

## The Humanities and a Humanities Exploration

Rodney Frey

(from the keynote address given 12 September 2011)

Now donning the regalia and dancing as the “distinguished humanities professorship” – though at my core still an ethnographer – this Humanities Exploration is really a year-long unfolding ethnography, a work in progress. My “research design” emanates out of the humanities, a mode of inquire particularly well suited for my “research question.

The humanities certainly share with other academic disciplines, such as in the natural and social sciences, and in the arts, the goal of seeking to understand and appreciate the human conduction. What distinguishes the humanities disciplines from others is not so much its content and subject; a creative playwright, a behavioral psychologist, and humanities professor could each be dealing with the same subject, for example, gender identity.

What distinguishes the humanities from other disciplines is that it is “interpretive.” Taking my lead from the Idaho Humanities Council, the IHC defines the humanities as belonging to the “interpretative disciplines.” These include cultural anthropology/ethnography, communications studies, cultural studies (such as American Studies, International Studies, American Indian Studies, Religious Studies, Women's Studies); they include the languages, law, literature, history, philosophy; and they include the reflection and theory in creative writing, in the performing arts of music, dance and theatre, and the reflection and theory in the visual arts of painting, sculpting and architecture.

While not a black and white distinction, the interpretative methodologies of these disciplines are typically distinguished from the positivist and empirical methodologies of the natural and social

science disciplines, and the creative and imaginative endeavors of the arts. Such interpretative methodologies, for example, include hermeneutics, literary criticism, phenomenology, and in my own discipline of ethnography, “thick description.”

To “interpret” certainly seeks to render something meaningful and understandable, serving to inform, enlighten, instruct. Likely first expressed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Middle English, “interpret” is derived from the Latin, *interpretārī* – “someone who serves as an agent, a negotiator.” Hence, to interpret certainly seeks to (1) generate new knowledge, rendering something meaningful, be it culturally or historically distant, be it something more immediate but veiled in some fashion. But to interpret also seeks to (2) render that knowledge accessible, applicable, relevant, that is, linking and integrating. Indeed, “negotiating” known and knower. Indeed, an element of rendering knowledge empathic, of projecting the knower into the known!

The Idaho Humanities Council states that “through [the] study [of the humanities it seeks to] yield wisdom.” Wisdom is that deep understanding that goes beyond knowing, to thicken and extend our understandings, to apply, to engage that knowledge in civic life, both locally and globally, to address the challenges faced by humanity. To take up the “big questions.”

In his 2007 keynote address, Gary Williams, my predecessor in this role of Distinguished Humanities Professor, and building upon the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities statement, emphasized that the Humanities are “. . . a way of thinking about and responding to the world – tools we use to examine and make sense of the human experience in general and our individual experiences in particular. The humanities enable us to reflect upon our lives and ask fundamental questions of value, purpose, and meaning in a rigorous and systematic way.”

With this understanding of the interpretative-nature of the humanities, the humanities are particularly well suited to assist and compliment the STEM disciplines – of science, technology, engineering, and math, for example. In reflecting upon, and the re-telling, in re-imagining the STEM stories to more fully render them accessible and applicable, and to integrate them more fully into our lives. The humanities might just offer a language of the hub, providing a means for transversing the material and imaginative in our lives? We'll get a chance to see over the weeks and months to come in our Humanities Exploration series.

As an ethnographer using “intensity and snowball sampling techniques,” and with my primary “research question” embedded in “a set of semi-structured interview questions,” I ask you, as I’ve already done for some thirty other faculty and student “members” of the Vandal community:

From your perspective, what is the significance of the interplay between the unique spokes and universal hub, between the particular and ubiquitous, between our collective diversity and our shared humanity?

How and in what ways has this interplay resonated with you, in how you learn and teach, in how you research and create, in how you engage and disseminate knowledge, in how you relate to fellow students, to fellow colleagues, to others in our community?

This Humanities Exploration is very much an ethnography of a single community, that of our University of Idaho. All the responses to my questions are coming from the members of our community, from you, its students and faculty, and any the insights that are revealed, discovered, created, will go back to you, into our community, and most assuredly beyond the borders of the University of Idaho.

It comes as no surprise, that as I've asked the question of the interplay between the unique and universal of so many members of our Vandal community, it hits home. But in the responses to the question, the specific characteristics of the "diverse" and of the "shared" have found new expressions, fresh extensions on the original theme – multiple ways of thinking about and acting out the interplay between the spokes and the hub/rim.

Not surprisingly then, how the Vandal interviewees are responding to the question of the "interplay" is expressive of a variety of ways and means – from performances in dance, music and theatre, through exhibits of photographs and paintings, through creative writing and playwright readings, and through colloquium talks on philosophy and jurisprudence, sociology and religious studies, history and public policy, through talks on biology and chemistry, computer science, entomology and physics. Responding in ways that are reflective, experiential and participatory, that are cognitive and affective. Responding with their own huckleberries to offer us.

And interwoven throughout these responses, these varied stories, to the question of the interplay between diversity and universality are far reaching implications on our capacities:

- for cross-cultural and trans-disciplinary communication and collaboration,
  - for creativity in the arts and discovery in the sciences,
  - for tolerance, civility, and respect,
  - for building and sustaining local and global community, among and between the students, faculty and friends of the University of Idaho, and far beyond.
- for the "Five - C's" – civility, communications and collaboration, creativity and community!

If we are to effectively engage with and understand, work together and build community with the distant and many strangers amongst us, distinguished by such divisions as class, ethnicity or religion, by cultural distances, distinguished by academic disciplines and theoretical paradigms, distinguished by entrenched partisan politics, are not the lessons from the hub and rim, of our shared humanity, just as critical as the lessons from the spokes, the lessons of our human diversity?

Do we have to wait to be galvanized by some external threat or catastrophe, to re-discover what we already know, what we already can do?

Can we not embrace the values of inclusion and interconnection, of equality and empathy as easily as Tom and Susie Yellowtail did?

Can we, in our own lives, transverse the seemingly "mutually exclusive" as easily and effectively as Tom and Susie Yellowtail did in theirs?

Posing the question, "What is the interplay between our human diversity and shared humanity, between the unique and universal?" please join our Humanities Exploration team. Let's come together to re-tell and share some stories. Let's do some *baaéechichiwaau* and see what a waits? Let's see what huckleberries might be gathered, huckleberries that might guide and nourish, huckleberries that might meet the challenges and chart the world, . . . and that just might taste pretty good too!

Thank You. Let's continue our exploration in the hall, with your questions and comments. And join use for some Hackberries – Huckleberry Ice-cream waiting for us there!