

The Chickasaw Cultural Center: Evaluating Expectations

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The Chickasaw Cultural Center is a place bursting with history, culture, and fun. It has everything from live dancing to stick-ball and a spirit forest. My fellow honors classmates and I were privileged enough to experience it all one beautiful Saturday morning in the spring of 2015. Upon pulling up to the Cultural Center, only two words could describe what we saw: a campus. The Center is not just one building, like a museum, but rather an all-in-one experience. The land that surrounds the Center is densely populated with trees and streams, and I felt as though I had traveled back at least a hundred years. Once we drove more and got past the wilderness, a gorgeous field opened up before our eyes and finally we entered the Cultural Center proper.

At the entrance to the campus, I noticed a stop sign with a foreign word written across it. As we found out later, all signs and buildings have the exact same foreign language written on them, the native Chickasaw language. The presence of these signs was just one of the many ways that the Chickasaws shared their culture with our class, the foreigners. We started off the day with a video, traditional music, and dancing. Not only did we get the privilege to observe a traditional dance performed by the Chickasaws who work for the Center, but after an explanation of its meaning, we were invited to join them in their self-described *Friendship Dance*, where we all danced as equals. The dance consisted of holding hands with the people next to us in boy-girl order, following our neighbors in a circle-like pattern, stomping along with the beat, and chanting in unison.

After the dancing, our adventure continued when we were fed a very interesting meal. I can say with confidence I had never eaten anything like it before. Consisting of Indian tacos, a healing soup, and grape dumplings, my taste buds didn't know what to think. Right after lunch, we ventured outside to a replica of a traditional Chickasaw village. Here I was able to look inside huts and see how the Chickasaws had lived; I could shoot a bow and arrow, learn about their agriculture, and play stick-ball. Hands down, this was my absolute favorite part of the trip, especially playing stick-ball. At the beginning of the stick-ball game, we were given an overview of how to play, the rules, and what to do; then, it was on. Teams were divided between girls and boys, but the Chickasaw girls we played with were just as much – if not more – rough and dirty as the opposing boy team. Needless to say, I had a blast competing in a traditional game in which the object was to hit the very top of a pole with a ball. We then ended the day by walking through another couple of buildings containing exhibits that included artifacts

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and in-depth knowledge about the Chickasaw heritage, along with tutorial videos, a spirit forest, and a special visiting exhibit of dugout canoes. This final tour concluded our day of immersion in the Chickasaw culture and sadly it was time for us to leave.

One of the things that stood out most to me was the Chickasaws' willingness to share their culture with us and have us actively participate with them in customs that have been going on for numerous generations. Whether it be dancing in a friendship dance, eating their food, playing their games, or exploring their everyday life and culture, the day did not go as I had imagined it would. Honestly, I came in with the perspective that I was an outsider; I was there solely to observe and learn about them as if we were in a formal museum. So color me shocked when the Chickasaws invited us to participate, do as they had done, and listen when they shared every personal detail about who they were as a nation, what they had gone through, and how they had endured. They were a genuine group of people who wanted to expand the world with the knowledge of their existence and their desire to share the beauty that is their lifestyle. The Cultural Center was not a dull museum; it was a radiant experience.

According to Governor Bill Anoatubby in words posted on the Chickasaw Nation's website, the Cultural Center was "built on the ideas, imagination and creativity of Chickasaws from all walks of life. [It] incorporates nature, history, and heritage to tell the ongoing story of the Chickasaw people." The reason for this massive Center's existence is the understood need to share their culture in order to preserve it and make certain it does not disappear. In my estimation, there are two reasons for its location: the first is that Sulphur, Oklahoma is the center of where many Chickasaw people currently live, and the second is the beauty of the land that it sits on. The very existence of the Center accomplishes the Nation's goal of preserving their way of life. This goal is demonstrated by the number of people who work there; their very presence is furthering their tradition. For example, our tour guide descended from both the Chickasaw and the Choctaw Nation. He knew his personal heritage, their customs, their dress, and their languages. His knowledge demonstrated that the Chickasaw people are resilient and willing to stand the test of time. They are here to tell their story and ensure the continuation of their cultural existence.

As their website explains, the imagination and creation of the Chickasaw Cultural Center was a twenty year process, and its existence is "a bond with tradition." The five goals for the Center are the following:

- To capture the essence of the Chickasaw Culture
- To revitalize and share Chickasaw culture and traditions through cultural demonstrations
- To preserve, protect, and add to Chickasaw history through archives, collections, and research
- To provide educational opportunities to the Chickasaw people and
- To share our unique culture with the world

I was able to experience the Center with and through the Native America humanities class I took with Dr. Lisa Coleman at Southeastern Oklahoma State University in the spring of 2015. Our class day of immersion can be represented and

described by way of the Chickasaw Cultural Center's simple and beautiful logo. The three parts of the logo are the spiral, the eye, and the sun. Taken as a whole, it is a beautiful symbol of their nation, and, according to the Center's website, it "is symbolic of the stories and artifacts that weave our people's rich history. In a trio or separately, these powerful designs speak to our hearts and heritage and can be found cleverly tucked into architecture and exhibits throughout our campus." The spiral, "symbolizes wind, which is representative of each person's passage from birth, through life and into afterlife." The all-seeing eye, "or ogee, symbolizes how our people view the world around us." And lastly is the sun, "Providing light and warmth; the sun stands for rebirth, the heavens, and the giver of light."

I was not only able to read and learn about these aspects of the Chickasaws, I was able to be involved in them. The Honors Native America class asks students to read and learn about the tribes, lands, and history of Native America, but it also provides the opportunity to learn how to apply the knowledge gained firsthand. Since students who attend Southeastern are living in the heart of what is considered Native America, the course encourages us to learn by experience about the implications that accompany that statement. The course stresses that students learn to talk to people, see what they see, understand what they know, and inquire about their history. In my opinion, two recurring themes were seen throughout this class about Native America: the importance of perspective and the value of "cosmopolitan courtesy," a concept coined by Stephanie Brown that draws on Kant's discussions of cosmopolitanism in his treatise *Perpetual Peace*.¹

Perspective is entangled and entwined with learning, and life is a constant process of learning. People's perspectives are influenced by their experiences, observations, schooling, and the ways they process information. Since everyone's experience differs, everyone approaches situations differently and reacts differently. Each person's vision is clouded by previous and or past judgments. A review of George Steiner's book, *The Kingdom of Appearances*, explains this clouded view with the words: "the eye is never naked" ("Books" 132). With this reviewer's observation in mind, one must stop and consider what other people are seeing and thinking in order to truly understand what is happening in a given situation as well as to get a sense of the bigger picture, even if that bigger picture is unsettling. The unknown is something that scares everyone, but we must try to unteach ourselves our biases, beliefs, and perspectives, because within the unknown darkness, we just might find something beautiful: the beauty of new knowledge of a way of life or a culture. I believe that to strip ourselves of all preconceived notions is the ultimate goal in life. We must throw away what we think we know and learn things with a blank slate. To fully understand, we must learn and then unlearn. Knowledge is power, and power has the ability to corrupt, but knowledge can also have the power to create something remarkably extraordinary, like a new companionship between otherwise different people.

¹ For more on this term, see Brown and Virginia Cope's essay, "Cosmopolitan Courtesy: Preparing for Global Citizenry."

So how do these observations connect with Native America and the Chickasaws? Through passages from texts I read in my class, I learned about Native American tribes and civilizations. The settlers sailed to a foreign land with the preconceived idea that it and everything on it was theirs. This perspective was a very greedy one that led to the invasion of Native lands and the displacement of Native tribes. The tribes were neither seen nor treated as equals because of the unwillingness of the settlers to learn about their way of life. In some cases the tribes' striking civilizations were destroyed by the settlers' fear of the unknown; the settlers did not know these tribes, the lands, their life-style, and they felt threatened. Although intermarriage between the indigenous cultures and the settlers did take place, the possible greater companionship between these communities as a whole was missed, and therefore the possibility of helping each other more fully was demolished.

Yet, despite my current ability to recognize and recount this state of affairs, I was initially guilty of thoughts similar to that of the settlers. The only difference is that I had the pre-existing knowledge that my past was influencing my future, and I knew I could change it. When my class visited the Cultural Center, I stepped onto the bus that morning with a little bit of dread that I was spending one of my free Saturdays at a school function, at none other than a boring museum. My belief that I was not going to have a fun experience almost ruined the trip for me. That is one of the magical things about the Cultural Center: it forces you to strip yourself of your preconceived ideas by fully immersing you in a learning process that teaches about the Chickasaws' great nation.

Along with the realization that knowledge coupled with experience can change one's perspective, the concept of cosmopolitan courtesy creates the backbone behind the Chickasaw culture and serves as the centerpiece of the discussions I had in my Native America class. Cosmopolitan courtesy at heart means being an open person who is able to understand other people's lives, needs, wants, and conditions. I believe that cosmopolitan courtesy cannot be reached without clearing one's perspective, or at the very least recognizing the need to clear it, in order to learn and act in a more open manner. In one of our class texts *For Love of Country?* Martha C. Nussbaum opines in her essay "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism" that the first value of a cosmopolitan education requires that we learn more about ourselves. We must understand our history: where we come from, to whom we are related, who we are, and what we have done, in order to then understand others (11). First, we must regulate the internal in order to clearly see and interpret the external things in life. Yet, at the same time there must be caution, because society today over-promotes the individual to such a degree that the external community may be completely lost. When you are ignorant about the rest of the world, it in turn makes you ignorant about your life.

In the same essay, Nussbaum introduces the ancient Greek philosopher, Diogenes the Cynic. When anyone asked Diogenes where he came from, he said, "I am a citizen of the world" (6). Diogenes refused to be defined by his one culture, his people, or the perspectives people took around him. He sought to learn about the world and then in return to have the world reflected within him (6-7). In the same vein, Kwame Appiah's essay "Cosmopolitan Patriots," also published in Nussbaum's collection, tells the story of his upbringing as the son of a native Ghanaian father and a British mother. Appiah relates

the last message his father wrote to him and his sisters, in which his father tells them, “Remember you are citizens of the world” (21). As such, the action one person takes in turn affects us all. And yet as Nussbaum notes in her essay, “Becoming a citizen of the world is often a lonely business” (15). Why is this the case? One might think that becoming a part of the entire world, with millions of people inhabiting the land, could not be lonely. But it is said that if someone is everywhere, they are also nowhere at all. Nussbaum believes that becoming a citizen of the world is in effect a kind of exile, away from the warmth and comforts that we know and hold to be true. There are so few people who take the time to understand the history and implications behind things in life that the knowledge, if gained, in turn isolates that person. Seeing the world and all the people that reside within it from a cosmopolitan perspective inevitably changes one’s point of view and sets them apart, even as it has the capacity to instill and clear the way for cosmopolitan courtesy.

In my estimation, the Chickasaw nation embodied and embodies cosmopolitan courtesy, a term, as stated earlier, that derives from the thought of the eighteenth-century philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant believes in universal hospitality and when visiting another land, one should not be treated as an enemy upon arrival (105-108). The Native Americans were not hostile when the foreigners traveled from Europe. They invited them to learn of their life, agriculture, and beliefs and in return learned from the settlers, even recreating some parts of their life in imitation of them. This hospitality is vital, but the same should be said in reverse. That is, if one travels to a new place, the inhabitants should not be overlooked but treated with respect because it is still the traveler who is the outsider. The Chickasaw Nation was deprived of cosmopolitan courtesy in this aspect when the travelers came from a foreign nation and proceeded to claim and overtake their land.

When visiting the Chickasaw Cultural Center, I was overwhelmed with the enveloping warmth that I received; that warmth can be called nothing less than cosmopolitan courtesy. I was welcomed in, when I did not belong, and the only thing they asked in return was my engagement. According to Appiah in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, the so-called “Golden Rule” states, “What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do unto others” (60). I was astonished that the people who were so deprived of cosmopolitan courtesy themselves were the first group of people that truly embodied that courtesy with their whole essence. Cosmopolitanism centers on respect and understanding. I would advise to amend the “Golden Rule” to include, “Respect others the way one would want to be respected.” The Chickasaw Cultural Center was a refreshing place to witness cosmopolitan courtesy in all honesty. The members of the tribe did not treat the Center as just a place where they work; instead they recognized and believed in the furthering of their culture by way of the courtesy and respect they showed to others.

American philosopher, John Rawls said, “Purity of heart, if one could attain it, would be to see clearly and to act with grace and self-command from this point of view” (514). All of my experiences from the class on learning about Native America have changed my mindset and the way that I look at and approach things. Experiences like our trip to the Chickasaw Cultural Center have taught me that some things were not what I

originally thought they were. This meant I needed to have an open mind when going into any situation. Also, the Chickasaw people showed me what cosmopolitan courtesy looks like in real life. Their unbelievable courtesy to invite us in when they had every reason to shut us out was remarkable to me. They took our group in, people who were complete strangers to them, and treated us with the utmost respect. They invited us in with open arms and shared personal details about their lives. That welcome showed their nondiscriminatory courtesy to everyone who walked through their doors. People, including myself, can learn a lot from their actions. If everyone were to follow the example set by the Chickasaws, the world would truly be a different place.

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