

PLURALISM

Script for a Slide Show for Hawaii Girl Scout's Convention
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Who am I?

Am I the inheritor of my parent's genes? Is all that is important about me expressed in the genes and chromosomes that I received, half from my mother and half from my father, when I was conceived? Do I have her eyes and his nose and their ways of doing things--forever?

Or is my family more important than just the two people who happen to be my mother and father? Am I part of a clan which stretches back so far in time (perhaps I know not how far indeed) that still can grasp and hold and mold me, fondly, perhaps, but surely to its own ways. Is it the case that I can not, or should not, live for myself, but for the honor and respect of my family?

Or is the most important thing in my life my community? My family, no matter how large, is only a part of the even larger number of people around them, without whom they themselves cannot live. Is it my duty to honor and obey and uphold the ways of my town, or my neighborhood, or my group. "Be true to my school"--is that the golden rule?

Or is it my state or region that defines who I am? I'm from Alabama; I'm from Maine; I'm from New York; I'm from California; I'm from Nebraska. Are you from Dixie, well, I'm from Dixie too!

No, no, it must be that the most important thing in my life is my nation--America, love it or leave it! My country, right or wrong--I must support it. Defend it. Glorify it. Worship it. Deify it. Attack and kill all who question it.

Or do my loyalties lie beyond any single nation? Am I a Catholic--worldwide? A Jew? A Moslem?

Or is the most important thing my color, my so-called, "race." Does my whiteness--or blackness, or yellowness, or brownness--my blood, my koko--define me more than anything else, so that I can unite more with people of "my kind" around the world than with those who are not?

Or is the fact that I am a woman--or a man--mean more than anything else. Should I rebel against this patriarchy which has oppressed us for several thousand years. Or is a woman's place properly in the kitchen mit kirchen und kinder?

Or is it my class? My upper class. My sturdy middle class. My toiling working class. My struggling underclass. Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to loose but your change.

Or do I belong to the entire globe. To the Commonwealth of all Humanity. Am I, or would I prefer to be, a citizen of the world, and not that of any nation--or race, or class, or sex, or group--alone?

Am I a child of God, and not of this world; this house afire from which we all will and soon must flee? Into the waiting arms of God my savior.

You must answer those questions for yourself. I cannot answer them for you, although there will be--there are now--many, many who wish to tell you what the true answer is. Some may be in this very room today. Others you have heard throughout this week. Whom do you believe? Why do you believe it? How do you know you are right? How do you know what "right" is in a world where so many different people and groups each argue, with God and reason on their side, that they are right and all the others are wrong.

Well, let me add just one more voice in the chorus. It is what I believe. I share it with you, not to convince you to my belief, but to convince you that seeking answers to the questions I pose, and continuing to pose and answer them all your life long, with humility and respect for the answers of others--that this is what is important. Valuing--placing values on things--and always questioning the values--is more important than being sure you have finally found the answers. Indeed, thinking you have found the One Way is, I believe, far more dangerous than exploring--with love and humility--the many, many paths which exist, and which you yourself can create and recreate.

Buckminster Fuller said, "I seem to be a verb; an evolutionary process--an integral function of the universe." I, too, do not feel myself to be a thing; an object; a fixed or wholly predetermined entity. Instead, I experience myself as a process. Thus, I am not a "human being." I am a "human becoming;" always changing, always emerging, always

experiencing--my reach always exceeding my grasp. Never wholly content (though often contended), I am never wholly defeated (though I don't expect to come out of this world alive).

In trying to argue for the possibility and necessity of futures studies, I often say that there really is no such thing as the "present." Rather, there is only my memory of the past, my anticipation of the future, and my actions resulting from my reflecting on the two. Thus I am the present--you are too. I--(and you) as living, changing, ongoing, never-static, never-fixed organisms--we are all there is to the present, rushing through time, always in the process of remembering, anticipating, and acting.

So what is all this talk of "preserving cultural identity?" Given the dynamism of life and the illusion of the present, how is it possible for me to imagine that I (or my culture) have an "identity" that I wish to "preserve?"

We each have developed our own personal identity, by chance of birth and residence, through interaction with the people we happen to have found around us. But also, by chance or purpose, we may encounter people from other places or cultures from whose ways we can also learn. Why is our way necessarily superior to theirs--or theirs to ours, for that matter?

No culture is intrinsically good or bad, superior or inferior. No culture, and no part of it, can demand our uncritical adherence in every aspect.

If my culture permits slavery or apartheid; wife-beating or clitorectomy, is that good? Should I identify with those just because my culture embraces them? I think not.

How about warfare? I personally believe that war is unacceptable in every situation. But my culture justifies it--indeed, requires it--indeed, glorifies it. Should I identify with my culture's barbarism, or should I be able to reject it, and perhaps try to lead my culture to reject the legitimacy of war as well?

I believe that "cultural identity" is a dynamic, and not a static, concept. It legitimately refers to the future, and not only to the past. Indeed, in my preferred formula, it refers ONLY to the future. The past is also necessarily an arena of continual examination, testing, and possible modification in terms of future preferences. No one can be forced to

conform to a previously-experienced mode of identity--still less should one be forced to conform to a mode of identity preferred by others, but not by one's self.

But more: the concept "culture" is often used as a specifically political tool with which to dominate others. Cultural elites often elevate their own personal preferences or privileges and pretend that these must be followed by everyone else they say are members of their particular culture. For example, sometimes people who are said to be "black" are coerced by other black people to act in certain ways, and not to act in other ways. They say that such behavior is necessary if one to be a part of "black culture." Sometimes this may be correct. Other times it seems to be nothing but power-tripping on the part of one segment of black people over others. It may have nothing to do with "culture" except the (to me) undesirable culture of powermongering.

The word "culture" has a meaning that is different from the way I have been using it so far. "Culture" may instead be used in the sense of "high culture"--art, poetry, music, dance--of a specific, refined, intellectualized, rarefied kind. In this use of the term, the ballet, "Swan Lake," is culture. The song, "Boggie till you Puke," by Rootboy Slim and the Sex-Change Band is not "culture." As in, "you ain't go no culture." Or as in complaints about our "uncultured youth." According to the way we have been using the word earlier today, there is no such thing as "high" culture or "low" culture. There are only different cultures. In the usage I am referring to now, "high" and "low" are most certainly important distinctions--and they are most certainly used by the "cultured" to power-trip the "uncultured", I can assure you.

But how can we talk of culture in this sense, when we live in a culture, in the other sense, which seems to be happily and purposefully on the brink of destroying itself because it believes that another tribe of humans across the sea are devils incarnate who live within an Evil Empire which must be destroyed?

Lewis Thomas put it this way, as he describes his feelings about the ending of the Ninth Symphony by Gustav Mahler:

"There is a short passage near the very end of the Mahler in which the almost vanishing violins, all engaged in a sustained backward glance, are edged aside for a few bars by the cellos. Those lower notes pick up fragments from the first movement, as though prepared to begin everything all over again, and then the cellos subside and disappear, like

an exhalation.

"I used to hear this as a wonderful few seconds of encouragement: we'll be back; we're still here; keep going; keep going.

"Now--with a pamphlet in front of me, on a corner of my desk, published by the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, entitled MX BASING, an analysis of the all the possible strategies for placement and protection of hundreds of these missiles, each capable of creating artificial suns to vaporize a hundred Hiroshimas, collectively capable of destroying the life of any continent--I cannot hear the same Mahler. Now those cellos sound in my mind like the opening of all the hatches and the instant before ignition."

This is a poem by Fritz Hamilton, titled, "Mother and Child."

"Just staring at Jesse in his crib,
no moving, not crying no more....
Of course, him too weak to cry for days now anyway.
Maybe if my nipples hadn't dried up
He'd still be moving and crying
and I'd still be holding him...
But I couldn't even keep feeding myself,
much less Jesse, so the milk dried up....
And the Welfare people stopped doing this for me, and
So did Mary's Help Kitchen...
Because (at least so they said),
they don't have no money either any more....
But nobody will hire me for nothing, and
all I can do is sit home and hold Jesse....
And I was always told that people don't
starve to death in American no more....
So maybe instead of wrapping up my baby
and dropping him in the sewer,
I'll just put him in a box and
Mail him to President Reagan
So he'll understand."

No, no, I just can't leave it like that. You know I can't. There is within every culture (there must be still within ours--within each one of you, I hope), a spirit of love, and sharing, and acceptance, and trust. Of inquisitiveness and daring. A desire to risk your self to try something new. To move from your fears to your dreams. We can do it. You can do it. We must do it. America, and the kind of perverted white culture that seems to dominate now, can no longer stand so fearfully and frightenly alone in a

world of other growing and yearning cultures. We must rejoin the human race, be willing to share and to learn; to give as well as take; to be certain enough of our culture to want to delve deeply into all others.

Who knows that better than women? What women know that better than Girl Scouts? What Girl Scout knows that better than you?