Cultural Genocide and Assimilation:

A Ted Talk

I-ED 373

Resource Review

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When thinking about finding a resource, I immediately thought about TED talks. I absolutely adore the website and knew they would have an insightful talk that would interest me. I am intensely curious about the whole notion of “cultural genocide” so I searched for a talk which would touch upon this. The talk I discovered is by Wade Davis called “Dreams from Endangered Cultures.” The way he speaks is like poetry, not a single word is wasted. I struggled to not write down every sentence as a quote which inspires me. I can watch this talk over and over again and still find new beautiful nuances which bring further meaning to the issue. A quote from Davis which truly speaks to me and highlights the fragile nature of understanding is: “the Earth itself can only exist because it’s breathed into being by the human consciousness.” In his talk, I can identify five relevant aspects that interest me. They include: different ways of knowing, language as culture, the genocide or ‘ethno-cide’, power and cultural domination, and finally, and most importantly, embracing a diverse world.

Wade Davis is an ethnographic researcher who went to research and live with those who had not “forgotten their ways.” He states that the world we live in is just one reality, our reality, but that it is important for us not to forget that for every single person on this planet, there is a different way of knowing. This is an aspect which interests me because I often have to remember that there are an infinite amount of ways to see each situation and to experience each moment. This will be important in being an educator because my students will all have their own ideas, perspectives, values, and culture which makes up their reality. Humans all sing, dance, and create art but our culture will determine how this is manifested in our lives. Each culture and unique way of knowing Davis calls the “ethno-sphere” and states that it is just as important as the biosphere. He states that this is human kind’s legacy on this planet, yet it is being eroded at a far faster paces than is the biosphere.

One major facet of culture is language. Language is not simply words, but is the “vehicle of the spirit.” It can shape how one sees the world and how we experience our lives. Davis beautifully puts that language is “an old growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, and an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities.” He then comments that in the 6,000 languages which were present at the time of our births, there are 3000 no longer being taught to children. The loneliness of being the last human to speak your language would be unbearably sad, and undeniably tragic. We often see the idea that “wouldn’t the world be a better place if we all spoke the same language?” Davis then asks us to think about experiencing the world without *our* language, the very thing that helps to shape our reality. This is an important point for me because how one experiences a situation or event is shaped by their language. This is an example of how vital it is to be accepting of all people and not to try to ‘assimilate’ them all to one way of behaving, way of knowing, and way of speaking or understanding language.

Davis then explains how we tend to have a Eurocentric perspective, even when studying cultures and religions. He states how we often overlook and de-legitimize the religions of Africa. We tend to see we what believe is the pinnacle or model example of a ‘religion’ and use that as our measuring guide and anything that deviates far from our Eurocentric ideals, is discredited. There are countless styles of cultures and realities and our way of understanding them is only one view. Furthermore, our view of ‘tradition’ cannot be reducing a group of people to a ‘snap shot’ taken at a particular time. Traditions are constantly changing and adapting to the world and those experiencing it. Davis discussed how Indigenous peoples are closer to the earth than we are and that they have an amazing knowledge about the Earth. We typically use a “trial and error” approach to figuring out medicines, but one group of people, who have a deep and unbelievable knowledge about certain plants say that “the plants talk to [them].” Even when we feel that we understand how important the cultures of indigenous peoples are we must be aware of our own ways of knowing and seeing the world. The problem is that even those of us sympathetic to the plight of indigenous people view them, as Davis puts, “quaint and colourful but somehow reduced to the margins of history, as the real world, meaning our world, moves on.” This whole idea of the “real world” is elaborated on when Davis discusses that 21st century is not going to be known for technological advances but rather of a time where we watched ethno-diversity and biodiversity become *real* only in the words in a textbook. That being said, technology, change, and passivity do not define this plight. Davis changes our focus on technology being the ‘bad guy’ by stating that “it is not change or technology which threatens the integrity of the ethno-sphere, it is power, the crude face of domination. These are not cultures which are destined to fade away, the dynamic living peoples are being driven out of existence by identifiable forces which are beyond their capacity to adapt to.” The ‘genocide’ of culture or ethno-cide is something which will be an extremely important topic to discuss with high school students. While teaching them about different cultures of the world it is important not to emphasize and “us” and “them” however we do need to bring to attention the idea that there is an ‘ethno-spheric genocide’ occurring all over the world and how we fit into the picture.

Deforestation, disease, political domination are all realities for many people across the world. Davis challenges us by saying that the term ‘genocide’ is “universally condemned but ethnocide, is not only *not* condemned, but it is universally, in many quarters, celebrated as part of a developmental strategy.” It is this power and cultural domination which is putting our world at risk of becoming monochromatic and creating a generic worldview; a narrowing of the world imagination. Our idea of reality is such a small fraction of the entire human existence and us pushing forward with this one ‘ideal’ way of existing is denying the world a chance to embrace the beautiful diversity of the people who occupy it. This concept is important because so often we pass off the assimilation of the world as something which is a product of the ‘technological-era.’ We should instead see the power-dynamic, or even, power-imbalance, as a major cause of the plague of diversity.

Davis says that it is not all bad news. There have been incidences which create momentary feelings of optimism. For example, he says that the “Canadian government [was] not always kind to the Inuit people…[and] forced them into settlements” but that there are actions being taken to try to seek restitution with the people by letting them have land and control over the resources. It is hard for me to swallow the idea that the government is ‘proud’ in any way for their actions towards making it better. The whole way indigenous people have been treated is a complete embarrassment and these acts to try to make things better are only a small step, albeit a positive one, in their goal of restitution.

Davis further challenges us to ponder more ways of thinking. He says that the ‘remote’ places where many indigenous people exist are not remote at all, but “house branches of human imagination and culture.” He further states that “politicians will never accomplish anything… polemics cannot change anything but story telling can change the world.” It is the use of these stories of culture and education to hopefully embrace the idea that the world deserves to exist in a diverse way and that “all of the wisdom of all peoples can contribute to our collective well-being.” This final element which speaks to me is how we should feel privileged to be able to exist in a diverse world. We should celebrate our differences and learn from one another. This lesson is something that should transcend the textbook and be the practiced in every arena of education and life. We should hold ourselves to a higher standard and leave behind the imperialistic, superior, Eurocentric perspective of ‘assimilation is good’. “Why wouldn’t they want to live like us?” Because maybe, just maybe, the world would be a better place if we just ‘live and let live.’

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Where I believe that many of the lessons that could be learned from this post would be beneficial in elementary or middle schools, namely the embracing of diversity, however I feel that the philosophical nature of ‘ways of knowing’ is something that would be better explored more in depth at a later age. I would teach this topic in grade 9/10 social studies and possibly in other courses. This resource connects to the idea of ‘cultural genocide’ or ‘assimilation’ throughout his talk. He uses many different cultures as examples including the Inuit people in Canada. This talk will be useful for me as an educator in many ways. First, it will serve me as a reminder that to be sensitive to the different perspectives in my classroom and beyond. It will be a video which I could show my class to introduce them to the many topics Davis discusses. It could serve as a ‘jumping off’ place to begin discussions about different cultures, how we study them, and how our particular way of knowing can alter how we experience the world. Because this resource is not specific to Canadian Indigenous people, it may be an insightful way to begin the course because it discusses many different cultures all over the world. It could bring light to the issues of power and politics in relation to Indigenous studies. It could help them question their preconceived ideas about the world and their place in it. This topic would allow for group discussions because hearing the different perspectives in the room could serve as an example of the how every person has their own reality and ideas. Finally, it could be great to start a social discussion to relate to their lives about celebrating differences and embracing diversity. Adolescence is a period of their lives where they are impressionable but also curious. Being able to relate the material to their lives would help them feel more connected to it. Thus I would follow up this video by delving into a more focused look into a specific culture somewhere in the world and what it would be like grow up in that reality so they could relate more personally to the material. Overall, I believe that embracing differences should not be a lesson limited to a unit in social studies and that the idea of appreciating and celebrating differences should be apparent and practiced constantly throughout our lives.