

A Season of Change

I was raised in Southern Louisiana and spent most of my life engulfed in the Acadian culture. The Acadians are a diverse group of people including German, Spanish and French Creole, however, most Acadians are descendents of French speaking refugees who were evicted from Nova Scotia in the mid 1700s. Some Acadians settled in the Northern colonies. However, many settled in the French speaking colony of Southern Louisiana. Throughout my life, I have felt a strong connection and sense of pride associated with my Acadian culture.

One unique quality shared by Acadian Americans is the joy of food. I have heard people from other cultures say that Acadians will eat anything that they can catch and actually that may be the truth. Fishing, crabbing, hunting, and trapping are a large part of the Acadian lifestyle. Boiled seafood, including crabs, crawfish, and shrimp are local delicacies. Deep fat fried foods, gumbo, and any kind of meat served with rice and gravy and also staples of Acadians. The most unique facet of food that I have noticed regarding my culture, however, has to do with the element of hospitality that goes along with the food. Almost every event down south involves food and drink. It is expected that coffee or other drinks will be served to all visitors to a home or business, including salesmen and repairmen. If it is mealtime and visitors show up, then it is only good manners to feed them. The Acadian motto is that there is always enough food for one more.

Other unique aspects of the Acadian culture are the music, the dances, the festivals, and the Mardi Gras celebrations. Acadian music is predominately sung in

French and accompanied by the accordion, fiddle, washboard, drums, and triangle. Dances include the Cajun Two Step and the Zydeco Waltz. Large outdoor music events, called fais do dos, are held frequently to allow people to enjoy the traditional Acadian music. Festivals are huge city-wide events that were created to celebrate the blessings that we have been given, including good crops and plentiful fishing. Mardi Gras is celebrated differently in various areas in the south. In my culture, we celebrate with the Mardi Gras Run, in which costumed riders go out on horseback to collect chickens, money, and other food items needed to make a gumbo. The parade of riders usually ends up at the local Catholic church where a large supper is made for all of the townspeople. Most residents of Southern Louisiana are Catholic and many of the customs and traditions are derived from Catholic beliefs. However, there are many other religions also present in Southern Louisiana, including many Protestant religions. All of those aspects of the Acadian culture have played a part in making me who I am today.

However, the two aspects of my culture that have had the most impact on me are the belief in strong family and community support and the conviction in hard work and perseverance. I was raised to believe that there are no limits. I have always believed that no matter what color you are, what gender you are, what weaknesses you have, or how much money you have, you can do what ever you put your mind to, if you work hard enough and have the support of those around you. As a teacher, I have used those beliefs to help the children that I have taught. I think that there are too many restrictions placed on people. Children are often times given labels, either formally or informally, that are used to restrict what they can do. I think that children should be given the knowledge and support to reach for the stars. There should be no preset limits stopping them.

I was fortunate enough to be in a family and a community that supported me. My parents worked hard to provide a stable home for my sister and me. They helped us with anything we needed help with and taught us to be kind, accepting determined people. However, their support was not always enough to provide all of the help that I needed. I can remember getting educational help and motivation from extended family members, neighbors, and educators. It is part of the Acadian culture to work together to accomplish things and to rely on one another. I feel that the strong community support that I received in my Acadian culture has had a huge impact on the person that I am today.

Anytime I sit back to analyze my life, as I did in preparation for writing this cultural autobiography, I wonder if there is some pre-determined plan taking place in my life. I know logically that I make my own decisions and the effects of opportunities and circumstances intertwine with those decisions to lead me through my life. However, at many times, it feels as though there is some larger plan taking place. Until moving to Northern Louisiana several months ago, I had never sat down and thought about diversity or how it has influenced me. Since I had spent all of my life in Southern Louisiana, I took the Acadian American culture and the acceptance that I had in that culture for granted. I did not have to face the challenge of being the one who was different before moving to Northern Louisiana. At the same time, my children are also facing issues relating to diversity. Those events in themselves would not seem unusual, except for the fact that I am also currently taking a course on socio-culture and diversity. It feels as though a larger plan has been put in place. I have realized that the time has come for me to address diversity in my life, and at the same time I am now receiving instruction and guidance on how to do so through the discussions and research taking place in the class.

My actions and beliefs on diversity have been influenced by a myriad of events. Many of which actually occurred well before I was born. My mother was an illegitimate child born in the mid 1940's at a time and in a place where it was considered disgraceful. Her mother, my grandmother Segura, married when my mother was two years old. However, being illegitimate, she was never accepted by her stepfather or his family. My mother remembers being left behind at home every Sunday as the rest of the family went to have lunch with her stepfather's family. My grandmother Segura was raised in a children's home and knows very little about her own culture except that she is part Native American. From what I can gather, Grandmother Segura received very little nurturing as a child and carried on that trait as she raised her own children. My mother would have been completely on her own as a child if it hadn't been for an elderly neighbor named Mrs. Mildred. My mother worked in the fields with Mrs. Mildred and her family throughout her life. Mrs. Mildred fed my mother, gave her clothes, hugged her, and treated her like one of her own children. Why would this affect my beliefs about diversity? Mrs. Mildred was Black.

After my mother married my father, she moved away and stopped communicating with her own parents, but she still went back to visit Mrs. Mildred several times a year. I remember very clearly how comfortable I felt in Mrs. Mildred's house and how happy my mother always was to see her. I also remember the funeral of my mother's stepfather. She went to the funeral home for less than ten minutes. Her explanation was that she had to pay her respects but that she did not owe him that much respect. Mrs. Mildred died just a few weeks later, but her funeral was a completely different situation. When we heard that she had died, we all cried until we had no tears left. I was ten years old and

wrapped up in my own feelings, but I remember walking into the packed funeral home and realizing that we were the only White people there. For a split second, I started to wonder if we should be there, then people began to take notice of us. Immediately we were welcomed with hugs, smiles, and welcoming words. Almost everybody there seemed to know my mother. They all called her Mrs. Mildred's Patsy. My mother's name is Patricia and only Mrs. Mildred called her Patsy. We spent the next three days there, my mother owed Mrs. Mildred at least that much respect.

I think the experiences that my mother had with Mrs. Mildred and her family led her to associate positive feelings with people of different races. I know that the warmth, love, and kindness that I associate with Mrs. Mildred have led me to be more accepting of people who are different from me. I think maybe sometimes people have prejudicial feelings because they have not had close or positive experiences with people of other socio-cultural or racial groups. Since it was something that my mother always grew up with, she never exhibited those behaviors and my sister and I never learned them.

Other than the experiences that we had with Mrs. Mildred, my mother's family has never been involved in my life. My father's family, however, had a large impact on my childhood. My father is the oldest of ten children. My father's mother, who we all called Mamaw, was basically a single mother throughout her life. My grandfather worked the boardroads for the oilfield and had several mistresses, which kept him away from home. For most of their marriage, he only came home a few times a year. My father, as the oldest son, took on the role as man of the house. My grandmother and her children lived with my family until I was eight years old. It was a large blended family who had to pinch every penny to make it.

My father served in the military and then worked in the oilfield. He made a good salary but with twelve to eighteen people living in our house at all times, it was difficult to make ends meet. To say the least, we lived in a lower socio-economic status during my early childhood. We all lived in a big, run-down rental house in Lafayette, in a predominately Black section of town. We did not know then that we did not have much money. I do not remember ever needing anything or wanting anything that I did not get. Nobody ever told me that we were in a low socio-economic status or that we were living in poverty. Compared to the stories told by my parents of the difficult childhoods they had, we thought we had it good. Actually, that was the happiest time of my life. I can not ever remember being happier anywhere else. It felt like home to me.

By the time I was born in 1970, there were seven other children still living at home, including my sister, one uncle, and five aunts. Our house and yard were always busting at the seams with children from our house and from the neighborhood. Some were White and some were Black. We all played together and I do not remember any discussions concerning race while we lived with my grandmother.

When I was eight, my grandfather returned home, just as though he had never left. My father turned over the role as man of the house to his father and bought a house for my mother, my sister and I in Breaux Bridge. The issue of race became an issue once we moved to Breaux Bridge. The first negative memory that I have in regard to diversity occurred a few months after we moved into our new house in Breaux Bridge.

I was in the third grade and had made friends with a Black girl named Vanessa at school. Vanessa lived three or four subdivisions away from us. Her mother would allow her to walk over to my house to play with me several days a week. However, my mother

would not let me walk so far from home, so I never had the chance to visit Vanessa's home until the night that I was supposed to sleep over for a birthday party. My parents knew the family, because Vanessa's grandfather had worked with my father for several years and they felt comfortable letting me ride the school bus to Vanessa's house for the sleepover.

It was quite obvious that something was wrong the minute that I stepped off of the bus. Vanessa's mother pulled her into the kitchen and in a loud whisper chastised her. Meanwhile, I was left the living room with several of Vanessa's family members who were looking at me as though I had just set fire to there house. I have never felt so ashamed. I thought that I had done something wrong, but I didn't know what. Vanessa's mother called my mother and she came to pick me up. My mother tried to shield me from the event and told me that Vanessa was punished and was not supposed to bring a friend home. The next week at school, Vanessa and I got into an argument, each of us blaming the other for why we could not have our sleepover. After that we were no longer friends.

I did not find out the truth behind why I was sent home from my mother until I was an adult. It is still a painful memory for me. Vanessa was the first friend I had made during a very lonely time in my life when I was struggling to be accepted in a new school and in a home that was missing the large extended family with whom I had been raised up until that point. The rejection and guilt that I felt after losing her as friend was a bitter pill to swallow. It is even tougher to accept that it was all because of my race. I think that our parents were trying to handle the situation the best way that they could. I am sure that experiences that Vanessa's family had influenced how they behaved and that

they were probably just trying to protect her. However, if adults followed the children's lead more often, I think that this world would be a better place.

Several other racial incidents similar to the one with Vanessa occurred from the time I was in third grade until adulthood. When I was eleven or twelve, I remember saying to my sister, in front of my father, that White people could not marry Black people because the babies would come out funny looking. I was repeating something that I had heard at school from some of the other kids. I will never forget the way my father looked at me or what he told me after I made that comment. He stopped the task he was performing and looked at me as though I had lost my mind. It felt as though his eyes would burn right through me. He said I should be ashamed of myself and that he had not raised me that way. He told me that you can not judge a person by how they look on the outside; you have to judge by how they look on the inside. I was not really sure what that meant at the time. I did not know how to look at the inside of someone. He told me a story about how hard it had been when he and his brothers had served in Vietnam and how dangerous it was to work on oilrigs. He told me that you work those types of jobs with all different kinds of people. He said you had to put your safety and even your life in the hands of those people and that you better be able to see them for the good men that they are if you want to make it. I felt really bad that I had hurt my father by making him think that he had not raised me right.

Reflecting on that incident now, I realize that my parents did raise me not to judge people by their race, gender or other qualities that they have no control over. The conflicting information that I was receiving from peers clouded my judgment and caused me to question my own beliefs. I am glad that I had parents who redirected me in the

correct way. I wonder how many other children are influenced by their peers, but who have no one at home to redirect them.

While I was in junior high school, I joined the Jr. Deputy Cadets youth organization through the local sheriff's department. After several weeks, our sponsor told us that we were being forced to take in some new members from the backside of Breaux Bridge and that we would have to cancel the target practice sessions due to the type of kids that were coming. I did not know what he meant by the backside of Breaux Bridge, but from the tone of his voice and from his explanation about the target practice, I was scared. I wondered what kind of kids he was talking about.

I almost quit the group, but my mother made me go and face my fears. I waited on the edge of my seat during that meeting, until I saw some familiar faces walk into the room. The new members from the backside of Breaux Bridge were Black kids from our school; kids that I had been in class with since third grade. One was a boy named Lawrence who was in the same gifted program with me and with whom I had shared all of my classes for several years. I could not believe that those were the kids they were talking about. I knew all of them and they were just like the rest of us, except for the color of their skin. However, the club was never the same after Lawrence and the other Black students joined. We no longer were allowed to participate in most of the events that we had been involved in before and the meetings were spread farther and farther apart until eventually the group just stopped meeting.

The worst part is that as far as I could see, it did not bother any of the children involved that the group was made of Black and White members. It was the adults who were running the program that allowed their own prejudices to ruin a good thing. It was

an experience that has always affected how I think about prejudice in regard to children. As adults, I think that it is our responsibility to model positive behaviors for children. They act as they see us act. Our future lies in our children. I have seen first hand from my own life that cultural aspects can be lost in two generations. The French language that was spoken by all Acadians 75 years ago is now spoken by very few. I think that if it can happen with language, which was a negative thing, then it could also happen with aspects such as racism. If we wanted to, I think that we as a society could virtually eliminate racism in two generations.

Sixteen years ago, I married a man who is visually impaired. I have been asked by people why I would marry someone with a disability. The funny part is that I never saw him as disabled. I only saw him as a kind, loving, caring man. I guess my parents did raise me to accept people for who they are on the inside. Now I know what my father meant by seeing what people look like on the inside.

From study and discussion in LEC 704, I have come to realize that all people are at a different point on the continuum in regard to acceptance of diversity. However, I feel that no matter what point you are at as an individual, you should be careful not to let that affect those who look up to you for leadership. Understanding and accepting diversity, just like many other aspects in life, is a continuous process. One which should be actively researched, discussed, and explored in order to help us reach the highest level of acceptance and understanding possible. Over the past few months, I have spent a great deal of time thinking about where I am on that continuum. My response would have to be, "Please be patient because God is not finished with me yet." I still have a lot to learn.