

Cultural Misfit or Chameleon?

April 28, 2015

Each time I take a transatlantic flight I find myself in that zone, somewhere high in the clouds over the Atlantic, where my American and European selves converge and I feel the most at home. On a recent flight to Europe, I again found myself in this space. Navigating different cultures and trying to find a sense of belonging has long been a major theme in my life. Working with clients, I always stress the importance of finding the balance between being authentic to yourself and stretching to be at ease when out of your comfort zone. Yet for some of us, this may be a way of living. Over the years I have been able to find an answer to my cultural polarity in my work and my personal life. As a colleague recently remarked, I am a cultural chameleon. When I enter another culture, I try to assess the situation and adapt my behavior to conform to the norm of that culture as much as possible. After spending my life looking for ways to fit in, I have inadvertently stumbled upon both a professional and personal equilibrium that perfectly suits the global world in which we are living.

How well do you fit in? When you travel to other cultures how do you navigate that in-between zone where you want to just be yourself and you also know you will need to adopt new behaviors to be accepted in your new environment? For many people, there can be an uneasiness being in another culture, a feeling of loss and insecurity. Some may look for symbols of comfort, whether it's socializing with people from their own culture or frequenting restaurants that serve similar foods to home. Others may dive into foreign waters with determination looking for adventure and excitement. Curiosity and a thirst for knowledge about other cultures becomes the driving force. Still others may find themselves in that place that is so familiar to me, that in-between zone where there is the eagerness to discover the unknown and yet a strange sense of it being home.

Cultural-competence requires finding that balance between interconnection and non-attachment. Between being a participant and an observer. Between being willing to step to the precipice of the unknown and explore what may be and being genuine to who you are. As you traverse this somewhat nebulous space ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) Am I willing to try something I've never tried before?
- 2) How open am I to exploring new perspectives to doing something?
- 3) How can I connect with others different from me and build empathic relations?
- 4) How should I communicate in my new environment while remaining true to myself?
- 5) How can I assimilate without losing my cultural identity?

While each of us has a different answer to these questions and the circumstances will prescribe how we respond to them, remember that cultural competence and adaptation means that we sometimes have to take the plunge and surrender to discovering what

awaits us. This may ultimately be the difference between being a cultural misfit or a chameleon. Enjoy the journey.