

Encounters with “The Other”: A History and Possibilities

Barry Oshry

Can "Encounter" Fundamentally Transform How We See and Interact with “The Other”?

Act I -- How Our Culture and the Culture of the “Other” Came to be

1. Many cultures may look strange to us, but not to the “others”.
And our culture may look strange to the “others” but not to us.
That simple fact is the beginning of understanding.
2. We may feel that our culture is simply the way things have been, are, and ought to be.
The “others” likely feel the same way about their culture.
3. We and the “others” were not born with the rules of our cultures;
we learned them from parents and elders, teachers, and peers, and media.
4. In both cultures we and the “others” absorbed the do’s and don’ts of our cultures – appropriate and inappropriate emotionality, ways of speaking, clothing, interacting with elders and people of different sexes, and much more.
We were taught our culture’s beliefs and values,

rites and rituals,
ways of solving problems,
seeking justice,
expressing joy, or sadness, or grief,
and much more.

5. In both cultures, these rules were taught as the ways to live, to survive, the ways to be in the world.
6. In time, we and the “others” learn our rules so well that we no longer experience them as rules, they become the lenses through which we view the world. Except we don’t see our lens and how it shapes what we see. Instead, we believe we see the world as it *really* is.
7. Neither we nor the “others” experience our culture as an option, as one of many possibilities. Each of us experiences our culture as the way things are or ought to be. And then we meet.

Act II -- Our Culture Encounters the “Other”: Loose and Tight, Liberal and Conservative, Pure and Conflicted, Tolerance and Purity Solutions

1. So now our culture encounters the “other.”
The “other” may have immigrated to our culture.
Or we may have conquered them.
Or they have may have once been invisible in our culture, and now they have become prominent.
2. Through our cultural lens the cultural behavior of the “other” appears
 strange
 off

wrong
inappropriate.

Wrong language, dress, emotionality, skin color, rites and rituals, and so on.

3. Since our cultural rules are experienced as the way to live, to survive, to be, the cultural behavior of the “other” is experienced as upsetting of our culture, as weakening it, or coarsening it, and, potentially, as threatening its survival. And we react.
4. **Loose and Tight**
Sometimes we react reflexively to the cultural behavior of the “other.”
At times we go **Loose**.
We reflexively *allow* the behavior of the “others,” not because we love the “others” or respect them or value their behavior, but because our reflexive Looseness allows us to avoid the discomfort of dealing with the complexity raised by their presence.

At times we go **Tight**.
We reflexively reject the behavior of the “other,” we judge it negatively, dismiss it, afford it no legitimate place in our culture.
Our reflexive dismissal again allows us to avoid the discomfort of dealing with the complexity raised by the “other’s” presence.
5. **Loose and Tight** appear in conflict with one another, yet both arise out of the same condition: discomfort in responding to the encounter with the “other”.
6. **Liberal and Conservative**
Loose and Tight are *knee-jerk* responses to the “other;”

Liberal and Conservative are *values-based* responses.

The **Liberal** response is based on moral grounds. It is offered as the right thing to do, to bring in the poor, the displaced, the oppressed. Liberals believe that the current culture will be strengthened, spiritually if not economically, by including the “others;” and they believe that the “others” will be strengthened by their inclusion.

The **Conservative** response is also based on moral grounds – the primacy of preserving and protecting the existing culture. Conservatives value the culture as it is, and believe that including the “others” will weaken, distort, pollute, and potentially destroy the culture, while diminishing the value of their own position within the culture.

Liberals and **Conservatives** oppose one another. The opposition is often intense since each stands on firm moral grounds.

7. **The Pure.**
Some of us are **pure** Liberal, firm in our conviction that making room for the “other” is clearly the right thing to do; while others of us are **pure** Conservative, equally firm in our conviction that preserving our culture is the right thing to do.
8. **The Conflicted.**
Many of us experience ourselves as Liberal or Conservative... mostly, yet at times find ourselves **conflicted**. We experience ourselves primarily as Conservative, yet at times, find ourselves welcoming and feeling generous toward the “other.”
Others of us experience ourselves primarily as Liberal, yet at times find ourselves judging and rejecting the behavior of the “other.”

9. **Tolerance** and **Purity** Solutions

Sometimes,
out of Looseness or Liberalism,
the “other” is *allowed* to co-exist in the host culture,
in a *tolerable* state of tension,
with various restrictions and limitations,
amid forces for accepting the “other”
and forces for rejecting them,
between living peaceably with them
or oppressing them,
between occasional acts of violence
and subsequent reconciliations.
Such tolerable states of tension can last
for years, decades, and even centuries.
This is a culture’s **tolerance** solution to the encounter with the
“other”.

Sometimes,
out of Tightness or Conservatism,
the forces to reject the “other”
overwhelm the forces to accept them.
The “other” is experienced as too different, foreign, dangerous.
The potential or continued existence of the “other” in the host
culture is seen as weakening, polluting, distorting, and
threatening to destroy it.
The solution is to protect and preserve the culture by
confining, suppressing, exiling, or destroying the “other”.
This is a culture’s **purity** solution to the encounter with the
“other”.

10. And, at times,
Tolerance solutions
are overwhelmed by **Purity** solutions,
resulting in catastrophe for the “other”.

11. Dehumanizing the Oppressed and the Oppressor

Both the Purity and Tolerance Solutions diminish the **oppressed**, (at times, disastrously); yet they also diminish the **oppressors**, corrupting and de-humanizing them as they hang their self-worth on the fragile thread of the diminished worth of the “other”.

What else is possible?
Assimilation?

Assimilation

1. Sometimes the “other” finds acceptance by adapting to and adopting the cultural rules of the host culture.
And sometimes the “others” achieve full assimilation when they become indistinguishable from the host.
2. Some “others” can never become indistinguishable, or their progress to indistinguishability can be slowed because of skin color or dress or religion or racial or sexual identity;
and still “others” have no interest in becoming indistinguishable.
3. And sometimes what feels like assimilation is simply a Tolerance solution;
and, given the right mix of circumstances – diminished resources, threat of warfare, all enflamed by demagoguery – assimilation/Tolerance readily devolves into a Purity solution.
4. And the final limitation of assimilation is the grand assumption that the host culture is the best of all cultures – and that, therefore, assimilation is the obvious solution.
Why wouldn't everyone want to be just like us?

Knowing/not Knowing the “Other”

1. **Substitute knowledge**

We sincerely believe we know the “other,”
and that knowledge justifies our feelings and actions
toward them.

But consider for a moment the possibility that we *do not*
know them – not really,
not the “others” generally (if there is such)
and certainly not *this* “other”
who stands before us.

And consider the possibility that,
in the absence of real knowledge,
our minds are open to
“substitute knowledge”
– our projections based on our own fears and desires -
(seeing *them* as thieves, liars, cheats, sexual menaces).

And consider the possibility that in the absence of real
knowing,
our minds are open to “substitute knowledge”
as fed to us by demagogues –
enflaming us with images of the “other” –
their conspiracies, vile practices, inferiority,
all in contrast to our purity.

“Substitute knowledge” fills the void.

With it we now *know* the “other,”

and knowing what we know:

Who wouldn't do what we do to such people?

Nothing else is possible

1. So, maybe nothing else is possible.
maybe we are at the mercy of our genetically transmitted
wariness of the “other,”
triggering us into fight or flight.
Lose and Tight

Liberal and Conservative
Tolerance and Purity
snap reactions,
snap judgments,
drawing us ever more closely into like-minded tribes,
reinforcing one another with our funds of substitute
knowledge,
growing ever more different and separate from the
“other.”

Circumstance will arrive,
as they are arriving now.
Wars, revolutions, environmental disasters.
Millions on the move,
different colors, religions, languages, politics;
the demagogues are at their microphones and twitter
feeds,
the message is clear;
it’s an old one;
it’s been here throughout the ages.
Save our tribe!
Purity, purity, purity!

What else is possible?
What about laws?
Can Laws stop oppression?

Laws

1. **The Law**
One way to end oppression
is to pass laws forbidding it,
or issue proclamations and emancipations
indicating that the “other”
is free and equal and welcome.
2. Laws and proclamations can serve the “other”

when in the midst of acts of oppression,
they can point to and draw on the laws and proclamations
for relief or justice.

3. Yet laws and proclamations often fail
to stop oppressors
who continue to see the “other”
as foreign, as a danger, as a pollutant
who needs to be controlled,
suppressed, exiled, or eliminated,
despite the law.
4. Laws, proclamations, and emancipations
cannot change how we see the “other;”
they may control our behavior,
but they do not control our *seeing*.
Can anything change how we see the other?
Is it possible to really see the “other?”

Act III – Seeing the “Other” Through Power or Love

1. What do we see when we see the “other?”
Do we see them as like us
or as different from us,
as connected to us
or as separate from us?
2. **Power seeing**
is seeing difference
and separateness.
*The “others” are different from us
and unconnected to us.*

Love seeing
is seeing commonality
and connectedness.
*The “others” are like us
and connected to us.*

3. **Robustly seeing the “other.”**

It is possible, theoretically at least, for our experience of the “other”

to be grounded in *both* Power and Love;

where we experience our differences from the “other”

and our commonality with them,

our separateness from them

and our connectedness with them.

Robust seeing is a possibility,

yet it is a possibility too rarely realized,

and here may be why.

4. **The Power reflex**

Is it not true

that, when we encounter cultural behavior of the “other”

that is very different from our own –

dress, skin color, religion, language, emotionality, rites

and rituals –

our *reflex* response – without awareness or choice –

is to experience our difference from the “others”

more than our commonality with them?

Our separateness from them

more than our connectedness with them?

This is not a question of what is right or wrong,

moral or immoral,

Liberal or Conservative.

It is a question about our *reflex response*

to the different cultural behavior of the “other.”

5. **Power without Love**

The reflex preference for Power,

when it happens,

can easily set off a process in which

Power gradually increases its predominance over Love,

eventually overcoming it

to the point at which Love is gone,

and there is no experience of commonality or

connectedness

with the “other.”

And here is how that happens.

6. **A vicious cycle: Separate and different**

Separateness and *difference*

are the two components of Power,
with each reinforcing the other.

The more we maintain our separateness from the “other,”
the more this supports our experience of difference from
them.

And experiencing our difference from them
reinforces our inclination to remain separate from them.

And round and round we go,
separateness enhancing difference
which reinforces separateness,
and downward to the experience of
Power without Love.

7. **Power without Love**

When our experience is grounded in
Power without Love,

we lose all commonality and connectedness
with the “other,”

enabling us to do things to the “other”

we would never do to one another –

suppress them, enslave them, exile them, and murder
them.

8. **Love to the rescue?**

So, where is Love?

When our experience of the “other” is grounded in Love,
we experience our commonality with the “other”
and our connectedness with them.

If our experience of the “other” were grounded in Love,
the likelihood of bigotry, oppression, and rejection
would be greatly diminished,
if not eliminated.

It’s not so easy to oppress people
with whom we feel so much in common
and with whom we are jointly engaged.

So where is Love?

9. **You can't get there from here... not easily**
Once we are locked into the experience of Power without Love,
Love is not experienced as a possibility.
Good idea maybe, but not with these people!
Once we fall into Power without Love,
our experience of the "other" as irreconcilably foreign feels solid, a reflection of reality.
This is who they *really* are.
All efforts to change are seen as foolish, pointless, dangerous.
Not with these people.
All of this happens without awareness or thought.
All of this is a consequence of our systems blindness.

10. **System blindness, system sight**
In our human interactions
we are constantly falling in and out of
patterns of relationship with others;
Power without Love is one such pattern.
Here is what we need to know:
The patterns we fall into shape how we experience ourselves and others.

When we are blind to systems,
we believe that our experience of the "other"
is a reflection of reality –
This is who they really are.

When we have system sight,
we understand that how we experience the "other"
is a *consequence* of the pattern we have fallen into.
Change the pattern and our experience of them will likely change.

When we are blind to systems,
we think that the realistic way to deal with our relationship with the "other"
is to dominate, oppress, suppress, exile, or destroy them.
Who wouldn't do this to such people?

When we have system sight,

we think that the realistic way to deal with our relationship with the “other”

is to change the pattern of relationship we have fallen into.

In this case, this means infusing Love into Power without Love.

11. Love as the disrupter

We have seen the self-reinforcing pattern of Power without Love –

how being separate from the “other”

reinforces our experience of their being different from us;

and experiencing them as being different from us

reinforces our staying apart,

and round and round it goes.

Love needs to be the disrupter of this cycle.

Separateness needs to be counterbalanced with connectedness.

We need to connect with the “other”

in *ongoing and mutually meaningful ways* –

building housing together,

taking meals together,

plowing fields together,

writing and producing plays together,

working on community projects together.

Endless possibilities of connecting in *ongoing and mutually meaningful ways*.

12. For Love also has its cycle.

The two components of Love are

connectedness – partnering together in common enterprise –

and commonality – experiencing our fundamental similarity with the “other.”

Each component reinforces the other –

partnering – working together with the “other” –

increases the likelihood of experiencing our commonality;

and experiencing our commonality supports

further partnering,
and on its goes.
So, is there hope?

13. There is the truth about human relationships
and there is our willingness to accept the truth.
The truth is:
*the patterns we fall into shape our experience;
change the pattern and our experience will change.*
That's the truth.
Do you reject it out of hand?
Do you believe it?
Or are you willing to test it?
Connect.
Infuse Love into Power.
14. So, it may be possible for us
to change our experience of the "other,"
creating a robust relationship,
a relationship in which we recognize, accept, and
potentially value
our differences from one another,
while also experiencing our commonality;
a relationship in which we pursue our separateness from
one another,
each going our own way,
while also connecting with one another in ongoing
mutually
meaningful ways.
Relationships of Power and Love.
15. The alternative is always at hand:
bigotry, oppression, suppression, exile, and murder.
In the following section there are brief descriptions of
some of the 20th and 21st centuries' catastrophes
stemming from
Power without Love.
Some are examples of Tolerance solutions devolving into
Purity solutions.

Some are examples of enlightened, high-culture civilizations falling into barbarism.
All are examples of the triumph of system blindness over system sight,
the consequences of Power without Love.

Catastrophes: Power without Love

1. Sacred missions

Catastrophes are clothed (justified) as sacred missions.

- A perceived sense of long-standing injustice erupts in revenge, resulting in the wholesale slaughter of the perceived oppressors.
- The beliefs, practices, rites and rituals of the “other” are experienced as violating the sacred beliefs, practices, and rituals of the host culture.
- The very existence of the “other” in the territory held sacred by the host culture is experienced as a contaminating influence resulting in the slaughter and expulsion of the “other.”
- The host culture develops a new social or political ideology, and the behavior of the “others” is seen as blocking the implementation of that ideology, resulting in the re-education, massacre, or expulsion of the “other.”

2. Demagogues

Demagogues play a major role in inflaming catastrophes, mobilizing the forces for rejection by offering a near irresistible appeal:

Purity,

the sacredness of their cause,
the sacredness of the culture they choose to protect and purify,
the superiority – moral, spiritual, physical –
of those who join them in purifying the culture,
the inferiority – moral, spiritual, physical – of the “other”.

The sacred mission is to purify the culture by dominating, if not eliminating the “other”
and eliminating those who support the “other”.

3. **Perpetrator or Victim**

Catastrophes are the subject of fierce debate, depending on whether one’s culture has been portrayed as the perpetrator of the catastrophe or its victim.

And, sometimes, a culture maintains its image of purity by denying that the catastrophe has even occurred. And, sometimes, catastrophes are portrayed not as crimes, but as realistic outcomes of cultural self-defense and growth.

4. Whatever protective mythology has been created, and whatever rationales have been offered, the Purity solution has been employed throughout recorded human history, resulting in the oppression, expulsion, and murder of hundreds of millions of human beings.

5. Catastrophes are an imminent possibility as long as there are cultural differences – skin color, race, religion, ethnicity, political ideologies – as long as there are demagogues ready to exploit these differences, selling us messages of our superiority and purity and the inferiority and impurity of the “other,” and so long as we are needy and naïve enough to take these messages to heart and fall into relationships in which our experience of the “other” is grounded in Power without Love.

A Sample of 20th- and 21st-Century Catastrophes

NOTE: The following summary of 20th- and 21st-century catastrophes is incomplete and potentially subject to much dispute. My research was based on internet searches; Wikipedia was a very helpful source. Source estimates of deaths and expulsions vary widely, yet the precision of numbers is not the primary point. What does matter is recognizing our human capacity for reacting viciously and lethally to the “other” in the service of one form of Purity Solution or another.

- **Myanmar (2017 and continuing).** In the service of creating a *Clean and Beautiful Nation*, Muslim Rohingya, although having lived in Myanmar for generations, are treated as separate, non-citizens, illegal immigrants, “Bengalis.” As such, they have been driven from their homes and country, forced to live in squatter camps and slums and have been subject to rape, torture, and arson.
- **Darfur (2003 and continuing).** Government attacks on the villages of Sudan's non-Arab, darker-skinned farmers commonly began with Air Force bombings. These air campaigns were often followed by Janjaweed militia raids in which surviving village men, women, and children were either murdered or forced to flee. It is estimated that this purification campaign has resulted in four million people being displaced and two million dead.
- **ISIL genocides (1999 and continuing).** A caliphate was created aimed at creating a pure Islamic state which would follow the prophecy and example of the prophet in precise detail. The goal of ISIL is to purify the world by destroying all who do not live by these principles; this has included Assyrian Christians in Iraq, Yazidi, Shiites, and the heads of every Muslim country who have elevated man-made law above Sharia. Ongoing worldwide attacks on civilians in many countries are further acts of purification through the deaths of “infidels.”
- **Rwanda (1994).** Over a one-hundred-day period, an estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 Tutsis, approximately 70% of the Tutsi

population in Rwanda, were slaughtered through the actions of the Hutu majority government. Soldiers and police officers encouraged ordinary citizens to take part. The extremist Hutu regime appeared to believe that their only hope for maintaining power demanded the complete destruction of ethnic Tutsis.

- **Cambodia (1975-1997).** Somewhere between 1.5 and 3 million Cambodians were killed in a vision-driven attempt to create a new society – an ideal socialist agrarian republic based on Marxist-Leninist and Maoist principles. The effort required a total societal transformation including the creation of a “new man.” Mass killings were organized of those opposed to or seen as unfit for this new world – ethnic minorities, intellectuals and professionals, civil servants, and recalcitrant city dwellers.
- **The Partition of India (1947).** Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs who had co-existed for a millennium attacked each other in efforts to purify their newly separated states. The members of two states were bent on destroying one another through horrific acts of violence. Gangs of killers were reported to have set whole villages aflame, hacking to death men and children and the aged while carrying off young women to be raped.
- **Croatia (1941).** In the service of establishing a “Greater Croatia,” an estimated 500,000 Serbs were murdered, 250,000 expelled, and 200,000 forcibly converted to Catholicism. (Estimates vary widely.) Most atrocities occurred in several concentration camps throughout Croatia. Serbs, identified with blue badges were often murdered immediately upon arrival.
- **Armenia (during World War I).** The Ottoman government, followed by its successor Turkish government, systematically exterminated 1.5 million Christian Armenians. The campaign began in 1915 with the roundup, arrest, and deportation of Armenian intellectuals and community leaders, the majority of whom were eventually murdered. The Armenian holocaust is an example of a decades long Tolerance solution that devolved into

Catastrophe.

- **Germany (1942-1945).** At the height of its power, Germany controlled territory in countries with extensive pre-war Jewish populations: Germany and Austria (240,000 Jews), Poland (3,300,000), the Baltic nations (253,000), Slovakia (90,000), Greece (70,000), the Netherlands (140,000), Hungary (650,000), Soviet States (1,875,000), Belgium (65,000), Yugoslavia (43,000), Romania (600,000), Norway (2,173), France (350,000), Bulgaria (64,000), Italy (40,000), Luxembourg (5,000), Russian SFSR (975,000), Denmark (8,000). Of the 8,861,800 Jews living in these countries, 5,933,900 (67%) were murdered, often with the willful collaboration of these countries' citizens.

I am aware of so many catastrophes I have not included, some of which I will now mention in a phrase or two simply to emphasize the breadth and depth of catastrophe as a human possibility.

- **The Nazi Eugenics**, between 1939 and 1941, 80,000 to 100,000 mentally ill adults in institutions, 5,000 children in institutions, and 1,000 Jews in institutions were killed.
- **The Polish genocide.** In preparation for the occupation of Poland, an anti-intelligentsia action resulted in the murder of 100,000 Polish citizens. The goal was to complete the Germanization of western regions of Poland before being settled by pure Aryans.
- **Genocide of the Slavic population in the Soviet Union.** As central to their plan (lebensraum) of expansion eastward and creating a New Order in Europe, the Nazis set about purifying their new territory by enslaving, expelling, and destroying the Slavic peoples of Europe whom they considered racially inferior and non-Aryan. The death toll in areas occupied by Germany was estimated at 13.7 million.

- **The Expulsion of Muslims.** In the 1860s. The Russian Tsar ordered the expulsion of most of the Muslim population of the North Caucasus in order to have access to the Black Sea coast. A whole population was eliminated in order to satisfy the economic interests of a powerful country.
- **Algeria.** 1830-1875. The French conquered Algeria and attempted to purify it (making it French) by killing an estimated 825,000 indigenous Algerians.
- **North America.** From the 1490s into the 1900s, native Americans were uprooted from their lands, subject to forced relocations, massacres, torture, and sexual abuse. Practice of their religion was outlawed, children were taken from their families in an effort to “educate” them away their culture.
- **Ireland.** 1650s. The native population of Ireland was forcibly displaced as part of the mission to transfer the land from Irish to English hands.
- **Sri Lanka.** 1983-2000. Genocide of the minority Hindu Tamils at the hands of the primarily Buddhist government.
- **Democratic Republic of Congo.** During the Civil War, there was a program called Effacer le tableau (wipe the slate clean) aimed at purifying the country by destroying the pygmy population.
- **East Timor.** 1975 onward. During the occupation of East Timor by Indonesia, the government tried to purify the country by killing, causing death from hunger and illness, and using starvation as a weapon to exterminate the East Timorese. Estimates of death ranged from 60,000 to 200,000.
- **Indonesia.** 1965-1966. The Indonesian government, with the support of Great Britain, Australia, and the United States, aided

and abetted mass killings including beheading, evisceration, dismemberment, and castration of hundreds of thousands of leftists and those tied to the Communist Party.

- **North Korea.** Continuing. In an effort to purify the state, the Christian population of North has been systematically massacred and persecuted; by 2012, 50,000-70,000 Christians were imprisoned in North Korea's concentration camps.
- **Bangladesh Liberation War.** During the 1971 war for independence, members of the Pakistani military supported by Islamist militias raped 200,000-400,000 Bangladeshi women and girls in a systematic campaign of genocidal rape.
- **Polish Ukrainian genocide.** 1943-1945. The Ukrainian Insurgent Army killed 40,000-60,000 Polish civilians in Volhynia and 25,000-40,000 in Eastern Galicia for the purpose of removing non-Ukrainians from a future purified Ukrainian state.
- **1948. Palestinian Nakba.** An estimated 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled from their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Between 400 and 600 Palestinian villages were sacked during the war while urban Palestine was almost entirely extinguished.
- **The Srebrenica massacre.** 1995. The massacre of more than 8,000 Muslim Bosniaks, mainly men and boys, perpetrated by units of the Bosnian Serb army and assisted by the Scorpions, a paramilitary unit from Serbia,
- **The Holdomor.** From 1930 to 1937 an estimated 7-10 million Russian peasants died of starvation resulting from the elimination of kulaks – rich land-owning peasant farmers – who were shot or deported and whose lands were collectivized. People standing in the way of a sacred socialist mission.

Enough.

So, there it is.
Purity is one solution to encountering the “other,”
and Tolerance another.
Both are grounded in varying degrees of Power over Love.
Both exact their terrible costs on the oppressed
while diminishing the humanity of the oppressors.

And there is a third possibility,
one that requires a fundamental transformation in
how we see and experience one another,
a transformation based on the understanding that:
*the interaction patterns we fall into
shape how we see and experience one another.
What seems to be a real and solid picture of the “other”
is merely the consequence of the pattern we have fallen into.
Change the pattern of interaction
and our experiences of one another will change.
The possibility of Power and Love will emerge.*

Barry Oshry
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