

Dr. Michael N. Compton Public Affairs Essay Contest

By: Veronica Jacobs

Sawubona

I am a senior student here at Missouri State University. I am from Lebanon, Missouri. I am majoring in Anthropology and dual minoring in French and Linguistics. I am in the College of Humanities and Public Affairs, and I will be graduating this May (Spring 21). The aspect of the theme that I am focusing primarily on is voice, as related to language, and the Public Affairs pillar of cultural competence.

Charity of Choice: Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages

Word Count: 702

Did you know in the Kiowa language, there are no curse words? This reflects the purity of this language, or in a greater sense, the people themselves. Or did you know that in Japanese, there are two distinct words for perception: “tatemae” refers to the way that the public sees you, the behaviors and opinions that you deem worthy of letting the world know; then “honne” is much more fun, referring to your own true feelings, thoughts, and desires. In French, you have “l'appel du vide,” the instinctual urge to jump, even when we cannot see the bottom of the canyon below. Yet we do not jump.

Subonawa is a Zulu word, used in East Africa that means “I see you”. It is typically used as a greeting, but it is much more than this. It means that you truly are looking at another person. Not looking in the way that you are using your visual sense to perceptually recognize the presence of another individual, but that you see them as a person, as a human being. You see their thoughts, dreams, feelings; you see their struggles and their heartbreak; you see them as a person. That is really quite the feat.

How are we, human beings, able to create these words? More importantly, how do we create these complex, intricate, amazing ideas? How do we look at the world around us, produce a sound or symbol, then gather our friends, family, enemies, lovers, and all agree that this thing, this noise or scribble, means these absurdly, intricate categorizations of our reality? And the most unbelievable part... we can all agree on it.

We are constantly fed information: what shoes look best, how to answer your friend when they ask you a difficult question, who to vote for, when to fall asleep, how you are allowed to love another person. What matters is how we listen to these things, and we find the answers to these questions in a way that other people may understand. Language does not work alone. Society doesn't either, and without other people to validate that the things we think are real, the

thoughts we have, the feelings we share, the things we hate, the people that are not “one of us”; these things would simply cease to exist. So it is within this “togetherness” that humans, whether we like it or not, are tethered together. It is important to *see* each other.

As a student of Anthropology, one of the things I am always reminded of is that the first step to be culturally competent, that is to understand that there are other ways of life than the ones you know and are comfortable with, is simply empathy. Stop thinking that everyone else is so different than you; put your own shield down, and just listen. Listen to the things that make those people unique and special, and more importantly, listen to what makes those people like you. We are far more similar than we are different.

Did you know there is a word in the English language that means to be simply and amazingly entranced with the world around you? This word encompasses the ability to listen to one another, to take time and comprehend what others are saying, and to use this knowledge to observe our world through a different, more open-minded lens. This word can mean that there are things that we hate so much that we can't think of another way to say it. This word means holding hands, having coffee with board games, sweating as you almost miss your bus, crying because you failed someone, feeling hopeless, praying for patience, fighting with your best friend, packing a suitcase and going somewhere new, trying new things, finding peace in the process, looking over the edge at the dark bottom below and being brave enough to jump. This word does not mean that we understand everything, that we will not make mistakes, or that we will always look at another person and immediately understand them and their way of life. This word simply means to be brave, to step out of our comfort zone, to sit down and listen, to try. The word? Love.