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## Curiosity and What to Make of It

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# Curiosity and What to Make of It

*"You don't have to be an anthropologist to let your curiosity about different ways of being in the world take you on little journeys of discovery."*

Story by PROFESSOR REBECCA GEARHART MAFAZY

Anthropology Professor Rebecca Gearhart Mafazy says she believes it is essential "to provide opportunities for my students to interact directly with members of different societies." Those opportunities include inviting cultural experts into her classroom, organizing field trips that offer "cross-cultural immersion experiences," and challenging students to conduct ethnographic fieldwork "that includes integrating themselves into a society or sub-culture in which they have no prior experience."

The goal is for her students to transcend stereotypes and suspicions of people from other cultures, replacing these with curiosity and the desire to know others. She notes that "Illinois Wesleyan students are more and more adventurous in terms of their openness to interacting with people of diverse backgrounds and moving outside of their comfort zones. This makes my teaching more exciting and creates a wonderful learning environment."

Mafazy brought a taste of her immersive teaching style to this spring's Honors Convocation in Westbrook Auditorium. The ceremony paid tribute to the 2017 graduating class and to other students who have earned academic and activity honors. It also honored Mafazy as winner of this year's Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence, the University's highest teaching honor given annually to a faculty member who brings spirit, passion, and scholarship to the art of teaching.

Her convocation keynote address revealed her journey from a small-town Minnesota upbringing to becoming an expert on non-Western expressive arts and for whom East Africa has become a second home. Using her own life experiences as an example, Mafazy examined human curiosity and its role in motivating us to overcome our fears and begin to know and understand one another.

In a surprise, near the end of her speech, Mafazy introduced the IWU gamelan orchestra. Ever the teacher, Mafazy provided useful guidance to her audience on what they were about to hear: "Please draw your attention to how each musician plays a unique but harmonically related melody, and to the interlocking soundscape, which musically replicates the interconnections and circularity of life."

With a glowing smile, the professor joined the gamelan. Led by I Ketut Gede Asnawa, who has taught many IWU students in the orchestra, the gamelan comprises metallophones, xylophones, gongs, and a hand drum played by the conductor. Asnawa and Associate Professor of Music Adriana Ponce collaborated to bring the gamelan to IWU in 2014. Asnawa guided its construction on his home island of Bali, blessing the new instruments before they were played for the first time. "Because it is used to summon the gods and ward off evil spirits, [the gamelan] plays a central role in almost all sacred and secular events. Every village in Bali has a community gamelan like ours," Mafazy explained in her introduction.

And so the music began, strange and discordant at first to the untrained ear, but in time sounding more melodic and delicate, inspiring minds to move places unknown just moments ago. Joining onstage was Asnawa's wife, Putu Oka Mardiana. Draped in colorful, embroidered layers of cloth and wearing a golden headpiece, she performed the Baris Dance. With gestures and facial expressions communicating the heroic emotions of Balinese warriors, Mardiana's movements guided the gamelan's music with bold, precise gestures as her bare feet moved firmly but gracefully across the stage's amber floorboards.

After the performance, Mafazy summed up what rewards may come with appreciating and celebrating humanity's myriad expressions of culture and identity such as the gamelan: "One way that societies

communicate important messages is through art forms such as music and dance that transcend our ephemerality by connecting us with those who have come before us and with those who will be here after we are gone — and who we hope will carry our messages forward." – Tim Obermiller.



Illinois Wesleyan students join with a gamelan orchestra and dancers to perform on the Hansen Student Center stage.

More of Mafazy's speech, titled "Curiosity and What to Make of It," is excerpted below:

Our curiosity about the world and about each other is one of the defining characteristics of being human.

Curiosity drives creativity: How can we do it better? Curiosity drives courage: How far can we push our boundaries? And curiosity drives compassion: How can we understand one another more deeply?

We are born with insatiable curiosity. It is the reason we as babies touch, smell, and taste everything and everyone around us. We want to fully engage with the world; it is our nature. Think of how much self-confidence and bravery it takes for us as toddlers to start walking, even though we know we will fall down, and start talking, even though we know nobody will understand us perfectly. Anthropologists believe that this lack of inhibition — which seems to stem from curiosity — is why children are the inventors of the world's languages.

Recently, for example, aboriginal children have created a new language called *Warlpiri rampaku* in Australia's Northern Territory. Like all new languages, this one combines words from languages spoken in the region with new ones, has its own structure, and, in this case, a tense that does not exist in the other local languages, making it a completely unique way of communicating. That children all over the world, since the development of human language 100,000 years ago, have worked together to create effective ways to communicate and identify with each other demonstrates the amazing things we are capable of when we let our creativity be guided by our innate curiosity.

What I have observed among Swahili children in coastal Kenya is that young children eagerly play with other children in their neighborhoods, despite differences that separate their parents such as ethnic background, religion, or economic class. When we are young, the categories adults use to divide people are insignificant to us. We simply enjoy each other's company while impervious to the social divisions in operation all around. As we grow up, we are taught to focus on each other's differences, and gradually allow stereotypes to override our childlike inclination to treat everyone as a potential playmate.

Children are also masters of nonverbal communication, which is an instinctual way we enhance our verbal communication, whether we are conscious of it or not. Scholars who study the physiology of emotion, language, and the brain have identified at least six facial expressions that correspond to emotions all humans share: sadness, happiness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise. Facial expressions such as happiness and anger produce distinct changes in our brain activity. For example, a smile produces feel-good neurotransmitters such as dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin, both in us and also in the people we smile for.

## A Different Perspective

A smile can also mean different things to different people, and appearing to be too happy has certainly gotten me into trouble on more than one occasion. The first time this happened was when I went out East to Mount Holyoke College, where my big Minnesota smile was received with quite a bit of suspicion.

Interacting with students who were more cosmopolitan and better educated than I was, and who considered my Scandinavian heritage exotic, was part of learning to navigate the terrain of a new place and new people, some of whom were from parts of the world I had never even heard of before.

My first roommate, Loyce, for example, was from the West African country of Ghana. And though she hailed from the vibrant city of Accra and I from the sleepy town of Anoka, we helped each other get over homesickness and culture shock by listening to each other's stories about our families and the friends we left behind, what our neighborhoods looked like, and how the food we missed tasted.

Loyce (along with my African history professor, Fi Herbert; my Senegalese French professor, Samba Gadjigo; and Girma Kebede, my Ethiopian geography professor) nurtured my fascination with the magnificent peoples of Africa, whose histories and cultures led me on a journey of inquiry and discovery that included traveling to East Africa as a junior. That was a big leap for me. But my parents assured me as I boarded the plane that all adventurers have a basecamp to return to, and mine was my family, who would be there for me when I came home. That simple message gave me the confidence to travel halfway across the globe to try out life in a completely different society.

I describe that first trip to East Africa as being bombarded with extreme opposites: People who were faced with economic challenges beyond my comprehension while being more generous with what they did have than I could fathom; landscapes filled with plants, birds, fish, and other wildlife more beautiful than I could have imagined; and some of the largest, unhealthiest settlements in the world, where no one should have to live.

What I learned on that trip was that the strength of the human spirit is intricately tied to the strength of the bonds people have with their families and communities, and that deep happiness and contentment is found playing gin rummy with

friends, especially by kerosene lantern, which was how I spent many evenings with my host family, Zainab and Saidi, on Lamu Island, Kenya.

Zainab went far beyond her role as my Swahili language tutor. She decorated me with henna, taught me how to make samosas from scratch, and explained interesting Swahili cultural practices such as the seclusion of mothers and their newborns during the first 40 days of the infant's life. Zainab also had questions for me. She wondered how American parents allowed young, unmarried women, like me, to travel to unknown and potentially dangerous places where any number of things could go wrong.

And Zainab's husband, Saidi, tested this hypothesis by taking me on an all-night fishing expedition in a traditional Swahili sailboat made out of wood, as well as teaching me how to ride a donkey and how to use very sharp chisels to carve Swahili designs into wood. Saidi introduced me to African reggae, and I shared my Van Morrison music with him. When I answered Saidi's questions about American life, he was very skeptical about the durability of our wooden houses, the sustainability of our massive cornfields, and the suggestion that fish stay alive under frozen lakes in the winter; he did not believe a single one of my ice-fishing stories.

Zainab and Saidi taught me that explaining ordinary things to people who live very differently is a chance to see oneself from another perspective. These kinds of interactions, when people from different backgrounds listen and ask, are openings for understanding — both about others and about ourselves. This give-and-take, cross-cultural exchange forms the basis of how we cultural anthropologists do our work. But you don't have to be an anthropologist to let your curiosity about different ways of being in the world take you on little journeys of discovery.

## Moving Past the Comfort Zone

Nurturing our curiosity about how other people see the world and live in it can begin simply by getting up the courage to initiate a conversation with someone you don't know. This could be someone who seems a bit out of place, a member of a different ethnic group, someone from a different part of the country, or from abroad.

I help my students get a taste for this by assigning projects that take them across campus and into the community to integrate into a group to which they do not already belong. This can be an RSO, a faith-based group, an athletic team, or it can be working with one person who represents a group, such as the women community leaders with whom my visual anthropology students worked last semester.

These interactions with people the students might not naturally gravitate toward help them get used to the initial discomfort of being around people with whom they are unfamiliar and build up their confidence integrating into a new group.

Success in these endeavors encourages students to take their skills to the next level and venture into the world on a May Term travel course, an international summer internship, or on a semester abroad program. These experiences help students replace stereotypes with meaningful personal interactions that often lead to friendships like those that set me on my path to becoming an Africanist scholar 30 years ago.

One of the distinct pleasures I have as an anthropology professor is introducing my students to a host of extraordinarily talented and passionate local cultural experts whom I regularly invite into my classrooms or to lead campus workshops. These experts expose students to new cosmologies, or ways of understanding the world and our relationship to it. They include Carol and Eliida Lakota, sisters of Native American heritage who I met soon after joining IWU's faculty. At least once a year, I invite one or both of these inspiring women to campus to share Lakota Medicine Wheel teachings, which in this time of human-induced climate change remind us that the four-legged, the winged, the creepy crawlers, the swimmers, the plant people, and we two-leggeds are all members of one family and need to care for one another and our beautiful Mother Earth.

One concept Carol and Eliida discuss is seven generations stewardship. Codified by the Iroquois, this principle holds that decisions should be considered in how they will affect



Mafazy says it is essential to give her students opportunities "to interact directly with members of different societies."

our descendants seven generations into the future. Carol and Eliida imaginatively communicate these concepts through powerful creation myths, humorous stories, and personalized craft projects that deeply resonate with students.

Peter Magai Bul is another person whom I am honored to introduce to my students. Peter was born in Southern Sudan, and is among the thousands of Lost Boys who fled bomb raids and military kidnappings in the late 1980s. Peter traveled hundreds of miles on foot without food or water to refugee camps in Ethiopia and then Kenya, where he lived for a decade before obtaining refugee status to come to the United States in 2001.

Peter's willingness to tell of the near-death experiences as a child, and how he took on the adult role of parenting hundreds of orphaned children barely younger than himself, helps students grasp the horror we are capable of unleashing and enduring and the long-lasting impact of war and its destruction.

Like many of the Lost Boys of Sudan who now live in the U.S., each of Peter's accomplishments in the States — learning to speak fluent English, to drive a car, to become economically self-sufficient, to integrate into American society while maintaining his Dinka sensibility — is motivated by his commitment to helping his relatives and friends still living in refugee camps in East Africa or in the war-torn villages of South Sudan.



Peter Magai Bul, left, gave a talk on his former life as a refugee who was forced to flee from war-torn Sudan.

The same combination of fear and hatred that forced Peter and the Lost Boys from their homes 30 years ago is now fueling civil war in the new country of South Sudan. In his ongoing effort to resist surrendering to frustration and despair, Peter focuses on maintaining the school he built in his hometown, where an equal number of girls and boys are being educated. Peter's hope is that knowledge and understanding will ultimately win over ignorance and fear and that the neighbors who fought so long and hard together to win their independence will again unite as one.

Tapping into our innate curiosity about one another, with which we come into the world but unlearn as we get older, leads us to this collective wisdom:

- We are mutually intelligible
- We are mutually vulnerable
- We are all related

Recognizing that the Warlpiri, the Swahili, the Lakota, the Dinka — in fact, each society on earth — has unique and creative answers to our common human problems, and insights into the great mysteries that elude us all, is the key to how we will survive as a species.

Like biodiversity, cultural diversity is essential to our success on this planet. The quote by American author Jacqueline Woodson that appeared on t-shirts worn by some first-year students this past fall is worth contemplating here: "Diversity is about all of us, and about us having to figure out how to walk through this world together."

In a campus mural she designed, Lucy Sanchez '17 shared her artistic talents to encourage minority students at IWU to stick together and support one another along the path to graduation. But her mural also reminds faculty, staff, and administrators that we are responsible for creating an environment in which all students thrive. And it serves as a message to students whose skin color, sexual orientation, or religion makes them part of the majority that everyone's experience here is diminished if there are minority students who feel like they don't belong at IWU or that this campus is not their home.

When my husband, Munib, came to the U.S. from Kenya, he faced many of the cultural obstacles all newcomers face, and those first years were a roller coaster of exhilarating high points and terrifying low points. I was very proud of my family members and friends who unconditionally welcomed Munib and disappointed by others who were too busy or set in their ways to take time to get to know him. Yes, meeting someone new can be uncomfortable because such situations are fraught with social awkwardness and the possibility of miscommunication. But it is just these moments of mutual vulnerability that create openings for building trust and making meaningful connections.

Such a moment was when my Great Grannie Irene first met Munib. My grannie — who raised 10 children in a tiny, northwestern Minnesota farmhouse without running water or electricity — did not have many opportunities to meet people from different parts of the world. When I introduced her to Munib, she swung open her arms and gave him a big hug and, while doing so, gently touched his hair. "It feels like wool," she said in awe. And though I gasped at what I thought was a

terrible misstep, Munib did not miss a beat, and gently returned the gesture by reaching out to touch my grannie's hair. "It feels like cotton," he said, a little sheepishly.

And in that moment, when Munib and Grannie let down their guard to reveal their curiosity about one another and allowed themselves to be vulnerable in the same way, they created a space to build a lasting friendship.

We owe it to ourselves and to each other to go out on a limb every now and then and build bridges of understanding over the walls of fear and ignorance that separate us. Following our human instinct to reach out instead of close off, and letting our innate curiosity lead us to the courage and creativity necessary for true compassion, will enable us to create a campus, a community, and a country where no one is an outsider, and everyone is at home.

*About the author:* Professor Rebecca Gearhart Mafazy received a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Florida in 1998 and joined the Illinois Wesleyan faculty in 1999. She takes an interdisciplinary approach (visual anthropology, history, and performance studies) to her research on non-Western music and dance performance traditions. Her area of interest is East Africa, where she has frequently lived over the past 20 years, primarily among the Swahili people of the Kenya coast. She is co-editor of the book *Contesting Identities: The Mijikenda and Their Neighbors in Kenyan Coastal Society* (Africa World Press, 2013) and has authored numerous scholarly papers.

