

## MULTICULTURAL COUPLES — IDENTITY AND CHANGE

The twenty first century is a brave new world of global connections, and multicultural relationships and marriages. While this brings unparalleled creativity and choice about how we live our lives, there is a shadow side to diversity. The shadow side can loom heavily in relationships where husbands and wives forget to invite each other to an ongoing conversation about how they will negotiate and blend their cultures over time into a third culture as they raise children.

There is a universal longing in all of us to be heard and understood regardless of language or culture. The normalizing good news is all marriages have some cultural differences. Every one of us comes to a marriage with some idiosyncrasies from the family in which we were raised even when we speak the same native tongue and were born in the same country. Interestingly enough, differences in religion or socioeconomic status can be more powerful emotional triggers for conflict in a relationship than language or country of origin.

As a simple example, at US Thanksgiving I make my turkey with rice dressing and you make your turkey with bread dressing. While this difference may seem petty enough to be a conflict scenario on an evening television situation comedy, it carries a very serious theme to which we all resonate. The real conflict is about the emotional attachment to the comfort and “rightness” of the food, ambiance, and celebration of the holidays and life events which we hold dear in our hearts. Why we feel the way we do is completely illogical but very valid. It is our grounding, our history and our identity.

Reasonable, responsible adults find themselves embarrassed or resentful when time and again they become heated about such things as whether to teach the children evening prayers in English, Spanish or both. Are both languages for all the prayers overkill? If we teach some prayers in one language and some in another language, which language gets which prayers? Some prayers don't translate well into another language because the feeling or the meaning is diminished. Then what? Once again, the conflict is about the emotional attachment to honoring our history, culture, and language. We want a successful marriage and emotionally healthy children who have a clear sense of cultural and language identities. To achieve this it is essential to rise above the content of the conflict and make time to talk about the meaning of an act or event, how it affects your history and your cultural identity. When you have a very strong emotional reaction that does not make sense to you or your spouse it's a warning light. Cultivate a willingness to be vulnerable, honest and open. It can be unnerving. Remember the universal need to be understood. Your spouse has it too. Take courage and forage ahead.

There are some tips which can be helpful as you negotiate and blend cultures and families over time. First of all you can't have it all. When Jennifer Chou marries Anders Sondheim, the child can have the surname Chou-Sondheim but what happens when he is grown, falls in love and wants to marry Ellen Lopez-Rosenblatt? Are the children to have the surname Chou-Sondheim-Lopez -Rosenblatt? It is important to talk overtly about how you will make an identity together as a couple. It is essential you look

carefully into your hearts and talk to each other very specifically about the meaning of “the little things”. Telling stories about yourself or your family that represent the meaning of a food, an expression which is hard to translate or a national holiday will help your spouse and children understand why the experience is so intense for you.

Second, there will be some painful decisions. Remember again, you can't have it all your way, your language, your culture. When you hit an impasse, consider how important that specific issue is to each of you. There will have to be a judgment and a negotiation about some things. One or both of you will have to lose and you both need to acknowledge the loss. Rate the issue on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most important. As part of your goal to be understood, acknowledge to yourselves and each other the moments of grief about things you choose to let go of as you create your multicultural family together. Be kind hearted and allow each other an occasional overreaction with tears. Your changing identities will affect how you relate to your native culture and language. When you work at it, you will evolve cultural identities together which will hold your children in a cozy wrap as you raise them. Note the changes as they happen; perhaps with a ritual you invent or a journal you keep as a record of your multicultural journey.

Third, make time together to talk about emotional fallout from both sides of your extended family. Parents can feel threatened and fearful they will lose you and their grandchildren to a new culture, language or both. Some of their fears are justified. Strategize with your spouse ways to consciously teach your children to walk in all cultures; the one they live in and the one each set of grandparent's lives in. This is especially important before holidays or visits from relatives.

We live in a time when it is acceptable to talk with each other about our cultural preference and why each one means so much to us emotionally. That doesn't mean it is easy to do. There is an expression, “weller than well” I believe it applies to bilingual, multicultural families. “Weller that well” means the life changing growth necessary to cope with life challenges make you more human, empathetic and stronger than those who live in the comfortable middle mainstream. It might be lonely at times. It helps to use the support of other multicultural and international families. You are the forerunners of the twenty first century. You are the new role models. Hold your heads high and go for it.