

The Different Colors of Angels

By Krystyna Nowak-Fabrykowski

While preparing lectures on diversity, I looked for multicultural books to read and analyze with our students. I asked an African-American colleague for suggestions. She told me about a problem of her own. Her own children asked her once, "Can angels be black?" In that moment I thought about all the representations of white, blue-eyed, blond angels, and I asked myself the same question: "Can angels be black?"

In the library I spend a lot of time looking for books with illustrations, pictures, or stories about black angels. I was happy to find at least one in a book by Diane Goode entitled *American Folk Tales and Song*. In that book, the illustrations for "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" depicted black angels.

As a European who has not lived in the United States very long, I have to admit that I had never previously thought about the question, "Can angels be black, or yellow, or red?" Then I thought: How do Black children feel about seeing mostly White Angels?

During my lectures, I asked my class to read "An Angel Just Like Me," and many more questions arose. For example: "Why do angels all look like girls?" "Can boys be angels?" "Why are they always pink?" "Aren't there any black angels?" Tyler, the character from the book, went on a search to find an angel that looked like him. He discovered that none of the angels on Christmas cards or wrapping paper looked like him either. Tyler went to Santa Clause for help and Santa told him that he should be able to find angels like him. After further failures, Tyler's solution was to put a star on the Christmas tree, because "they are the same for everyone." In the end, a package came from Santa, and Tyler received an angel that looked like him. After showing his angel to all his friends, they all wanted to get one looking exactly like them.

It happens that most of the students attending the college where I teach come from the nearby area. The enrollment data provided by the campus' cultural audit (1999) for 1997-98 indicates that, out of a total headcount enrollment of 1,920, just 2

percent are international students, 1.5 percent are African American students, and 1.5 percent identify themselves as American Indian or Alaskan native, Asian or Pacific Islander, or Hispanic. The total minority student population of 127 students represented 6.6 percent of the total enrollment in 1997-98.

Although the college population is mostly caucasian, with very little diversity in the student population, we have some diversity in the faculty (9 out of 200). Thus, I asked my students to interview some of our faculty members. The questions that they asked were:

- ◆ What language(es) do you speak at home?
- ◆ What holidays do you celebrate?
- ◆ What holidays did you celebrate in your home country?
- ◆ Who are(were) the important people from your home culture?
- ◆ What are the famous places in your country?
- ◆ What are the most important values/beliefs that your children learn at home?
- ◆ What food is typical of your home land?

My students had an opportunity to interview two Chinese professors, one Polish, two Japanese, one German, and one East Indian. They presented in the classroom what they learned about the cultures, foods, holidays, important people in these cultures, and the values and beliefs of these diverse faculty members.

I also asked my students to evaluate the classroom environment where they were doing their field experience (questionnaire adopted from Frances E. Kendal). My students investigated with questions such as the following:

- ◆ Did what was hanging on the walls and bulletin boards represent a multicultural community?

◆ Did the classroom have a wide variety of age-appropriate and culturally diverse books and language-arts materials?

◆ Were there stories about a variety of people from of different cultural groups?

◆ Did the curriculum as a whole help the children increase their understanding and acceptance of attitudes, values, and lifestyles that are unfamiliar to them?

◆ Were materials and games racially or sex-role stereotypic?

◆ Were the accessories in the block area representative of various cultural groups and family configurations?

◆ Was there a wide variety of clothes, including garments from various cultural groups, in the dramatic-play area?

◆ Were the pictures on the wall and the props in the dramatic-play area representative of a diversity of cultures?

◆ Did music presented in the curriculum reinforce the children's affirmation of cultural diversity?

◆ Were the cooking experiences designed to give young children a general notion of the connections between cultural heritage and the process of preparing, cooking, and eating food?

The conclusions were disappointing. For the majority of my students, their school environment was not very multicultural even if they had Spanish, African American, or Japanese children in the school. The classroom environments do not reflect diversity. Mostly what my students see are just posters depicting people from different racial groups. In the first and second grade, children are taught French in some schools. All of my students thought that what the schools are doing is insuffi-

cient. Their suggestion is that even if the class does not have diversity among the students, the classroom should still represent the diversity of the world. We planned to create in the schools where our students have their field experience, and where the school staff and the school administration would permit it, "Around the World Centers" with signs in different languages, books about other countries, dolls representing different ethnicities, stamps from different parts of the world, and so on.

Another activity I tried to implement was making an "All about Me Box" in which the students collected in a small box items that represented them and their culture. We all shared our boxes and talked about the role of the parents (they can be involved helping children to prepare such boxes). The students brought such items as a baseball ball and glove, a quilt, a doll dressed in her heritage costume, a recipe for their favorite food, and so forth.

America is a nation of immigrants. Immigrants are people who come to a new land to make their home. All Americans are related to immigrants or are immigrants themselves. (Maestro, p.1)

This concept can be reinforced when asking students to research and create their family tree going back to their great grandparents.

It can also be taught by the exercise which I would call the "Seven Important Things in My Life." This is an exercise I learned during a conference organized in 1999 in Washington, D.C., by the National Multicultural Institute. In this exercise every person takes seven little cards made of white paper. On the cards they write:

1. mother's name
2. father's name
3. brother's and sister's names
4. education
5. language
6. profession
7. their most important possession

Then they select a partner. They hold the cards like playing cards, and take a card from their partner. The partner tells how his/her life would be different without this person or thing. Then he/she takes one of partner's cards, and repeats the process of reflection. They continue until there is just one card left. This exercise always has a powerful effect on people and helps them to understand the situation of the immigrant.

Teaching To Understand

All newcomers to America have a hard time at first. This is true

whether they came in the 1600s or have just arrived. It isn't easy to start a new life in unfamiliar country (...) Sadly, new arrivals are often poorly treated by other Americans just because they look or act differently. (Maestro, p.12)

Teaching students to focus on similarities rather than differences is a way for understanding that there are archetypes that are symbols common to all cultures. One of them, according to Jung, is the archetype of a mother.

But it is also important to learn about the key symbols of the culture that our students represent. As Ortner (1979) emphasized, each culture has certain key elements of special significance. Learning to celebrate the differences is also a good idea, but first we have to understand the meanings of the symbols prevalent in the cultures we study.

Some of the examples I have studied with my students are the following:

In Chinese culture, the dragon is the most meaningful symbol. It has appeared on the Chinese flag and frequently decorates porcelain, furniture, and clothes. According to Harvey (1973), the dragon symbolizes social and political prestige and social advancement. It brings good luck. The Chinese image of the dragon is quite different from that of western cultures, where it is regarded as a frightening monster. In China, it is a mythical animal, and it is worshipped to make rain during drought. The dragon appears in the holiday of the "Dragon-boat Race" and the celebration of the festival in honor of the god of war.

In French culture, one of the most powerful uses of symbols emerged during the French Revolution. Agulhon (1979) argues that France's most powerful symbol was a beautiful woman representing the French republic. This figure changed with regimes. When holding a sword and the constitution and wearing a crown of leaves, she represented the democratic republic and, when wearing the red Phrygian cap, the republican republic. The red Phrygian cap symbolized liberty, since in Rome it was placed upon the head of slaves when they were freed. Another French symbol was the name Marianne, given to the figure of the Republic. Marianne was a popular name and was chosen "to designate a regime that saw itself as popular." The name was used very often as a name of the Republic in Victor Hugo's and Felix Pyot's poems and was used in 1851 by the Republican-organized secret societies known as "Marianne-Republics." Marianne, also appears as "Liberty," inspired by a woman, Francois Liberate, born in Paris in 1789, and found guilty

of the crime of revoltion in July 1830. She was painted by Eugene Delacroix in 1830 as she lead the people to the barricades wearing a white dress and Phrygian cap.

In American culture, an example of a symbol cited by Ortner (1979) is Horatio Alger, representing the myth of successful social action. Alger was a poor boy who by working hard became rich and powerful. The Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building are symbols of democracy, freedom, and opportunity.

Another way of helping students to understand the different symbols related to different countries, peoples, and cultures is by making artifacts. In my social studies methods class, students tried to address some multicultural issues by learning about and creating foreign artifacts such as a kachina cradle doll, a Japanese folding screen, an Intuit finger mask, a Lacotasioux charm bag, and a magic power shield. These activities facilitate familiarization of at least one element of another culture, and thus I hope stimulate interest in that culture.

Through these class activities, students who have spent their lives in a very homogenous environment with very little awareness of the world outside their town, have learned to reflect on other cultures. The concept of global perspective and the notion that they are the part of the larger world, however, is often difficult for them to comprehend and accept, even after talking about their own heritage and traditions and revealing the diversity existing among themselves.

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