

The Matrix of Culture by Lloyd Robertson

The Matrix is currently my son's favorite movie. It's an Australian film based on the idea of a mass induced computer generated virtual reality. He had only seen it six times and insisted I view it with him a seventh. My reaction? We already live in a virtual reality and it's called culture.

Two things make us human. The first is our physical or genetic inheritance. The second is culture. Culture is language based and includes our shared beliefs, attitudes, ways of doing things and ways of relating to each other. The power of culture is slowly being recognized.

The power of culture is such that it can control what sounds we hear. At birth there are approximately 70 distinct sounds the human ear can hear for the purpose of language. English uses 44 of these sounds. Unilingual adult English speakers cannot hear the other twenty sounds. They have not developed the analogue of the sounds in their brains; therefore, they do not recognize them. For example, I am told that there is a Cree sound somewhat between an English "t" and English "s". English speakers will hear it as a "t" or an "s". If the sound cannot be heard correctly then it cannot be spoken correctly and "Cree as a second language" people will sound "funny" to people who learned Cree as children. The reverse is also true. People who did not learn English as children, or learned it from people who had not mastered the English sound system, will sound strange to native English speakers.

Culture can also control how we see things. Years ago I met a "Euro-Canadian" woman who could not recognize aboriginal people who were educated, dressed in sports jackets and talked without an accent, regardless of how "dark" they were. Yet this same woman had no difficulty separating aboriginal from Caucasian "street" people. I wrote her off as a victim of her racist upbringing. But I now think that is not the whole story.

I learned a different cultural perspective in Chile. With 1.5 million, the Mapuches are, by far, the largest Amerindian people in that country. But to be a Mapuche one must live a traditional lifestyle. Those who have chosen to live in the capital, Santiago, and dress in suits and ties are literally not seen to be Mapuche.

"Race" is a cultural illusion that affects our eyesight. People who are "race conscious" will see some people as "blacker" and others as "whiter" than they actually are. In an earlier time Orientals were seen as "yellow" and Amerindians were seen as "red". Since all of this is illusion we are free to define race, or not define race, as best meets our needs to get along.

Canada is the only country on Earth that recognizes a people like the Metis. In most other countries people of mixed ancestry are identified with the dominant culture. In some countries people of mixed ancestry have a choice, they can be either "Indian" or "White". But in our country some of us have chosen to be neither and, in turn, have been recognized by other Canadians to be a distinctive people. Are thirty million Canadians wrong?

A "people" share the same traditions and values and see themselves as distinct from other "peoples". In short, a people are any group that share the cultural belief that they are one. In Canada we have many peoples because we have a mass culture that permits diversification. The United States "melting pot" is an experiment in the opposite direction.

Culture can determine the emotions we feel. European cultures have a feeling of gratitude reflected by the words "thank you". The majority of the world's cultures do not have those words in their languages. The feeling is not there. Instead, gift giving generates a serious and reciprocal relationship which is felt and understood but is different from the European feeling of gratitude. It is a little like the European idea of contract but it is more intimate and enduring. Interestingly, as the culture of the Lac La Ronge Cree changed, they invented a new word, "tineki", which, of course, means "thank you". As culture evolves, language changes.

Similarly, culture can affect how and when we feel anger, sadness, joy, grief, love, companionship and other emotions. Culture can also control our hopes, dreams, relationships, memories and the limits we place on ourselves.

For all its power, culture exists only in our collective minds. The limits that culture places on us, as individuals, are really walls of illusion. My next column will be about how we can pass thru those walls of illusion and multiply our potential one hundred fold. Just call me Morpheus.