

Recipe for Cultural Identity

I have always considered myself an “American Mutt.” Although, in comparison with many other Americans who are the products of immigration, my cultural heritage is fairly pure; I am a quarter Native American, over a quarter Scottish, and the rest is Irish and German. It is not just my bloodlines that define my cultural identity. I consider the community and region I grew up in, the schools I went to, and the experiences and cultures I was exposed to by my parents and through my education to define my cultural identity in conjunction with my ancestry.

I am deeply connected to my Native American and Scottish roots that come from my mother’s side. My Native American history is unfortunately lost in terms of historical documentation, but some of it still exists in oral tradition. My Scottish history is fully identifiable and a visit to Scotland in 2002 shed light to my mother and I on how connected we are to our Scottish cultural identity than we had previously known. As explained by Ryan Shin (2009) in his chapter, “Promotions of Ethnic and Cultural Identity through Visual and Material Culture among immigrant Koreans,” in the book, *Globalization, Art, and Education*, when he steps into a Korean market, “My thinking, acting, and attitude changes from that of an Americanized persona to that of a Korean” (p.49). Similarly, when we stepped into the village where my grandmother’s parents immigrated from in Scotland, we better understood, through our five senses (Shin, 2009; Bolin and Blandy, 2003), why my grandmother was the way she was and how we had become the way we are.

Although my ancestry definitely plays a part in my cultural identity, I place more weight on the region I grew up in, the unique educational experiences I have had, and the way my parents have raised me. I grew up right on Lake Michigan in between Chicago and Milwaukee. This presented several culturally defining experiences:

1. Education: I was a product of the first Magnet School program in the state of Wisconsin which led to my enrollment in the Stephen Bull Fine Art School for elementary school which was located in the ghetto in Racine, Wisconsin. This experience brought me in contact with a different socio-economic neighborhood than my own, as well as placed me within an extremely multi-cultural student body. I knew that some other students had different skin color from me, but I was not exposed to racism or racial inequalities. We truly embodied a unified multicultural harmonious school. I am grateful for this beginning to my education because it has definitely formed me into the culturally diverse and unbiased person I am today (beyond my ancestry). Due to gang violence in our community and a strong obsession with getting the best education possible, I asked to attend our local private school for middle and high school. I was accepted into The Prairie School, built and founded by the owners of S.C. Johnson’s Wax. Due to the affiliation with this international company, and the school’s dedication to provide scholarships to bright students from underprivileged families in our community, the diversity of the student body I was exposed to was maintained. At this school, I could be sitting in a room with my peers and literally be the only American student.

2. Family: my father traveled extensively on business and the purchase of a house boat in 1987 and a condo in Marco Island, FL in 1986 led to our family’s obsession with traveling. As a family, we learned to appreciate a transient lifestyle. We spent every school break in Florida, we spent every summer exploring new towns along the coasts of Wisconsin and Michigan, and we learned the value of experiencing different regions in the United States through traveling on

occasion with my dad on business trips. As a family, we are very quick to pack our bags and venture off to new places.

3. Education, Travel, Family: My cultural identity is largely impacted by the people and cultures I have come in contact with through my education and my passion to travel and experience new cultures. Both my sister and I have lived in Asia--she lived in Japan and I lived in Taiwan-- and the experiences of living in those countries deeply defines each of our cultural identities. My experience in living and teaching in Taiwan partially led me to teaching at an international boarding school. My multicultural and multilingual background (speaking Spanish and Chinese) has earned me great respect from my students. I have spent a lot of time traveling and have lived in Europe as well, so my students value my stories and experiences as taking part in many cultural practices and belief systems outside of my Midwestern roots. Out of the six children in my family, 4 out of six have married or will be marrying outside our race. There are already 17 grandchildren in my family and we have a very diverse cultural background. It is notable to mention that although I attended Christian church as a child, my parents and my education exposed me to many world religions. I was one credit away from minoring in Religious Studies and have a deep respect and understanding of many world religions. Although many people may feel that I need to be "saved" due to me not defining myself as a Christian, I am grateful to my experiences living with, my education of, and my personal interest and respect for world religions. I feel that not having been raised to accept only one religious practice has greatly informed and defines my cultural identity as well. My unbiased and knowledge of world religions also has earned me respect from my international students and allows me to model to my students how to be respectful and tolerant to all members of our global society, although I never share my religious or political viewpoints with students.

4. Region: Lastly, having begun my career in a rural community right off of the Menominee Reservation about 45 minutes west of Green Bay, Wisconsin, I was exposed to the most culture shock I had ever experienced in all of my world travels. I came face to face with a side of America that I never knew had existed. Teaching and living in this small community had a huge impact on the person and teacher I am today. I had always told people I was from "outside of Chicago," but after living in the Northern part of Wisconsin, I developed a deep pride and respect for being a "Cheesehead." Especially since moving to Orlando, Florida, I have a better understanding of how the region I grew up in has influenced and defines my cultural identity. I am definitely a product of the Midwest and Lake Michigan will always be the most important landmark in the development of my American cultural identity. Being away from the lake has made me realize how important a mark it has made on who I am. If you grew up near Lake Michigan, you probably know exactly what I am referring to. It is hard to describe, because regional influences are something that we experience viscerally.

As an art teacher and artist I am able to explore and share more openly the knowledge I have gained from the diverse global and cultural experiences I have personal insight and experience with, as well as model to my students how to effectively and without bias be a global citizen. I have my educational experiences, my parents, my regional background, as well as my ancestry to thank for the development of my cultural identity, which continues to evolve as my life continues to be exposed to different places, people, and experiences. I am open, grateful, aware, and hungry for new experiences that impact my cultural identity.