

## Do Parts = More than the Whole?

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Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough,  
what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants.

*The Silent Language* by Edward T. Hall

If we take multiculturalism seriously, then we must also consider that there are fundamental, maybe irreconcilable, differences in what constitutes “wholeness” of character. Although I think that only hermits are not at least bi-cultural, I do believe that most faculty in this country are more culturally “Western ” than otherwise so their vision of what “wholeness” looks like will probably be influenced by Western(ized) thinkers.<sup>1</sup> However, many students live more obviously “on the hyphen.” When their teachers/counselors/mentors unwittingly describe the process of seeking and finding meaning in our several lives and selves as only or primarily a matter of becoming a “whole person,” the portrayal can be counterproductive if not also inaccurate, even harmful. While wholeness might function as an umbrella term for a common goal that is culturally inclusive, care should nevertheless be exercised, especially at the outset when the “ifs, ands, & buts” have not yet been sufficiently introduced or absorbed. Furthermore, many young first-year students are processing a new mode of life insofar as they have an additional address. This represents a new reality in that, e.g., report cards will henceforth be mailed to them. Although the U.S. Postal Service and the Americanized have regarded mail to be “private” from the time an individual is capable of reading, this, like so much else, is not a universal norm so the symbolism is not just a legal formality, for, in many homes, mail is a “family,” not “individual” matter.

In my case—a female who arrived in America from China at the age of four in 1946, and who grew up in New Jersey at a time when the country had fewer Chinese than now live in this state alone—I could articulate my feminist views long before the “Chinese-American” ones. Thinking in English and forgetting in Chinese, I consciously identified with the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Emancipation Proclamation. What associations I had with the *Exclusion* or *McCarran-Walter Acts* were not as passionate as the indignation I felt about how long it took for *Brown v. Board of Education* to happen. The experience of being “other” had to be translated from the emotional/psychological, often silent, language of the home culture into one that could not only clarify but also validate in a way that was more constructive than pride born of resentful defiance and/or hostile separation. In other words, I have reached a more complete understanding of the hyphenated Self because I am now consciously and intellectually pleased with the discrepancy between what I was taught in American schools,

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<sup>1</sup> In Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes would have us be wholly ourselves through a sexual unifying while the Platonic view of the lesser “cave” self v. the Ideal influenced Augustine et al. There is also the Aristotelian view of actualizing our *innate* possibilities. Later, Descartes stressed the “Cogito” but, as Gilbert Ryle criticized, Cartesians would still conceive identity as a “ghost in the machine” and other variations of the “body and soul” imagery against which we have different forms of something less bifurcating as with existential, dialectical, positivistic ways of “being in the world.” Whatever, the presumption and telos are culturally as well as experientially singular.

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churches, television, etc., and how I am, that is, pleased in not being “whole” so much as “in parts”— meaning multiplicity as well as roles. Consequently, the ethical searching and finding are inseparable from the cultural, and I have replaced the imagery of “whole” with:



and the question: **What shape are you in?**

First about the drawing<sup>2</sup>:

Is it a rabbit? A duck? A duck-billed platypus? A plucked daisy? Nude descending the staircase?

If you concentrate, one or the other comes into view. Or something no one else has seen.

But no matter how many you perceive, no matter how quickly you can switch from the “duck” to the “rabbit” and back again, the drawing can only be one thing at a time.

Carol Gilligan once likened this phenomenon<sup>3</sup> to what (most) women and (some) men may experience when, for example, they render a verdict. They may first decide in terms of “the law,” according to objective and impersonal standards and then, almost, but not quite, instantaneously view the same set of circumstances “in a different voice,” in terms of the more subjective, personal, and/or individual considerations.

The same kind of “cultural” double-take occurs when you go to the doctor’s office: first seeing yourself as an “object,” an anatomical specimen that is “examined,” not touched, then seeing yourself as a subject, a person with history and worries, for whom the touching can be medical or sexual.

Background-foreground cartoons are often found in children’s books. They can be more than a moment’s entertainment. They can be a lesson in *how to review our lives and our many cultures—as double visions, twice removed, by time and understanding*. They can train us to admire the variety before deciding which, if any, is “better.” They can remind us of what John Gillis has written, “We all have two families, one that we live with and another we live by.”<sup>4</sup>

Once we replace the “whole” with the “duck-rabbit-platypus-etc.” model, it is easier to resist the unifying goal in favor of diversifying which, after all, is what most schools espouse as mission and curricular guidepost. The duck-rabbit approach is a device to reveal how and why there are many more viewpoints than there are people and that this condition is not something that needs “fixing” but is itself “normal,” even desirable.

More problematic is the question “What shape are you in?” It is dangerous because it has to do with the idea that cultural diversity is real and that someone who can accurately characterize a Confucian one from the one in, say, Crawford, Texas, will pass the Comparative Whatever

<sup>2</sup>Cathy Bao Bean, *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle, A Memoir and Manual* (New Jersey: We Press, 2001), 215.

<sup>3</sup>Conference “On In A Different Voice” at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, March 22-4, 1985.

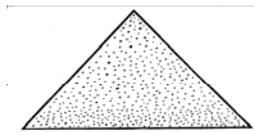
<sup>4</sup> John Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), xv.

course. But, once we “characterize,” we are walking a very fine, sometimes indistinguishable, line between generalizing and stereotyping. And that could entail interjecting so many “ifs, ands, and buts” that we would have to cut our syllabi in half.

Yet, generalizing about a group of people is probably what our (grand)mothers did when we were still tied to their apron strings. For them it was no big deal to say, “Chinese do this, not that” or Irish like that, not this.” They handed down their cultural heritage with the noodles we slurped or twirled, the dances we skipped or stomped, the sounds we hushed or shouted. Most thought their way was “normal,” maybe even “best.” Few gave a hoot about being “politically correct.” However, once you step outside your house, you need to understand what the slurping, twisting, skipping, stomping, hushing and shouting are about. Just because it was your (grand)mother who handed it to you doesn’t mean you have a clue what you got.

Nevertheless, she (or the neighborhood or job or K-12, etc.) is the starting point so, more often than not, we all stereotyped ourselves. Therefore, if the college experience paves the students’ way toward developing “character” and “characterization,” it should take into account where they start so they know from whence they came and how their families placed them in that cultural mode. Happily some of this happens in the campus “office of multicultural affairs” or its equivalent. But this is often by happenstance and self-selection.<sup>5</sup> Schools need to be more systematic and thorough in institutionalizing the value of searching and finding. In doing so, heightening, not mitigating, the connectedness of culture, identity, and meaning is paramount even if this leads to less “wholeness” or “unity” and a heck more “relativity.” In other words, avoid phrases like “Underneath it all, we’re the same” or “We’re all human.”

The following examples point to another way of talking about personal and cultural identity that is based on useful generalizations that are fine-tuned by individuals so as to get and convey information without being only personal, let alone offensive. Hence the question: What shape are you in? Not just physically but culturally, maybe psychologically, possibly philosophically. If what you see, think, hear, see, or feel is informed by how your cultural universe is shaped, then literally “figuring” out that shape can be both a shortcut and seminar in understanding the choices we make.



I describe my Americanized self as being in a pyramid. The “shape I’m in” is the result of the by-laws that form most of the major institutions metaphysically and practically from governments to corporations, from churches to schools. More often than not then:

- There is room for fewer at the top (God, President, CEO, Pope, Principal, et al.) where individualized power over self, others, information, intelligence, and objects is concentrated and measuring the scope and nature of domination is how we rank and rate relative merit.

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<sup>5</sup> This past year, I have surfed hundreds of school web sites. Of those that have a physical location dedicated to students’ diversity, very few have a high-level administrator assigned specifically to oversee and promote programs. Mostly, the personnel is “below” the level of dean and, given what I later write, signals less than wholehearted institutional commitment.

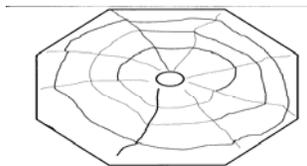
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- Progress is linear and directionally “up” the ladder, through the glass ceiling, into heaven, above and beyond, etc.
- People have been asked since early childhood by everyone who matters “What is your favorite color” and “Who is your best friend?” and “Who is the nicest teacher?” so that the most desirable is primarily a matter of exclusion and choosing only one is the first method of expressing our opinions and, thereby, describing our individuality.
- The “half full” rather than the “half empty” glass is indicative of optimism.
- “Perfection” and “ideal” are meaningful terms as are “forever after” and “immutable.”

If we now populate this world with atomic individuals who have rights and identity independent of others, more often than not then:

- A person can “get what (s)he deserves” regardless how the punishment may affect family members. Similarly, winning the lottery happens to the actual ticket-holder—sharing it is a matter of conscience or lawsuit.
- Relationships between and among individuals are formed because we consent by saying “I do,” signing on the bottom line, pledging allegiance, attending Thanksgiving dinners, being homesick, and so on. However, why we consent to do so is another matter insofar as America is permeated with Freud. With a conscious, subconscious, ego, superego, and id, a person can be the last person to know who he or she is. Indeed, a psychiatrist can be paid to deal with an identity that has been lost or split and an attempt at suicide can be a “reaching out” to a total stranger who can be of help by reaching back. And, if that is not sufficient, we shall soon know enough about human DNA to predict personality propensities.
- Democratic and “civilized” interaction is regulated by logic, Robert’s Rules of Order, and Miss Manners (“survivor” programs notwithstanding!).
- Typically, a college applicant who edited the school paper and captained a varsity team and received straight-As and scored perfectly on every available standardized test<sup>6</sup> and volunteered at the hospital and cared for a severely ill family member is the shoo-in “all-around” candidate.
- It is “more tragic” if an elderly driver survives an accident instead of the child because the former already had a “full life” while the latter still had his whole (Aristotelian) life ahead of him.

Until recently, every schoolchild was taught Kipling’s sentiment, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs...you’ll be a Man, my son!”



<sup>6</sup> I recently juried a very competitive scholarship program in which some applicants created their own AP courses in the absence of ones in the curriculum.

On the other hand, I describe my Confucian self as being the central space of a spider web so that there is no “I” except that which is formed by the strands or “relationships” to family, neighborhood, company, government, etc. In this world, I am less concerned with what “I” want as how I will affect others. We nurture sensitivity and mutuality over individuality. What is of utmost importance is that each person does his or her relational duty (as son, teacher, parent, mayor, etc.) in order to contribute to the strength and well-being of all, not just him or herself.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, to say “please” and “thank you” or tip for service well done is traditionally considered an insult, intimation that the person might have done otherwise, i.e., chosen not to do what is “right”—his or her duty. Liking each other is secondary to being present. Saying “I love you,” traditionally only uttered to a spouse, was encouraged by Mao Tse-tung, not out of exuberance for Communist comrades but to indicate rejection of the Confucian stress on family while reinforcing a “materialistic” approach to interpersonal relations. To overtly do someone else’s duty as well as your own is to overstep and/or make another less significant. There are fewer attempts at suicide because no stranger can restore one’s identity. Not unconnected is the attitude that success and failure are never an individual matter. Thus, when glory and ignominy are shared, one cannot stand on top of the world as the lone victor but one is also not totally bereft when hitting bottom. There is no “perfect” for there is always room for improvement in an always-changing world, and “ideal” is a moving target, a matter of balancing chaos and order through cyclical time frames. In this world, the empty glass or hub is valued for its capacity to receive. If you could only save one—the traditional Asian would choose the grandmother over the child because you can always make another baby but can never replace the wisdom that comes with old age and long experience. Control over our selves is within our power and, with luck, more reliable than control of inanimate objects or natural forces. Being different or “standing out” is rarely good, even for the leader.

Had Kipling been Asian, his poem might have been, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs...then there is probably something very wrong with you, your family, your village, your ruler, and your ancestors.”

Aware of the different shapes I can be in, I better understand what’s happening when I morph from the Chinese to the American and back again and again. So, rather than choosing between the two worlds and ways of being, I get more proficient in switching.<sup>8</sup> Concomitantly, I can control access to the playgrounds and avoidance of the minefields associated with each. In doing so, situations that once put me in “moral binds” are relaxed:

- The “drinking” that conjures up Puritanical disapproval, MADD, (il)legal limits, designated driver rule, loss of control, etc., is now not “opposed” to excess indulgence—as long as everybody else is equally inebriated or sober.
- Similarly, taboos about allowing, let alone teaching, a child to gamble—is now not “opposed” to enjoying our family tradition to play poker and roulette (and on Christmas Eve to boot).
- Less stringent about absolute rules and truths, and having no compunctions about lying if someone’s “face” was being saved, I still insisted on calling St. Nick the “Make-believe Santa”

<sup>7</sup>Often I liken this to what was/is expected of the “ideal” pre-feminist female.

<sup>8</sup>For elaboration, I suggest (besides my own book!), my earliest and latest reading: Francis L. K. Hsu, *Americans and Chinese—Reflections on Two Cultures and their People* (New York: Doubleday/Natural History Press, 1970). Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought—How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...And Why* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).

and the Woman with the Dental Fixation the “Imaginary Tooth Fairy” because I never want my son to say “Yes” if I ever needed to ask, “Have I ever lied to you?”

- I have compassion for people for whom I have no sympathy yet hardly blinked when my father expressed his thought that it is not necessarily evil to kill millions if that would deal effectively with overpopulation and maintain the balance between order and chaos (in that this is more “reliable” than hoping for interplanetary travel—and, besides, there’s reincarnation). A hyphenated person can simultaneously be “hated” for failing the web but “respected” for being one’s own person.

A friend described his American-Latino duality as being within a double-walled egg. In America, the outside wall is low and easily penetrated or scaled. For example, when introduced to a colleague, he would likely respond to being called “Professor Torre,” with “Please, call me Carlos.” If, however, the new acquaintance took Carlos’s informality to give “full access”—like asking to house her mother-in-law next week—she would face the very high, thick, hard-to-scale, inner wall. On the other hand, if the same introduction occurred in Puerto Rico, it might take years before he’d say, “Please, call me Carlos” but, once said, the mother-in-law would be guaranteed a guest room and spending money. Being more “open” or “private” is not simply another instance of “When in Rome....” Rather, there is no presumption that “in the end” or “underneath it all,” one way is preferable for the sake life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness or world peace.

Another friend described the shape and dynamics of community and democracy in terms of a dance that is, appropriately, Greek, during which a flamboyant and acrobatic leader cavorts while connected by a handkerchief to a line of quiet followers. Without direction or coercion, the leader will cede his position and willingly join the line and move with sedate steps as a member of the majority. However, he can also see the virtues of being in an America where the bride and groom first dance as a couple and incumbents should not be restricted to two terms.

In any case, students can be encouraged to look at the “facts” of their lives then, after seeking and finding the “duck-rabbits,” figure out the shape(s) in which these events have and can occur. Certainly there will be choices to be made but far fewer than previously believed. What I suggest is that students keep in mind three thoughts:

- That the “facts” may be hard but the brain doesn’t have to be.
- That options can be weighed in terms of “closing the fewest doors.”
- That one of the Universal Truths is that, regardless of culture, no father ever says to his daughter, “Please, marry an artist.”

Hopefully, the cumulative effect of intellectual openness, critical flexibility, and a sense of humor will facilitate learning how to search and be calm when confronted with a need to do it more than once.

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