

# OTHERNESS

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Daniel L. Everett

When I was 26, I moved to the Amazon, from California, in order to study the language and culture of a people that were believed to be unrelated to any other people. I flew in a small missionary plane, a bumpy nausea-inducing ride, to meet the Pirahã people for the first time. My body was weak; my brain was taut with anxiety and anticipation. The Pirahãs are unrelated to any other. They speak a language that many linguists had unsuccessfully attempted to understand. My task would be to understand where little understanding currently existed. This encounter with these 'others,' so unlike myself, was to be the defining experience for the rest of my life.

One of the greatest challenges of our species is alterity, 'otherness.' All cultures for reasons easy enough to understand fear other cultures. War and conflict have defined humans for nearly two million years. When we encounter others unlike ourselves, we frequently become uncomfortable, suspicious. A new neighbor from another country. A friend of our child who has a different color. Someone whose gender is not a simple binary classification. This is an old problem. Jesus himself fell under suspicion for befriending a woman thought to be a prostitute, Mary Magdalene. She was unlike the religious people of Jesus's day. An 'other.'

Those unlike ourselves may eat different food, be unintelligible to us when speaking to those more like themselves, build different-looking homes, or, in the view of some who most fears otherness, simply live 'wrongly.' To some, others are not only suspect, but their differences are morally unacceptable. When I first entered the Amazon as a missionary, this was my belief. Everyone needed Jesus and if they didn't believe in him, they were deservedly going to eternal torment. In my encounter with the Pirahãs, though I was uneasy, I realize now, ironically, that I was actually the dangerous one, the one who came with insufficient respect, with an ego-centric and ethno-centric view of my own 'rightness.' How fortunate for me that this gentle people disabused me of so many of my silly beliefs. Though this years-long encounter with the Pirahãs was to improve my life globally, it certainly didn't seem that way at first.

During my first day among the Pirahãs I was taken by a young man to a fire by his hut. He pointed at a large rodent on the fire with its tongue still hanging out and a small pool of blood at the edge of the fire. The hair was burning off of the fresh kill. The young man uttered a then-unintelligible phrase: **Gí obáa?ái kohoáipi gíísai?** Later I learned that this meant, "Do you know

how to eat this?” And I also learned that if you don’t want any offered food, you can simply say, ‘No, I don’t know how to eat it.’ No one loses face. It is an easy, polite structure that allows you to avoid foods you don’t want. Many other cultures, Western cultures for example, don’t tend to be this polite. We often simply offer people things to eat and get offended if they refuse. Unlike among the Pirahã, there is a more portentous pressure in some Western cultures for a guest to eat whatever the host offers.

For almost all of us, we experience the world first through our mother. All that we touch, taste, hear, smell, see, and eventually come to know and understand begins with her and is mediated by her. As we develop of course we notice others close to our mother - our father, siblings, and others. But until our first experiences as individuals begin outside the home, our values, language, and ways of thinking all result from interactions with our mother and the select small group she is part of. These early apperceptions shape our subsequent lives. They lead not only to an individual sense of identity but also to a conception of what a ‘normal identity’ is. This is all very comfortable. We learn early on that new behavior and new information entail effort. Why listen to dissonant jazz when the steady 4/4 beat of country or rock is familiar? Why eat haggis instead of pot roast? Comfort food is just food that requires no gaining of acquired tastes. Why learn another language? Why make friends of a different color, a different sexual orientation, or a different nationality? Why should a professor make friends with a cowboy? These efforts go against the biological preference for expending as little energy as possible and maintenance of the status quo. The work of learning about otherness is worthwhile, but this is not always obvious initially.

Linguists recognized long ago that the first rule of language is that ‘we talk like who we talk with’. And other behavioral scientists have realized that ‘we eat like who we eat with’, ‘we create like who we think with’, and ‘we think like who we think with’. Our earliest associations teach us not only how to think, create, talk, and eat, but to evaluate normal or correct thinking, talking, eating, and creating based on our narrow range of experiences. The crucial differences between others and our in-group are values, language, social roles, and knowledge structures. All else emerges from these, or so I have claimed in my own writings.<sup>1</sup> Each builds on the others as we learn them in the context of familiarity, a society of intimates (i.e. our family or our village). This leads to a conceptualization of our own identity. For example, I know in some way that I am Dan. Yet no one, not even ourselves, fully understands what it means to be ourselves. The construction of our identity through the familiar leads us to think of what is *not* us, *not* our family, *not* our norm. Inevitably, as our experience expands we meet others that do not fit neatly into our expectations. These are ‘the others.’

In 1990, Columbia University psychologist Peter Gordon accompanied me to several Pirahã villages in order to conduct a pilot study of language learning among Pirahã children. We set up cameras on a hut, in full view, with the permission of its occupants, and started

1. For Everett’s writings see among other titles: Everett, Daniel. *Don’t sleep, there are snakes: life and language in the Amazonian jungle* (2008). Pantheon Books, New York.

filming. We both were in the film, talking to the adults about their beliefs and children's behavior. After we were done filming, we noticed something that we had not seen before, because it was happening behind us. A toddler, perhaps a year and half old, was playing with a sharp kitchen knife with a 30cm blade. He was swinging it nonchalantly, almost stabbing himself in his face, legs, and midsection; occasionally swinging it close to his mother's face and back. We initially assumed that the mother didn't see her toddler's dangerous toy. But then, as she was talking to another woman, the camera recorded the baby dropping the knife and starting to cry. Barely glancing backwards at her child, the mother casually leaned over, picked the knife up off the ground and handed it back to the baby, who returned gleefully to his quasi-stabbing of himself. This was a confrontation of values for Peter and myself, underscoring the otherness divide between the Pirahãs and us. Wasn't the Pirahã mother concerned about her child's welfare? She was indeed. But to the Pirahãs a cut or non-life-threatening injury is the price that occasionally must be paid in order to learn the skills necessary to survive in the jungle. Would a Dutch mother give her child a sharp knife as a toy, believing that any piercing of the child's flesh would be compensated for by its contribution to the child's development? Could she even respect this other (m)otherness - the otherness at the root of our lives?

When I first encountered the Pirahãs, I learned the language by pointing and giving the name in English. I would pick up a stick and say, "stick." The Pirahãs, most of them anyway, would give me the translation in their language. Then I might let the stick drop to the ground and say, "the stick falls to the ground" or, "I throw the stick away" or, "two sticks drop to the ground," and so on. I would transcribe the responses and say them back at least three times to the speaker, making sure I had them right. I was able to follow their translations and also write down their comments. But the occasional speaker would ignore my request and instead say something that turned out to be even more interesting. **ʔaooí ʔaohoái sahaʔái ʔapaitíiso ʔaba ʔáígio hiahoaáti**, which means: "Do not talk with a crooked head. Talk with a straight head." The Pirahãs wanted me to talk like a person, not like a bizarre foreigner. Like an American tourist in France, the Pirahãs could not understand why I couldn't speak their language. Then one day a missionary plane had brought us some supplies in the jungle. Among those was lettuce. I was so excited to have greens. The Pirahãs eat no greens and think of them as worm food. I was cheerfully eating lettuce from a bowl when a Pirahã friend walked up and said: "That's why you don't speak Pirahã yet. We don't eat leaves."

In other words, the Pirahã man believed that language emerges from culture as well as the entirety of our behavior as members of a society. This is a belief I have come to as well. They felt we could not learn their language at native level unless we became also part of their culture; and native level is what matters to them, there are no prizes for merely speaking their language intelligibly. This was against everything I had been taught about language in university courses, and it underscored the gap between them and me. Languages and

cultures interact symbiotically, each affecting the other. Our sense of self and of society emerges from our enveloping culture and from the language and accents we hear most during our childhood development. The speed of our conversations and the structures of our interactions with others are formed in local communities of people like ourselves. The most comfortable conversations are with people who sound like you, put their phrases together as you do, and who reach similar conclusions.

There are many ways in which we confront otherness. Strangers are not always people. Nature is often a foreigner to most of us and we can learn by submitting ourselves to it. One reason that I annually read the American Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, my favorite book in all of American literature, is that Thoreau was so articulately different from me. That is irrelevant to Thoreau's account of his year alone. His year was a brilliant experiment. Thoreau did not remain at Walden. He returned to take up a fairly boring life as a handyman in the adjacent city of Concord, Massachusetts. Yet, the book he wrote is full brilliant observations based on the concepts of American Transcendentalism: the idea that people and nature are inherently good and that they are best when left alone by society and its institutions. Transcendentalism implies that as we come to know ourselves and remove the otherness of nature by experiencing it with all our senses. That our sense of oneness with others, as embodied in that very nature, grows. Thoreau's insights into his lessons from nature - as the stranger - teach us about what it means to live as a human, to be independent, and to occupy a part of the natural world. Through Thoreau we encounter the strangeness of a solitary life in nature. Oneness with ourselves and nature - and the others that are strange to us but are, like us, just part of nature - requires slow work of contemplation and experience that at once embraces the otherness of nature. It demands working towards removing this sense of otherness and embracing it as part of the oneness that we seek with the world around us.

Otherness, as I see it, is the spark of original thought and greater appreciation of nature, while the sense of oneness is the paradoxical goal of encounters with otherness. We need a sense of oneness of ourselves with nature to clearly see otherness, and we need otherness to build a more encompassing and panoramic sense of self and oneness with the world. Thoreau ignored society to know himself. Most of us ignore ourselves to be part of society. Thoreau eloquently expressed the loss that, being carried away by the demands of others and society, brings us to our sense of self. We think of conformity rather than our own unique identity and so blur who we are as individuals. Thoreau captured this well when he exclaimed that, "the one is more important than the million." That is, it is only as we each individually appreciate our oneness with the world, nature, and the other as part of this oneness that we can achieve the best individual life, and thus society.

Thoreau's hut Walden stands still as light in the heart of the forest, a small cabin where one can sit and think and read and wonder about

the reasons for living. Jungle nights were this light in my life, as I sat around campfires, talking in a language that was so hard for me to learn. Albert Camus said that the biggest mystery of philosophy is why not everyone commits suicide when honestly contemplating the futility of life. As a possible answer to his own question, Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, held up poor Sisyphus<sup>2</sup> as an example of a good life. Sisyphus, after all, had an objective, one that entailed a measurable daily activity that always ended in the accomplishment of getting that rock up the hill. But Thoreau perspective rejects Camus's analysis. He saw no reason to count familiarity or predictability of social life, foods, or accomplishments as among the goals of life. They teach us little and change our behavior insignificantly. His example was that we learn most when we insert ourselves as aliens in new conceptual, cultural, and social environments (in his case, the absence of society). I am convinced that our lives become richer when they are less predictable. This is not to say that our lives are always predictable in the absence of the other. Otherness renders our expectations less fixed and requires more thinking, planning, and learning.

The Pirahãs would disagree. They believe that it is homogeneity that gives us comfort and keeps us strong physically and psychologically. Otherness vs. predictability, which is more desirable? In essence, we need both even if we'd construct a greater sense of oneness that embraces the unexpected. The two greatest forces of preserving and constructing cultures are imitation and innovation. When our environments, culturally and physically, are constant, innovation is rarely useful. Like biological mutations, cognitive and cultural innovations are usually unsuccessful. The effort to invent will usually isolate us as strange and less successful than those who merely imitate. Failed innovation in a society that most values imitation emphasizes our own 'otherness' and provides us with little advantage. As environments change – such as the ecology of the Pleistocene that so shaped our Homo ancestors, climate change today, the shifting political boundaries, or the intrusion of others into our environment – innovation becomes a more important force, providing new solutions to new problems that imitation alone is unable to provide. The Pirahãs live in an environment that has changed little over the centuries. They value conformity and imitation over innovation. Consequently their language has changed little over time. Records of their culture and language from the 18th century show a people identical to the people we encounter today, three centuries later.

In environments that, especially culturally, change at light speed we need to learn to think, speak, act differently, in order to innovate in multiple areas simultaneously as the changes we encounter transform our familiar environment into 'an other'. Every day brings problems that we never faced before. Diversity of experiences and encounters with others inspire new ways of thinking and new forms of living. If we all look the same, talk the same, value the same things, paint the same pictures, dance the same dances, and hear the same music then we are simply imitators falling behind

2. The doomed soul in Greek mythology who had the repetitive job of daily pushing a huge stone up a hill only to see it roll down at the end of his efforts and leave him with the same task to perform the next day.

the challenges of our world. This applies to all of us whether we are hunter-gatherers in the Amazon or advertising agents in New York City. It blinds us to new forms of beauty. What we see around us, with the rise of anti-immigration political movements in Europe and the USA is, at least partially, a fear of otherness. Our preference is for conformity and imitation; our fear then itself arises from that preference in contrast to otherness and the greater steps towards an ever more encompassing oneness of the type that motivated Thoreau. However, the ultimate engine of innovation is otherness - of people, food, environments, art, and culture - it strengthens us and prospers us.

Our languages and cognitive abilities expand as we learn new vocabularies and new values by talking to people and experiencing their relationships to nature that are unlike our own. Human language emerged within the Homo line because it was the only creature to embrace otherness as to actively explore for the sake of exploration; to seek encounters with otherness. As Homo erectus sailed to islands beyond the horizon it invented symbols and language to cope with the greater need for communal efforts to expand experiences. Language change is an indication of cultural change (and cultural change will change language). Together, they amplify our species ability to innovate and survive. All that we are is the result of our human embrace of the other, the love of alterity that makes us distinct from all other creatures. Alterity is one of our greatest fears. And yet it should be our greatest treasure.













