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SARAJEVO; THE ULTIMATE CELEBRATION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY: PROOF POSITIVE THAT THE BEST ASPECT OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY CAN BE PUT ON A PLATE AND EATEN

Bennett L. Rudolph

As I scan the *New York Times* for this week's list of tragedies in Bosnia, I cannot help but think of my own brief visit to Sarajevo more than ten years ago as part of Grand Valley's delegation to our sister institution in what was then referred to as Yugoslavia. For me it was such a happy occasion. Good food and drink with friendly and bright Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. I was well aware of Yugoslavia's unfortunate history, but at the time I wasn't fully conscious of which of my hosts belonged to which ethnic group. To an outsider like me they all seemed to get along well together. Knowing it was a sensitive issue, I never asked anyone which ethnic group they belonged to or what their parents had done during the 1940's. Being of Jewish heritage and having lost a considerable number of relatives during the holocaust, I didn't really want to know. The extent to which the Bosnians were different from one another only added to my interest and fascination with the region, and increased the diversity of food, drink, art, song and dance.

I remember many toasts, and I am sure that because of my jovial states, I have forgotten many others that began with such lines as, "There will always be a Bosnia!" I went along with this and happily drank my plum brandy even though I knew that in reality there had never been a Bosnia, just Serbs, Croats, and Muslims.

What has occurred in Bosnia since my joyful visit reinforces for me an old human lesson. While it is currently in vogue for academics to "celebrate cultural diversity," the hard truth is that ethnic diversity is atavistic and has a dark side. Ethnic diversity essentially emerged with primitive humans from the caves in which people dwelled. It is based on the premise that we must kill the stranger before the stranger kills us. People with different backgrounds or traditions are the most dangerous thing on earth, since they are much more likely to attack than a bear, a lion, or other wild animals. For hundreds of thousands of years all living creatures on this earth learned that the chance of being killed by a stranger is much greater than the chance of being killed by the forces of nature such as lightning, storms, cold, or fire. It therefore became the prime duty of all organisms to immediately kill strangers that were encountered. If they did not, the stranger would assuredly kill them and their relatives, given a chance to do so.

Only very recently has human civilization created a gloss of toleration over the old primitive instinct. However, it does not take much to scratch the thin veneer. In Bosnia the gloss of toleration was extremely recent and a bit thin to begin with. After Tito's death, power hungry politicians were absolutely ruthless in scratching away at the surface in order to gain and retain their own political power. As a result, the old instincts have re-surfaced. It will take a long time for the veneer to be re-applied.

Thinking back on my travels to Sarajevo, I can't help recalling that the best part of cultural diversity is that each group developed their own food, drink, art, song, and dance. These aspects of diversity I found fascinating and was delighted to celebrate. As for the rest of it, I wish Bosnia had been less diverse.