



Oct/Nov 2017 • Nonfiction

# I'd Never Even Heard of "Diversity"

by [James VanOosting](#)



Image excerpted from [A Nice Cup of Tea](#) by Roe LiBretto

**Diversity did not** play much of a part in my upbringing. Not in our dairy town, in northwest Illinois, in the 1950s. Not unless you counted the Swedes and the Norwegians, who lived cheek by jowl, and split their differences over Danish and coffee. I grew up a Christian Fundamentalist. The word "diversity," had we known it, would have been sin-onymous with "hell bound." Throughout boyhood, I knew exactly one person of diversity. He stood apart from the crowd because he drank martinis, smoked cigars, played poker, and swore—elegantly. I wished to be just like him. Once, my grandfather said to me, "Christianity, James, is the penultimate recourse of the intelligent man." I do not know whether he picked up that phrase from Socrates, Hume, or Trotsky, or whether it just fell off the caboose of the Land O' Corn, rolling through our town, from Chicago, every midnight. I began saying "penultimate" myself, as often as I could, until Mrs. D, our third-grade teacher at Lincoln Elementary, suggested I might want to give it a rest.

Missionaries constituted our only exposure to the farther reaches of diversity. They told us tales of dark-skinned people who wore scant clothing, ate uncooked food with their fingers, lived in huts covered with big green leaves hacked from trees. They showed us slides of lions and tigers and panthers and leopards, boa constrictors and elephants. What my friends and I really wished to see, however, were pictures of cannibals. Apparently, none of our missionaries ever got close enough to snap one. Also, it turns out, none of them ever got eaten, although they assured us they looked forward to being eaten, someday, as a sign of their

devotion. We wished them good luck with this. Secretly, I prayed that the director of our Jesus-Wants-You-For-a-Sunbeam Choir might get eaten.

The whole point of global evangelization was to quash diversity, eliminate difference, and convert the world to sameness. My own fundamentalism took a mighty wallop during my senior year in high school. There, in quick succession, I read *Siddhartha*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Upanishads*, and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul On Ice*, just published. That's when I got my notion to become pro-human. Ever since, it's been nothing but giddy-up for me. Giddy-up and catch up.

At Northwestern—jump cut—whenever socializing with fellow students, I listened attentively to their conversation. Afterward, I would head straight to the library to look stuff up. What makes Einstein's theory of relativity "special"? How come a person shouldn't say "masterpiece"? And who is this Sappho fellow? A celebrity professor once motioned for me to follow him down the hallway to his office. There, he eyed me grimly and said, "VanOosting, try not to be so grateful."

Diversity, I believe, constitutes the core curriculum of higher and higher education. "To educate," after all, derives from *ex ducere*, meaning "to lead out," and disputes a person's provincialisms, prejudices, and fallacies of thought in order to clear a path for what's new, different, and alien. Every class begins with a concrete touch, taste, smell, sound, word, or place, and then climbs the ladder of abstraction towards sensation, language, history, and culture. To see the world through the poly-prisms of diversity can provoke amazement, produce knowledge, and, when lucky, render understanding. It's a down-and-dirty pedagogy, sprouting from the ground up, rewarding induction more than deduction. Diversity, by my lights, equals revelation. That's why it troubles me so much whenever I see it reduced to mere classification.

Categories such as race, sex, gender, birthplace, language, and income generate numerical data that are necessary and consequential. How else to document discrimination between races, quantify underrepresentation of women, defend the continuum of gender, measure disparities of income, or map displacements by country of origin and first language. And yet, for me, diversity is not so much a matter of oversight as it is of insight.

I chaired a doctoral program at a Midwestern university for eight years, and over that time, the faculty devoted ourselves to achieving diversity in our ranks. With several open positions, we were able to increase the percentage of women from 10 to 50 percent, and we inched forward from having zero racial diversity to having, at least, some. These changes required collective commitment, clever recruitment, and administrative support. But, my-oh-my, what positive differences such changes wrought. Showers of blessing soaked clear through to department governance, faculty meetings, committee membership, hallway interactions, staff morale, and job interviews. Teaching changed. Curricula expanded. The range of subjects for Ph.D. dissertations exploded. Even the number and variety of graduate placements increased.

By the time I became dean of arts & sciences at a Northeastern university, I'd come to understand that diversity alone, while necessary to cultural transformation, is insufficient to the task. It's only the starting point toward achieving *inclusiveness*, and inclusiveness is only the midway point toward achieving *integration*. The US Census Bureau measures diversity by counting things. Inclusiveness and integration, by contrast, cannot be quantified. The first

manifests in policy, whether regulated by corporate HR or legislated by Congressional HR. The second reveals in practice, whether deliberate or spontaneous. Progress happens gradually, moving upward from representation to participation, and from compliance to connection.

*Sehnsucht* is a German noun (pronounced zane-zookht) dear to both C. S. Lewis and Steve Jobs. Untranslatable into English, it speaks of a longing that can never be satisfied but that remains, nonetheless, desirable. For me, *sehnsucht* epitomizes the insatiable yearning of a fundamentalist boyhood. Still, today, I cannot bring myself to reject religion, not entirely, although God knows I've tried. I cannot unbelieve in the possibility of truth, although I relish the ubiquity of doubt. I keep on singing the hymns of eternal life, although I can't stop humming the songs of the Grateful Dead. Every day, at precisely 6:00 PM, I shake our martinis, extra dry, Bombay Sapphire, always in three-quarter time. Leap years, come rain or come shine, I smoke one premium cigar, slowly, to make it last. Day and night, I read loads and loads of books—volumes downloaded, uploaded, front-loaded and backloaded, usually *sotto voce*. Penultimately speaking, I take no less pleasure at 65 than I did at eight in repeating my grandfather's arcane word. Being a writer, *pen* is about as close to the *ultimate* as I ever figure to get.

