STRANGE VIRTUES: ETHICS IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

SIX: STRANGE COMMUNICATIONS

Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf are well known among linguists for their hypothesis that language is "a self-contained, creative, symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help but actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projection of its implicit expectations into the field of experience."[1]

Language and the Way We See the World

The assertion of the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" is that language is not just a neutral medium through which we express our ideas but a powerful structure that shapes all that we think, say and do. Most of what we see and understand is filtered through language. The implication for crosscultural ethics is that different languages produce different perceptions of the world. Language and culture cannot be separated. Therefore we cannot hope to really see the world through the eyes of another culture without learning the language.

George Kraft suggests that if a person spends two months, two years or ten years in a country, the entire time should be spent in learning the language. No other task better communicates the gospel.[2] The same advice could be given to a tourist spending two weeks in a country. Language learning is the best way to open the door to communication, understanding and human connection. By becoming learners and making the difficult effort to speak with foreign words, we demonstrate our care for people and allow them to show us how they name their world. Sometimes it is less important how well you speak than that you are trying. Halting phrases bring smiles and approval. On the other hand, skill in a language acts like a passport to real relationship. Skill or fluency entails a deep understanding of the culture. Fluency is lacking as long as we translate our language into another. Fluency requires that we experience reality through the categories of the new language. Then we not only will communicate clearly but may also instinctively say the right thing, at the right time, in the right way. If we think in another language we may say very different things from what we would ever say in our own language. The following story illustrates the point.

Sometime in 1906 I was walking in the heat of the day through the bazaars. As I passed an Arab Cafe, in no hostility to my straw hat but desiring to shine before his friends, a fellow called out in Arabic, "God curse your father, O Englishman." I was young then and quicker tempered, and could not refrain from answering in his own language that I would also curse his father if he were in a position to inform me which of his mother's two and ninety admirers his father had been. I heard footsteps behind me, and slightly picked up the pace, angry with myself for committing the sin Lord Cromer would not pardon—a row with Egyptians. In a few seconds I felt a hand on each arm. "My brother," said the original humorist, "return and drink with us coffee and smoke [in Arabic one speaks of 'drinking' smoke]. I did not think that your worship knew Arabic, still less the correct Arabic abuse, and we would fain benefit further by your important thoughts."[3]

Nonverbal Communication of Goodness

Communication includes much more than language. Ray L. Birdwhistell, who sparked the relatively recent interest in nonverbal communication, estimated that in a conversation between two people from the same culture, less than 30 percent of what is communicated is verbal. It is reasonable to suppose that people from different cultures rely even more heavily on nonverbal communication. This is good news insofar as much can be communicated between people who do not share a language. I will never forget a weekend we spent with a French family in 1970. My wife and I picked up Jean Marie, who was hitchhiking outside of Paris. We were just beginning to study French, and he spoke no English. When we let him off, he invited us to his home in a small village for the weekend. There, through music, laughter, food, wine, children, flowers, chores and shared grief over the injustice of the world, we became like brothers and sisters. Of the few words we were able to exchange, only one do I remember as significant: the French word *sympathique* expressed what we had found together. Part of the rapport we shared stemmed from our common membership in the worldwide youth culture of the 1960s. But our whole family has enjoyed real, if less dramatic, nonverbal rapport with strangers in a dozen foreign countries. I once stumbled upon a hidden tribal village in the mountains of Mindoro, Philippines, far from the nearest road. There I met a teenage couple who lived in a simple bamboo hut and had no formal education or contact with the outside world. They invited me into their home to share a simple meal of wild root vegetables cooked in coconut milk. Not only did they make me welcome, we spent an hour in delightful communication without words. The human connection between us was enhanced by our mutual strangeness. When I left, surrounded in the warmth of their shy smiles, I knew I had received a great gift. The next day I tried to return, but I could never again find the secret path that led to their valley.

Such experiences may lead to the false conclusion that all human beings are basically alike and nonverbal communication is universal. Unfortunately, communication without words is a complex language that varies widely from culture to culture. An hour or a weekend may be all that it can bear without serious misunderstanding. Something as simple as a smile, or laughter, may signify widely different meanings in different cultures. With a certain hyperbole, a well-known travel writer suggests that a smile almost never means happiness in China.[5] More often it signifies something like "Westerners are so stupid!"

In Indonesia I am repeatedly amazed at the pervasiveness of smiles and laughter, especially in the countryside, where 90 percent of the people live. Smiles and laughter often indicate genuine pleasure, friendliness or at least politeness. They are also used to defuse tension and minimize someone's embarrassment. Thus when a large American woman, who was feeling very self-conscious in a world of small people, tripped and spilled her drink at a party, everyone began to laugh. The meaning of the laughter was not, as the woman thought, ridicule of her clumsiness, but a socially conventional way to defuse tension and help her feel at ease. Concern for her feelings (a virtue) prompted the laughter, not insensitive ridicule. Unfortunately, she did not know the nonverbal language.

In many cultures the values of pleasing a stranger and responding positively to their wishes is far more important than telling them the truth. Javanese almost never say no to a direct question. It just feels too impolite. In some cultures an affirmative answer is likely if your question is given with a smile or an upbeat manner—what the hearer interprets as the expectation of a positive answer—regardless of the question. Conversely, a sober or angry manner is likely to bring a negative answer. It seems to be what you expect. The listener's job is to be polite and say what is expected, not give factual information. An amusing example of this happened in Oakland, California. Grace Dyrness, the director of an inner-city Christian ministry, had just returned from teaching a class on crosscultural communication at New College Berkeley and was on her way to Harbor House, which offers English classes for Southeast Asian refugees. In a friendly manner she stopped to talk with some older Laotian men who were sitting outside. She asked them if they had been to English class, if Irene was their teacher, if she was a good teacher and if they had enjoyed it. To each question they returned her smile

and answered yes, yes, yes, yes. Grace entered the building with a warm feeling at the positive attitudes of the old men. Inside she learned that there had been no classes yet that day and the old men were not even enrolled!

Culturally specific forms of nonverbal communication include unconscious as well as conscious actions. When I first met an Indonesian graduate student in the United States, I was puzzled that although our conversations were very friendly, he always seemed somewhat tense. Somewhere I had read that in Indonesia it is more respectful not to look into a person's eyes when you talk to him. I decided to try it. It was very hard. My American conditioning made me feel that I was not being open and honest if I did not look him straight in the eye. Nevertheless, I was amazed at the results. As I talked to his chin or his chest with only occasional glances at his eyes, he began to relax and became more jovial than I had ever seen him.

This behavior is not a "rule" that you can follow with Indonesians or even Javanese. Often Indonesians do look each other in the eye with no indication of disrespect. My experience on this one occasion may only indicate that averting of the eyes is a traditional, refined Javanese way of honoring a superior in a society that highly values humility. Unconsciously, the meaning of downcast eyes registers as respect in Indonesia but as evasiveness in America.

Studies using high-speed film show that speech and bodily movement are totally synchronized. The body, even down to the blinking of the eyelids, follows the speech. Nothing is random or totally without meaning. Not only the speaker's movements but also those of the listener are coordinated with the speech. Different languages and different cultures show different body movements. As John C. Condon and Fathi S. Yousef put it, "We dance to the rhythm of our own voice when we are talking and, as listeners, we dance to the tune of the speaker's voice."[9]

Unfortunately, the specific meanings of nonverbal communication are not all universal. Some have been shown to be very different from culture to culture. No one knows how much is transcultural. But certainly this makes "fluency" in another language much more difficult to attain. "Not only must we learn to hear and express the new sounds in new rhythms of another language, we must also learn to blink and twitch in a new rhythm!"[10]

Nonverbal communication includes facial expressions, posture and stance, hand gestures, use of space, touching, eye movement, smell, taste, timing, volume of voice and many other things. Edward Hall has illustrated ten different areas in which all cultures communicate: interaction, association, subsistence, bisexuality, territoriality, temporality, learning, play, defense and exploitation.[11] In Hall's model, each of his categories interact with every other category to form one hundred areas in which culturally unique communication occurs. An analysis of just these ten vectors of communication could yield virtually an infinite number of specific cultural practices, all of which are value-laden.

The following example displays a misunderstanding that includes crosscultural confusions in the areas of interaction, bisexuality and territoriality.[12] An American businessman was talking with a young Latino woman at a party in Central America. As they conversed, she took a step closer to him. Feeling uncomfortable, he took a step backwards to maintain what he felt was a comfortable distance. Over the course of their conversation they repeated the unconscious maneuver until they had moved the entire length of the room and he was cornered. He arrived at the conclusion that she was aggressively "coming on to him," and suppressing his moral qualms about her behavior and his response, he invited her to his apartment. She was totally shocked and insulted. She felt that he had been extremely cold and aloof all evening. Each had a different cultural convention for the meaning of space between people in a conversation. Latinos feel comfortable standing closer to each other in a casual conversation than do North Americans. Each made value judgments about the other based on unconscious nonverbal communication that was misconstrued.

The literature of crosscultural studies is full of stories of major and minor disasters that befall those unskilled in crosscultural communication. Some are tragic, some are funny, many are freighted with moral content. But few are as outright delightful as the following:

A little golden girl of seven brought in a coconut which she had opened under the tree outside, sat down, and offered it to me cupped in both hands, at arm's length, with her head a little bowed.
"You shall be blessed," she murmured as I took it.
I did say, "Thank you" in reply, but even after that I should have returned her blessing word for word, and after that I should have returned the nut also, for her to take the first sip of courtesy; and at last—when I received it back, I should have said "Blessings and Peace" before beginning to drink the milk.
All I did woe is me! was to take it, swig it off, hand it back one-handed, empty, with another careless, "Thank you."
"Alas," she said at last in a shocked whisper, "Alas! Is that the manners of a young chief of [the white people]?"
She told me one by one the sins I have confessed... but that was not the full tale. My final discourtesy had been the crudest of all. In handing back the empty nut, I had omitted to belch aloud.
"How could I know when you did not belch... that my food was sweet to you? See, this is how you should have done it!"
She held the nut towards me with both hands, her earnest eyes fixed on mine, and gave vent to a belch so resonant that it seemed to shake her elfin form from stem to stern.
"That," she finished, "is our idea of good manners," and wept for the pity of it.[13]
Anyone entering a foreign land needs good teachers who will teach him or her the languages, spoken and unspoken, that reflect the goodness, truth and beauty of local custom. Above all, we need people who will tell us the truth about our mistakes. Would that we all had teachers as truthful and eloquent as that little girl.

Adaptation to the Role of a Stranger

Christians entering another culture frequently make two mistakes. First, although they know they have a lot to learn, they expect to make rapid progress within a few months. In fact, they are less skilled than a little child in how to communicate and fit in. Almost always they are disappointed in their progress. Learning another language and culture takes years of hard work. If peak efficiency and productivity are your goals, it is probably better not to enter another culture. This is especially true for people from wealthy countries who go to the Third World. The material limitations of developing countries may be significant. But the structural barriers of a strange language and culture can be overwhelming. Crosscultural literature frequently warns people that if they can't succeed at something in their own culture, they will not improve in a foreign context.
Non-Western people who visit the United States often adapt more quickly than their Western counterparts who go abroad. For one thing, people who travel to the States are far more likely to speak English than Americans are to speak a given foreign language. Moreover, Asians, Africans, Europeans and South Americans often know far more about the United States than Americans know about their respective cultures. "Globalization" and U.S. domination of the world's media make American cultural values familiar (though perhaps in distorted form) to people from many parts of the world.
Second, Western Christians think they have a lot to offer. Many would not go to another country if they did not have motivations of ministry. Christians go to serve, to evangelize, to help build the church and the developing country. Probably they have more education, more money and more opportunity than many of their national colleagues. That makes them not only rich but also dangerous. As every parent should know, powerful people who try to help often do more harm than good. Apart from the risks of dependency or of help that is inappropriate, there are the subtle dangers of help that masks self-interest. A foreigner who comes to help may find less

appreciation than he or she expected.

Beyond the physical, language and cultural difficulties they face is the immutable fact that they are foreigners, strangers in a foreign land. Even those who are totally fluent in the language and culture do not cease to be strangers. Even an American who becomes a citizen, who settles permanently in the country, remains a "white man," inexorably tied by skin color, birth and history to the imperial, colonial powers of the West. Similarly, a Nigerian or Indian who lives for many years in England will never be accepted as a true English person. In Indonesia, Chinese whose families have lived there for hundreds of years are still not considered "native" (pribumi). The difficulties and dangers of strangers remain. A foreigner, in time, may be loved and respected. But he or she does not thereby cease to be a stranger.

Anthony J. Gittins, an anthropologist at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, points out that in many languages the word for "stranger" is the same as the word for "guest." These words have a very different feel in English, but in many cultures the rules of hospitality require that strangers be treated as guests. Rules of hospitality are not taken lightly. The responsibilities of a host are significant. Being a stranger is not easy, but neither is being a host. Both must play their role if a crosscultural relationship is to be formed. Gittins asks:

- Do we show adequate and genuine deference to our hosts?
- Do we willingly acknowledge their authority in the situation, and their rights and duties as hosts?
- Do we allow ourselves to be adequately positioned as strangers, according to the legitimate needs of the hosts?
- Or do we try to seize initiatives, show them clearly what our expectations are, make demands on them, and thus effectively refuse the role of stranger, thereby impeding them from being adequate hosts?[14]

Strangers have no inherent right to credibility or trust. These must be earned. Legitimation is a gift from the host. Unlike a citizen, who has a right to be there no matter how obnoxious or foolish he is, a stranger/guest is dependent on his host for the right to remain. Thus the guest is always subordinate to the host. This is a moral relationship that is usually enforced politically through the necessity for visas and restrictions on foreigners. Unfortunately, it has not always been so enforced. In the past those with power came and did whatever they wished. One of the worst things a guest can do is to take away the rights of a host to be the host.

Today the older, more obvious oppressions of colonialism have given way to a more subtle neocolonialism. The paternalistic relationship between the United States and the Philippines is a sad example of how a host nation can politically lose the rights of a host over its own home. The Bell Trade Act, forced on the Philippines at the close of World War II, granted Americans the same rights as Filipinos to do business in the Philippines. Whereas in Indonesia foreign companies must form joint ventures with their hosts, in the Philippines local businesses must compete on equal terms with multinational corporations. During a ten-year period, for every dollar invested from the United States in the Philippines, five dollars returned to the States. Twenty-four of the fifty largest companies in the Philippines were owned by Americans.[15]

The history of colonialism and neocolonialism is a story of how guests came bringing gifts and then took over the home of their hosts for the sake of profit. Missionaries sometimes do the same. As one wag put it, "They came to do good and they ended up doing very well."[16]

This familiar story should not obscure the fact that missionaries and other foreign guests have often made great contributions to their host countries, sometimes at great personal sacrifice. In spite of the history of colonialism, and as testimony to the reality of forgiveness, Western strangers are still welcome in many parts of the world. But their welcome is not unconditional. In the 1970s some Two-Thirds World Christian leaders caused shock waves in the West by calling for a moratorium on Western missionaries. Today the idea of a moratorium is seldom mentioned. Most churches in the Two-Thirds World appreciate missionaries, provided they can find the right kind.

During the Indian struggle for independence there was once a massive demonstration calling for all foreigners, and especially Britishers, to be thrown out of India. During a passionate speech by a fiery radical, a humble English priest came forward and asked if he too should leave. The priest had lived for many years in simplicity with the people, identifying with their struggles. A great roar of denial went up from the crowd, and the speaker replied, "Oh no, Father; you see, you are one of us."

Stages of assimilation. Gittins elaborates three stages of assimilation that were classically described by Arnold van Gennep.[17] When you first arrive as a stranger, there is a preliminary stage of mutual exploration. When the novelty wears off, you enter the transitional or liminal (threshold) stage, in which you are not given special treatment but are still exploring the meaning of your relationship with the culture. Finally, if you do not become liminoid (stuck in the liminal stage), there is the possibility of eventual incorporation. In real life these are not discrete descriptions of specific stages. Rather, they should be thought of as ideal types or as a continuum of the experience of inculturation. A stranger may move back and forth between the three stages.

The preliminary stage is marked by formality and tentativeness. If the stranger is also an invited guest, she may be treated with exaggerated politeness and respect. This does not mean the host is without caution. Strangers may be a valuable resource, but they are also dangerous. Societies that are not cautious with strangers may not survive long: "there are no longer any indigenous Uruguayans or Tasmanians; and for every forty Brazilian Indians before the arrival of the Europeans, thirty-nine have been exterminated (from 1.2 million to 30,000)!"[18] If we look at what is even now happening to tribal peoples in many parts of the world, from the point of view of survival, those who skip the preliminary stage and get out their blowguns may be the wisest. Most strangers bring the threat of competition, paternalism, cultural change, economic and social domination, exploitation and dependency. Strangers usually bring gifts, but their motives and long-term impact are unknown. They may be powerful and dangerous.

Nevertheless, the preliminary stage is not usually characterized by suspicion. More often you are treated as an honored guest. In the popular literature on culture shock, this stage is often referred to as the honeymoon phase. All the attention and ritual are exciting. They are also tiring, both to you and to your hosts. If you do not leave first, they must come to an end as you enter the transitional or liminal phase.

In the transitional stage the stranger is no longer treated like an honored guest. If you have made it this far without fleeing the culture shock, you are now accepted as a normal part of the local scene. You are still a foreigner, but no longer noteworthy.

No longer will there be the formal ceremonial relationships of hospitality and kindness; in fact the stranger may sense a certain cooling-off on the part of the hosts. What was relatively structured behavior in the early stages now becomes frustratingly unpredictable, changeable, even random. . . . The incomer is perhaps treated with casualness or even left to manage alone.[19]

This can be a relief, a cause of anxiety or both. Your presence is accepted, and it is assumed that you have adjusted to the culture. In a sense you are honored by not receiving special treatment. It means you are accepted. On the other hand, your adjustment is far from complete. While the highs and lows of the initial stages of culture shock are past, recurring experiences of culture fatigue are common and may sap your sense of identity and self-worth. By now, after six months or a year or three years, you expected to be fluent in language and culture. Instead you, and your hosts, are aware of how much you still don't know. Your body still does not "dance and twitch" in the appropriate manner to the rhythms of the new culture. And you suspect it never will.

The commitment of the hosts in this phase is still conditional and tentative. The guest is being tested to see how he or she will turn out in the long run. Enough time has passed for the sheen to have worn off of both parties, and as in a marriage, either may wonder if they have made a

mistake. Joy and closeness may be experienced one day, followed by alienation and disappointment on the next. The host wants to know how committed the guest really is and how long they are likely to stay. The guest wants to know if he or she is really still welcome and how long that is likely to continue. Neither side wants to be simply exploited for the interests of the other.

The important thing in the transitional stage is to keep moving, keep growing, don't let relationships stagnate and, as in marriage, stay committed. That is not so easy. The longer a stranger stays, the easier it is to become stereotyped into fixed functions or begin to compete with the hosts for power and status. Insofar as that happens, the possibility of becoming partners, fellow-learners and friends will be lost. The transitional stage can last for years. It can last a lifetime.

Three things can happen to strangers in the transitional stage: (1) they can remain in that stage till their task is completed and they leave (voluntarily or involuntarily), (2) they can become "liminoid," frozen in a more or less permanent state of cultural distance akin to alienation, or (3) they can become incorporated, or adopted into their new cultural home (stage three).

Some strangers come to do a job for a short or long period. They both give to and receive from the culture but have no intention of becoming incorporated into it. These may be called "utilitarian transitionals." They are like long-term tourists who are appreciated for what they bring and in turn appreciate the experience they receive, but there are no strings attached. They are like a couple that goes out for a casual date with no intention of any further commitment. When they leave they are thankful to be returning home, and they are not likely to be missed.

In every country I have visited, there is a community of expatriates, some of whom have been there forever, who seem to despise the country in which they live. The most common characteristic of these "liminoids" is that they continually complain about "the locals." In return they are heartily resented. A liminoid person is like someone stuck in a disastrous affair or a bad marriage. They hate it but for some reason don't leave. Tony Gittins remarks, "Liminoids do not get better, they get worse."[20]

Sometimes liminoids have had a healthy and productive relationship with the country, but for some reason it has gone sour. If you are a liminoid it is better to bail out and go home.

Sometimes people become liminoid against their will. Even though they have the best of intentions, gradually the stress of culture fatigue builds up and they become chronically unhappy with the country. Of course everyone is liminoid sometimes, even the "locals"! But a true liminoid is trapped in destructive attitudes.

An ideal goal of the transition stage is *incorporation*. A stranger is incorporated when she or he is fully accepted and integrated into the culture. Both sides have made a long-term commitment to the other which will not be terminated even if the stranger leaves. When you are incorporated, you have internalized the culture to the extent that it has become part of you. Incorporation does not occur at the initiative of the stranger. It is an act of the host to make the stranger a real part of the family. The closest analogy may be adoption. But it is also like marriage in that both parties make a commitment to each other.

As in adoption, a person who has been welcomed into a new family does not ever become structurally equal with his new "parents." The new culture may become family, but it will also remain your host, at least for a very long time. As an incorporated foreigner, you remain a guest, structurally subordinate to your hosts. Gittins suggests that if strangers are unwilling to accept this and show it in their attitudes, they are unlikely to be incorporated into the culture.

> Acceptance by the host is no *carte blanche* for the stranger to forget the precedence due to the other. . . . If the stranger wishes to remain "free" and not be beholden to the host, then incorporation is not desirable; but where incorporation does take place, then *noblesse oblige* [requires] the guest to defer to the host and be loyal rather than critical. . . . If we sense that we are incorporated into a group, do we thereby acknowledge our responsibility to support and be loyal to our hosts? Or do we retain our "right" to criticize and judge others, thus effectively

making it undesirable for us to seek incorporation? And what of our hosts: do we appreciate their relative slowness in accepting us fully? Do we understand how seriously they take the duties of hospitality? Can we accept that they remain superordinate, since we are on their turf and not our own? And do we nevertheless aspire to learning how to be appropriate strangers, or do we wish to repudiate the conventions and seize the initiative and control?[21]

It is possible that a stranger who has been "married" by a culture may be "divorced" if she acts disloyal or overly critical of the "family." On the other hand, it seems to me that Gittins confuses stages when he speaks of loyalty as a prerequisite for incorporation and incorporation as requiring absence of criticism. Before incorporation you may need to prove your loyalty through forgoing the "right" to criticize. But loyalty and criticism are not mutually exclusive. If they were, my marriage would not have lasted for twenty-five years!

If outsiders have lived in a culture long enough, proved their loyalty and been truly incorporated, their constructive criticism of those who remain their hosts may be part of their gift to the family. If so, incorporation is not a *barrier* to criticism but rather a *prerequisite* to constructive criticism. Those who remain in the transition stage, still less those who are liminoid, have very little right to criticize. Their loyalty to and identification with their hosts is not yet established. Their understanding of the context is too superficial. Only those whose commitment and acceptance are clearly understood have earned the responsibility (not the right) of constructive criticism.

In the case of Robert and Dean Wong considered in the last chapter, Robert may have misjudged the stage of his assimilation. After a number of years in the country, Robert may have believed he was incorporated into the culture and had earned the responsibility of criticism, at least within his university. Possibly he was incorporated by some members of the community but not by others. If so, he may have earned the responsibility to criticize the portion of the community that had "adopted" him but not the right to criticize more widely. In any case, criticism in any culture must be done with sensitivity to the local rules of social interaction.

This is tricky when it involves social justice issues. Those in power are seldom likely to appreciate criticism from a guest, no matter how well accepted he may be by other members of the community. In Robert's case, he felt he was giving voice to the feelings of colleagues who were powerless in the situation. If Robert had actually been asked to speak out against those in power by marginalized members of the community, his moral position would be stronger. He could then have been seen as risking his own security in the community because of his loyalty to the weak and oppressed.

This is a common dilemma for those who work in countries with repressive governments. In countries like El Salvador, Western missionaries have lost their lives because of their solidarity with the poor. In one Central American country, local Christian leaders pleaded with American development workers to stand with them in exposing a government atrocity. The Americans knew that if they did so, they and perhaps their organization would no longer be welcome in the country. On the other hand, if they did not go out on a limb, their courageous local friends could lose their lives.

In the final analysis, no firm rules can be made about whether a guest may criticize a host. If the situation is serious enough and lives hang in the balance, even a preliminary-stage stranger may be required to speak out on behalf of the weak. The rules of relationship between guest and host usually preclude open criticism. Even indirect criticism is a sensitive issue. If guests, for reasons of conscience, are forced to speak out, they should know that their privileged position as guests in the country may quickly come to an end.

The Gift of Strangeness

The strangeness of strangers is their greatest asset. Far from being an unmitigated disaster to be overcome as quickly as possible, the oddness of a foreigner is a treasure to herself and to her hosts. She is different from everyone else, and though she may be a threat, she is also a

promise. Although she may be uncomfortable, she is likely to receive gifts of which she never dreamed. With almost monotonous familiarity, people who come to serve others in a foreign culture, whether across the ocean or just downtown, suggest that they have received far more than they have given in their attempts at "ministry."

The stranger is often valued for bringing resources that are unavailable in the local community. New wisdom, ideas, art, technology, music, education, spirituality, science, customs, money, food, health care, experience and relationships are all treasures that may come from across the ocean or across town. The church is a universal body in which all are enriched by the mutual sharing of diverse cultural gifts.

What is given to and received from a "successful stranger" is often unpredictable. Just as the dangers that emanate from the stranger are unpredictable, so is the treasure. A lawyer may enter a community to do legal aid work and end up caring for unwed mothers or taking meals to people with AIDS. The same lawyer may expect to help overcome institutional racism in the courts and receive in return cultural enrichment and gratitude. But her most valuable reward may be to see the courage and joy of people who daily face poverty and what her culture calls failure. Her whole view of the world and definition of success may change.

Often enough, groups will accept relatively rich strangers because of expectations for financial and technical assistance. Regardless of whether all the expectations for material or educational help are met, it is unlikely that the success of the assistance will be measured in physical terms. Material and even intellectual resources can deteriorate very quickly. But lives changed through relationship can last forever.

A gifted English scientist who taught for many years in an Arab university was very successful on a number of different levels. He helped his hosts establish a graduate program, obtained grants, wrote curriculum, developed materials, taught the faculty and so on. Thus when it came time for him to leave, he was surprised that in the official speech of gratitude only one thing was mentioned: that he was a deep man of God. This was all the more remarkable since he was a Christian teaching in a Muslim setting. His colleagues had recognized that he brought a treasure far more valuable than his scientific skills.

Groups that cannot defend their boundaries against strangers are often exploited and may lose their identity. But groups that seal their boundaries against all outsiders harbor the seeds of their own destruction. This is true biologically, socially, economically, culturally, politically and spiritually. Not only is new blood genetically good for human reproduction, it is also culturally good for a healthy society. That is why vigorous cultures are not static or fixed. They are in the midst of cultural change. The stranger, because of his or her strangeness, is potentially the bringer of life.

The stranger plays a significant role in both the Old and New Testaments. God's people are often pictured as strangers and sojourners on a journey through a strange land. Perhaps that is partly why both testaments stress hospitality to strangers. The Jews knew what it felt like to be alien. But there is also the recognition that the stranger may have a secret that is of great value. On more than one occasion in the Old Testament the stranger turns out to be an angel in disguise.[22] More powerfully yet, Matthew suggests that Christ is present in the stranger. When we welcome the stranger, we welcome Christ (Mt 25:35). Conversely, when we reject the stranger we reject Christ. When we are ourselves strangers, we represent Christ and are commanded by him to bring good news.

The central assumption of communication theory has been that understanding between people is based on similarities between them. Only insofar as people share the same assumptions and ideas can they communicate. This assumption has recently been cogently challenged by Zali D. Gurevitch, a sociologist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.[23] Gurevitch does not question the need for human beings to create a common world of meaning in order to communicate, but he suggests that this is only one side of what makes a meaningful dialogue. The other side is our need to "make the other strange," to realize another person's foreignness so that we can

encounter her reality.

The problem with people who are like us is that we know too much about them. As a result we enclose them in "a grid of familiar typifications" that effectively blocks their unique presence from view. We categorize and stereotype familiar persons such that we cannot see anything new, only what we already know. In order to have real dialogue, we need the ability not to understand them. We must see them as strange before we can really see them at all. Most of the time we hide from reality by seeing everything in abstract categories. Even the people closest to us may be seen as categories such as wife, student, neighbor or father. The problem is, as T. S. Eliot put it, "humankind cannot bear very much reality."[24]

When you become a stranger and enter another culture, the result is a radical "defamiliarization" of all you know. You are forced to open your eyes and really look. The simplest things do not make sense. The unexpected happens every day. What is normal to others is shocking or marvelous in your eyes. If you can handle the stress, your strangerhood becomes a powerful stimulus to understanding yourself, your own culture and the new world presented to your senses. The "honeymoon phase" of culture shock is a wonderful opportunity to really see the uniqueness, while your senses are still hungry for the newness of everything.

In a similar way, your strangeness shocks your hosts into recognizing a broader reality than before. Of course the host may just stereotype you into whatever image he has picked up about American Christians, Berkeley radicals or Cambridge intellectuals (pick your stereotype). But if dialogue really takes place he will soon be surprised to find that you are stranger than you seem. And the shock in his eyes may be God's gift, through you, to him.

The purpose of the stranger is not to become like the host (or vice versa). That is impossible, undesirable and probably immoral—probably immoral because it involves self-deception and/or hypocrisy. Strangers who pretend they are not strange at all are usually distrusted. Rather than being a chameleon who tries to be exactly the same as the surrounding people ("going native"), a good guest seeks a relationship that honors the profound differences that exist between cultures. In the words of Clifford Geertz,

We are not, or at least I am not, seeking either to become natives . . . or to mimic them. . . . We are seeking, in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them, a matter a great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized.[25]

Real conversation is a treasure that seems all too rare these days. When such opening of the heart occurs between people from radically different cultures, it is a miracle of grace. This may be one of the highest aims for which we were created. Each person, and each culture, has a unique secret. Each is capable of knowing something of God which no one else knows. In the meeting of strangers we have the opportunity to share that treasure with each other. George MacDonald says,

There is a chamber also (O God, humble and accept my speech)—a chamber in God's own heart, into which none can enter but the one, the individual, the peculiar person—out of which chamber that person has to bring revelation and strength for his brothers and sisters. This is that for which a person was made—to reveal the secret things of the Father.[26]