

READING

Understanding Strangers

Journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski explains that “an encounter with the Other, with other people, has always been a universal and fundamental experience for our species.” He writes:

Archaeologists tell us that the very earliest human groups were small family-tribes numbering 30 to 50 individuals. Had such a community been larger, it would have had trouble moving around quickly and efficiently. Had it been smaller, it would have found it harder to defend itself effectively and to fight for survival.

So here is our little family-tribe going along searching for nourishment when it suddenly comes across another family-tribe. What a significant movement in the history of the world, what a momentous discovery! The discovery that there are other people in the world! Until then, the members of these primal groups could live in the conviction, as they moved around in the company of 30 to 50 of their kinfolk, that they knew all the people in the world. Then it turned out that they didn’t—that other similar beings, other people, also inhabited the world! But how to behave in the face of such a revelation? What to do? What decisions to make?

Should they throw themselves in fury on those other people? Or walk past dismissively and keep going? Or rather try to get to know and understand them?

That same choice our ancestors faced thousands of years ago faces us today as well, with undiminished intensity—a choice as fundamental and categorical as it was back then. How should we act toward Others? What kind of attitude should we have toward them? It might end up in a duel, a conflict, or a war. Every archive contains evidence of such events, which are also marked by countless battlefields and ruins scattered around the world.

But it might also be the case that, instead of attacking and fighting, this family-tribe that we are watching decides to fence itself off from others, to isolate and separate itself. This attitude leads, over time, to objects like the Great Wall of China, the towers and gates of Babylon, the Roman limes [border fortifications] and the stone walls of the Inca.

Fortunately, there is evidence of a different human experience scattered abundantly across our planet. These are the proofs of cooperation—the remains of marketplaces, of

ports, of places where there were agoras and sanctuaries, of where the seats of old universities and academies are still visible, and of where there remain vestiges of such trade routes as the Silk Road, the Amber Route and the Trans-Saharan caravan route.

All of these were places where people met to exchange thoughts, ideas and merchandise, and where they traded and did business, concluded covenants and alliances, and discovered shared goals and values. "The Other" stopped being a synonym of foreignness and hostility, danger and mortal evil. People discovered within themselves a fragment of the Other, and they believed in this and lived confidently. People thus had three choices when they encountered the Other: They could choose war, they could build a wall around themselves, or they could enter into dialogue.¹

¹ Ryszard Kapuscinski, "Encountering the Other: The Challenge for the 21st Century," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2005), accessed November 8, 2007. Reproduced by permission from John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Connection Questions

1. According to Ryszard Kapuscinski, what are the three possible ways to respond to unfamiliar people? What other responses can you imagine?
2. How have you responded to individuals or groups that are different from you? Why? What factors influence the choices people make about how to respond to difference?
3. Why do we humans so often divide ourselves into “we” and “they,” or “in” groups and “out” groups? Is that division always negative? When does it become a problem?
4. What does Kapuscinski mean when he speaks of “the Other”? When do others become “the Other”? What do you think he means when he writes, “People discovered within themselves a fragment of the Other”? How might discovering the Other within yourself affect your universe of obligation?
5. What are some visible markers in your community of isolation and separation? Where are these markers in your school? Where in your community or school is there evidence of cooperation between different groups of people?