

The Gifts of Strangers: Understanding the Benefits of Diversity

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One argument for diversity is that it ensures participation and creates the power of being heard. It is expressed by the popular maxim, “Nothing about us without us.” Implicit in this idea is that those outside must come inside in order to ensure that their self-interest is served.

There is another way of understanding the value of diversity. It does not focus on the importance of the outsiders gaining equal participation. Instead it focuses upon the benefit the outsider brings to the group. It recognizes that, in welcoming the stranger, the group becomes more powerful by adding the outsider’s capacity.

At least five kinds of group benefits can occur from “welcoming the stranger”:

1. The stranger is an outsider and knows different cultures. These are cultures where people do things in a different way. The stranger knows about these ways – different games, songs, poems, food, languages, inventions and faith -- each a potential opening and opportunity for the group.
2. The stranger knows how their people or the other people they know make decisions. These different ways of deciding can provide opportunities for overcoming our own barriers to effective discussions and actions.
3. Coming from a different association, ethnicity, nation, or local culture, the stranger knows about different ways of achieving the common good. If we come from a culture based on hyper-individualism, their knowledge can create a more balanced community practice.
4. The stranger’s knowledge and practices will often surprise us. This surprise reflects our reaction to a different way that is based on a different vision for the future. These visions of the outsider offer new ways for us to imagine our own future.
5. As the stranger shares their knowledge and practices, trust is built with the outsider. It is that trust that is the foundation of democracy.

These five community benefits are unavailable without diversity. Achieving that diversity depends upon groups practicing hospitality. As a practice, active hospitality requires an invitation to the outsider and the stranger – an offering to become associated with us in many, many ways.

One of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute's wisest Stewards was Judith Snow. She had only the power to move the muscles in her thumb and face. She transported herself within a wheelchair. To most people she said she was a strange outsider. However, to anyone who had met her, she was the wisest person they had encountered.

Judith said most community groups look inward, their vision obscured by the wall of like-mindedness. That is why, above all, they should have a "welcome at the edge." Otherwise, they will never receive the gifts that only strangers can bring to their group.