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What's the Difference? (text and audio)

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President Myers, Provost McNew, distinguished guests, honored students, class of 1995, and one special faculty member to be named later, I am fairly humbled to stand before you today. You have offered me a most generous gift: the obligation to think deeply over the past year about an issue that I have longed to explore. In the course of this contemplation I have learned many things, some of which I hope to share with you today. But first we need a warm-up exercise. So everyone turn to a white space in your program, take out a pen or pencil and follow my directions carefully. If you are wearing academic regalia today you are exempt from this exercise.

First, draw me a picture of a loaf of bread. Next draw a picture of a window. Now spell out the letters of the name of our railroad system. Finally, write down the name of the President of Mexico and the Prime Minister of Canada. Now imagine that we are conducting this experiment in Montpellier, France. What would your loaf of bread look like? Wonder bread? Wrapped in plastic? Will it stick to the knife when you spread something on it? What about your window? Will it move up and down, or in and out? Will there be a shade to pull down? You probably got the train question right—AMTRAK. In France it would be, of course, SNCF. What do the letters in AMTRAK stand for, besides 30 minutes late? The President of Mexico is named Zedillo and the Prime Minister of Canada is named Jean Chrétien. How many remembered the accent in "Chrétien"? Do you think more of you would know the leaders of your country's nearest neighbors if you lived in France? I think so. Culture is rooted in the language through which we express it; "pain" and "bread" are not directly translatable equivalents for one another. Language shapes and is shaped by the cultural values we hold dear.

Let me tell you a story about overcoming cultural obstacles. It is a true story, an African story. My friend Yeno Matuka was left fatherless at an early age, a position of some trepidation for a Zairian youth in a culture where much depends on the ability of one's father to smooth the way, to engage his personal network of connections on a child's behalf. In fact, Matuka once told a group of students in Contemporary French Culture here at IWU that he had been named by his father to commemorate a significant event in life; namely, that his father was still fertile at the ripe old age he had reached when Matuka was born. That is an Honor's Day way of saying nicely that his name really means "Still standing strong and proud" and I am not referring to his backbone.

In any event, when he was nine or ten, Matuka pestered his uncle (now head of the family) to send him to a school run by Belgian monks. The uncle finally agreed, but like many other families, failed to pay tuition by the end of the year. The next fall, when Matuka showed up at school (a three-day walk from his

native village), the monks refused to enroll him. They let him sleep on the kitchen floor for one night, but sent him on his way the next day in search of tuition. Of course, this was also the beginning of the monsoon season, and Matuka walked for two days to the village of his uncle through a steady hard rain to confront his surrogate father about the lack of support. Matuka tells this story much better than I, coming from a culture which values more highly good storytelling. He tells me he spoke to the frogs along the way, and to the stones, and they all seemed to mock him both with their calls and with their silence. Think of walking that far at age ten. What in the world could possibly be worth that much effort, not to mention the hard work of lobbying he had to do when he finally confronted his uncle (who eventually paid up)? An education. From Belgian monks who wouldn't even let him sleep in a bed. And, by the way, the state of education in the Belgian Congo was House Speaker Newt Gingrich's doctoral dissertation topic. I think somehow Newt would approve of Matuka and his fight to get an education. I disapprove of Matuka having to fight so hard to get an education.

I am humbled by this story. Matuka's courage and his commitment shame me in my comfort and the relative ease of my life. I have always assumed my education; it was clear in my family that I would not have a choice but to go to college. Unlike Matuka, I would not claim this valuable experience until much later. Matuka and his family now live in the United States, political exiles from one of the most inhumane regimes known to a continent which represents something like the major leagues of repression. Matuka is my brother and my teacher and I wish he were standing here today with me.

I too know something of Belgian monks for I teach in the Department of Foreign Languages, the department that makes everyone nervous because we do weird things such as behaving as if English weren't the most important language on earth. After nine years, it is still something to be remarked on, that I spend 95% of my instructional time speaking French. And a significant amount of my meeting time also.

There are several common reactions to this strange behavior of mine, all of them offered by good-hearted people of well-meant intention. Among them are that speaking a foreign language is cute, fun, entertaining at parties, a neat secret code in which you can say what you really think about something. Foreign language is the only program at Illinois Wesleyan by which we recruit students by assuring them that with some effort they will never have to take courses in it. Think about that for a minute. Think about spending your working life learning a set of skills, mastering a body of knowledge, only to listen to admissions guides tell prospective students that they may never have to use the "neat equipment" we have on the first floor of Buck if they are lucky. At some point in one's career one learns to smile through this frustration, to understand that one is always going to represent difference to some degree, that what we do threatens a

significant portion of the population, even in our somewhat rarefied community.

I use my own experience as a window through which to understand how "foreign" continues as an operative word in American discourse. I now realize I grew up in a suburb of Detroit as segregated as any found surrounding Johannesburg. An important part of my youth was devoted to learning that difference existed, even if it was to be avoided.

Like many of my contemporaries, I spent my college years learning about difference, in my case learning the virtues of thinking in a different language system. The ability to move between two language systems became my life's passion. I learned in short, to cherish the difference.

On February 14, 1990, I began a new leg of my life's adventure in which I am learning to erase difference, to move beyond the French obsession with norms and deviations, to live in the light of the teaching of Dr. Martin Luther King where we seek those things that bind us together rather than separate us, where every person can realize full potential, where artificial impediments to that realization are overturned by dogged, loving opposition.

Finally, I think it is a function of working to get beyond difference to realize one day that quite unexpectedly, one has come to represent deviation from the norm to a large group of people. In my lifetime I have learned second-hand from the experiences of such individuals as Dr. Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela how one counters being labeled as different without sacrificing one's own humanity. I have also learned from my own experience that being designated as "different" brings pain, growth, and often unexpected blessings.

My exploration of difference today begins with the immediate culture in which I find myself. Most of us are aware that the State of Illinois has no foreign language high school graduation requirement, though many high schools themselves do. I can only begin to guess why not. More urgently, I can only begin to wonder why no one seems particularly upset by this fact. Most countries I have visited have education systems in which knowledge of a second or even a third language is a fundamental expectation for every student. This is so, not because second languages lead to better jobs or improved economic status, but because the ability to think as the "other" represents an important step forward in human growth. To be able to think, to reason, to feel within the confines of only one language system is viewed as limiting growth to child-like levels, which explains why my French friends often discuss Americans as overgrown children. It is not my intention here to reopen a debate between Americans and Europeans which has gone on for 200 years, but rather to point out to what extent learning to reason within other language systems is normative throughout the rest of the world. We are different in this country and I believe we are deficient. In point of fact, and here I speak out of personal experience, Illinois culture as reflected by our school system is one that first negates differ-

ence, then isolates it, thereby heightening it without celebrating its positive aspects, and ultimately forces those who are differently colored or abled to pay a price. "What's the difference if the differently abled or colored never learn, so long as they don't hurt us?", I hear this culture asking. And who is that culture that shuns difference to such a degree? Why it is us, of course. Pogo always knows.

It has always been thus in Central Illinois. The first Europeans that I know of here spoke French, and came looking for furs and souls, probably in that order. They found plenty of both. The journals of LaSalle, Marquette, and Hennepin speak of the native American they found here (the Illinois) as distorted and uncouth mirror images of themselves. *Civilisés et sauvages.* At some length, one journalist details the way in which the Amerindians of this region formalized life experiences. This is of course one of the best ways in which to describe the French culture which produced the writer himself. Seventeenth-century French culture saw form and content as intimately linked, the one producing the other in an organic, symbiotic existence. French explorers and writers such as LaSalle and Marquette were experienced decoders of form, and as such were apt to project similar world views onto the natives they found along the Illinois River. In a world quite different from their own, it was perhaps natural that these two men sought out resemblance of any sort. There it is, an initial reaction to the strangely threatening or the exotic is to deny the existence of difference. To Marquette and Hennepin, stuck in the paradigm of civilization/savage, favorably comparing Amerindian dance rituals to the Ballet de France may have been a way to push back Josef Conrad's horror. Or perhaps an anonymous French trader/canoer hired to help transport LaSalle, and abandoned while the latter went for help back to Quebec said it best when he carved the famous inscription on the ruined boat which sealed his fate: *Nous sommes tous sauvages.* We are all savages. Sometimes when we encounter what we see as difference, we do not appreciate what we learn about ourselves. I hope this individual learned to reconcile himself to what he learned about himself, but we'll never know for he vanished without a trace.

And yet as I read these journals, I am left with a sense of frustration that the Frenchness as well as the Amerindians have been cleansed so thoroughly from this area. For with all of their Western imperialism and limited views of the Amerindians, the French trappers and missionaries whom I have read seemed, if not to embrace difference, then at least to coexist with it on roughly equal terms. There were fortunes to be made, and a rich mission field to be explored, but not by driving the Native Americans across the Mississippi. Jesuit and Recollect fathers who lived with the Amerindians in Quebec, Ontario, Wisconsin, Michigan, and yes, even Illinois, furnished stories which became bestsellers of Louis XIV's court. That many of these fathers ended their life in torture and murder only heightened the appeal of their writings. Everywhere they went, they spoke French and they saw microcosmic images of *La Belle France.* But they did not

seek to destroy what they saw.

All of this was, of course pushed to the back shelf when the English conquered Quebec in 1759 and began to eradicate any culture or way of life which threatened their hegemony over the land. One of the more obscure victims of this cultural dominance was the small French settlement near Peoria which had fiercely resisted any cultural inroads until a contingent of Anglo-centric Americans sailed up from Shawneetown looking to eliminate any Amerindians they found, and settled for driving French-speaking citizens off the land. In no way matching the horror of Bosnia, nonetheless, the policy of "ethnic cleansing" helped begin the dominant culture of this region as we know it. One culture, one way under God. If a few French or Indians have to be moved, what's the difference?

But what of the melting pot, or the salad bowl? Well, nuts. I am weary of the periodic eruptions of violence that I have witnessed in my lifetime due to our inability to live with difference in whatever sort of metaphoric vessel we place ourselves. I am also weary of supplying "foreignness" in an area of the country that used to be a fairly interesting intersection of several cultures.

I find echoes of this oppression due to language or skin color in my own experience, though still second-hand. As a boy, I commuted from the lily-white suburbs of west Detroit to a lily-white downtown church in an all-black neighborhood across the street from Northern High School, from which my father had graduated. For those of you blessed with a knowledge of Detroit, this is along Woodward Avenue, south of Palmer Park. I sang in the choir throughout my youth, since this meant I got to leave before the sermon in order to rehearse for the next week. One of the duties of the youth choir was to lead the adult choir into the sanctuary every Sunday, singing God's praises, swaying left-to-right in rhythm to the music. Tom Szabo and I led off every week. We never missed a Sunday because we were afraid we would lose our spot at the head of the assembled choirs. One Sunday however, everything changed. Herman Gray was brand new to our church, needed a partner, and no one would be his partner because Herman was the first and only African-American boy in our church. Everybody was asked, everybody said "No," and finally it was my turn. "Sure, I'll do it. What's the difference?" Well, as it turned out there was a lot of difference. I had to march at the back instead of the front, lots of people stopped speaking to me when I was with Herman, but it was OK because Herman was cool. Herman was tough. His parents were missionaries, his father was a doctor in Africa, and Herman had more dignity than anybody I had ever met. And he couldn't sway at all. He and I invented slam dancing going down the aisle together.

Two years after I met Herman, troop carriers rolled down my street patrolling my lily-white neighborhood, supposedly protecting my people from Herman's people and we all started over trying to learn to get along. And it became a little

clearer to me how tenacious difference is, that sometimes it matters when it shouldn't and that other times we ignore it when it does matter.

So I became a French major and learned the richness of things that were different. Albion College, The University of Michigan, Ball State University, IWU. We only look the same because we see the same. But we don't have to. At first I was thrilled to learn French ways of seeing. Then, slowly, as I reached the end of my graduate career, I began no longer to notice the distinctions of French and English. So thanks to George Kieh, I sought out new ways of seeing, African ways of viewing. And slowly the passion to write, to argue, to persuade that Pierre Corneille almost killed in me revives. I too am Yeno Matuka, standing again tall and proud. And I do mean my backbone. Thank you George. You too are my brother and my teacher and I wish you were standing here with me today.

I came to Illinois Wesleyan because I was tired of working at a school where second languages were not seen as relevant to the lives of the students, 95% of whom came from the several counties around the university. If the students, most of whom never intended to leave east central Indiana, never became proficient in a foreign language, what's the difference? It did not seem to occur to folks there that the world might well come to seek them out.

One of my students there was named Janine. Janine worked hard, truly cared about improving her French, and never seemed to mind my teasing attempts to push her one level higher. She became frustrated at how long it was taking her to break through the intermediate/advanced level barrier. One Friday afternoon, as I was walking through the halls on my way back to my office, she raced up to me shouting in perfect, machine gun French: "Monsieur Matthews, je ne parle que francais depuis deux jours! Je ne cesse de penser qu'en francais! Ca y est, j'ai réussi!... Je parle francais, je parle francais." Epiphany. Janine had experienced one of the more dramatic breakthroughs I have witnessed, not unlike my own some 12 years before. As a student, I once found myself sharing the plot of a French film with the French club in fluent, if not perfect, French, and I held my own for 45 minutes (and then collapsed in total exhaustion). Janine had experienced much the same thing, and it changed her life. She went to study in France, returned home and became a fine French teacher. I don't know if she drives a fancy car, but she can undoubtedly tell me all about it in French. Her life is deeper and richer in ways than money in her pocket could ever provide.

When I came to Illinois Wesleyan, the first thing that happened was that everyone who hired me began to leave. The acting department head informed me when I came over to look for an apartment that she had resigned and we would never work together. Swell. The permanent department head, who labored for a year to get me to eat healthier lunches, gave up and left to pursue a personal agenda in North Carolina. The President of the University had already retired two months before, and I met the new President at my first fall faculty

conference. My first Division Director, and one of the best French teachers I have ever met, left to pursue an administrative career and is now President of Monmouth College. Nobody who hired me was around when I came up for tenure, and that should explain a lot. All of this coming and going provided opportunity to hear and see things I might have otherwise missed.

It was at the inauguration luncheon for IWU President Wayne Anderson that I heard Bishop Woody White offer a metaphor for what Illinois Wesleyan could become. Thinking of a bouquet of flowers, he said that God had created a world in which there are many varieties, many colors, many scents of flowers. So too with people. How well did we think our "bouquet" at Illinois Wesleyan reflected the rich variety of "flowers" from which we could select? Not very well, was our understanding. What if he asked that question today? How does our bouquet look today? Or will we say, simply, "What's the difference?"

I knew I had experienced difference mostly through the eyes of others when my son John was born on Valentine's Day, 1990. John has taught me patiently and lovingly what comes after being defined and labeled as different, after grudging acceptance of difference. John was born with an extra chromosome, a random occurrence from which no one is immune, which cannot be passed from generation to generation, which cannot be prevented and which results in varying degrees of retardation and other health problems. John experiences both of these things, but they do not define him. That has been his teaching for me. To teach me to reconcile myself to him, to all of him, not just to the extra damn chromosome he carries in every cell of his body, but to all of his chromosomes. John cannot hide his difference like I could when I studied in France. John speaks English as a second language using muscles and neural networks different than mine to communicate with others. John will always be different in this way. We look different. But we don't have to feel different.

Raising a child with Down syndrome, as with any child with a disability, is more expensive. It also causes one to experience being labeled as different firsthand. It is true that Mary Ann and I have acquired the stigma associated with Down syndrome through our parenting of John. It costs more money, it costs more tears, it requires much understanding from friends, relatives, and employers. It requires more confrontation than I am comfortable with, as we seek to help others overcome fears and misunderstandings about John. I have learned to ask myself daily a question borrowed from American Indian heritage as I pursue equal opportunity for John: "Is this the hill I am willing to die on?" More and more, the answer is yes.

As the same time John has taught me to be less tolerant of the occasional Illinois Wesleyan student to whom has been given so much and who chooses not to apply himself or herself. Students who refuse to speak French in class because it is too much trouble or they might appear less than perfect. Students who settle for the first answer rather than the best answer. Students who are, in

short, the spiritual descendants of those Americans who sailed up the Illinois River to eradicate the French-speaking population of Peoria. "No Indians to shoot? Oh hell, we'll shoot the French then. What's the difference?" You don't have to love French or Spanish or Japanese or Russian or Greek or German, just respect those who do. You don't have to love John, just don't prevent him from realizing his full potential. You don't have to love people with disabilities, just don't make their lives harder than they already are.

I fear John will never attend an institution such as Illinois Wesleyan for he will never be able to generate the standardized scores upon which we place so much value. He is too different for this place today, although more and more students with disabilities graduate from institutions of higher learning every year. It is for Illinois Wesleyan that I am sad in this foregone relationship, for John enriches every place he is. He is a prodigious and devoted learner already at age 5, and his unique way of seeing and expressing his world have deeply touched all who know him. John is my teacher and my brother, as well as my son, and I am delighted that he can stand with me today.

Asking the question "What's the difference?" has been a reflex action for me throughout my lifetime. It has meant to me at various times, "I can't tell the difference," "I'll pretend there is no difference," or "I have reconciled myself to the difference". More recently, it has come to mean, "Let me help you beyond your struggle with this difference." Last year, Paul Bushnell stood in this very spot and said in ringing tones: "Let us teach for justice and not for privilege!" Amen, Paul. It certainly bears repeating. In that spirit, let us remember the words of another Paul, the apostle Paul:

> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so than no one may boast before him.

In that spirit, let us teach students the courage to grow beyond paradigms like civilization/savage, black/white, abled/disabled. Let us create an institution at which Yeno Matuka, Herman Gray, and yes, even John Matthews will feel welcome to teach us and to learn from us. Let us not shirk from climbing those hills upon which we must be willing to die. And once the battle is over, let us remember the words of a character from an Ousmane Sembene novel:

> Happy is the warrior who fights without hatred.

I thank you for this honor this day and I share it willingly with my teachers, my brothers and sisters, and especially with the members of my department without whom I would not be standing here. I am proud to be a member of our community and I look forward to seeing that community grow in the years to come. And if we are all a little early/late for lunch today, well, what's the difference?