

# The Challenges and Rewards of Multiculturalism

BY DAVID E. NELSON

I lived the first decade of my life in a small town in South Central Nebraska. I thought everyone shared a home with a Mom and Dad and couple of siblings. I assumed everyone took a bath on Saturday night and got dressed up on Sunday morning and went to a church. Everyone dressed pretty much the same, influenced by the rural lifestyle that dominated our space. My family insisted I become aware of the world outside our village, but it was usually through pictures and stories, not the real thing. My world was quite small and very comfortable.

Today I live in a city of a million and a half. We have neighborhoods that reflect the energy and culture of every continent. I am part of the Interfaith Council that recognizes and celebrates fifteen different world religions. I can't imagine a quality life without my "family members" of a rich variety of language and ethnic heritages. This place is not better (or worse) than the small town where I first lived. But it is more like the world in which most now live. Diversity is a reality. What we do with it is a choice.

Assumptions are choices we can make about how to see and experience our world. The assumptions we choose will determine the world we live in. What we pay attention to becomes our reality. Let me illustrate:

**Assumption:** "In every culture, religion, and community, something works." It is just as accurate to embrace the assumption that "in every culture, religion, and community something doesn't work." By embracing the first assumption, I am intentionally focusing my attention on what is good, what works, and what will add to the value of community. In the workplace and in the neighborhood, diversity is a reality. Celebrating the gifts of pluralism is a choice. The choice works for me. I can't begin to tell you the great joy I have discovered as I have developed friendships with people whose reality is quite different than mine.

Ahmed has taught me how precious his Muslim faith is in a disciplined life. Sheila has introduced me to the wonders of Judaism in the rituals of home and family. Tyler challenges me with his stories of family life in a Mormon home. Sonny enlightens me each week with provocative conversations at a local McDonalds filled with African Americans. Juan shares his stories from his Hispanic world that light up my hope for the world. Robert entertains me with his ancient myths from the Nordic tradition that give new meaning to the way we engage



each other today. These friends have given me amazing gifts that move my life forward. We share stories and listen to each other, and we all evolve to a deeper respect for each other and ourselves. I have appreciated the evolutionary progression that has made this possible.

## Connection → Conversation → Cooperation → Community

We begin with a willingness to **connect** in a respectful way. Rather than beginning with suspicion, we begin with openness and curiosity. In each of the cases I mention above I have read or experienced stories that felt threatening. There are beliefs and practices of some members of each of the communities that do not add value to the community in which I live. But individuals are individuals and I refuse to judge a group by the inappropriate actions of a few.

Our **conversations** are filled with sharing of stories rather than pontificating of dogma and "truths." We are intentionally listening for new truths that can add value to our lives. The art of listening takes practice, but it is well worth the effort. I cannot deny another person's experience and the other cannot deny mine. Stories humanize each of us and invite deeper relationships.

We **cooperate** in our work, our play, and in making meaning in our lives. Working together in offices, neighborhoods,

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communities, organizations, and sports, I have discovered I even like myself better. These friends fill my world with diversity and excitement. They expand my vision for the sacred and the deeply human. It takes some effort to span the differences, but it is always worth the effort. The result is a **community** that pulls us to the future with hope and promise. Our Interfaith Council is nurturing our greater community to be the most welcoming place in the world. I know that is a big vision, but we are worth big visions. Together we can face the difficult events, the unknown economic challenges, even the threats of crime and terrorism. When we are in this together, the problems do not seem as big or as powerful.