



# In an Age of Diversity, How Do We Deal with Differences?

*Earlier this year, National Geographic put a call out to photographers from around the world to capture images that would close ‘a widening empathy gap between us and those who have life experiences that differ dramatically from our own.’ The end result was a breathtaking amalgam of images, juxtaposed against one another to highlight the similarities of our diverse humanity.” (Amira Elghawaby. Where has all of our empathy gone? G&M, Aug 19, 2017.)*

How do we learn to see these images and to imagine — and to feel — the experiences and hopes and suffering of our world community’s neighbours?

So many of the individuals, couples, and families with whom we at IFL are privileged to work with are experiencing dimensions of anxiety — and frequently despair — about the state of the world, the environment, their employment, their faith community, their relationships. For many, the security they had once felt of a monolithic worldview and culture has given way to a vibrant, multinational society with a variety of religious worldviews, political tensions, and threats of war. There is an undertone of fear and a loss of a certain kind of peace.

For many, this is a time of moral injury and despair. There is a fear of the stranger, a resistance to welcoming the “other.”

But how can we learn to be curious; to overcome our own blocks and resistances to change; to look again at the ancient Biblical mandate to welcome the stranger; and to answer the question, “who is my neighbour?”

Often the challenge in being therapists and offering therapy, is learning to become curious, to seek the grace of openness to another way of being, and to seek to understand and move towards rather than to shut down emotionally and move away from those who are perceived to look, act, and believe differently. For all of us, facing fear is the work of grace.

Strangers come in many different guises, but so too do friends. In looking at the larger systems that comprise a city like Toronto, there may be ethnic differences — we may speak different languages, eat different food, listen to different music, have different customs. There may be racial differences — the “other” may look different from the dominant cultural group and suffer from the effects of deeply entrenched systemic racism. There may be class and financial differences — we may live in different parts of town and our children may attend very different schools. And there may be religious differences, whether within or between a faith community — we may represent them through different symbols, forms of dress, and religious holidays.

On the relational level, there are a variety of personal differences. There are gender differences — some identify as clearly male or female; others may be born with indeterminate gender; some are members of sexual minorities and experience prejudice and discrimination (and even persecution) as a result. There are mobility differences — we are differently abled: some may not be able to walk easily, or at all, and require different kinds of assistive devices; others are extremely agile and gifted athletes. There are visual, hearing, and learning differences — some are more visible to many whereas others are hidden from all but the closest people. And there are emotional and relational differences — some are unable to form close relationships; others have a large social network; some

suffer from the effects of mental and emotional illness or addictions; others are unable to engage in treatment and become isolated and disconnected from family or friends.

Can we learn together to be open and welcoming of the stranger or will we be people and a society that needs to “build a wall”? And what if the “other” is a spouse, family member, colleague, client, or someone in the same classroom or living on the same street? Is there a way to have healthy boundaries that are permeable and hospitable, not rigid and alienating? And when is fear a healthy response? How do we discern what is truly dangerous from what we simply fear because a person or a group is unusual?

Countering our resistances to change, facing honestly the challenges to our comfort level, and learning to move towards rather than against — all of these dynamics are part of the work of therapy. And they are also the work of a society, a faith community, and a nation as we live in a global age.

by Diane Marshall, RP, RMFT

In a 2016 Canadian Environics study (Canadian Public Opinion on Aboriginal Peoples, p. 37), the authors note that “acknowledgement of Aboriginal peoples as having unique rights is somewhat more evident among women, people born outside of Canada, and those with lower household incomes.” Does privilege and social hegemony diminish our capacity for empathy?

A recent G&M article (Sept 23, 2017) quotes political philosopher Michael Sandel: “At a time of hardening attitudes towards immigrants and so-called outsiders, Toronto is a shining example of a pluralist place that welcomes immigrants and appreciates the civic importance of pluralism and diversity....I think Canada is perhaps doing better than most [democratic societies where] we see a populist backlash...in the wake of rising inequality.”

*“To create peaceful change, we must begin by remembering who we are in God. Gandhi believed the core of our being is union with God. From this awareness, nonviolence must flow naturally and consistently...”*

*“Regardless of what name we call the divine, Gandhi believed that experiencing God’s loving presence within is central to nonviolence.” Richard Rohr,*

*Sept 20, 2017.*

### **Further Reading**

Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi on Non-Violence. Thomas Merton, ed. New Directions, Reprint edition: 2007, p. 36–38.



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