

# The Road to an Open Mind: Traveling and Learning to Live with Differences

Chadwick Co SY SU

*Assistant Professor of Organizational Communication  
and Philippine Arts, University of the Philippines Manila*

It is difficult to have an open mind when all you have seen is the sky above your hometown. While there is nothing wrong with being confined to a five-kilometer radius, as was often the case before mass transportation and air travel, it is definitely a circumstance improved upon with today's technology. Travel can expand our minds and teach us to suspend judgment. The simple realization that people elsewhere do things differently is an eye-opener, the nascence of improved thought processes.

Openness of the mind begins with the recognition that different does not mean defective. Take driving, however prosaic, as an example. Drivers in Singapore have an entirely different definition of what is road-appropriate from that of their counterparts in, say, New Delhi. The one-car distance when overtaking in India may be interpreted as aggressive tailgating in Singapore. Returning to the correct lane after overtaking may be construed as a near-miss by the unwitting traveler in India; however, in both cases, drivers go about their business with nary a complaint. To some extent, this can also be seen in Beijing, and even Hangzhou. To the untrained mind, these drivers may very well be the source of the stereotype that Asians are terrible behind the wheel. They are not so; notions of unsafe driving are negotiated culturally, such that what may be unsafe

driving in one place may be standard practice in another. The same goes for different eating practices that one can easily frown upon or see as disgusting. It may be just more salutary to look at different diets simply as that—different—instead of as proof of who is (not) exotic.

Given so much variety in our customs, it would be absurd to claim universality and equality, but it is nevertheless helpful to look for pockets of commonalities between and among peoples. Small talk revolving around sports, interests, and ways of living, among others, has often been the departure point to the discovery and understanding of many commonalities amidst the differences.

Should we simply tolerate our differences? Is it just about letting others be, or does that (also) imply a position of power and privilege that allows us to tolerate anyone? Is it a conscious effort to ignore the actions of others, even if we disagree with them? Power certainly figures in the concept of tolerance, so what if we aspired for peaceful co-existence instead? It entails a balancing act, a suspension of judgment in the face of differences, a respect and recognition that other people are free, and have the space, to live their lives as they choose, and an implicit acknowledgement of equality. For instance, I can co-exist with religious people, even as I pray to no deity and entertain no delusions of a life after this one. In return, they can co-exist with me even if I do not participate in their rituals. Such co-existence, however, stops if I were to witness the harassment of another person just because he holds a belief different from the majority.

Cultural relativism, I propose, is another starting point towards introspection, dialogue, and ultimately, more informed decision-making. Any person has his own set of experiences, values, and judgments, whether he becomes a traveler or not, but travel affords anyone the chance to re-evaluate these more closely. Travel allows one to recalibrate the different scales of right and wrong, the sacred and the profane, the acceptable and the indefensible. From matters as mundane as driving and eating, to philosophical questions such as how to live peacefully amid different and oftentimes disagreeing practices, travel has taught me to afford other people the understanding that I would want them to afford me as well.

Of course, it may be too ambitious to assert that travel can reduce the pernicious effects of othering exemplified by, say, populist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Xenophobia is likely if one has not had any interaction with the other. Even so, when one actually witnesses how other people go about their lives, it becomes so much more difficult to reduce them to caricatures. Every journey I embark on de-exoticizes the place I visit, just as the people who see me have the opportunity to de-exoticize me. Stereotypes are reconsidered, perhaps even replaced, by actual encounters, instead of caricatures planted by popular culture. In the middle of a pandemic, I look forward to my eventual return to the itinerant life: here's to more actual encounters and fewer caricatures.