

Intercultural Couples Counselling in the Most Diverse of Cities

by Daryl Landau

"Historically, identity as a member of a group was a matter of destiny, not decision. But as barriers have fallen, especially in the last twenty-five years, group identification has increasingly become a choice. We now face the complicated task of creating our own sense of identity."(Crohn, 1995)

Toronto is a little United Nations, a whole cosmos in a city. It exists in a free country, as a safe haven where love between different religious or ethnic groups is possible.

Possible, yes, but not necessarily easy. Couples must negotiate customs, and families must consider how welcoming to be of such cultural differences within the family. The gap between respecting another person, and wanting that person as a son- or daughter-in-law, can be a wide one. Parents must face the judgment of others in their community.

I know of couples who kept their relationship secret from their parents for years. I know couples for whom Christmas or other celebrations bring unaccustomed challenges. Many of the students I taught in "Culture and Diversity" had experienced intercultural conflict in their relationships. Sometimes couples who had no troubles are taken by surprise after their first child, because raising children also raises the stakes. Yet I also have seen many people successfully overcome all obstacles, through sensitivity and creative compromise.

A surprise to many who married within their 'community' was that there are subcultures that can be just as challenging to unite. Two Lutherans or two Muslims can practice very differently, and hold quite different values.

My own Eastern European Jewish family has been quite homogenous until recently. It has been interesting to see it become more diverse with the younger generations. At times, the prospect of intermarriage has been a source of tension, yet in practice things have worked out well. Still, it requires attention or problems could quickly develop.

"The risk of not dealing with differences is that they may later reappear in spite of efforts to suppress them, especially around life-cycle rituals."(Crohn, 1995)

For these reasons, intercultural counselling can be very helpful. I help clients to prepare for, or to respond to, these cultural crossroads. How? First, by helping individuals think through their values and priorities. Then I help couples to find common ground and a common strategy. I assist the dialogue with the rest of the

family. Naturally, I do not consider myself an expert on all cultures. I draw upon the knowledge of my clients, and my own researches, to gain a respectful understanding of my clients' cultures. I combine counselling with mediation, actively assisting my clients to manage conflict, as long as they want that assistance.

Quotes from Joel Crohn, *Mixed Matches* (1995).