

The Role of Culture

by Sharif Abdullah

If consciousness is the way we perceive "I" in relationship to "other," culture is the set of behaviors that act out that perception. If I perceive/believe that grasshoppers are food, I will act according to that belief and gather grasshoppers for dinner. To the extent that others believe and do the same thing, we form a "culture."

If I believe that grasshoppers are pests, I will act accordingly and spray them with pesticides. And my children will be raised to see the world that way.

Whether you believe that insects are food or pests, chances are that your belief developed not from your own direct life experience but from what your culture taught you.

By "taught," I do not mean that someone sat down with you and said, "Now, Suzie, this thing is a grasshopper and it is good to eat and this is how you eat it." What happened is that you saw someone eating a grasshopper and imitated her. Alternatively, you found a grasshopper in the yard, stuck it in your mouth, and then found yourself surrounded by adults screaming, yelling, pleading with you to spit it out, and calling the doctor. You had just been "taught" that eating grasshoppers is bad.

If taught that "I" am separate from "you" (whether separate-and-superior or separate-and-inferior), I will develop or accept a set of behaviors through which I can act out that teaching. Exclusivity becomes my culture. This culture is practiced in a million different ways, every day, to the point that I consider it "normal."

Most of our culture is normalizing and encompassing. We do not see our consciousness as an accumulation of the beliefs and perceptions of others--we see "reality." We do not see our behavior as one of a countless number of possible valid actions---we generally do not see our behavior at all. When we encounter those who act differently, we tend to see them as "wrong" or "evil." Even among the "enlightened," encountering another culture means becoming "tolerant" of others; we rarely stop to think that others are trying to be tolerant of *our* bizarre behaviors!

...No one ever "taught" you your culture; you have always been surrounded by it. It is difficult to move far enough away to get an objective view of culture. "Story" becomes "reality."

Maintaining the Culture of Exclusivity

A friend related the following experience:

My mother and father always taught that everyone is equal, and that everyone deserves a fair shake. However, when we were youngsters in our family car, we would get a different lesson. At a certain point in our journey, my father would say, without turning his head, "Okay, everyone lock up now." We were all supposed to lock the doors to the car. The only thing that was different about that part of our trip was that the people on the streets were black instead of white.

That was a powerful lesson. To this day, I still want to lock my car doors when I see black people on the street, even though I know I am in no more danger than at the beginning of the journey.

Because of culture, people think their behavior is normal, no matter how eccentric it may appear to others. People defend practices related to death, mutilation, and oppression on the grounds that they are "cultural" [normal]. The institutions of slavery and segregation were

maintained for hundreds of years, each generation being taught that these practices were normal. Similarly, we are currently engaged in behaviors that our grandchildren will consider as barbaric as slavery: clear cutting forests, permitting the virtual unregulated sale of cigarettes, tolerating hunger and homelessness, chemically manufacturing [and spraying] food, keeping people in economic slavery... [and confining and killing animals for food and clothing].

While culture maintains behavior, the opposite is also true: behavior maintains culture. Behavior sets up a tendency, a "field," in which it is easier to act within the dictates of culture than it is to operate outside of it. In a culture that eats grasshoppers, it is much easier to go along and eat grasshoppers than to fight the grasshopper eaters. It is easier to act as if conspicuous consumption were important to you, even if it is not. It is easier [or so it seems] to live the... [culturally approved] story, even when you know it is dysfunctional, than it is to change it.

As we shall see later, although consciousness and culture are deeply entrenched, they *can* be transformed. In the case of exclusivity, they *must* be changed, for the good of all.

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