

As I reflect back on my own cultural journey, my mantra has become “you don’t know, what you don’t know.”

My personal journey began with “one view of the world” while I was growing up in La Crosse, Wisconsin in the 1950s and 60s. My household was quite conservative; I attended Catholic schools and valued my grounding in Christian values. My favorite prayer still is the Prayer of St Francis. I was obedient, observant and quiet as the oldest of 8 children, and had strong ties to my Norwegian and German family. In contrast, my mother, one of the first Pan American Stewardesses in the 1940s, lived and traveled around the world five times and shared many stories about the people she encountered and the places she traveled to. At the time, I became [aware](#) La Crosse was not as diverse or as interesting compared to the stories I grew up hearing from my mother. I was lucky in that my parents took me to the Middle East and Europe as a teenager. These contrasts in my experiences drove my interest to explore outside of my community.

I attended University of Wisconsin Madison in 1971. During this time, I began to [understand](#) and experience a far different worldview. Madison, and the nation, was in a time of chaos with the Vietnam War. Students were seeking peace and non-violence. This culture of change, along with instilled curiosity about the world from my mother, began to influence how I thought about, [respected](#) and [valued](#) the world and the people around me. I became friends with students from different cultural backgrounds and views and visited their family homes and communities. I served on the UW Madison Student Council and learned the fine art of debate with amazingly assertive students from New York, China, and India. I mentored UW Madison football players from inner city Milwaukee and Chicago that were in my classes. I volunteered at the free clinic caring for impoverished Hispanic migrant workers. I learned about violence and war and became a nonviolent peace protestor against the Vietnam War. And as a banquet waitress at a local premiere hotel, I had my first experience being in the minority among a staff of gay waiters. I was warmly welcomed by this group, mentored, embraced as a friend, and protected from sexual harassment in the banquet hall.

The experiences I had the University of Wisconsin Madison opened me up to a worldview that continues to shape who I am today. It was through the experience of entering a realm of difference that I began to see the importance in being open,

listening, and moving through discomfort with understanding and love. My journey in Madison created the space for me to step out of my culture and belief systems and start my own journey toward embracing my own way of knowing. Through reflecting with others, I began to see how curious I was about human connection and embracing difference rather than allowing fear and judgment to overcome my thoughts about how we are different. I felt fueled by a thirst for authentic connections. Our identified differences enhanced our group's strength in contributing to our overall success. This open, non-judgmental caring approach became fundamental to how I practiced as a nurse.

As a nurse for 39 years, I have been a behind the scenes [advocate](#)/promoter of cultural awareness in many venues, including the development of this Cultural Competency Website at the La Crosse Health Medical Science Consortium. I have used my experiences in approaching both relationships and patient care in an open and non-judgmental way, to improve the quality of health care by participating in the creation of innovative models focusing on care provider and patient relationships. Presently, I volunteer at The Winter Warming Center providing foot care for our diverse population of homeless clients. I continue to carry on my passion to mentor and role model inclusive values for young professionals. It is this work that brings me great pride and gratitude for the experiences I have had. I strongly believe that the human caring connection is what is most important in everything we do.

I encourage you to take the opportunity to start your own personal journey towards cultural competency!

Sincerely,  
Stephanie Swartz RN

For more information on the progressive path towards cultural competency:

[http://www.lacrosseconsortium.org/content/c/personal\\_journey#step2](http://www.lacrosseconsortium.org/content/c/personal_journey#step2)