

The Whole World is....

One World

One World is a publication of Cultural Crossroads, Inc.

Vol. 6, No. 1

Early Spring, 2009

CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS

Kansas Citians talk about important issues and share their stories in ongoing series



As we approach the 2009 series of “Cultural Conversations” at the Plaza Library, we look back on some of the Conversations held at during the 2008 series.

The Summer, 2008 issue of *One World* contains reports on the discussion of “Unwitting Transgressions in a Multicultural World” with educator David Alexander and “Diversity in the Media” with journalists Lewis W. Diuguid, Sylvia Maria Gross and Eic L. Wesson. A report of “Diversity in Religion” with The Rev. Vern Barnet, DMn and members of the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council appears in the Autumn, 2008 issue. (All issues of *One World* are posted online on our website at <http://www.culturalcrossroads-kc.org/Newsletters.html>.)

Other sessions in the 2008 series were “Diversity in the Workplace” (report in this issue) and “Milestone and Passages” (report will appear in future issue).

Mark your calendars for the 2009 series, again co-sponsored by the Plaza Library and Cultural Crossroads. Each session is held on a Sunday afternoon at 2:00 pm at the Plaza Library at 4801 Main Street, Kansas City, Missouri. (<http://www.kclibrary.org/event/cultural-conversations-role-family>)

March 15: The Role of the Family

The effect of family on our lives and how that differs among cultures.

April 19: Teaching Our Children

How does culture affect education?

May 17: Health and Healing

How does our diverse cultures and faith traditions affect our health and the health care system in our country?

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CORRECTION TO LAST ISSUE

The Winter, 2008 issue contained a representative listing of a few holidays and holy days of various cultures but inadvertently omitted *Makar Sankranti* (marking the increase of the sun) on January 13 and *Vasanta Panchami* (celebrating Saraswati and Lakshmi) on January 31. We apologize to our Hindu friends for this omission.

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DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

In these times of corporate downsizing, the workplace is the focus of even more interest today than when a small but intense group met at the Plaza Library on March 16, 2008, to discuss the issues surrounding diversity in the workplace and how diversity is handled by the various players in the workplace. From the vantage point of today's economic crisis, the issues presented by diversity are even more important – as companies make decisions to terminate employees, how is that decision perhaps affected by the diversity of that workforce?

The group agreed that diversity takes many forms, not all of which are currently protected under antidiscrimination laws. The forms of diversity generally acknowledged include race, gender, national origin, and age. Several of those in attendance also pointed out that diversity issues are not only based on obvious “categories” of people; diversity may also subtly influence how an older person, for example, views technology or how a member of a minority may be deemed to have “an attitude” which is simply a cultural mannerism.

Great strides have admittedly been made in counteracting the rampant, overt discrimination in employment of the past. Many of the group had personal stories of blatant, unabashed bigotry and discrimination in hiring or in the workplace itself. Today, due to the protection of law and evolving consciousness, most bias is covert, rather than overt; the very nature of covert discrimination, however, means that it is more difficult to identify such bias and to counter it.

Even ADA (the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is designed to protect workers against job discrimination due to certain disabilities) has limited guidelines, e.g., mental disease is not covered. Several people also raised the issue of the size or weight of a worker, which is not protected either as a classification or as a disability. Although there was interest in this topic, there was not sufficient time to explore it in the context of this session. It was the consensus of the group that there will be more attention to such “hidden” diversity issues in the future.

The group discussion raised various trends that are increasing, rather than decreasing, the pervasiveness of discrimination and lack of understanding in the workplace, even as diversity itself is increasing in the workplace:

- Today's more covert nature of discrimination partially arises because many people do not recognize possible internal “latent” bigotry.
- The modern “ASAP” corporate culture. The theory of Total Quality Management dictates purely outcome-based production levels, with less time to accommodate the individual and less attention paid to individual workers. Because productivity is now measured in minutes and seconds, rather than hours and days, there is a premium on rapid achievement.
- Technology is often outsourced, resulting in a solidification of the technology “gap” within our society, as well as promoting apprehension regarding the cultures and countries to which those functions are outsourced.
- Young workers will change as they acquire homes and children, adding to the cultural differences between generations of workers. This “workplace generation gap” is heightened because of the prevailing view that resumes should no longer reflect longevity and stability, but that a worker should change jobs every 3-5 years to reflect growth.

Those present drew upon their personal experiences to share advice with the group. One suggestion stressed personal attitude – to hold the desire to work with diversity issues as a benefit in the workplace, not the resolution of a problem. Another suggestion was to “harmonize with the embedded corporate culture” in order to achieve success.

Awareness, attitude, concern, attention....these were the words that appeared throughout the discussion. It is encouraging that these words all imply positive thoughts and a view to the future. Certainly, these are the very tools that will prove useful as our workplaces evolve, both in terms of economics and in terms of diversity.

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT: Have things changed in the year since this conversation? How?

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BREADS ACROSS THE WORLD



The hamburger or hot dog bun of America, the pizza of Italy, the tortillas of Mexico – these breads have become iconic to those cultures.

Bread is one of the most basic foods prepared by Man and is present, in one form or another, in practically every culture on Earth. Even before cultivating grain crops, early humans gathered and processed tubers, roots and grains for breads. The results of the hunt may have been the first food to be placed over a fire, but breads are certainly among the earliest and most commonly-eaten foodstuffs in any culture.

This most basic of foods offers flexibility, a direct tie to the Earth, and satisfaction for the soul. (Who can remain “uptight” when working or kneading dough? Who can be unmoved by the smell of fresh bread?)

Peoples have a special relationship to their breads – a relationship deeper than with other foods...a relationship that transcends bread as mere food. An Italian man relates how a piece of bread accidentally dropped would never be left to be wasted on the ground, as that would be disrespectful. A woman of Middle Eastern descent says that “the old ones” – the women of her heritage – thought bread was “holy” because it was a divine gift.

Bread may take different forms in different cultures, but it is important across cultures. Evidence has been found of breads in early Sumer and Pompeii. *Nan* from India may be “plain” or enhanced with fruits or cheese. The braided breads of Greece nourish body and spirit, as special breads are made on important Holy Days. The style is as varied as the flexibility of Ethiopia’s *injera* to the flatbreads of the Middle East to the rice pancakes of the Orient. Many cultures use bread as utensil as well as food. Flat breads are used for this purpose in Ethiopia and across the Middle East and Central Asia today and in Western societies in the past. In medieval Europe, the “trencher” was a piece of stale bread which served as a plate. After the meal, the trencher could be eaten. “It was not until the fifteenth century that trenchers made of wood started to replace the bread variety.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bread>



*Note the similarity of these two ovens for baking bread:
the one on the left is in South Africa and the one on the right is located on the island nation of Cyprus.*

There are many common sayings from Western culture which use bread symbolically. We “break bread together” to signify our community through shared nourishment. The term “bread and water” is used to signify the most basic requirements of sustenance and our cultural language contains many references to its importance.

Consider the phrases “our daily bread” -- “the staff of life” -- “it’s bread upon the waters” -- “Man does not live by bread alone.” -- “upper crust” -- “the greatest thing since sliced bread” ... the meanings cover varied situations, but the underlying stress is on the importance of bread as life-sustaining metaphor. The names chosen for some groups combatting hunger equate “bread” with “food” -- Bread for the World (www.bread.org) and Project Bread (www.projectbread.org) are examples.

There are, of course, many more than can be related here. Reflect on the possible origin of these sayings and you will understand the central position this seemingly humble food holds in our hearts and minds and memories.

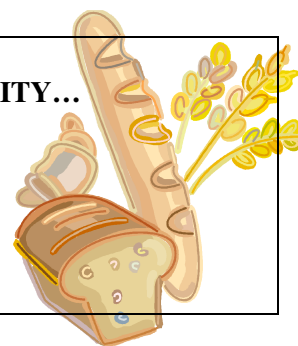
The next time you “grab a sandwich” or nosh a bagel or roll up a tortilla for a quick on-the-go snack, pause for just a moment to contemplate how that simple act is an exercise in multiculturalism and a link across time and space to the soda bread and bannocks of Ireland and Scotland, the *bánh cuốn* (rice pancakes) of Vietnam, the hearty rye bread of seafaring Scandinavians, the *lavosh* of Armenia...a trail that leads directly back to ancient peoples.

Wheat, rice, oats, corn, rye, amaranth, barley -- these are “gifts of the harvest” that bind us together with Nature and with our fellow humans. When we stop to truly *think* about our actions and to live consciously, we find many such links...few, however, are as honest, as filling and as fulfilling, as our breads.

HERE’S ANOTHER WAY TO “BREAK BREAD” WITH OUR COMMUNITY...

Do you have a favorite story about bread from your family or culture or your travels?

Share it with us and we’ll publish it in a future issue of *One World*.



PROGRAM CALENDAR - SPRING, 2009

When you’re planning your garden and waiting for warmer weather, add these Cultural Crossroads programs to your springtime calendar:

March 9	Raytown Library	Display – <i>Head-to-Toe</i> (week-long)
March 10	North Independence Library	Program - <i>Reading & Rhythm</i>
March 15	Plaza Library	Cultural Conversations - <i>The Role of the Family</i>
March 21	Blue Ridge Library	Program - <i>Hello, World!</i>
April 2	Kearney Library	Program - <i>Is This Your New Year?</i>
April 19	Plaza Library	Cultural Conversations - <i>Teaching our Children</i>
May 17	Plaza Library	Cultural Conversations - <i>Health and Healing</i>

**Join in one of our “fun” programs – as a volunteer or as a participant!
All programs are open to all ages. Call the host library to sign up.**



Go to our website at <http://www.culturalcrossroads-kc.org/Newsletters.html> to read past issues of the *One World* newsletter and to see photos from past programs and festivals. Call or email if you can volunteer and be part of the fun!

Send us your email address if you can receive our publications online to save printing and postage.

Cultural Crossroads offers opportunities for involvement as volunteers, board or committee members and, as a 501c3 organization, all donations are tax-deductible.



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