The Journey . . .
A Conscious Decision

Our world is changing, the demographics of our country are changing and we, as healthcare providers (HCPs), are asked to deliver care that “fits with and is useful to the client and family,” according to Dr. Madeleine Leininger (1991 p. 39), Culture Care Theorist. The impetus of this book, for me, was the voices of clients encountered on my journey, especially those whose ethnicity and culture were different from mine. They were saying, “You need to tell our stories.” The result – Reflections from Common Ground.

This book is an opportunity for you to engage in self-reflective exercises, to discover your culture and to realize how your culture influences every encounter. With each activity you’ll discover something unique about yourself. Your ways of living in the world, your style of communication, your approach to health and illness, and therefore your response to a given situation are dictated by your culture. Each insight enables you to understand your differences with other people and to find common ground.

Reflections from Common Ground addresses the challenges and celebrates the accomplishments of providing culturally sensitive and competent healthcare. It is not a “cookbook” approach on how to deliver healthcare to diverse populations. A checklist is not included. Why? Because, in reality, there is more diversity within a cultural group than between groups. A recently arrived Mexican immigrant is going to be different from a fourth generation Mexican American. The African American whose history is rooted in slavery is different from the newly arrived immigrant from Nigeria or Ghana. It is helpful for HCPs to learn about the client’s history – their story – before making assumptions based on ethnicity. How you manage the complexity of a situation to address the needs of clients is contingent on knowledge of the cultural values, beliefs, and health practices of various ethnic groups.
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The vignettes, found in chapters ten through twenty, are a compilation of experiences written in a fictional format. The purpose of the stories is to bring to life events that challenge the HCP to provide care that addresses culture and its influence on decisions about healthcare, from the pregnant Mexican American woman (Chapter Ten) to the elderly Hmong gentleman (Chapter 17) who presents in the emergency room with gastrointestinal bleeding, to the youth-oriented Anglo American woman (Chapter 20) with hypertension. Each will pique your interest and desire to know more. The vignettes are not meant to stereotype, but rather to highlight each aspect of particular cultures. McGoldrick (1996), author of Ethnicity & Family Therapy, says it well in her introduction. “Although stereotyping or generalizing about groups has often reinforced prejudices, one cannot discuss ethnic cultures without such generalizing. The only alternative is to ignore this level of analyses of group patterns which in our view only mystifies and disqualifies our experience thus perpetuating covert negative stereotyping only if allowed to air assumptions we can learn about each others’ ethnicity” (p 22).

The vignettes offer insight into another world. They highlight cultural values, beliefs, and healthcare practices. You discover in this process the similarities and differences between your culture and that of the individual in the story. As a HCP, you have the opportunity to incorporate both perspectives, yours and your client’s, into a plan of care. Positive health outcomes are more likely when differences are recognized and collaboration with the client and family is utilized.

Setting the Stage

“Setting the stage” is a phrase used with many cultural groups and with actors! It refers to setting aside time at the beginning of an event, an appointment or a presentation to get things in order. It may involve socialization – chatting with colleagues from the previous shift or with a client – before focusing on the reason for the appointment. The first nine chapters of this book set the stage. Chapters Two and Three focus on demographics and history – the stories behind the individual – and their influence on health decisions. Reflective exercises guide you to discover your own story. How is it the same or different from others? Answers lead to the acknowledgment that individual biases can stem from historical events and can lead to prejudice and discrimination (Chapter 4), thus furthering disparities in care. It is interesting to see the correlation of history with current health issues found in various ethnic groups today.
Chapters Five and Six highlight other obstacles that continue to affect health outcomes. We must be aware of each. For example, in the United States, thirty seven million persons live in poverty, fifty percent of African American and Latino youth drop out of high school before graduation, and nearly 14 million Americans are not proficient in English. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2006) found that eight million persons cannot read the label “keep out of reach of children.” It’s important to note that barriers such as income, education, language, and literacy play a role in the delivery of care. You are the link between the client and care. You can bridge the gap and provide information the client needs to restore health and well-being.

Culturally sensitive and competent care, discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight, is the foundation needed to care for diverse populations. It begins with HCPs’ desire to know more about themselves and to respect and value their culture. It is followed by a motivation to learn about others. How are my cultural ways of living and working similar to or different from my clients”? How do I define health and illness? What treatment methods do I consider most effective? Chapter Nine, Ancient Wisdom . . . Modern Medicine, explores various healing methods and brings an awareness that there is a varied approach to healing. The best way to acknowledge these beliefs is to incorporate the beneficial practices into the client’s plan of care.

Each of these “setting the stage” chapters affords you the opportunity to discover the richness of your culture and your interactions with others. This self-reflective process enables you to understand culture and to communicate with your clients and colleagues in an effective and respectful manner.

**A Variety of Approaches . . . You Choose**

Variety is a hallmark of Reflections from Common Ground. This book provides multiple approaches that healthcare organizations (Chapter 22), health occupation faculty (Chapter 23), and individuals can use to gain cultural awareness and competence.

An organization or hospital may want to use the information in this book to ensure a culturally competent staff that also meets criteria for Joint Accreditation Commission of Health Care Organizations (JACHO), Magnet Status Recognition, or the Office of Minority Health’s Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Standards. It is important to demonstrate that staff members have attended required diversity programs and show that they are knowledgeable about the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of various ethnic populations.
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Health occupation faculty can use the book to achieve multiple goals: meet accreditation requirements, gain cultural awareness and competence for faculty, or provide an adjunct textbook for students.

Prior to beginning the process of becoming more culturally aware, it is recommended to hold staff meetings to discuss the proposal. To be an effective program, staff/faculty must have an opportunity to review the subject matter, ask questions, raise objections, and make recommendations. It is important that they, as a group, demonstrate a willingness to participate, and agree to set time aside for this process. The program should be evaluated at intervals and revised as needed.

As an individual, you may recognize an inner readiness and desire to delve into the cultural world of the “other.” It is in this process that you discover yourself, your beliefs, your values, and your practices. Those “aha moments” open you to unexpected revelations that change your perspective. You begin to see the world through the “eyes of the other.” This new outlook sends a message to your clients, patients, and colleagues that you acknowledge there may be differences, but that you are open to finding common ground. This new understanding enables you to develop trusting and respectful relationships.

Reflections from Common Ground provides a venue for you, the HCP, to recognize the significance and value of culture and its influence on health practices and decisions, and to supply the knowledge and skills needed to provide culturally sensitive, competent, and respectful care. Enjoy the journey . . .