

REFLECTIONS ON A FULBRIGHT YEAR AT OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

David McGuire

"Before I can walk in the shoes of another, I must first take off my own"

More than any other saying, this sums up the overarching lesson learned from my Fulbright year. The fact that I have been teaching and conducting research at Oakland University, 20 miles outside of the most segregated city in North America, namely Detroit, has brought the issue of diversity very much to the fore. It took me less than an hour after arriving in Detroit to learn about 8 mile and its significance. In truth, 8 mile is something of a misnomer. Sure, it separates mainly poor struggling African-American communities from the more affluent suburbs, populated by predominantly white, middle class communities. Visually, it distinguishes the carefully manicured and sprinkler laden lawns of the haves from the barren wasteland of the have-nots. However, 8 mile masks the true extent of segregation. It presents the illusion that segregation is the result of historical circumstance and is geographically defined. The fact is that Southeast Michigan contains at least a dozen 8 mile roads, dividing communities on the basis of color. Not only do the two communities live apart, but they work apart, worship apart and play apart. There are black churches and there are white churches just as there are black sports and there are white sports.

Living just outside of Detroit has provided a valuable opportunity to experience and learn about different cultures and religions. In the past year, I have become something of a "church tourist". As I jokingly explain to colleagues, in Ireland you have three choices: you are either Catholic, lapsed Catholic or à la carte Catholic. It fascinates me to observe different religions and cultures in motion and the realization of how different socialization processes contribute so significantly to who we are and what makes us unique and different. An amusing cultural experience involved a visit to the Underground Railroad in downtown

Detroit. Naively, I went there expecting to see trains and railway tracks. I couldn't understand why downtown Detroit needed a people mover (overhead mass-transit system) when the city already had an underground railway and references by the tour guide to Harriet Tubman were lost on me. I quickly learned that the underground railway was not as it first seemed, but rather represented a secret corridor for transiting slaves safely from southern states across the border to Canada. Detroit was the last "station" en route to Canada.

Metropolitan Detroit gives all the impressions of a community under threat. Here I do not refer solely to the existing terrorist threat, but rather to the lingering siege mentality and climate of fear fostering the perception that this is a dangerous violent society. How many breaking news reports have you watched covering events happening on Detroit's Eastside/Westside? America has a gun culture and Detroit has a gun problem. Averaging one gun-related death a day, the problem is destroying lives, tearing communities apart and stripping the city of its sense of safety and community. The sad irony of living in Metropolitan Detroit is reading news accounts of children dying in house fires in poor neighborhoods, barricaded indoors to protect their sparse possessions from theft, yet unable to escape due to bolted down windows and doors, while a few miles up the road, million dollar houses lie unlocked, their owners unperturbed by the risk of burglary. A recent visit to the gun and knife show at the Pontiac Silverdome reaffirmed my fears about America's easy relationship with guns. I strolled past dozens of men sporting military paraphernalia of all kinds with rifles slung across their shoulders in scenes reminiscent of grainy cowboy movies I watched as a child. At one booth, a middle-aged man was selling copies of the *Anarchists Cookbook* for \$10 (a recipe book for bomb-making enthusiasts) and handing out copies of the bible on CD-Rom, seemingly blind to the obvious contradictions. Liberty comes at a price which needs to be carefully assessed.

America is a country talking to itself. The realization that America is facing a terror from within has provoked a wholly justified self-defensive, self-preservative public response. Seeking out the enemy

within has become prime objective number one. Driving through the housing subdivisions in Dearborn, which is home to the largest Arab-American community in the US, one is powerfully struck by the large number of American flags and banners stating “Proud family of son/daughter in Iraq.” To my eyes, this display of patriotism outflanks that seen in other neighborhoods in southeast Michigan. It points to the enormous sacrifice being made by this and other communities across the United States, but I believe it also alludes to something deeper. It hints at an underlying fear that in post 9/11 environment, all Arabs will be tarnished by the brush of terrorism; that Allah will be seen as a threat to national security and that the peaceful tenets of Islam will be lost to the fanatical murderous intentions of extremists. The greatest tragedy of all would be for this country renowned for its tolerance, openness and respect for diversity to lose its sense of hope, love and unquenchable spirit.

Coming from a relatively homogenous society, namely Ireland, it is easy for me to make observations about race. I recall clearly the reaction of my four-year-old cousin when he first saw a black boy blacking in the street outside our house: he ran into the kitchen and promptly informed his mother that there was a chocolate boy outside. Diversity therefore is new to me. I wonder though, whether people in this area have become complacent about race relations and whether the passage of time has affirmed their views about the intractability of the problem and weakened their resolve towards solving it.

On a recent trip to Chicago, I visited the city’s cultural center. Inside an exhibition was running entitled “Hair Stories.” Just as my visit to the Underground Railroad had stressed the value of meaning in discourse, this exhibition reemphasized that lesson. A series of interviews, photographs and paintings explained the importance of hairstyle to individual identity as well as placing it within a cultural political and social context. What perhaps was most striking was a discussion of stereotypes relating to hair and how “good hair” has been defined as long, straight and silky, whereas “bad hair” is considered curly, kinky and nappy. To my mind, it presents evidence of racial division by discourse. Just ask yourself, how many African-American models have you seen on television advertising hair products.

“The best leaders are the best teachers.” So Dennis Pawley stated at the naming of the school of education and human services building now bearing his and his wife’s name. The great hope for the future lies in our teachers. In this regard, Oakland University’s future is in safe hands. Here I would like to pay tribute to my colleagues at the school of education and human services and in particular to those within the department of human resource development for their generosity, friendship and professionalism. However, attending the recent commencement ceremonies, I was powerfully struck by the low number of African-American, Hispanic and Arab-American students among the newly conferred graduates. The challenge for the future lies in the achievement of greater participation by these communities in campus life.

One of the most memorable occasions of my Fulbright year at Oakland University was a 3-day trip I made to Atlanta, Georgia to conduct research at the King Centre for Non-Violent Change. Here, I was kindly given access to the private archive containing the personal correspondence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., articles that he wrote and speeches that he made. It has had a profound effect on my thinking and worldview. On a visit to Jamaica, Dr. King was greatly touched by the motto of that island “Out of many people, one people” and in a letter to Sammy Davis Jr. expressed his fervent wish that it would become the goal for America. Indeed, that goal is as relevant today as it was in 1965 when he wrote that letter. My wish as I leave Oakland University and return home to Ireland is for greater outreach, community and solidarity among both the people of southeast Michigan and the people of Northern Ireland, so that through greater understanding, interaction and conversation, the “beloved community” of peace, hope and love envisioned by Dr. King will become a reality.

The author wishes to acknowledge the financial support of the Irish American Fulbright Commission