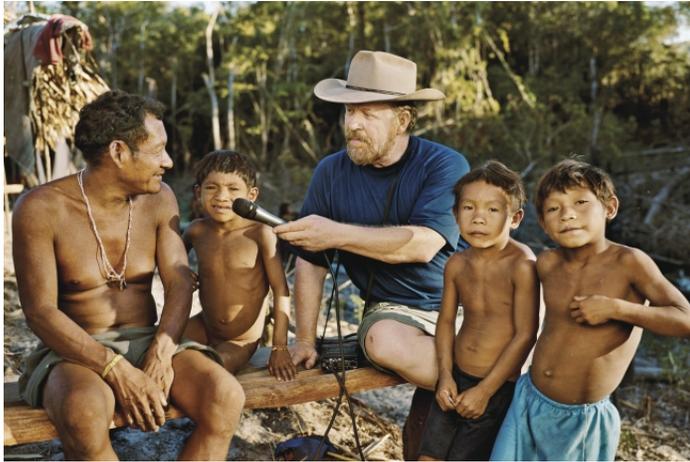


THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Seek Out Strangers

The less comfortable we are, the more we learn



Martin Schoeller

Daniel Everett, who spent about eight years among people of the Amazon River valley, learned to appreciate what he calls "wisdom from strangers."

By Daniel Everett | APRIL 30, 2017

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In a Pirahã village along the Maici River in Brazil, I squeezed mustard onto a piece of bread. An old woman from the village watched me. "Why do you eat bird shit?," she asked. There was irritation in her voice. Then I looked at her more closely: My curious inquirer was sucking the brains out of a roasted rat head.

There was novelty in what we were seeing. Diverse perspectives. We had stumbled upon the necessary condition for all learning.

There are those who say that learning is changed behavior following exposure to new information. If we already know the information we are receiving, such as the familiar food before us on the plate, we have not mentally expanded. Same food, no learning. New food, learning.

Eating a plate of *surströmming* would be new behavior for me, based on the new information that one can, in fact, eat a terribly stinky fish. Just as sushi was once new to me as an adult, and solid foods as an infant. Food is a captivating teacher.

This principle of learning applies to conceptual and cultural learning as well. It is harder to learn things from people like ourselves — say, someone who grew up with us in our neighborhood, from our ethnic background and our gender. We already know most of what each other knows. This is not our situation as we enter life, of course. We are born as aliens, everyone in our world a stranger, except our mother (whose food preferences, intonational patterns, and fear reactions we learn in the womb). The child's behavior changes daily with new information.

But then the child begins to feel comfortable in his or her limitations, slowing the rate of learning. The brain is prepared for this, pruning synapses in part to reduce search space for new information, what some refer to as "the critical period." Thus, early on, our capacity for learning from newness is reduced, requiring greater effort to expand our mind. And our cultural biases, facilitated by the natural operation of synaptic pruning, continue to strengthen throughout our lives. Unless we make an effort to learn new perspectives, our biases constrict us slowly, like a cognitive python.

But new behavior and new information take effort. Why listen to dissonant jazz when the steady 4/4 beat of country or rock is familiar? Why eat haggis instead of pot roast? "Comfort food" is just food that requires no learning. Why learn another language? Why make friends of a different color, a different sexual orientation, a different nationality? Why should a professor make friends with a cowboy?

I have lived abroad nearly half of my life, about eight years of that time in the Amazonian jungles, away from "civilization." But I have also lived in England, in Germany, and in Mexico. I now live among New England intellectuals. But I was raised in California's Imperial Valley, among farm laborers whose idea of fun was a Western movie with lots of fighting. My father's exclamation, "Damn! There was a lot of shootin' in that one!" was about the highest praise one could offer for a film experience.

The sameness of life in those early days made the weather on television and the names we hadn't heard before seem somehow inferior to our daily experience. Not until I left home — and in spite of how much I have fought it — did my information rate, the entropy or unexpectedness of the information I received, grow higher. The quality and quantity of my learning thereby increased.

Diversity of intellectual and cultural experiences, exposure to new people unlike ourselves, is what I refer to as "wisdom from strangers." Indeed, many of us live in a society of strangers — we are occupants of communities in which most of the people we see are unknown to us. This contrasts with societies of intimates, where every one knows every one, like most Amazonian groups and many rural communities. Where there is sameness, there arise autodenominations, the linguist's term for descriptions of others like "straight ones" and "bent ones," phrases I learned among the Pirahã. Lack of learning, the comfort of homogeneity, renders most of us ethnocentric.

But even in societies of strangers, we learn far less than we might. We often limit our contact with strangers — the less another person is like us, the less we desire to know that person. Some of us want "comfort relationships" even more than we crave comfort food. Learning is hard. The lecturer who never varies course form or content is not learning, but it is the easy way. Prepare the course once, teach it forever. (I throw out all my lecture notes at the end of every semester, to avoid a teaching rut.) The students who take only the courses that interest them are reducing their learning potential.

Of course, learning requires more than mere exposure to difference. To glean wisdom from strangers, we must submit ourselves to those strangers, as a child submits to the world of his or her parents. Placing ourselves under the tutelage of others is a necessary condition for acquiring wisdom. Everyone should live for at least a week with strangers, ideally those most unlike themselves. An atheist woman in a fundamentalist Muslim home. An urban sophisticate with a family of wheat farmers. Learning enters such experiences if we live by others' rules and their values. Let them tell you how "it's done," and then do it that way.

But let's be clear: Diversity is about self-interest, not altruism. If you hire a faculty member from a minority group or make an effort to recruit more minority students, you are not doing them a favor so much as increasing the likelihood of learning in your institution, your business, and in your life.

Social science can benefit from diversity by studying people very much unlike ourselves. Not to exoticize them, but to learn from them. To live among them, under their teaching, to learn about the limits of human experience. I have learned as much in casual discussions around Amazonian campfires as in any course I have ever taken or any research I have conducted. By watching people point out constellations that my culture doesn't recognize, or having someone teach me about plants and animals I have never seen, or learning words that don't fit my conceptual categories, I become wiser.

Some of us might think that the ability to learn from others is limited by a universal biological fact — we all share an identical human nature. This was the view of Adolf Bastian, who was among the first to talk about the "psychic unity of mankind," and those he influenced — Joseph Campbell, Jung, Freud, Franz Boas, and, indirectly, Noam Chomsky and Jerry Fodor. Bastian's views on human nature were in turn influenced by the long line of rationalism that extends back to Plato, reaching forward through Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, and Kant, among others. In this sense, whether in language or conceptual inventories, humans vary little deeply, most variation being superficial.

But what if there is no such unity?

Others of us, influenced by Aristotle, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and on down to C.S. Peirce and Willard Van Orman Quine, believe that psychic unity, or "human nature," is a fantasy. Each human, without an appeal to an inborn set of concepts, is shaped by the "dark matter of their minds," an amalgam of their cultural and individual experiences. In a sense, Buddhism and Hinduism captured these distinctions long before Western philosophy in the contrast between the *atman* ("self") and the *anatman* ("no self").

The role of culture in shaping, indeed providing, our concepts, values, social roles, and knowledge structures has long been debated. But for many of us, the preponderance of evidence is that there is no *atman*. There is only an individual shaped by his or her apperceptions interpreted through the light of culture and held together by unreliable memory. We are all Heraclitean creatures, sometimes the same, but often different from moment to moment.

Elsewhere I have described culture as "an abstract network shaping and connecting social roles, hierarchically structured knowledge domains, and ranked values. Culture is dynamic, shifting, reinterpreted moment by moment. ... Culture permeates the individual, the community, behaviors, and thinking." This means that culture is not "out there." Culture has no existence apart from one

individual's learning from other individuals.

The related concept of "dark matter of the mind" is just any knowledge that is unspoken in normal circumstances, usually unarticulated even to ourselves. It contains implicit values, body postures, food preferences, and all the other things that make us who we are, how we are like and unlike others. Such dark matter is largely where culture resides in the individual.

If there is a human nature, then we learn from others by discovering as many possible superficial permutations of that nature as our energy and willingness to learn permit. But if, as I believe, there is no human nature, then the lessons from other individuals and cultures that are unlike us become much more profound, and the entropy level of received information rises dramatically. In either case, the more we remain comfortable, the less we learn, the less our behaviors change, the less adaptable we are. The worse for the species.

We fail to recognize our own knowledge shortcomings, because our knowledge is embedded in the dark matter of our minds, as this arises from the practice of social roles, the use of knowledge structures, and the application of our value hierarchies. Each of these arises via aperceptions in the course of our individual life histories. Consider a citizen of Houston and a resident of Paris. Ask them if they like good food. Both will say yes. Ask them if they like to be in good physical shape. Both will say yes. Now observe their behavior — does one seem to value physical appearance or conditioning above good food? That one will probably be thinner. Does one value good food over physical conditioning? That one will probably be less thin.

Observe. Converse. Learn.

Wisdom from strangers reduces our fears. We fear our neighbors and our world in proportion to our unfamiliarity with them. Tom Waits's song "What's He Building?," about a reclusive neighbor who arouses suspicion, comes to mind. Our country, like all countries, is somehow the sum of its local populations. Different local populations have different cultures. And the state boundaries around those varied values and the individuals they shape are a reflection of this principle. In fact, they were the object of the founders of America's thinking on the Electoral College. It isn't enough to win the support of the majority of individuals, but the majority of local populations, the majority of states. And many of those local populations vote from fear. Fear of new neighbors who don't look like them, fear of new jobs replacing old jobs, fear of change in the comfortable sameness of their existence. Pockets of culture shape individuals, communities, nations, and all the activities those entities engage in.

Condemning one another is unproductive. But we do often lapse into condemnation when comfort is threatened, when the entropy in what we are experiencing makes the information intolerably new. Yet that is the point. As individuals and as a nation, we are less resilient and less adaptive without diversity. America was ostensibly founded on the principle of diversity. The principle is that we need to learn from the other, to embrace the wisdom of strangers. The literature, science, technology, medicine, art, and magnificent system of higher education that have emerged in the history of America are the outputs of national diversity. As we valued that, placing it almost as a national motto on the base of the Statue of Liberty, we developed into a great nation. But we should never aspire to be a "melting pot," where differences are eliminated in a homogenous, tasteless gruel.

We are a buffet of cultures. Or a salad.

Minorities may gather into enclaves, but they are forced, by virtue of being minorities, to learn from the majority. The majority, on the other hand, forms more than a cultural enclave. It is the enveloping culture that can muffle other voices in norms of comfortable discourse, routines of diet, and too much sameness in social and cultural experiences. It is the majority that is at the greatest danger of missing the power of diversity. African-Americans who can speak African-American Vernacular English and standard white California English have an advantage. Members of the LGBT community who can function well in straight society have learned more than straights who cannot enjoy queer society. This is not to say that all cultures, all values, or all knowledge structures are of equal value. But it does say that values are local, not universal.

Diversity is the heart of success because it is the heart of learning. Without ensuring a flow of wisdom from strangers, a country chooses the comfort of sameness and predictability over the challenge of new ways of thinking and living. One thing that is similar across human populations is the set of problems we all have to solve — food, clothing, shelter, happiness. The power of diversity

offers us inexhaustible sets of solutions to those problems. The wisdom of strangers can be learned only when we submit ourselves to differences, seek them out, and celebrate the perimeters of human experience.

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