

BRIDGING

CULTURAL

DIVIDES



Can Choruses Lead the Way?

Art Jackson's little book, *Lions and Tigers and Bears—Oh My!: A Parable on Diversity and Inclusion*, tells the story of an imaginary kingdom in which several categories of beings live. There are Lions who have authentic or perceived power and authority. There are Tigers who have some perceived power simply because they look similar to Lions. And there are Bears who have no power simply because they are so very different from Lions or Tigers.

In any particular situation, we might find ourselves cast in one of those roles, Jackson says. Whether you're a Lion, a Tiger, or a Bear affects your view of the world, your interactions with others, and your beliefs concerning diversity and inclusion.

In this "kingdom" we call choral singing, which one of the beings would you be? And how would this affect your attitudes about diversity and inclusion?

David Morales, music director of Cantare Con Vivo in Oakland, California, regards the choral world from the perspective of someone whose cultural heritage is Mexican and whose musical training is in the Western (European) classical tradition. He would say that the Lions in the choral world are these "Eurocentric" musical traditions.

Words like diversity and inclusion are "invented by the dominant culture," Morales says, "and if you have the power, you're the one deciding who or what to include." He believes the choral "kingdom" has to change to reflect the reality of a multicultural America.

Given the difficulty with concepts such as diversity and inclusion, one could bet that there are turtles in Jackson's kingdom beings who have decided to pull their heads into their shells rather than confront all the messiness of relating to differences.

But messiness, it would seem, is the way of things if we are to confront the fact that the world in which we live and work is not always open and embracing of "otherness."

Chorus America as an organization, and many of its member choruses, are stepping into the messiness. When Chorus America president and CEO Ann Meier Baker invited diversity consultant Patricia Moore Harbour to meet with the executive committee of the board last spring, she asked Harbour to provide a model of an organization that set out to increase diversity and did it well. "There isn't one," Harbour laughed ruefully. "The process is not like that—it's hard work." That, it would seem, is the nature of change from the inside out.

Tapping Choral Music's Intrinsic Power

Many types of organizations are tackling issues of diversity. Harbour, who has facilitated a number of them in a process that she describes as the Transformative Learning Experience, believes arts organizations, especially choruses, may start out ahead of the game. She details the six strategic elements for social change in an article from the *Journal for Cultural Diversity at Work* (outlined in the Sidebar on the next page; the complete article is available at www.diversitycentral.com). ►

SIX ELEMENTS OF TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE



by Patricia Moore Harbour

Differences—whether about culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, personal history, religion, ideology, income, or ability—carry with them a story. And those stories, often unconscious, usually unspoken, influence how we interpret every encounter, how we conduct our relationships, indeed, how we view the world.

In order to tell our stories, and to hear others' stories, we need to feel safe. Creating such a safe environment for mutual discovery is at the core of a social change leadership process I created 15 years ago under the auspices of the

Fetzer Institute called Healing The Heart of Diversity®. Later the Ford Foundation and other funders provided support for this work.

In implementing this process with hundreds of people across the United States, we have found that real change is possible when we enter into what Dan Goleman calls the *transformative learning experience*. Such an experience begins with a deep inner probing of the relationship between one's inner beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and thinking and one's external actions including behavior, decisions, language, and treatment of others.

Six elements characterize such an experience and help to create and sustain lasting change.

- 1 All participants are both teachers and learners.** We come to each other on level ground, to discover new things and to impart knowledge to others.
- 2 All participants are engaging in deepening their knowledge of themselves and their relationship to each other and their purpose.** This means understanding how their life experiences have shaped who they are and how they think and how they regard others. It means gaining access to the ideas, messages, and attitudes they may have toward an issue or a cultural group.
- 3 All are engaged in authentic communication.** This means speaking one's own truth and listening to the extent possible through the "lens" of the other person. Jack Kornfield calls this "listening and speaking from the heart."
- 4 All are engaged in critical reflection.** This means gaining access to one's deeper or higher self in relation to the theme being explored. It is not so much about listening to others as it is listening to one's self, especially the hidden parts that may feel unimportant or even shameful. Methods for reaching these parts might be visualization, meditation or other contemplative practices, creative art, or journaling.
- 5 Participants engage in dialogue and inquiry.** This is sometimes called "living into the question." Everyone, without blame, shame, or guilt pursues the question. Political correctness is put aside for authentic dialogue that addresses the unspoken and the uncomfortable.
- 6 Participants make choices that lead to commitment and action.** This means becoming aware of whatever attitudes or behaviors may be contributing to an "ism" and deciding to do something different, to choose and act differently. This is a personal decision, not a "should."

Patricia Moore Harbour will be leading an In-Depth Seminar, "**Music Builds Bridges for Diverse Communities and Audiences,**" on Wednesday, June 6, 2007, as part of Chorus America's 30th Annual Conference in Los Angeles. More information on the Conference and Seminar is available at www.chorusamerica.org.

Bridging Cultural Divides *continued*

For one thing, choruses are already what she calls a "learning community." Individuals come together, not to submerge their differences, but to meld those differences into a product where the sum is greater than the parts. There is a recognition that choral music, by its very nature, can be a powerful force for good.

Choral music also taps the power of language. Through the texts they sing, choruses are able to tell in a deep and emotional way the stories of a people—that is, our stories. "The culture, history, and traditions of any group of people lives in its music," says Harbour. "Performing the music of an ethnic group other than your own takes you inside another's world."

"REACHING ACROSS THE DIVIDES NEEDS TO BE SEEN AS A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION."

There is also a growing awareness that the very life cycle of choral organizations may depend on how they respond to a mix of cultures and races and ways of life in North America.

So a number of choruses have set out to do something to cross the divides. While they realize there is no right way to bridge the divides, they have made a commitment to trying, learning as they go.

"Your Story is My Story, Too"

When thinking about the storytelling power of choral music as it relates to diversity and inclusion, a number of choruses are asking, whose stories are we telling? Whose stories do we want to tell?

The Des Moines Choral Society had a goal, as many choruses do, to build its audience. The group's leaders decided that one way to do that, and an intrinsically homegrown way, was to tell the stories of people from various cultural backgrounds who call Iowa home.

They launched the Iowa Heritage Concert Series in 2003, telling the story ►

in script and song of Iowa's unique Civil War history in which African Americans and white soldiers fought side by side. In 2004, the Choral Society joined with the all-black Gospel choir from the Corinthian Baptist Church in Des Moines to perform a program called "Liberty and Justice for All," commemorating milestones in Iowa civil rights history.

"Iowa courts had a decision about school desegregation 50 years before *Brown vs. Board of Education*," says J. Ann Selzer, vice-president of the Choral Society. "You can do a concert of spirituals and protest songs, but when you make it about milestones in your state's history, it makes it more personal."

The Heritage Series events have been powerful, and overall audiences are growing because "the stories have a resonance that crosses lines of culture and race," Selzer says. But she notes some missteps along the way. The "Liberty and Justice for All" concert, for example, did not draw a bigger audience from Des Moines' African American community as hoped.

"We said, okay let's assess this," Selzer recalled. "We held the concert on the 'whiter' side of Des Moines in a very progressive church that had lobbied for the performance because they wanted to be part of the series. But if we want a more diverse audience maybe we should be on the turf of the audience we wish to attract."

This examination prompted a shift as the Chorale Society planned a concert of music of Jewish composers in collaboration a local synagogue. The group will perform the concert at the synagogue and share ticket sales in order to encourage diverse audience building. "We learned that we needed to create a stronger part-

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nership," says Selzer. "Reaching out is not sufficient. We have to connect."

For the Choral Society, reaching across the divides is seen as a journey, not a destination. "Having a diversified choir and a diversified audience doesn't happen in a year," says Selzer. "You may have some successes, but to really change the face of things takes longer. The key is knowing your audience and knowing the themes to tap into and then planting seeds, nurturing those seeds, and keeping at it," says Selzer. "Six months is not enough. Not even two years. It's more like a 10-year plan."

Taking Choral Music to Places We Haven't Been

The Minnesota Chorale is solidly ensconced in the Eurocentric choral tradition—it is the principal chorus of the Minnesota Orchestra—but the Chorale's leadership expressed a desire to reach into parts of their community that they knew little about. So 14 years ago, they tried something far removed from their standard fare—they created an annual program called Bridges, which focuses on a local theme, usually a pressing social need or an underserved population in the Twin Cities community. The Chorale finds key collaborators, whether a community, an organization, an artist, or some combination of these. It then looks for appropriate occasions and venues, locates or commissions suitable repertoire, and tailors a range of outreach, education, and performance activities around the chosen theme.

The 2007 Bridges program, "Sing Me a Home," a collaboration with Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity, explores the idea of home and aims to deepen public awareness of issues relating to affordable housing and poverty. Kathy Saltzman Romey, the Chorale's artistic director, interviewed six Habitat for Humanity families about their lives. Tapes of the interviews were transcribed, and the texts were given to high school students who teachers had identified as having literary or poetic gifts. These student lyricists then created song texts that local composers have now turned into short songs. The students' high school choirs will sing the new songs as part of the series of concerts in May.

"The commissioned composers agreed to write their songs as work for hire," says Larry Fuchsberg, the Chorale's director of grants and communications, "so that anyone who wants can perform them gratis. Many of our singers are members of other choirs or conduct other choirs, so they can take these songs with them and introduce them elsewhere. We are hoping to create a durable repertoire of new songs that can be sung in a variety of settings where issues of home, safety, community, and affordable housing are on table."

While a concert may be the primary end product of the Bridges program, the process and the conversations it engenders may be a more important aspect. Each year's initiative has a long gestation period—in part because the National Endowment for the Arts, which has been the program's most generous funder, requires submission of grant proposals more than a year in advance. "That allows things to gel slowly," says Fuchsberg. "Without that, it would be harder to get pieces to fall into place."

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"When we recruit partners, they tend to be agreeable but not highly motivated at first," says Fuchsberg. "In Minnesota, we all have a hard time saying no. So groups will say, sure, we'll do that, without quite being able to envision the program that will actually result."

Initially, there are meetings where "two languages talk past one another," says Fuchsberg. "For the singers, it starts out being another gig. For the community partners, singing is usually the last thing they think about."

At some point, those two languages begin to come together. "We are taking them into a choral universe, just as they are leading us into a social framework that we, people who sing, may never have visited," says Fuchsberg. "By singing someone else's music you start ►

to be someone else, at least fitfully. Bridges helps create conditions under which that kind of expansion of identity can take place.”

There are some who question whether a nearly all-white chorus in a predominantly white part of the country can have a real impact on the divides between races and culture.

“Depending on your native cynicism and point of view, you could question what can come of something like this,” says Fuchsberg. “Isn’t this *noblesse oblige*, just a good intentions kind of thing?”

“We say no, it’s a process,” he continues. “Sometimes we feel that Bridges has modified the internal culture of the Chorale, that we’ve become aware of things outside of our usual sphere of involvement. We are in a very white part of the world. That is changing slowly, but we don’t primarily focus on making the chorus or even our audiences more diverse,” he says. “We are trying to extend our tendrils into places we haven’t been before, and to make ourselves useful.”

In a previous Bridges program, the Chorale entered into a two-year collaboration with the Leigh Morris Chorale, African American community leaders, and four inner-city church choirs to examine issues that separate the African American community from the larger community. The collaboration culminated in a community sing-along called “Lift Every Voice” at the downtown First Baptist Church (pictured on the cover).

During the concert, a man walked in from the street, apparently moved by the music and the spirit coming from the church, and asked for prayer to overcome a personal trial. As someone later noted in their audience evaluation, “For a moment everyone became one community, praying over this man together.” As another audience member wrote in his evaluation: “Could this be the start of something new, meaningful, and relevant to the change process of how we see, deal with, and respect each other?”

We Will Come To You

Children who sing with the Glen Ellyn Children’s Chorus in Glen Ellyn, Illinois are regularly exposed to an array of cultures—through repertoire, touring (they do extensive education about the culture of countries they visit), and its outreach programs. But by virtue of its location in a predominantly

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white upper-middle-class Chicago suburb, the Chorus has struggled to recruit singers from non-white ethnic groups.

In 2006, Priscilla Smith, GECC administrative director, heard about a group that helps immigrant families get settled in the United States. It turns out that Glen Ellyn received hundreds of these families. Smith and music director Emily Ellsworth wondered whether some of those children would be interested in a music program.

“The parents were very excited,” Smith recalls. “But these were families that were new to America, trying to find housing and furniture and jobs. Transportation was a big issue. So instead of having the children come to us, we decided we would go to them.”

In the fall of 2006, the Chorus launched an after-school singing and movement session at Lincoln Elementary in Glen Ellyn, which many immigrant children attend. Some 60 children, grades 3-8, from 25 different African, Latin American, and Eastern European countries are now participating. Ellsworth leads the sessions, with help from older singers in the Chorus. The children learn songs from several world cultures by ear and are encouraged to share the songs of their homelands.

Though the program is in an early stage, Smith hopes that over time some of these children will want to audition for and sing with the Chorus. But she knows that for many immigrant families, Glen Ellyn is a temporary stop en route to a more permanent home. “That’s why it’s so important to have the program at the school, where the kids already are,” says Smith.

For now, the program is offering children a sense of belonging, a sense of having something valuable to offer, and

a window into each other’s worlds. “It’s so exciting when a child says, ‘Let me tell you about a song I sang with my grandmother,’” says Smith. “Every time you use music as a vehicle to help cultures learn about each other, it’s an extraordinary experience for everyone involved.”

Diversifying the Chorus

In the summer of 2005, leaders of the San Francisco Boys Chorus met with former San Francisco Mayor Willie L. Brown, Jr. and Federal Court Judge Marilyn Patel, both long-time supporters of the Chorus, to explore ways to diversify the Chorus enrollment to better reflect the Bay Area’s cultural makeup.

In their exploration, the group found that the Chorus’s traditional media and publicity efforts were not saying to boys from diverse populations, “We want you!” For one thing, there was little diversity reflected in their marketing materials. As a result, few boys from African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and other ethnicities self-selected to audition for the group. “We needed to go find talented boys instead of waiting for them to find us,” said Ian Robertson, artistic director.

Armed with this new understanding, the Chorus took action. First, it created the Willie L. Brown Jr. Music Scholarship for Boys, which allows the Chorus to actively recruit musically gifted boys from socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. The scholarship includes tuition and transportation to and from rehearsals, as well as summer camp, tours, snacks, uniforms, and concert tickets for each singer’s parents.

Since September 2005, the Chorus has visited nine schools in five underserved ►



Young new recruits from the San Francisco Boys Chorus

neighborhoods, listening to some 1,800 boys and recruiting untapped talent. Fifty-two boys have been identified and 28 are active members of the Chorus. In less than two years, 32 percent of the Chorus membership was from diverse backgrounds.

In achieving this goal, practical things mattered a great deal. The Chorus contracts a shuttle bus twice a week to pick the boys up at school and drive them to rehearsal. It's one of the most costly parts of the program, but according to Susan Brown, a board member who co-funded the scholarship in her father's name, "Without the bus, we wouldn't have a program."

Embracing Another's Song

Many choruses regularly perform the repertoire of diverse cultures. But entering into that culture's musical world takes some boldness—and humility. For music directors schooled in the Western classical canon this may require a bit of a stretch.

In 2003, Cantare Con Vivo joined with Northern California's Gospel Music Workshop of America to sing a program of African American Spirituals and Gospel songs. Morales led the spirituals, but turned the teaching and conducting of the Gospel songs over to the Gospel Music Workshop's legendary music director, Helen J. H. Stephens, an African American woman in her mid-70s.

"Her group did not read music, learning everything by ear," says Morales. "After an early rehearsal one of my choir members came up and said, 'Can you write the notes down for us?' I said, 'I could do that in 10 minutes, but I'm not going to. You need to learn the tradition.' We, with our Eurocentric roots, rely so much on what we see and do not listen very well."

For Morales, the importance of the collaboration was for the two groups to meet on level ground, enter fully into the other's world, and see what they could learn. Following a piece during the dress rehearsal, Stephen's began to tremble, unable even to speak, and Morales's chorus members became uncomfortable as well as concerned. "I told them, 'You don't need to worry. She is just overcome by the spirit because of what you just did.'"

"It was a powerful thing to have Helen directing us, taken emotionally by the



David Morales, Cantare Con Vivo with Helen J. H. Stephens, Gospel Music Workshop

song," says Morales. "Our culture is so fearful of such vulnerability. We are often overly concerned with superficial details at the expense of genuine passion. My choir needs to see an African American woman do it her way, to have these experiences."

Cantare's collaborations are aimed at building community, not just putting on a program. That means "rehearsing in parts of Oakland where some of my singers have never been and might even find uncomfortable, eating together, getting to know people by name, and sharing stories," says Morales.

But he does not consider these collaborations to be a "feel-good" kind of missionary project. "It is my responsibility to determine what is in the best interest of my choir and our organization," says Morales. When his group embraces music from diverse cultures, he says, "We do it to make us a better choir and ultimately better people." And more relevant in our evolving multicultural country.

Clearly, there are more stories to tell. And no formula for telling them. "For Chorus America, addressing issues of diversity is not a project," says Ann Meier Baker. "It's a way of thinking—and acting." And it's important to have a conversation, not one, but many. This is where change begins. ■

This article is a collaboration that began with diversity consultant Patricia Moore Harbour, continued with chorus leaders who shared stories about their programs, and concluded with the editorial expertise of Kelsey Menehan, a frequent contributor to the Voice. Chorus America is committed to continuing a dialogue with members and others about addressing issues of diversity in the choral field.