I don't like Black people.”

The student teacher said, “Well, Bobby—you know—I'm Black.”

The little boy stared up at him and said, “You ARE?”

This experience seems to sum up just what we've been talking about today: cultural differences that add enriching dimensionality to our lives; and human commonalities, which come straight from the heart to unite us.