

The Demise of Ethnic Differences--Cultural Identity and the Internet

By Caleb Rosado

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The Internet, the most extraordinary engine of social change since the military conquest of nations, is helping us re-make our ethnic and cultural identity. In place of a tired old focus on the color *of* people we are experimenting with a healthy new focus on the "color" *in* people - on their remarkable systems of thinking and the resulting behaviors. This revolutionary change - still an optional one - has extraordinary significance for the rest of your life.

A Borderless World.

Traditional approaches to human identity have focused on external issues of a biological, cultural, gender, or socioeconomic nature. We have rushed to label and pre-judge people by their appearance, style of life, sex, or social class. Those of us who continue in the 21st century to categorize others on such a superficial basis may be blindsided by deep-reaching changes already looming on the horizon.

The Internet is altering the way we see ourselves and others, and the way our minds work. In ages past, where national and group boundaries were important for socioeconomic, religious, ethnic, and political reasons, identity with your own group, culture, and nation was vital. Passports - even in the non-paper form of membership in this or that group - were essential for proving who you were, for entry, and for residence.

Today, the Internet has not just created fluidity across traditional boundaries; in many situations it is actually obliterating them. I do not need my passport to cyber-travel to the UK and access the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. After writing the previous sentence I stopped and immediately traveled online to Oxford to access their main library to make sure that I had the correct spelling-I had missed the "i"-all within 50 seconds. No passport, no Concorde, no getting out of bed where I was doing my writing.

In a previous time period I would not even have gotten through the door at Oxford due to color, class, culture, and country differences. Now all that is in the past. I went in and out in a matter of seconds and no one knew the difference for none of those differences mattered. This is a small example of how the Internet is moving society toward a borderless world where all the old socially constructed boundaries are increasingly becoming irrelevant. [1]

The new variables that connect and divide people are their systems of values, their interests, the limits they set on their thinking and possibilities, and the new networks they

forge with others who share the same interests and concerns in the cyber-world of the World Wide Web. On the Internet one does not know with whom one is communicating (whether they are Black or White, from Sweden or from Africa, a 9 year-old computer wizard or a Nobel laureate, is mono or multilingual, a lesbian or a homophobe, an atheist or a Buddhist, the variables are endless).

What matters in the WWW are not the old visible boundaries. In the past they pre-empted people from entering or expressing their ideas even before they could open their mouths - due to the mental scripts of the gatekeepers of power. The Internet trumps such 20th century superficial factors by creating a new sort of "affirmative action" program. All, irrespective of who or what they are, have equal access as long as they can cross the Digital Divide and "get themselves connected." This is what really matters now - *connectedness*.

Here is where schools are already playing a key role. Education, K-12 and beyond, is now being "virtualized." [2] Students can and are taking online courses with students anywhere in the world. Virtually any course can be, and many will be virtualized via the Internet. "Designer curriculums" are already in place. At leading high schools here and abroad, students design their own course of study. With wireless connection becoming widespread, learning will take place from anywhere in the world according to a student's interests, needs, and schedule, rather than the traditional 8-to-3pm classroom schedule.

Celebrating Diversity or Living Wholeness?

Two other factors, associated with the Internet are also influencing new identities. The new "multiracial" category of the 2000 US Census with which nearly 7 million people identified is also watering down ethnic/racial/cultural identities, eventually to the point where such differences will matter very little. [3] Latinos, for example, have been a multiracial people ever since Columbus landed and began to miscegenate with the indigenous populations. And there are very few Blacks in the US who can honestly claim to be 100% African.

The Human Genome Project, with the data readily available on the Internet, is the other factor that is redefining who we are as human beings. The data show that all human beings have only some 30,000 genes, and every person on Earth shares 99.9% of that same genetic code with all other people. Such findings demand that the focus must shift from superficial issues of race, color, and ethnic divides to the deeper levels of operational value systems within people.

"Celebrating differences" cannot be the ultimate goal or final stage of human relations endeavors. If such is their end, in the long run these efforts—as good as they appear to be—end up promoting racial/ethnic/gender divides that further alienate, fragment, and frustrate our social well-being. Focusing on what differentiates people at the expense of what they have in common does not further the cause and efforts for unity. To focus on the one hundredth of 1% of human differences, and not on these deep decision-making systems, is to focus on the gnat on an elephant's back and miss the

whole elephant.

Successful human relations efforts must not only address factors that make people distinctive, but even more so, what they share that makes them similar. This is where the colorful spiral of emergent, unfolding behavior systems that shape human conduct and the way people see the world comes in. For from these differing value systems emerge, not only intolerance and discrimination among some, but also compassion and acceptance of human differences and the factors that create for unity and human connectedness among others.

Unity is not synonymous with uniformity, neither is diversity synonymous with separation. The solution to the tension is to respect and value diversity while working for unity and wholeness, otherwise exclusion is the result. Thus, the strength of a nation or organization lies in *Living Wholeness* - the balancing of the two elements of unity-in-diversity through the valuing of wholes and parts.

What will make this possible is a moving away from a fragmentary worldview that treats the wholeness of the human family and social reality as inherently divided, fragmented, and disconnected, separating people into races, nations, cultures, classes, with each part regarded as "independent and self-existent" (David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (Routledge, 1980). The result is that this fragmentary, atomistic, binary, mechanical worldview that divides what is indivisible—the oneness of the human family, and unites what is not really unitable—groupings of people separate from the whole.

As the saying goes, "you cannot get there from here." The issues of racial, ethnic, and gender divides cannot be solved if one begins from a fragmentary view of the world. One needs to shift to one of "wholeness"-a holistic framework that acknowledges the interdependent yet autonomous nature of our social reality. The former comes from a Newtonian/Cartesian worldview, linear, binary, and mechanical. The latter comes out of nonlinear quantum physics, with its holographic view of the universe, where the whole is not only in the parts but bigger than the sum of the parts.

This Living Wholeness is a lifestyle unique to the 21st century, for never before in human history have so many different cultures and ethnic groups, with differing systems of thinking and "mindware," come together in the major urban centers of the world to form some semblance of social existence and convivialness.

The Internet Generation.

In terms of human social identity, a new generation with a new identity is emerging - *the Internet Generation* - one that did not directly experience the Civil Rights Movement and segregated living, one that operates at its own level of human existence, acceptance, and thinking, with a different set of operational values. Many members (though not all, of course) do not share the interest in social labels others who may "look like them" and have so identified themselves in the past, may want to hang on them - whether it be their Blackness, their Chicanismo, or their being a "model-minority". [4]

Where Afro-Americans are concerned, for example, Nat Irvin II calls this new generation of Blacks the "Thrivals". They are a "post-struggle generation of Africans and African Americans, characterized by a keen awareness of and appreciation for multiculturalism, globalization, and change. Drawing on strengths derived from historical victimization and oppression, they actively participate in global economics and politics and are a strong influence on social change. Individuals are typically competitive, critical, savvy, and educated, and have an outlook that is international and multicultural." [5]

Many members of this new Internet Generation - Black, while, and whatever - will be more impacted by its global cyber culture and individual achievements than by past bio-psycho-social-spiritual factors that forged the identity of their parents. Tiger Woods, with his "cablinasian" identity is just one example.

No More Friction?

The changes awaiting us in the near future will invite us to come to grips with the essence of our common core humanity, one which we tend to deny or hide behind cultural armor and image-enhancing facades of racial, ethnic, and gender identities. This does not mean, of course, the old paradigm of ethnic and cultural identity will soon disappear, for it won't. Ethnic wars will still rage and cultural differences will continue to dominate racial discourse, in great measure due to the values people uphold or are fighting off, and the self-interests they desire to protect and garner for themselves. [6]

For many, however, the core question asks - "Who am I?" - as a human being, beyond being Black, Brown, White, Jewish, Arab, Irish, Buddhist, Christian or whatever other socio-cultural labels we may identify with. These labels reflect the objective "Me" (the way I and others perceive me), but not the subjective "I" (the essence of who I am as a human being beyond societal impositions). It is in the "I" where our similarities as humans are found, and where systems of change will increasingly focus. [7]. As Howard Thurman said in *Creative Encounters*: "It is my belief that in the Presence of God there is neither male nor female, white nor black, Gentile nor Jew, Protestant nor Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, nor Moslem, but a human spirit stripped to the literal substance of itself before God."

Summary.

Any understanding of diversity in this new millennium needs to consider how the new culture of the Internet can and probably is already shaping a new "cultural" identity that transcends old bio-cultural ones. [8] For as humans we have more in common with what unites us than with what divides us. In this Third Millennium, looming socio-technological changes birthed by the Internet can aid our human minds bring about a global transformational shift from competition and fighting for "rights" to mutuality and living wholeness ... a shift that will salute connectedness. Care to help forge this finer Future?

Footnotes.

1. A new website has emerged, Words Without Borders (www.wordswithoutborders.org) that seeks to obliterate

cultural borders that create "cultural blinders," by bringing literature and commentary from all over the world to the American public via the Internet.

2. Samuel L. Dunn. 2000. "The Virtualizing of Education." *The Futurist*. March-April, pp. 34-38.

3. These identities are socially constructed and are not part of our biological makeup. They all played a key and vital role in the 19th and 20th century social movements from Civil Constraint-focused on Slavery, to Civil War-focused on Freedom, to Civil Rights-focused on Equality. And yet the slavery-to-equality range of issues is as far as most conversations, committees, and commissions on race have gotten. The result has been a massive struggle for human rights and privileges, most of it to be lauded. In some cases, however, the medicine has been worse than the disease. The backlash against multiculturalism and affirmative action, which has now moved to a campaign against ethnic studies programs in university campuses, has been in some cases an attempt to provide a corrective to extreme policies of political correctness. Yet, in other situations, it has been an all-out war of annihilation of effective programs.

4. William F. Ogburn in 1932 addressed such tensions brought about by social change by showing how the material aspects of culture [in terms of this discussion, the Internet] change faster than the non-material aspects can keep up with [our value systems, the way our brains are presently wired]. He called these periods "cultural lags," and the result can be severe internal conflict, both in the person and in the nation. The present national reality, oriented toward ethnic/cultural identity and flying in the face of the changes the Internet is bringing, is an example of such "cultural lag" and the psycho-social warfare it creates over culturally constructed differences. William F. Ogburn. 1932. *Social Change*. New York: Viking Press. For a understanding of where racism and ethnic conflict is headed into the future, see. Caleb Rosado. "Memetics and the Multiple Futures of Racism-Beyond the Myth of Race Toward a New paradigm for the Third Millennium." *Futures Research Quarterly*, Spring 1999, Volume 15, Number 1. pp. 29-62;

5. Nat Irvin II. 2004. "The Arrival of the Thrivals." *The Futurist*, March-April, pp. 16-23.

6. The recent racial/ethnic riots throughout England and Europe make this clear that ethnic self-interests are not going to go away soon. Yet focusing on outward differences between groups, rather than on thinking systems, as much diversity and race relations training tends to do, will do nothing to ameliorate the situation. Thus, among some groups, depending on their level of operation in the spiral of human development, racial and ethnic identity will intensify due to worsening conditions. For others at other levels of existence it will simply disappear as other factors take on greater importance. It was José Ortega y Gasset who reminded us that such attempts to hang on to "nationalism" in the face of inevitable change for inclusiveness represent the "last flare," the "last sigh," which are often "the longest" and "the deepest." And these tend to intensify "on the very eve of their disappearance." José Ortega y Gasset. 1957. *The Revolt of the Masses*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

7. Too many of us tend to be concerned with the "Me" and with all its self-enhancing entitlements with which we dress and prop up our otherwise fragile egos and dishonest behaviors. Even the virtual identities and e-consciousness the Internet is creating can become a new source of conflict if we forget that as humans we have more in common with what unites us than with what divides us. However, whether there will be an intensifying for some and inclusiveness for others depends on the deep-level value systems at which people operate, the forces of change they are addressing, and how open they are to these changes.

8. The key factor here is what lies behind this new identity. It is not the old ideas of the color *of* people, but the color *in* people- i.e., the colorful memetic systems of thinking and the resulting behaviors these produce - which have always generated most of the conflict.

*A shorter and somewhat different version first appeared as part of the Cyber Society Forum at the web site of the World Future Society (www.wfs.org) at www.wfs.org/rosado.htm.