



# Staying Connected



a publication designed for alumni of Catholic full-time volunteer programs  
brought to you by the St. Vincent Pallotti Centers

Volume 9, Number 3

Fall 2007

## Staying Connected to...Cultural Diversity

### Part I: Discovering Your Self and Your Culture

### Read what these formers have said.

We shall not cease exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, Nobel Prize recipient for Literature  
(also a volunteer during WWII); from *Little Gidding*, the 4th of Eliot's Four Quartets

**This issue's theme:** If you are like many former volunteers, during your time of service you were exposed to another culture, whether ethnic, linguistic, geographic, economic or religious. These cross-cultural experiences have the potential for profoundly enriching your own humanity and spirituality. But to absorb these insights, it takes time and reflection, both of which are often in short supply during most volunteers' year or two of service.



This issue of *Staying Connected* is the first of a two-part series exploring how cultural diversity enriches our lives. Practitioners and researchers tell us that in order to better understand the complexity of cultural diversity, you first have to know your own culture. Therefore, this issue will begin by exploring what it means to know and stay connected to one's own cultural identity. (The second issue of this series will delve more into cultural diversity.)



There is some evidence that the average mainstream American does not recognize that he or she does have a culture. One academic, Jianglong Wang, quoting the ancient Chinese poet Su Shi, compares becoming aware of one's culture as similar to attempting to see a mountain range while you are hiking in it. Often it is only after you've left the mountain and can see it from some distance that you recognize where you've been ([www.ac.wvu.edu/~culture/Wang.htm](http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~culture/Wang.htm)).

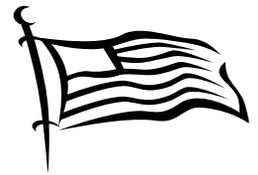


"I tend to define myself and how I'm doing based on what I'm doing. I think this is common to Americans, but it is not so to others and [for those] where dependence is nothing to be ashamed of, it is an accepted norm that binds people together. . . . One of the best things of going overseas is returning home. We need to come back and say, 'Here's what I saw, and this is the way these people live. The American way is not the only way to be a human being or a Christian, and our choices are not the only choices.'"

Paul Wheeler  
(S.M.A., Society of the Missionaries of Africa)

"I told myself that I could not, as a whole, reject every thing about the North American culture. I had to approach things that made me uncomfortable with the same open-mindedness as I did when I first arrived in Chile. I could not resort to a sense [that my newfound Chilean culture was superior]. . . . I need to find my identity here in the States before I think about returning to Chile . . . Discovering how to integrate these two worlds, instead of choosing one over the other, is a long and difficult process . . . Until I find answers to these questions for myself personally, I will not begin to feel that I have returned home."

Bill Leheny  
(Holy Cross Associates)



- For you, what values characterize American culture?
- Which "American" values do you accept and reject?
- To what extent do Paul's or Bill's experiences resonate with your own?



# All in the Family: How do family values influence your cultural identity?

We all know that the family serves as a vital subculture that can affect how we form our cultural identity. Considering the many values our parents and caregivers teach us, which values make the biggest impact on who we are?

The well-known psychologist, Erik Erickson, emphasized the importance of trust and mistrust in the first of his *Eight Stages of Development*. Erikson believed that trust was one of the most formative elements in developing the relationship between child and parent. Since this is the first relationship we experience, trust then becomes a deeply-rooted belief that shapes all of our subsequent relationships. The level of trust we receive from our parents can affect to what extent we trust others and thus influences how we relate to others and perceive the world.

*Considering the importance of both the values that were instilled by your family as well as how trust was established, reflect on your formative childhood years....*

- What were some important values that your family passed on to you?
- How were these values introduced?
  - By word...by action...or both?

- How have you incorporated these values into your adult life?
  - How did you decide which values to keep and which to adapt or remove altogether?
- How did these values shape how the "Other" was viewed in your family?
  - Did your family teach you mainly to trust or suspect outsiders?
- Taking into consideration the importance of trust within the family, how was trust instilled in your family?
- If your family had a high or low level of trust, did this correspond with a high or low level of openness to one another? To others?
  - What examples come to mind?

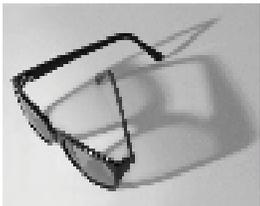
It is important to allow yourself time to reflect on how trust was established in your family, along with which values were instilled. This will help you to further explore the progression of your cultural identity and how it influences the way you interact with others today.

*For more on sharing values within the family, see Staying Connected Volume 6, Number 1 at: [www.pallotticenter.org/StayingConnected/archives.htm](http://www.pallotticenter.org/StayingConnected/archives.htm).*

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## How have your experiences colored your perspective?

If someone asked you to describe your cultural identity, what answer might you give? Perhaps you would initially think about your country or region of origin, the language(s) you speak, your faith, ethnicity or even your musical or dietary preferences.



But there are other important, yet less obvious, aspects of cultural identity of which we may not even be fully aware. The differences between contact lenses and sunglasses may help illustrate these subtle aspects.

Whether or not you wear contact lenses, you probably understand that when worn, they are typically undetected by both the wearer and others. Sunglasses, however, visibly change the way in which we see the world - you can see the filter that alters vision.

It is often harder to see the components of our cultural identity that look and feel more like contact lenses than like sunglasses. All of us, regardless of how well we fare on a vision test, have "mental contact lenses" - filters that are not easily visible to us, but alter the way in which we interact in the world. We also all have filters that appear more like sunglasses. Consider the following questions to

help you sort out the filters that comprise your cultural identity:

If, as an American, we visit a country very different from our own, it's often quite obvious that the way we view and interact in the foreign country is colored by our expectations and beliefs as Americans - similar to how we view the world when wearing sunglasses. What are the components of your own personal cultural identity that more obviously impact the way in which you see the world?

If you are a part of the majority culture, it can be more difficult to see the mental contact lenses that alter your perception. For example, in the U.S., it is often difficult for Caucasians to see elements of white privilege. What are the components of your cultural identity that are less visible and harder to identify? Have you had experiences that called these elements to mind?

Our mental contact lenses are often made visible and more like sunglasses by challenging experiences: immersing oneself in another culture, questioning one's deep-seated beliefs, or going against the grain, to name a few.

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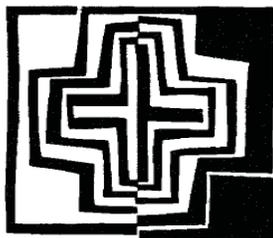
# SPIRITUALITY

Discovering God's transforming presence  
in our lives



Just as our culture provides a sort of “lens” through which we view the world, our faith also influences our point of view. Is it your faith or your culture that most strongly contributes to your identity? Are you conscious of how your faith and your culture influence you? If so, do you want to make any changes?

As residents of the United States, many of us live within a cultural framework based on the ideals of our “Founding Fathers:” individualism; capitalism; a limited, representative government; and religious pluralism. We focus on the rights and freedoms of the individual, and we thus draw our identity from our individual accomplishments and attributes. American culture



encourages us to be self-assured and ambitious, so we pride ourselves on professional and financial success, physical appearance, efficiency, and self-improvement.

Christian tradition, on the other hand, teaches us to be less individualistic and more focused on our neighbors' well-being. Jesus speaks about caring for “the least of these brothers” (Mt. 25:40), and His beatitudes similarly urge us to be like the “meek...the merciful...[and] the peacemakers (Mt. 5:5-9).” These messages obviously **do** contradict some predominant characteristics of American culture. How do we reconcile these characteristics with our Christian faith? Consider the following questions as you examine your own identity, your culture, and your faith.

- How does the American culture influence your faith, and vice-versa?
- Do your culture and faith work together, or do you see them as separate parts of your identity? What aspect of your life—faith or culture—most influences your major decisions?
- In this pragmatic, success-oriented culture, what are some ways that you make space for prayer and contemplation, for compassion and community?

Watch for the next  
issue of *Staying Connected*, part II of this  
series: *Respecting the Other and Cultural  
Diversity*.

Former Volunteer  
Sightings in the

**Bay Area, CA**

**Parishes & Retreat Centers:** For a list of parishes in the greater San Francisco Bay Area that have ministry with young adults, visit: [www.sfyam.org](http://www.sfyam.org) // St. Agnes, located in the Haight Ashbury district, [www.saintagnessf.com](http://www.saintagnessf.com) // Jesuit Retreat Center of Los Altos, [www.elretiro.org](http://www.elretiro.org), 650-948-4491 // San Damiano Retreat Center, [www.sandamiano.org](http://www.sandamiano.org), 925-837-9141, located in Danville // Mercy Retreat Center, [www.mercy-center.org](http://www.mercy-center.org), 650-340-7474, located in Burlingame.

**Civic and Volunteer Opportunities:** Bay to Breakers, offered as a suggestion by multiple formers, is a race in May for runners, walkers, and spectators alike, and features crazy costumes, entertainment, and chances to volunteer // Old Skool Cafe, [www.oldskoolcafe.org](http://www.oldskoolcafe.org), helps provide job skills and community to SF youth and is happy to accept volunteers.



**Things to Do:** Lindy in the Park - FREE swing dancing every Sunday afternoon (free beginners' lessons, too!) at Golden Gate Park // Henry W. Coe State Park (Morgan Hill), Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park (north of Santa Cruz), and Big Basin Redwoods State Park (Boulder Creek) have good camping and hiking opportunities.

**For more sightings, visit:** [www.pallotticenter.org/  
Resources/InYourArea/california.htm](http://www.pallotticenter.org/Resources/InYourArea/california.htm)

Thanks to Maria Gaona, Kristen O'Hare, Joe DeBenedictis, and Teresa Goines for their great suggestions!

Look for our profile of **Louisville, KY**  
in the next issue of *Staying Connected*.

If you know of resources in Louisville that no former should be without, email [stayingconnected@pallotticenter.org](mailto:stayingconnected@pallotticenter.org).

*continued from page 2*

- Subsequent to your volunteer experience, were there “mental contact lenses” that you became more aware of? What were they, and have you remained aware of these filters since that time?
- Did your awareness of your own cultural identity change after your time of service, as compared to your awareness before you volunteered? What other events or experiences since your volunteer time have impacted your awareness of your cultural identity?

As former volunteers and missionaries, you have a unique set of experiences that no doubt highlighted or shaped your cultural identity in some way. By reflecting on and becoming aware of your mental filters or contact lenses, you will be better able to appreciate and value the cultural diversity of your friends, neighbors, and co-workers.



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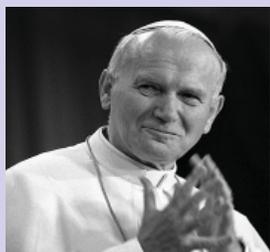
Cultural identity:  
family, values, and  
spirituality; plus  
sightings in the  
Bay Area!

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Help us recycle. Please do your part by passing on your copy to another former volunteer  
or by recycling the paper. Thanks!

## Leaders Envision Their Followers' Cultural Identity: Who Inspires You?

Leaders, by definition, are individuals who people follow. But how is leadership developed?



Let's consider a pair of the Church's leaders, and see what their contrasting visions tell us about the way leadership "happens." Most young adult readers of this publication grew up knowing only one pope, namely John Paul II. For Catholics who strongly admired him, he defined a vision of Catholicism which emphasized a fidelity to the past, a return to the basics and to the rich tradition of the faith. Many of the parents of these young adults, however, grew up with Pope John XXIII, whose Second Vatican Council called for an *aggiornamento*, for opening the Church's windows and for fresh air to renew religious practice. He emphasized creating a new future whereas, to an extent, Pope John Paul II stressed a return to the solidarity of the past. Both, however, had a vision for the Church and each

helped their followers to understand Catholic culture from their perspectives.



Most cultures have leaders who portray different visions of the culture and sometimes the tension between them is extraordinary. Among U.S. Presidents, for example, our second president, John Adams called for a strong federal government with weak states' rights, whereas his successor, Thomas Jefferson, called for the opposite. The young nation's future hung in the balance and the tension continues to this day.

Consider the following questions and what your answers tell you about how leaders help to shape your cultural identity:

- Of which cultures do you see yourself being a member?
- Who do you see as the leader(s) who inspire you to identify with each of these cultures?
- What is it about the leader(s) that attracted you to become loyal to their vision?
- What is it about the vision itself that most appeals to you?
- Who, among today's leaders, best expresses your cultural identity?

### *Staying Connected: Assisting in the continued formation of former lay volunteers.*

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**Mission:** Our goal is to promote lay volunteer service that challenges laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church, and to support lay volunteers  
*before, during and after* their term of service. **Location:** The regional Pallotti Center is in Boston.

The National Office is in Washington, DC. **Inspiration:** The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who  
believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.