

## **Are Cultural Difference Fear and the Fear of Death Analogous?**

In the following interview excerpt you can check out Reinart's view on cultural difference fear. Janet is the editor of an intercultural competence development related journal.

### **Janet**

Reinart, at lunch you mentioned the need to address cultural difference fear head-on. What do you mean?

### **Reinart**

Right, you know Jannie, there is plenty of work to be done before we can advance ICD. Before we can make real progress in both the ends and means, we need to eliminate the fear of proactively and openly communicating about intercultural differences with intercultural counterparts. That is one of the overall guiding strategy elements in our work at Talaria. Related to this head-on collision with fear, we need to incorporate the emotional element of intercultural adaptation. You know, the complexities of adaptation are more in the gut than in the head. The university approach is generally ineffective in dealing with the emotional element. David Hoopes and Margaret Pusch got into this in their 1979 pioneering book, *Teaching Strategies: the Methods and Techniques of Cross-Cultural Training*.

### **Janet**

(chuckling) And I suppose you could give me a select quote from that book?

### **Reinart**

Why certainly my dear. You know, you really need to learn some of the lore – get into these pioneers of intercultural competence development. They wrote the following:

It is at the affective level that the learning must take place if it is to have an impact on behavior—the ultimate aim of the educational experience.

### **Janet**

I don't suppose you know the page number, do you?

### **Reinart**

Sure – page 106. You know Janet; I think you enjoy exposing me as the intercultural geek that I am.

### **Janet**

Very much so sir! (both laugh) Now, can you speak a bit about the fear element? What do you see as the main reasons for it?

### **Reinart**

The overall current state of organizational intercultural competence contains an overall primitive dimension. It lets us know that we are in the very early stages of mass intercultural competence fluency worldwide. You know, anytime fear is pervasive around a particular social condition, it feels primitive. There are two primary reasons for this fear. One is that typically people everywhere are afraid of the unknown and what they don't understand, so they avoid it. The second reason is that most people don't have a way to safely and productively communicate about cultural differences and their resolution. In this way, the fear of cultural difference discussions is similar to the widespread fear of talking about death. You know, in the small talk period before meetings get into full swing, why don't we discuss the question, "How are you preparing to die well?" instead of the latest popular TV episode? I mean, we have a whole lifetime to prepare for it and it's the one thing all humans have in common, and yet most of us, including me, procrastinate and avoid it. It is the ultimate deadline (emphasizing "dead"), if you get my drift (chuckling).

**Janet**

Hmm, well I think I see what you mean. (laughing) I think I will try putting that on my next team meeting agenda.

**Reinart**

There ya go. We can learn a lot from Tibetan Buddhists regarding the acceptance and preparation for dying well. You could use the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or Sogyal Rinpoche's more accessible *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* and D.J. Brazier's *Who Loves Dies Well* as references. Also, Leonard Cohen does an excellent audio narration highlighting key parts of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

**Janet**

(laughing) Right and I could try to get the Dalai Lama as a Resource Person.

**Reinart**

Excellent plan Kiddo! You know, death could be more of a unifying force in our lives if we explicitly recognize it. Birth and death are the two things that all forms of life have in common. And yet, people in some cultures spend most of their lives ignoring the death topic altogether. Bring it up and you are accused of being morbid. Perhaps you perceive me as morbid right now (arching his eye brows).

**Janet**

Well, when you first started talking about it I was kind of feeling that way, but the more you talk the less I see it that way.

**Reinart**

Thanks for saying so Kid. So, many people go through their lives dreading the inevitable. That to me is morbid! Also, we miss an opportunity to realize a new-found depth of relationship and connectedness. We miss the opportunity to console, counsel and support each other with straightforward communication. It would reduce loneliness I believe. How can we really learn how to live life to its fullest until we have a deep understanding of death? I'm not talking about what comes after the body ceases to function. I mean that if we don't better understand how the fear of death impacts our life, how can we fully understand our life? There is a great gap there. How can life be best understood without understanding death? How can we understand light without dark, joy without pain etc? Interculturally, how can we understand our cultural values? How can we understand how to best handle power if we don't understand and have experience with both hierarchical approaches and egalitarian approaches? Jannie! What do you think? (laughing) Do you think I am reaching a little too far with this?

**Jannie**

(takes a moment to think) Well Reinart, I am still with you so far, but I think if you reach any farther for this analogy, you might lose me.

**Reinart**

Yeah, I reckon so. Anyhoo, there is something to the analogy between the fear of proactively and openly dealing with death and the fear of proactively and openly dealing with cultural differences. Sure, they are different, especially the grief part mixed in with death. Still, there is something similar resonating throughout both. At the very least, death and cultural differences both share the dubious distinction of often being the unrecognized "elephant in the room."

Let me put it another way. A tragedy occurs in many people's lives at the time just before they die because of the inability and/or unwillingness of the people surrounding them to proactively and openly deal with death.

Why are we here messing around in this thing we call life? I like Kurt Vonnegut's answer to this question; "I don't know; I'm just trying to get out of it alive!" Whatever the primary purposes, most of us spend a good deal of our life staving off loneliness by making deep and loving connections with others. For people who manage to be happy and develop these kind of deep relationships, they generally enjoy a life that is fulfilled; in other words, not lonely. However, that connected feeling is sometimes cut short – cut just before the actual time of death. If those happy people are not surrounded by loved ones who can actually

relate to them in their condition of dying, those happy people can all of a sudden end their happy life in a state of loneliness. A book that could change your life and that of the ones you love is Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. It is the story of a man who is dying. Part of the story is this kind of loneliness he feels because nobody around him is recognizing the fact that he is dying.

The inability and/or unwillingness to discuss death can have grotesque manifestations. Some years ago, I visited a good friend of mine, Jack, and his dying father, Aaron. Aaron was dying from lung cancer after having been a regular cigar smoker his life. He was near the end when I visited, so it was very sad. He couldn't really talk and coughed a lot. One of Aaron's old friends dropped by to visit. After some small town small talk and joking, the friend brought out a small gift he had brought. It was a box of Aaron's favorite cigars!! The friend said in a joking kind of conspiratorial way, "I know your wife won't let you smoke these anymore, but you should be able to sneak in a smoke once in a while." With that, he said his last good-bye. I'll never forget the look of horror and incomprehension on both Aaron and Jack's faces.

I learned the importance of supporting elderly people as they neared death when I worked for a few months in a large Skilled Nursing Facility - Sniffs as we used to call them in the biz - and known as Nursing Homes to most folks. I was a Transporter. I worked in the Physical Therapy department and spent my days taking residents back and forth by wheelchair from their rooms to their therapy appointments. It was a big building and so we had lots of time to talk during these transport trips. It started out with comments like, "I dreamt I was dead last night and was surprised to wake up still alive." During these many conversations I would mainly listen; validating and being a witness. Sometimes they would ask my view on death and the explaining of it drew us closer to each other.

I also learned how even most of the professionals working in the building were unable to openly discuss dying. One day I remember bringing a resident named Sadie to the therapy area. Her therapist started working with her. Sadie made the comment to her which I referred to earlier about dreaming she was dead. The therapist, with a smile and a tone similar to one which you might use to humor a child, responded, "Aw Sadie, you're going to live forever!" Sadie looked at her with disgust and venomously blurted, "You don't know anything about me..." Sadie became silent and called an early end to the appointment.

**Janet**

Those sound like great life experiences for you Reinart.

**Reinart**

They were among the best I've had. There is one other thing Jannie. At the very least I think we could bring down the divorce rate in this country if people took some of the fear out of the dying prospect by talking about it more openly.

**Janet**

(laughing) You think the fear of death impacts the divorce rate? This I gotta hear...

**Reinart**

The film, *Moonstruck*, helps us to understand why this would happen.

**Janet**

Oh, that's a great movie. I saw it a long time ago.

**Reinart**

You remember Cher's character, Loretta?

**Janet**

Oh, right. She was very good in that.

**Reinart**

In the movie, Loretta's father is having an affair with a younger woman and her mother, Rose, discovers this about her husband. Once Rose finds about it, she goes around asking people, "Why do men cheat?" You remember that?

**Janet**

No, I can't say that I do. But I know you will tell me right now.

**Reinart**

The one response she got that is relevant to our discussion now was, "Because they fear death."

**Janet**

As a man, do you think there is anything to that?

**Reinart**

Well, I could see that – not based on personal experience mind you (both laugh). Anyhow, if there is a cause and effect relationship there, it seems that the proactive and open dealing with death would take out some of the fear and result in diminished philandering rates. The result would be more marriages staying together. It's all quite logical Jannie.

**Janet**

Yes, you are clearly a creature of logic Reinart (both laugh).