

AFFIRMING COMMUNITY WELLBEING ACROSS CULTURES AND CONTINENTS

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Project Overview

Cultures and communities – ranging from remote villages to neighborhoods and “urban villages” – are where people spend the great part of their lives. They are also repositories of cultural knowledge, built over time and through shared activities. While nation-states and corporate interests grab headlines, as well as power, models for living and potentialities for wellbeing are grounded in family and community. During the inaugural year of the Community Engagement Fellows program at Western Washington University, I explored the potentials for interconnections across communities centering on climate realities and responsibilities, and grounded in both distant and direct relationships that include students.

Affirming wellbeing has never been more important than today, amid new and growing acknowledgement of the unprecedented scope and consequence of humanity as a global species. Inherent in a framing that I call ecocultural wellbeing is vital reckoning that a healthy environment and the health of future generations are coterminous – that living well on earth requires ability to live well with each other. As the perspective and discipline about what it means to be human, anthropology is key to an emerging ontological shift, one that sees planet and posterity as a shared relational frame of interaction.

As systems of appropriation and control have generated disruptions that threaten ecological integrity everywhere, partnerships for identifying and sharing ecocultural commitments have become essential. Developments in communications and transportation have allowed me to explore how people have lived contact with the world around them. Primary focus is on principles and practices grounded in ecological balance and cultural continuity, primary means being interactions of students with community members in a variety of cross-cultural locations. These are settings where I have been honored to come to know during my anthropological career: those of Maya in, and now also dispersed far beyond, highland Guatemala; second, villages and neighborhoods where I have lived while accompanying students in ethnographic field courses; and thirdly, the sister cities of Bellingham, five of which I know through my role on the Bellingham Sister City Association.

Preliminary and Prospective Accomplishments

Intergenerational and intercultural transmission of knowledge promote community continuity along with wellbeing. They are among the most promising, justice-generating endeavors imaginable in the face of the great tide rising, literally and

figuratively, with respect to climate awareness and urgency. Through exploratory interviews (using Skype), and in preparations for an impending field course in Asia, I have begun inquiring about what these endeavors look like – or might look like – and how they may include reflections and resiliencies around climate change.

Drawing on my involvement with Maya in Guatemala and in a continental diaspora, I am using the internet and photo-elicitation to discuss changes in livelihoods and prospects associated with shortages of land and water, incipient effects of climate disruptions, and resulting mass migration. A collaborative ethnography, combining my own research with the lived experiences of people in a highland community I have come to know over four decades, is the goal of a sabbatical proposal that will focus largely on responses to land fresh water degradation that have become both alarming and motivational. Engagement with the Maya community is also underway through relationships I am building with the 400-person Maya community now resident in Whatcom County. Local Maya youth are beginning to be consider higher education, and I am involved in planning workshops around going to college, and to Western in particular.

Climate change is also the primary focus of my Summer 2016 “Himalaya Cultures and Conservation” field course, situated in a high-altitude region where resourceful adaptation and shrinking glaciers scarcity represent remarkable setting for community partnerships for understanding social adaptation and sustainability.

I am also developing a proposal for linking schools and community organizations across Bellingham’s sister city relationships with health of our planet as a common centering concern. These relationships represent valuable, and largely untapped, resources for promoting best practices for social and environmental health interculturally. I have begun connecting with educators and students in what is potentially an 8-city network, across 5 continents. There are great possibilities to jointly explore community strengths around prioritizing long-term environmental health and social equity, incorporating visions and voices of young people, and creating narratives and practices and narratives that promote active hope alongside civic activism.

Much has been assumed about the benefits of study abroad, service learning, and sustainability, yet collaborative listening and leadership across communities is often neglected. The mutual benefits to ecocultural wellbeing are huge, the possibilities for partnerships with less advantaged people great. I find much inspiration in imagining the evolution of experiences, knowledge, and encouragement that comes through engaging in envisioning common interests and goals, and working on what matters most – a share and healthy world.