How to Break the Ice with "Someone from a Different Culture"

Some Suggestions and Considerations

Let's say you're a bit like me . . .

- You've always been interested in learning about other countries and cultures
- You are frequently in spaces where you are likely to see or meet people from different countries or cultures (airplanes/airports, buses/bus stations, receptions, parties, conferences, your workplace, etc.)
- You often notice or meet with someone who appears to be from a country or culture different from yours, and you would like to connect with them somehow, maybe strike up a conversation, or even build a friendship …

How do you do it?

Well, if you've ever been "burned" after an unsuccessful effort—one that left you or the other person feeling uneasy or awkward despite your best intentions, here are some suggestions (in the form of "dos and don'ts") that have helped lead to more satisfying exchanges with "people from other cultures" I've reached out to.

1. Don't ask the question, "Where are you from?"
    - When we ask a person where they are *from*, we are making an assumption, usually based on how they look or sound, that they are "not from here." While our intentions may be to be friendly and to show genuine interest in that person's story, what they may conclude (in this post 9/11 era) is that we see them as *outsiders*, as on different footing from us, as the "Them" in "Us versus Them." Others may be offended that we assume they're not U.S. Americans, when they may even have been born in this country or are a naturalized citizen.

- Bottom line? While some people may be fine with the question "Where are you from?" and even welcome the opportunity to respond, others may fear we have ulterior motives--like trying to find out if their country of origin or faith tradition is "acceptable" to us.

2. Rather than asking the risky "Where are you from?" question, open the door for that person to volunteer such information on their own, and if they wish to, they will. Test the waters by making a more neutral, less personalized comment or question, and see if they're receptive to taking things further.

    - One way is to start with the familiar "talk about the weather" approach (e.g., "My goodness, it's terribly hot today!"). It may seem an unoriginal and boring strategy, but many, if not most people will recognize that statement as a polite invitation to a casual conversation. It may lead to nothing more than a "Yes," or a nod of the head (in which case, we should honor their wishes not to engage). But it could also lead to a more fruitful response like, "Yes, it is very similar to the weather in my country," where they've given the signal that you can ask them more questions (e.g., "Oh really? That's interesting. What country is that?")

    - Another way is to respectfully acknowledge something in their possession or on their person that catches your interest in a positive way. (e.g., "What a beautiful handbag! Do you know if it's handmade?") If it is an item attached to their culture (or even if it's not), you're giving them an opportunity to share its significance (e.g., "Yes, this bag belonged to my grandmother; she's still in Guatemala but we are very close.")

    - Again, rather than ask where someone is from or "what they do (for work)," which for some could feel like you're gauging their nationality and/or social status, I like to start or continue a conversation by asking "So, what do you do when you're not talking with me on this bus (*or* at this conference, at this airport, at this reception, at this church?", etc.) It leaves the door wide open for them to answer the question however they like.

    - If you've successfully entered a conversation with the person and they mention something of interest to you, try repeating the words you'd like them to clarify or elaborate on (e.g., Y*ou mentioned your grandmother is in Guatemala . . .*) to see if they'll say more about it—or simply say, "Can you say more about that?" Asking open-ended "Tell me about …" questions rather than "Yes" or

"No" questions, helps us avoid asking questions based on our own assumptions, which are often mistaken and can be offensive.

- Let yourself be human and let others be human. If you *do* commit a faux pas with a person by saying or doing something inappropriate (as we all have), just apologize, simply and from the heart. Sincerity and humility can go a long way. On the flip side, if it's the other person who says or does something *you* find off putting, remember they may or may not have intended to bother (it's so easy to misread intentions when communicating across cultures!)—then give them the benefit of the doubt (or just cut them some slack).

- If you don't share the same native language with that person, but you happen to know it and would like to speak it with them, ask them humbly if it's okay to do so (e.g., "I heard you speaking Spanish a few minutes ago. Do you mind if I practice my Spanish with you?") Asking in that way presents the question in a spirit of humility, where you're not suggesting that by speaking their language, you're doing them a favor.

- If you end up asking a lot of questions, leave room for them to do the same with you. But if you find they're responsive to *your* questions and have a lot to say, often the most compassionate thing you can do for them is to *listen*—that is, to show interest in their story/feelings/point of view without offering advice (unless they ask for it).

3. If it is possible and appropriate to build the relationship and you are interested in doing so, don't leave things at the empty statement *We'll have to get together sometime*—unless you mean it.

    - While the phrase is understood (at least in America) as well-intentioned but with no follow through expected, people from other cultures may take the statement at face value and be confused and disappointed when it doesn't happen.

    - In many cultures of the world, hospitality in the home is practiced with such love, artistry, and generosity. So, consider extending your hospitality to this person and their family by inviting them to your home for a home-cooked meal (or at least refreshments: perhaps brownies from the bakery that look homemade?). There are few things that could be a better gesture, and you're likely to end up receiving much more than you give.

- If you're better equipped to invite them out (rather than to your home), take them to a place where you can afford to treat them; it's truly the gesture that counts!

A final word: If you're one of those people who wishes you could interact with people from other cultures, but hold back for *fear you may say or do something wrong*, please take it from me:

- When I lived in Iran and met new people (including lots of extended family members), I definitely did my share of memorable mistakes—some much more memorable than others! (I can give you an example if you ask me in person, but I'm not so sure I can share it here in a public forum!) But, as we probably know from our own lives, when people see that we are really *trying to do the right thing*, they are willing to forgive a multitude of mess-ups! And when others see we are willing to laugh at ourselves, it can lead to more opportunities to laugh together (in the very best sense)!