

10 Honorable Ways to Learn about Another Culture

Culture is the everyday stuff of life, that feels normal and natural, to a group of people, who share time, spaces, and meaning.*



However, because culture feels so normal and natural to us it is often difficult to realize that culture is different for different people groups. So we must be intentional about our efforts to learn about another culture. Fortunately, we live in a time when we can easily be exposed to a world full of different people with interesting and important customs, habits, values, schedules, food traditions, games, languages, and more. Because of technologies, greater ease of travel, a global economy linking countries like never before, and Internet-based learning we have more opportunity than ever to recognize that what feels so “normal and natural” to us is very different than what feels “normal and natural” to others.

But just like with everything else, there are more and less honorable ways to learn about another culture. For example, the Church has always been diasporic (we move away into different spaces) and missional (we want to share how we understand God’s movement in and through people and the world). Yet, even sometimes with good intentions, the Church has been guilty of forcing the diaspora of people from other cultural groups and doing mission in ways that attempt to eliminate cultural histories unlike our own. So how can people of God learn about other cultures in honorable ways? Here’s 10 ways to begin:



1 LEARN ABOUT YOUR OWN CULTURE

Wait a minute, what!? Yes, that’s right. One of the most honorable things we can do is to first learn about ourselves, our worldview, our perspectives, and our own culture before learning about someone else’s. A solid grounding in our own self provides us with the eyes to see the culture that seems so natural to us. Once we’ve been able to recognize the ways culture influences us, we have better eyes to see how culture influences others.

2 READ BOOKS AND ARTICLES WRITTEN BY PEOPLE FROM OTHER CULTURES

The key here is to read books and articles written by people who identify with that culture. While one person cannot represent the full cultural thought or perspectives of any culture, by starting with one perspective of someone of that culture you honor at least one voice that culture has helped to produce.



3 READ NEWSPAPERS AND ONLINE NEWS SOURCES THAT PEOPLE FROM OTHER CULTURES READ FOR INFORMATION FROM THEIR OWN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE



As with number 2 above, one news source cannot offer every perspective found within one culture. Just think about the differences between just four U.S. news sources: for example, Fox News, CNN, Good Morning America, and Huffington Post. However, news from different cultural perspectives can bring greater insight. Especially helpful can be localized or specialized news sources that state their cultural perspectives right up front.

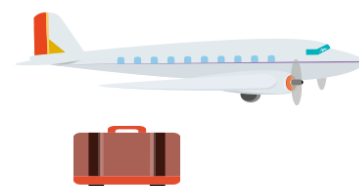


4 FOLLOW SOCIAL MEDIA OF PEOPLE FROM, OR ORGANIZATIONS THAT REPRESENT, OTHER CULTURES

There are so many people and organizations using their Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and other media forums to share information with the public about what matters to them. Not sure about what the Black Lives Matter Movement is all about? Like their FB page or follow them on Twitter. These are the forums where they are inviting people into their thoughts, values, and commitments. (Another way to be respectful is to honor when cultural groups restrict certain pages or threads from those from other cultural groups. Not sure why this is important? A quick Google search can help here, too.)

5 IF YOU GET THE CHANCE, TRAVEL

Whether you’re taking a year off in between studies (gap year), participating in an immersion experience for school or work, or you have the chance to travel for leisure, inhabiting another cultural space gives you access to experiences and perspectives in unique ways. Not sure how to travel honorably in another cultural space? Try thinking about your travel destination as visiting someone’s home. Learn as much as you can ahead of time about what is respectful for the person whose home it is. Avoid thinking of it as your home. Take your cues from your hosts. Act in ways that your host would want to invite you back.



6 LEARN ANOTHER LANGUAGE



Communicating with someone in their preferred language shows that you respect what's important to them. If you become proficient, you will have access to nuances of language in both conversation and in writing that do not translate exactly. For short trips or brief encounters with people, even beginner's phrases and greetings will often be seen as a way to respect someone else. Be diligent, though. Work on your pronunciation as if you were meeting someone very important (because you will be!). Also, do not allow your stereotypes to determine who you believe speaks what language. Assuming a Korean co-worker would understand your newly learned Japanese phrases represents a dishonorable way to learn about another culture, as would speaking Spanish to a Latin@s person who only speaks English.

7 ENTER INTO A MUTUAL CULTURAL EXCHANGE

A mutual cultural exchange allows for both parties to share their cultures with each other, freely and without explicit or implicit coercion of any kind. What about starting a pen-pal program with a UMC in another country? What if the senior pastor and half of the congregation of a Pacific-Islander UMC church and the senior pastor and half of the congregation of a Hispanic UMC church switched churches one Sunday a quarter? What if those same churches met twice a year for a fellowship meal (once hosted by the Pacific-Islander church and once by Hispanic UMC church)?



8 VISIT MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL CENTERS



The exhibits and displays here are intended to teach people about aspects of culture including but not limited to art, history, cultural norms, food and more. Museums and cultural centers are one of the ways to experience the non-textual aspects of culture as well. If one is not near you, many museums and cultural centers have online exhibits meant to share cultural knowledge virtually.

9 TAKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CLASSES OR CONTINUING EDUCATION COURSES

There are classes specifically offered to teach people about aspects of a particular culture. For instance, you could take "Argentinian Culture 101" but also "US race relations in the 1960s" or "Catholicism under Pope Francis."



10 IF THERE IS SOMEONE FROM YOUR INNER CIRCLE OF RELATIONSHIPS WHO IDENTIFIES WITH ANOTHER CULTURE, ASK THEM RESPONSIBLE QUESTIONS



RESPONSIBLE QUESTIONS: Whenever we ask someone about their culture, it is our responsibility to present our questions in ways that respect the lived experience of the person we ask. I.E., curiosity about a practice, word (or slur), or news story for you can mean a sorrowful or harmful experience for someone else.

FROM YOUR INNER CIRCLE: Consider how you would feel if people who didn't know you well only asked you questions about your culture. This creates the impression that you only see them as your cultural 101 teacher rather than a whole person (or a respected person on your job).

*Paraphrase of Dr. Robin DiAngelo's definition of culture found in chapter 3 of her book, *What Does it Mean to Be White?* DiAngelo, Robin. *What Does it Mean to Be White: Developing White Racial Literacy*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012.



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