

Does my entry into another culture mean stepping out of mine?

From the Philippines in 1968 I set foot on U.S. soil, the so called "melting pot". My Philippine entry into American culture was 53 years ago. Did I have to step out of my culture to "melt"? My simplistic conclusion can be derived from a few anecdotes below.

* Way back then my height was 58 cm (4 feet 10 inches). Now that I am an octogenarian, my height of 56 cm (4 feet 8 inches) is even more impressive. At an outdoor fundraiser for a group home for disadvantaged and troubled youth where I was consulting, there was a group of children having a cheerful commotion. I was summoned by one to join them. The topic was who among them was the oldest, and who was the tallest. One curious resident asked how old I was. Silence and quizzical expressions on their faces were obvious after hearing I was 50 years old. One resident stepped backwards, looked at me from head to toe, and asked loudly, "Aren't you a bit too small for your age?"

* In another agency that I consulted, a few who had seen me and enjoyed earning privileges through modifying their behavior, had been influencing some close friend to ask for appointment to see me. One day the head nurse was chuckling when she informed me that one of the boys requested to have an appointment with that "miniature doctor."

* A kindergarten adorable girl was referred to me for concern that she might be psychotic. Referral note stated that every time the class has circle time – to name sounds of commonly known animals – she routinely joined the group in unison and correctly uttered the sound of the first animal the teacher identified. However, she repeats that first identified animal sound even when subsequent animal named was different. Example: When the group was asked what sound does a bird make? She joined the group in saying "Tweet tweet." When the teacher moved on to a cat, dog or cow, the whole group would answer correctly in unison. But this girl remained saying, "Tweet tweet."

The teacher tried to start with another animal such as a cat, her initial response in unison with the group would start correctly with "Meow, meow." But when the teacher moved on to a bird, dog or cow, her response remained, "Meow, meow." Note: This adorable girl was a Korean adopted by an American couple. It took one diagnostic session and the answer came from her lips, regarding her one-animal sound participation at circle time. "Why do animals have to talk in different languages?"

* First session with a boy I will call Yuan, referred because of troubling behavior. He was very polite, attentive, not resistant in answering questions that delved into his problems identified by his teacher. Then, after about 45 minutes, almost the end of the session:

Yuan: "Dr. Santiago, when are you going to talk in English?"

Dr. Santiago: "Hindi mo ba alam na simula ng magusap tayo ay nagsasalita na ako ng English?"
(Translation: Don't you know that since we started conversing I am already talking in English?)

Yuan: "What's that?"

Dr. Santiago: "That's my language, called Tagalog. That is what you would hear but not understand if I'm not talking in English."

* When I was the director of a guidance clinic in Newton Massachusetts, I was often summoned when a phone caller had an accent obviously from another country of origin. This happened frequently, despite my repeated explanation that a person from another country who speaks with an accent, like me, has even more difficulty understanding others from another country who speaks English with their own accent.

* In the same clinic, we do have occasional walk-ins seen by staff who are not occupied at the time. Newton, Massachusetts is an upscale community being close to the Route 128 technology strip, with high ranking hospitals including Mass General Hospital, and residents are in general highly educated. I happened to be the designated staff to give audience to an expensively attired, prim and proper but visibly very anxious and troubled middle aged couple. We will call them the Jones.

The Jones were deeply disturbed by their daughter's choice of a man friend, especially with the daughter signifying that they were about to be engaged. I could not fathom what this couple's objection could be to this man who seemed to have an impeccable character, had letters after his last name, and was gainfully employed in high tech industry. All I could say was that since they also described their daughter to be well educated, had a good job, and had always been sensible, perhaps they should trust their daughter's judgement

I was escorting them out of my office, when as soon as they were out of the door threshold the couple turned around and facing me disclosed, "That man is from Nigeria, he is black." I replied to them, "Mr. and Mrs. Jones, rest assured you have nothing to worry about. I am also colored and look different, but the person who married me is a Swedish-American and we are very happy. Some people do choose to have a colorful life." They smiled back – sweetly!

Today, I am still the same – my brown skin color has not changed except for appearance of wrinkles due to age, still speak stilted English with an accent, have lost height hence am more of a demi-petite, and cook mainly Philippine dishes. In other words, I still look funny and talk funny – I am culturally different. I live and enjoy some aspects of American culture including some dishes. These anecdotes are just few samples of my access to the different American culture, and vice versa. These encounters definitely did not get rid of, but instead highlight recognition, and give importance to the difference – a form of adaptation, entirely different from melting.

Marcosa J. Santiago, MD
Retired Pediatric Psychiatrist
Holds dual citizenship

