

“Face to Face with Cultural Diversity” An Interview with Clair Favro-Jimenez

By Raymond Platt

Meditation Magazine: Can you tell us a little about your background and what led you to the field of cross-cultural issues?

Clair Favro-Jimenez: I grew up on the campus of Earlham College, a Quaker liberal arts college that runs a lot of international programs and has a lot of exchange students. My parents are both very involved with Japanese studies and when I was a young teenager I lived for 2 years in Japan with my family. There I became sensitive to differences although I didn't really know how to analyze them or what to do about them; I just recognized they were there. For the last 8 years I've been working with foreigners who are learning English. Most of that time I've had classes at the college prep and college levels, so the students have advanced English skills already. About 3 years ago I took a master's degree program in psychotherapy from California Family Study Center and during the 2 years I was studying there, I read about cross culture issues and began to see connections between what I was reading and what I was experiencing in the classroom. Since I was teaching adults from sometimes up to 18 different countries all in one classroom, it seemed natural to think of my classroom as a laboratory, a place where I could begin to understand in concrete terms the culture difference and also begin to help these people deal with life in new place, which is invariably a cultural shock.

This very quickly grew, from my own personal investigations and interviews with my students, to a realization that I had information that other educators and administrators could use and, in fact, I began to see that anyone who lives in multi-cultural environment or has employees or customers who are multicultural could benefit personally, socially, commercially and academically from the information I was gathering. Also during this period of time, I fell in love with and married a man from Mexico, which means I will continue for a lifetime to gather information.

“We learn it as easily and quietly as we learn to see, to breath, to laugh. It is as deep in us as our perceptions of high and low, of left and right. It is as complex, multifaceted and subtle as the workings of our minds.

In bringing together the peoples of the world, both for mutual survival and mutual growth, it is awareness of cultural that paves the way to mutual understanding and respect, without which we are at the mercy of prejudice and/or blind faith. Prejudice blocks a fair hearing before it begins; blind faith contends that no hearing is necessary. In either case there is no listening. Listening to the cultural cues that motivate us with different precepts and manifest in different beliefs and behaviors, pills roots on the flowers of our good intentions and gives us something to plant in the soil of peace. ”

MM: What kind of information is this?

CFJ: I have been concentration on broad categories that build the reality perspective of a culture, or a whole region's culture. In other words, rather than simply learn them in a context that illuminates the psychology of the people who live in that culture. Learn that an Asian may not explain his or her behavior if it has created a crisis, and learn that the concept of losing face, with which many non-Asians are familiar, stems from an understanding of an extended family that reaches back through all one's ancestors and forward to all one's descendents. Consequently, disgrace is a burden of far greater weight than it might be for a non-Asian and response to it takes a different course.

Edward T. Hall's work in the area of proxemics (the study of spatial relationship) and kinesics (nonverbal communication) is fascinating in that he uses the information about, for example, the length of a handshake, or the distances between speakers, to compare clusters and their respective reactions to violations of their norms.

In additions, I have focused on ways to understand the dynamics of culture shock, culture adaptation and cultural prejudice, and how to create a process for moving beyond the pain in those experiences.

MM: Could these ideas be applied in reverse? Can you train U.S. citizens to function in an environment overseas using these same concepts?

CFJ: I haven't done that kind of work, because that works, and there are many people involved with it, means concentrating on only 2 cultural and how they interact. This is important work, but what I'm interested in is working in an area like Los Angeles, which is multinational to begin with, so that the people who benefits from what I'm doing would be open to understanding what's going on if, say, someone from Iran walks in today and you need to communicate and tomorrow someone from Indonesia and the next day someone from Ethiopia. If you have within yourself some sort of model for reaching beyond your initial reactions, which may be cultural conditioned, then it is at least possible that you could deal with anyone from any culture as long as you have a language in common.

MM: it sounds like a by-product of what you are doing is breaking down prejudicial stereotypes as well.

CFJ: Absolutely. One of the things we work with in the first part of a seminar in an understanding of what cultural prejudice is and easily one can move beyond a very sample model for changing thinking patterns and attitudes. Prejudice is not reasoned out. A changed in one's prejudicial thinking is predicted on n speaking of begins with curiosity, which leads to inquiry and investigation, which leads to a conscious decision. Just as we speak about having the choice between begin happy or begin sad, when you have information, you have the choice of whether to change your thinking or not change your thinking. When you have made a conscious attitude change will follows it quite naturally. So the process I like to deal with is painless. All it needs is some curiosity; all it takes is a person's desired to learn.

MM: Did you develop this model or are there predecessors?

CFJ: I developed it as a result of my own studies while facilitating seminars. People would ask me how to go about changing so I had to dive into it because there wasn't much information available. I credit California Family Study Center with a lot of influence on my thinking.

MM: It occurs to me that during medita in the metaphysical field for more than 20 years, has been that it is such a marvelous revelation and relief to find my attitude changing, to feel my heart opening, to understanding how to touch my closed heart and open it. It's another things to get up from that state , after meditating, walk out the front door, and talk to the person who lives next door and has been keeping me awake night after night with noise.

MM: This brings to mind a friend of fine with neighbors who are recently arrived here from another country. They live in an apartment above her and do their vacuuming and other chores between I

“We, as the residents of this country must be teachers, and we must not be embarrassed about that and we must not be aggressive. We must be helpful.”

and 3 in morning. How can she deal with this, knowing that there must be cultural differences?

CFJ: Metaphysical- minded people like to talk about communication and the oneness of the universe, and I have found as frequently as not, that we are roadblocked when we have to deal with a problem here in the physical that is unpleasant. It's easier to float above a crisis and make pronouncements of cosmic relevance.

In other words, put your head in the sand. Unconditional love is an incredible ideal, and a worthy goal. It isn't real, however, unless it's a part of every day and every action and that's not easy.

MNI: Yes, it's easier to contemplate an ideal than to manifest a tangible actualization. How do you suggest we manifest it using these tools you have spoken of?

CFJ: That's an excellent example because what we're dealing with are different concepts of time. Hall has written 4 excellent books dealing with issues of time and space. Let's look at your example in the light of his ideas. I would guess your immigrant family is from Latin, Middle Eastern or perhaps Southeast Asian origin. This is a guess, however, we know that those areas of the world have a concept of time which Hall terms polyehronic. P-time is involved with relationships and networking; it's cyclical. Let me give you an example. If we deal in P-time, we do not compartmentalize our interactions. If we have a problem, we will meet with each other and discuss it until we reach a solution. If we skip a meal because of it, we will not make excuses. If we have appointments, we will simply miss them with no apologies. And, the people who are waiting for us will not expect apologies. They know that when it is their turn, we will give them as much attention and time as is needed. That's polychronic and, of course, we are all

in this mode from time to time. But some people, just like some cultures, tend to emphasize it more than others.

The other mode Hall terms monochronic. M-time is linear, compartmentalized, and generates more attention to schedules and analytical thinking. Where P-time emphasizes content, M-time emphasizes form. In a culture that tends toward M-time, a meeting will be adjourned and reconvened if other appointments are pressing. Again, each of us works in both senses of time, but tends toward one or the other.

MM: Do you think this is connected with the other dualities, such as yin/yang and male/female attributes?

CFJ: I believe it is. I haven't seen much about this. Feminine value systems seem to be more polychronic. However, I don't think we should divide male and female order or time frame. A person who is more comfortable with M-time would find my method frustrating. Of course, I find office schedules and time-clock realities unnerving. I think there's definitely significance in the fact that we think of the watch-conscious business world as Masculine. In a culture that is dominated by M-time thinking in the power structure, as ours is, the Feminine is bound to be wounded. In the cross-cultural context, it's vital to realize that it isn't like this everywhere in the world.

MM: Let's apply this now to the noisy neighbors.

CFJ: Let's say you came to a seminar or began to do research on your own and you have meditated to release the anger you've been feeling about your lack of sleep. Of course, that is justified anger from your M-time perspective. So now you have released this anger through meditation, or in one of my seminars through a conscious attitude change, and yes, people may do this faster with the help of meditation. Now you are open to learning and what you might learn, for example, would be about poly- and mono-chronic time. So now you are sitting in your apartment at 2:30 in the morning reading about this time perception difference and you know, because of your education, that the people upstairs are not doing anything to intentionally destroy your life. You also know that if you went up to them and said, "Would you please be quiet?" it would have no meaning for them. From their point of view you may seem slightly neurotic and obsessed with time. So why should they change their lifestyle to accommodate a neurotic, obsessive guy who lives downstairs? Given that you still want to make some change, you have the possibility, rather than going up to them, of perhaps inviting them, at some other time, to your home, maybe for a meal. Since food, as you will have learned, is a very important social ritual - much more so than in this culture.

MM: We seem to have designated times for ritual feasts, like Thanksgiving, Christmas, etc.

CFJ: Yes. Whereas in some cultures, to have food is a blessing that you share with others. In the Middle East it is considered rude to eat in front of others, if you are not sharing it. So perhaps

you would take the time to invite your neighbors, at a moment when your nerves are not frayed, and share some social time with them. You have also learned that you mustn't jump into the topic immediately. Our culture puts a high premium on "getting to the point." This in itself is related to our urgency about time. In most other cultures, it is considered offensive to do so. If your end goal is meaningful communication then you have to be willing to move towards that goal in a way that is meaningful for the people you wish to communicate with.

MM: It seems to me what would occur at this meal is the suspension of my personal monochronic attitude for that moment, and move into a polychronic system, and not aped then: to move into a monochronic time frame.

CFJ: That you perceive it as a shift confirms the fact that you are more familiar and comfortable with M-time. I can tell you that they have also experienced that a shift is required to fit in here. They may not understand why or what shift is being demanded of them. You see, most of us are not in the least bit conscious of our cultural conditioning until we are faced with a variance, and then we rear-range the externals to recreate internal comfort as much as possible. And before you studied the subject, you may have felt that this family was just particularly inconsiderate. It may not have occurred to you that it might be cultural. They have undoubtedly recognized that it is difficult for them to be relaxed in this culture; they may not have identified something as subtle and specific as concepts of time.

MM: Do these concepts of time, space and other types of reality connect up with the religious, spiritual and metaphysical beliefs of the various cultures: Christian, Muslim, Judaic, Hindu, etc? Those of us who practice meditation and are aware of metaphysical ideas would probably want to speak of that at this hypothetical meal to help learn how to co-habitate in these different worlds of time and space. Would that be taboo or uncomfortable for our guests?

CFJ: You bring up a very interesting point, something that I face daily. If I don't know what information I want about your culture, for example, how your religion may teach you to eat the way you do, or to think about education the way you do, or to think about women and men the way you do - if I don't know what piece of information I want, how can I ask an intelligent question? Since we are talking about deep-seated beliefs, you probably won't know how to offer that information to me. There is some work that has been done, but I haven't read anything that links religions in detail to these concepts of reality that we are looking at. The only example that comes to mind is about Islam and education.

In the Islamic tradition, education is seen as the handing down of information that is ancient, the most important information having come from Muhammed. The educational system of traditional Muslim society consists of lectures, note-taking and a lot of listening. We have a lot of Middle Easterners who are culturally disoriented by our participatory educational system here, with its emphasis on independent reasoning and verbal production of ideas at a moment's notice. It's foreign and uncomfortable to them.

MM: Many Americans feel that immigrants have a duty to learn our language and way of living and mold - or should I say melt - into the American ways of life...

CFJ: I'd like to interrupt here. It's absolutely true that people coming to live in this culture must learn to survive in this culture. They wish to do so. They may have come because of political, economic or educational necessity. It doesn't matter why they are here; at some point they made a commitment to learn something about this system. The things we are talking about however, are not getting on the bus, calling the doctor, or opening a bank account. All of that information is available at English language schools and from neighbors and friends. What we are talking about is making sense of such things as billboards covered with provocative-information when you come from a culture where such a display is unthinkable. How do you deal with all these people who smile and ask how you are and don't listen to the answer, when in your culture you greet only people you know and you attend to their words? How do you deal with people who look at their watches as they speak with you, walk away in the middle of it conversation, neglecting to give you a proper goodbye?

When you are faced each day with behavior that is unacceptable you are robbed of your ability to judge the worth of the people you are speaking to, and by that I don't mean their worth as human beings. I mean, "Is this someone I can trust? Is this someone I can leave my children with? Is this someone whose suggestions I can rely on?" When you can't make value judgments about the people around you, how can you ask them questions, how can you understand their culture? So this goes back to what we were saying before: When I don't know what questions to ask, or of whom to ask them, how will I get the information?

It is the responsibility of the people who live in this culture to, as much as they can, impart this information, because we will not be asked; we must take the initiative to teach it. So, here you are, sitting at a meal with your immigrant neighbors. You want a change that allows both of you to lead the kind of lives that you enjoy. Apartment living always involves compromise. The idea of compromise will not be new. What you need to do as you enjoy learning about them and sharing food, is to teach, to explain. We, as the residents of this country, must be the teachers, and we must not be embarrassed about that, and we must not be aggressive. We must be helpful.

MM: What you are saying is that we need to suspend our ethnocentricity?

CFJ: Let's eliminate it. Who needs it? If we try to make changes while saying, "Why don't you go back home where you came from?" we accomplish nothing constructive. And what territorial rights can any of us claim to the space in this universe? If we can get away from the "Oh, that's weird" and, try "Oh, I don't understand that; what does it mean?" then we will have come a long way towards effecting personal, community and world peace.

One of the easiest ways to help native-born residents of the U.S. focus on our ethnocentrism is to ask where their ancestors came from. How many generations do you have to trace before you find a non-English speaking relative? Many of us find that our grandparents, if not our parents,

came from a foreign country and had to learn English. Families that trace themselves through generations of slaves have a difficult time answering this. They know only that western Africa may have been their origin, but have little sense of specific cultures. These people and those who can trace it back to original European settlers may be the two groups who created what we call "American" culture in its limited sense. Those of us who descend from the waves of immigrants in the last century and this century, have very little right to be ethnocentric. When I hear "They're taking over the country" accusations I quietly ask about family history.

Let's get back to your melting pot comment. It really doesn't exist. There's very little in this mainstream culture that can be called purely American, that originated here and has no ties with Europe, Africa or other parts of the world. As each successive wave of immigrants has come, they've brought with them their values and customs. You see, we are all immigrants except for the Native Americans, the original inhabitants of this land. This may seem obvious, but how many of us integrate that basic fact with our cultural conditioning?

MM: And we now see an upsurge of interest in Native American thought and customs.

CFJ: I think it's essential to be aware of what that means. There are cross-cultural studies that detail the many differences between Native American thought and European thought that came with the first European settlers. Which means that the first immigrants, the Europeans, did just what some accuse the immigrants now of doing - they imported their value system and customs. Everyone wants to keep ideas and practices that define personal self and reality. Why should it be any different today than it was then? So the new phrase we use is the "salad bowl" -we retain our culturally heterogenous nature.

MM: So that we need to do is to find the dressing to put on the salad.

CFJ: Sure, a cohesion that maintains the individual parts.

MM: Let's shift to a longer perspective and talk about global peace efforts and the role of meditation. Do you feel the United States has more responsibility than other nations in implementing these ideas?

CFJ: In my opinion, the United States does have more responsibility for the simple reason that. English is and probably will remain for a long time, the international language of finance and politics. However, the people who speak English and who translate English are not necessarily from the U.S., Britain, Australia or other places where English is the native language. What's going on in the world of English is quite fascinating. We might tend to think that those who learn English are speaking our English. In point of fact, since it is living language, each linguistic group that studies it, reshapes it. If you use your imagination a little bit, you can extrapolate the enormous potential for misunderstanding and conflict that occurs in interpretation. We may both be speaking English, but we may not be speaking the same language.

In addition, the United States has a responsibility partly because we are such an open society. We need to reaffirm this openness to many cultures. One of the questions I often ask people from other nations is, "Do you have cultural prejudice in your country?" While some are able to analyze this in detail, many reply, "No, we have none." A few more questions will typically reveal that foreigners are welcome as tourists, but not tolerated as immigrants. They simply do not have a history of immigrant waves such as the United States has experienced. In other cases, a little digging reveals that there is, indeed, a segment of the population, often of foreign birth or ancestry, who live at the bottom of the social ladder.

MM: Would that be the equivalent to a caste system?

CFJ: Similar to that. Some group of people who are not accepted as regular and so they do not perceive it as cultural prejudice against them.

MM: Could that be due to the lack of a middle class in some cultures? That there is basically an upper and lower class structure?

CFJ: I'm not sure. I think it may have to do with the racial purity of ancient, ancient cultures. The United States, on the other hand, was formed in cultural diversity. As a culturally diverse country, it seems self-evident that we have a responsibility to teach how this works, even with all its imperfections.

MM: Do you think that people involved in New Age metaphysics, science and spiritual practices have yet another level of responsibility that those Americans not on that path don't have?

CFJ: I think that the people who have found a way to their own inner peace will always have a responsibility to those who have not found a way to their own inner peace. If you have inner peace and you cannot radiate it into your daily life, I don't think it's worth much. I will look towards those who shine, and will want to learn from them. If what they teach me is egocentric or ethnocentric behavior, I am not likely to follow their lead. If they are showing me how simple it can be to live what they say they believe in, not just at seminars, not just at expos, then of course that's what it really means to be a leader, a teacher.

Every citizen of this country, who holds enormous power for change in his or her vote, needs to see that peacefulness from the inside can be created on the outside. It is important that we not assume that those who are "spiritually active" are automatically more capable of this than those who are not. In my work I have met many people who know nothing about metaphysical techniques, living in more peace than many I know who are studying it. Many people manifest love without being in the least bit conscious of it. Let's not forget that we teach what we need to learn.

MM: it's as if some individuals have retained the essence of childhood and not lost it in the growing-up process. What role do you feel meditation could play in opening up the willingness

of the American population to take on this responsibility? I am thinking of the meditations that Sri Chinmoy has been leading for Congress, the British Parliament and the United Nations.

CFJ: I'll reiterate that an open heart is the starting place. If you know how to take it beyond the open heart then you have a really solid foundation. You have your roots in the ground and your wings in the clouds. Meditation in and of itself is not action. Meditation is preparation for action.

MM: How are your seminars different from taking a class in cultural anthropology?

CFJ: A person interested in the broad scope of cultural anthropology might take courses to get started. In anthropology classes you study a culture, flip a chapter and study another culture, flip a chapter and study yet another. You are physically, emotionally and mentally removed from those cultures and you are separation them. My seminars attempt experiential involvement and discussion of topics that are personally relevant right now. The term is cross-cultural; perhaps inter-lacing cultures might be a better term. Underlying everything in the seminars is the concept of communicating. I want you to know who I am; I want to know who you are, and how can we live in the same space and work together so that we are not violating each others' cultural values?

MM: And this is where the concepts of proxemic and kinesics are introduced.

CFI: Correct.

MM: How do parents who attend your seminars relay those concepts to their young children, and prevent ethnocentric barriers from fanning?

CFJ: I remember when my children were very young and I was a cynical college student, that they re-awoke in me a sense of wonder in the world. I think the most important gift a parent can give, as far as this cross-cultural issue is concerned, is a sense of wonder about the people of this world, and a sense of inquiry, a desire to learn. Education in its broadest form is what parents can impart to their children. **MM:** Which, of course, plugs appropriately into your model of learning new ways to think and stimulating curiosity as the catalyst.

CFJ: Yes, the value of curiosity and wonder. If a parent can be attentive to a child's comments, reactions and interactions with those from other cultures who might appear bizarre, scary or funny, the parent can use those as moments for curiosity, for wonder, rather than for ridicule and rejection. We have the power to teach our children positive, inquisitive, compassionate ways to be with others.

MM: There's a lot of education that takes place outside the home. Do you find the educational system, as a whole, counteracts the work that may have gone on in the home?

CM: I know that when I was in school every teacher was a new experience. It didn't depend on the school, whether public or private; it depended on the teacher. We need to pay our teachers a just salary and support their determination to help our children be the best they can be, so that the

profession can attract more high-minded men and women. While they may not be versed in this specific information, they are aware and sensitive. They can awaken wonder in our children.

Most of my seminars, so far, have been for educators, administrators and undergraduates, who must - as must everyone else - re-establish commitments to ideals every day.

MM: In addition to your seminars, what other sources are there for this information?

CFJ: There is not much written about cross-cultural communication. The delightful part of this is that if you want to get involved in the field, there are plenty of opportunities for breaking new ground, many things that need to be investigated.

But, if you are interested, you don't have to limit yourself to books in the card catalogue under this title; you can approach the topic from numerous angles. If you like novels, read **The Clan of the Cave Bear**. It's historical fiction that sets up the interplay between two cultures which are extremely alien to each other - and it is written in great detail. If you are interested in linguistics, the book *The Story of English* is a great one to start with. Each chapter investigates the contributions to English of different immigrant groups. Any of Edward T. Hall's books make good introductions. The most important way to enter the topic is to live it everyday. Being in Los Angeles - or any multi-cultural community - makes that easy to do.

No matter how you choose to educate yourself and open your eyes, the important thing is that you take whatever peacefulness you feel inside yourself and give it birth into the world in a way that is meaningful for both you and the people you wish to know. If you do that, you will be increasing peace in your life, your community and the world.