

With Which to Paint Our World

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I came from a small town. My head was filled with small ideas. At the dinner table, discussions consisted of our small events of the day...who said what to whom and where we went and why, and what would be the agenda for the next day. Nothing was outside of the trivial. Life had a stale flavor back then, and was rather bland. It didn't help that all the furniture and walls seemed to be varying tones of tan. It was undeniably a muted world.

I would visit my best friend's house and linger for hours enthralled with his parents (both of whom had graduated college). They were within another financial bracket entirely and seemingly another world. They had furniture and knick knacks from other countries, a rug from Greece that I loved in particular. They listened to classical music and had a picture of Pavarotti on the refrigerator who bore a striking resemblance to my best friend's father. National Geographic magazines were cascading off the bookshelves. I saw my first foreign film there and they were constantly playing records from around the globe. I discovered a love for Spanish guitar (listening to, not playing, though maybe someday). To me, their home was a treasure trove of unexpected wonder. I practically lived there during my high school years.

And boy could they argue! Or so I thought. It took only a few exposures of this for me to realize that these incidents of raised voices were not arguing but debating. No one was actually mad! They would discuss and debate world events, which I knew nothing of having little exposure to any such thing in my home. Oh, how I adored them! There were no debates in our house, only arguments, and trivial ones at that. One could hardly voice an opinion without some kind of eruption ensuing.

But regardless, my tendencies towards an interest in other cultures began to show at home, which apparently became a cause for concern and unnecessary fear for my parents. I vividly remember being told I would be disowned if I brought a black man home to meet my family. They had a fear for that which appeared “different”.

I wanted to see the world from a broader vantage point. I had this strong feeling that if you could comprehend another person’s or culture’s viewpoint enough, and have a great empathy, that nothing could seem so foreign or strange as to justify intolerance.

As I moved forward in life and after graduating high school, circumstances landed me in the suburbs of Detroit where I began volunteer work at two local nature preserves. I was a naturalist drawing off of a yooper’s general knowledge of the environment to teach classes generated for kindergarten through 5th grade. But I realized I didn’t know enough. I could easily cover the material required for each program but I couldn’t answer the children’s questions that veered outside of that. So, purchasing slightly outdated college text books I began to study biology, geography, and anthropology. Each day out in the woods of the preserve, my surroundings slowly became more vivid. As I learned the details of the plants and trees it was as if the natural world was coming into focus for the first time. They weren’t just trees; they had names, associations, and uses.

My experiences there made me hungry for more. I still craved a greater vantage point to view the world from and now I knew where to get it. It was through education.

I moved back home and entered the UW college system. The transformative experience of learning a new perspective, a new insight into what it means to be part of a learning community, is something to be cherished. We stretch and broaden each other’s ideas and world views. By learning together we challenge each other’s paradigms in a

way that provides a new palette of colors with which to paint our world. The world is no longer a smudge of green shrubbery but each individual component begins to take shape and form in its own brilliant hue.

Through majoring in Anthropology which I've studied with Professor Dail Murray, I am reaching toward a richer world view. The world is now a tapestry woven together with the most beautiful cultural traditions. It is truly transformative when one can see one's own culture and realize that it can, and probably does, appear just as "strange" as other cultures can to our own. For example: women in our culture who wear various shades of red lipstick are perceived by some cultures as having the desire to look like they drink blood. This misinterpretation is something I like to remind myself of when I catch myself judging something or someone at face value. We cannot submerge ourselves completely within another culture to fully comprehend its values but we can attempt to get closer.

A minor in philosophy which I have studied with Professor Jane Oitzinger, has given me a vast and ever expanding view that has offered me the ability to keep questioning and shifting my perception. Philosophy keeps the vantage point in motion ever dancing about to gain different perspectives. It has really taught me a different way to process information, in other words, a whole new way to think. Professor Oitzinger's personal ideas and values of tolerance for other cultures and religious traditions have been a great influence on me. I hope to continue this growth and development for a long time to come.

I am utilizing these two educational disciplines to better understand environmental ethics, which is of great concern to me, and how we treat our environment

based on our cultural perspectives of the world around us. It is something I find perpetually fascinating. I hope to also gain a background in conservation and feel that I can pull from each of these areas of study to effectively teach others the importance of environmental health. There is always room to expand our understanding and there are always more details to enhance our vision.