

**MAKING INDIANA A WELCOMING PLACE FOR DIVERSE ETHNIC  
GROUPS**  
**Discovering and Understanding our Common Ground**

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Thank you for inviting me to be the keynote speaker at this first MultiEthnic Conference on making Indiana a welcoming place for diverse ethnic groups. I came to Indiana in 2001 to find a city and a state remarkably open to making a place for me, that welcomed people of ability and enterprise who wanted to contribute to economic and social progress. My family and I have found a home here.

I must note that this has not always been my experience. When I was a faculty member at Berea College in eastern Kentucky, and my wife a lawyer, I remember Sue remarking that if she were ever to run for public office, she would have to resume her maiden name because “Fong” would be a non-starter at the polls.

Perhaps times have changed, and people are more cosmopolitan, more welcoming of strangers regardless of race, religion, national origins, and economic class. I don't think that's universally so, nor do I take for granted that my welcome as the incoming president of Butler University is necessarily the experience of all sojourners coming to Indiana. That's why this conference is so important, because making Indiana a welcoming place for diverse ethnic groups calls for intentional hard work.

There is an old adage that states, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” It presumes that visitors to Rome had to adapt to Roman ways, that Rome set the

standards for cultural expectations and behaviors. Today, we realize that encounters between people of different cultural backgrounds necessitate our finding common ground, the subtitle of our conference. Global competence is more than realizing that difference host cultures expect different things: it's that hosts and sojourners should seek mutual adaptation to one another.

By the same token, in coming into a new land, the burden to adapt is always heavier on the sojourner. As an American Field Service exchange student in high school, I remember losing weight in Germany. I grew up in America eating a light breakfast, no lunch, and a heavy dinner. My host family in Germany ate a light breakfast, with lunch as the main meal of the day, and sandwiches for supper. I couldn't adapt to the dietary routine! In South Asia, the left hand is taboo for certain social activities because it is customary to use it to perform one's toilet. Being left-handed myself, this calls for very careful adjustments!

Indiana represents a Hoosier culture, and whether a sojourner is from California or Africa, Maine or Asia, Louisiana or Europe, we need to learn the customs of the culture.

At the same time, it behooves us Hoosiers to be sensitive both to other cultures and to how our own customs impinge upon them. I remember an American business leader travelling to Turkey and being entertained at the home of his Turkish host. He was encouraged to make himself comfortable, and he put his feet up on the coffee table, not realizing that showing the soles of his feet to his host was considered a social insult. He didn't understand until later why the visit turned sour and he lost the deal.

Global competence for Hoosiers, that is, seeking common ground with those of other cultures, is important for a practical reason: it benefits us. It opens markets. Everyone needs medicine, but why should a country buy from one manufacturer over another? Why should a drug distributor locate in Indiana rather than Kentucky? We must acknowledge that our world doesn't stop at state or national borders, and true understanding is to be achieved not at the point of a gun, nor a treaty, nor even a contract, but by the living relationships between people.

The noted Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner and I were once speaking about old and new style religious ecumenism. Once ecumenism meant that when people of different religious traditions gathered together, they tended to minimize or avoid what was distinctive in their individual faiths. The result was a common ground with little vitality or deep understanding. Jack said we needed a new ecumenism, one in which we prized one another exactly at the point where our traditions diverged. He concluded memorably, "Bobby, I want to think you are most my friend when you are at your most Christian, and I am most your friend when I am at my most Jewish."

The promise and potential of multiculturalism is that we can be stronger precisely when we bring our cultural differences to bear in order to enrich the perspectives needed to meet the challenges of our time. Within an organization, it avails one of a cadre of qualified workers and leaders who can benefit the company while remaining true to their cultures.

How do you encourage people to learn about cultures other than their own? This is a matter more for the host than the sojourner, since the sojourner has no choice but to learn the host culture.

For individual Hoosiers, global competence and intercultural sensitivity can help make you, your team, and your company more productive since it reduces the relational grit that gets in the way of smooth functioning. For supervisors, understanding what motivates your reports may make you a better manager. For boards and senior management, the needs of a global economy put a premium on recognizing, rewarding, and promoting talent without being distracted by issues of cultural comfort or fit. The doom of an organization is to presume that success merely lies in replicating the next generation of leaders just like “us.” This only replicates both strengths and weaknesses; potential and limits. To think multiethnically, you must be multiethnic.

Here are some questions you can ask about your organization: How do you alter organizational practices and procedures to embrace diversity? Is intercultural training a prerequisite for promotion? How does the company reward global competence and intercultural awareness? Is the company supportive, in cold dollars, of minority caucuses and their functions?

What special training do members of minority groups need in order to become successful leaders? Minorities need mentors who are willing to sponsor them beyond their initial areas of expertise. Sojourners need the opportunity to engage in framing new problems, managing a work group, writing and orally presenting reports, and recreating themselves from technicians to leaders. They need to be supported as they

stretch to become a different best self than they previously imagined themselves to be.

Let me turn to sojourners and their endeavor to find common ground in the host culture. How do you position your differences as strengths rather than liabilities? Every perceived strength by definition excludes another strength. If you are talking, by definition you can't be listening. But a perceived liability in turn can have its inverse strength. The Asian stereotype of the quiet reflective person who doesn't speak unless called upon in turn masks the ability of quiet people who can listen hard, summarize points fairly and disinterestedly, and after putting an issue in context, suggest where a consensus may lie. Asian leaders I know typically rarely speak first, and don't speak much, but they do speak late, and often what they say effectively ends the discussion. Make your cultural reticence a strength.

However, if your liability is indeed a liability; for example, if you have difficulty in speaking English as a second language, work to strengthen the skill and minimize the liability. But if what is perceived as a liability is really a cultural strength, learn what roles to play so that the strength is revealed as a strength to the organization regardless of culture.

If an employee believes he or she has encountered a glass ceiling, what strategies might be used to break through it? First, you need to use the red flag test. Is the perceived glass ceiling limiting only you or all members of your cultural group? Be honest, for a glass ceiling is by definition discrimination against a group regardless of individual merit. Second, if there are a few examples of the cultural group who have

surmounted the glass ceiling, talk to them to discern what accommodations or circumstances enabled them to break through. Third, if there is indeed a glass ceiling that ignores the potential worth of members of a group regardless of their accomplishments, bring it to the attention of change agents in the organization. Wasting human talent is no more economically useful than wasting materials, time, or equipment. Business, like sports, aims to succeed, and smart leaders want to use every edge. A glass ceiling that hinders talent development because of cultural disjunction works against success. Fourth, if there is no change, ask yourself both what your future is in this organization and if there is a future for that organization.

We also need to understand that sometimes it may be impossible to find common ground: that there is a distinction between cultural styles and cultural values. There is a difference between cosmetic accommodations to get along in order to get ahead and compromising cultural integrity. There is a difference between wearing a sari, a matter of cultural style, and a turban, an expression of religious fidelity.

What are clues that cultural conflict is occurring? Look for the red flag: is there a given issue that seems not only specific to a person but characteristic of a concern shared by an entire cultural group? For example, take eye contact by Asians. In Chinese culture, it is a mark of respect not to look person in eye. Staring back is considered aggressive. By contrast, Americans regard lack of eye contact as evasiveness. For most of us, however, this is a style, not a value issue. Asians can learn to make eye contact in social interactions with Americans. I confess, however,

that even after thirty years as a professor, it is still difficult for me to sustain eye contact with students in a classroom!

How do you resolve conflict if it arises not just out of misunderstanding of another's behavior, but because of incompatible values? First, determine if the issue is a matter of style or a value. Care must be taken in particular by the host: there is a power differential that permits those in the dominant culture to lightly and prematurely dismiss the discomfort of the sojourner as being simply a matter of style. A case in point: the wearing of a turban may be non-negotiable for the Sikh who wears it. For issues of workplace safety, this could be an issue serious enough to consider a parting of ways for principle's sake. In contrast, putting up one's feet in front of a Turk may not be a matter of principle but of social courtesy that nonetheless can have significant repercussions. With regard to Chinese and eye contact, it may be a matter of mentorship to help the sojourner acclimatize to a different stylistic expectation.

I grew up in the "assimilationist" 1950's, assuming one left one culture behind in order to become a member of another. The terms of cultural discourse have now changed. Cross-cultural communication most often calls for some accommodation from both host and sojourner, and the result, at least for the sojourner, is a modified cultural common ground, a public area of one's life that permits one to interact with others of different cultures without feeling that one has to abandon one's base culture.

Thus far, I've concentrated on discussing ways of seeking common ground, ways in which global competency can promote a more welcoming environment for

sojourners from different cultures. My remarks have been directed to situations where sojourners have come with the means to contribute to the social and economic progress of Indiana.

But in talking about making Indiana a welcoming place for diversity, I am concerned that we not limit our attention to those we want to be part of our community because we can benefit immediately from their contributions. I want to remind us of our calling to reach out to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

In the Hebrew Testament, Exodus 22:21-23 declares, “You shall neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any wise, and they call at all to me, I will surely hear their cry.”

We have single parents in Indiana who are barely getting by, who need support and education. We have children in Indiana who don't have the embrace and guidance of loving parents, who need physical and emotional shelter and education. We have immigrants, legal and illegal, in Indiana who have left language, vocations, support networks, and cultures behind to pursue better opportunities for themselves and their children.

I am the child of illegal immigrants, raised by a widowed mother, who died before I went to college. Without the welcome embrace of individuals and communities a generation ago, I would not be standing before you today.

My father died when I was two and my younger sister five months old. The Oakland Chinatown community reached out and supported my mother until the children were old enough for her to work at a sweatshop, sewing clothes at piece

rates. When my sister and I began school and were old enough to be latchkey children, mom commuted to San Francisco daily in order to work at a union shop. Indiana must welcome the single parents, who regardless of ethnic background, find that poverty is also a cultural barrier to hope and achievement.

When I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I got an after school job to help out with the family finances. When mom found out, she made me quit the job. She said, “We’re getting by, and I want you to work hard in school because the scholarships you earn will be more significant than any paycheck you bring home.” Then she said unforgettably, “Education is your job.” For our young people, particularly those without supportive parents, Indiana needs to welcome them into communities of love and guidance and remove the barriers that deter them from concentrating on their jobs: to educate themselves for brighter tomorrows.

In the first half of the twentieth century, quotas on Chinese immigration to America were so small as to be non-existent. Both my parents came over on false immigration papers. Today, we have immigrants from Latin America, from Asia, from Africa, from Europe and the Slavic states who are here illegally. They, like my parents, broke the law. But let us remember that laws worthy of America must be just and equitable, and that our history is replete with instances where the disadvantaged were urged to obey laws that today we find immoral and repellent. Leviticus 19: 33-34 reads, “And if a stranger sojourn with you in your land, you shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwells with you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” We have much to do in immigration reform, but Indiana must welcome

the stranger, knowing that they contribute far more to economic and social prosperity than they receive from public welfare.

America has been the land of opportunity and equality under law. We have flourished because we have welcomed the contributions of sojourners from all lands who bring their talents and capacity for hard work. It profits us to understand them and their cultures, to accommodate them because of their productivity. But the greatness of America, of Indiana, of Indianapolis, lies in welcoming not only the productive, but those poor in spirit, who by our support will grow strong and become those citizens who can make a difference in the lives of our state because somewhere along the way, someone, a Hoosier, made a difference in theirs. Let Indiana welcome the sojourner, the widowed, the orphan, and the stranger.