

# A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

My grandparents came from Norway and Sweden to Minnesota, and spent their lives on small farms near each other. My parents were very proud of being Norwegian (my mother) and of being Swedish (my father). In their time and place, their union was cross-cultural and there were edges of pride and nudges of prejudice. My brother Bruce and I grew up in Colorado, away from the large families and small community and celebrated our Scandinavian heritage most fully at holidays, with lefse and lutefisk—and delicious cookies. My grandchildren are (or will be) German, Italian, Indian, Swedish, Norwegian, with Sri Lankan influence; and who we are and how we live as family is a mixture of all of these cultures, but with the great loss of language and depth of culture that many families are blessed to be part of. We create our own rituals and choose bits of many cultures; sometimes we do wonder what our culture really is, where we truly belong.

The world is changing. Francis Wardle and I had fascinating conversations many years ago about bi-racial families and how parents were presented with dilemmas to navigate about how to include more than one culture authentically within their family structure. That seems like a long time ago; many more families today are multi-cultural, and incorporating a depth of cultural engagement with all their family cultures can be daunting.

Victoria Looseleaf urged me to learn about Ai Weiwei and so I came to watch his documentary, *Human Flow*, one evening. He presents the complexity of the way our world is and has been changing through migration, war and conflict, natural disasters, globalization. I was particularly struck by this comment from Dr. Kenal Kirişçi, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution.

“I think we have entered a period in world history where movements of people across borders has accelerated. Maybe social media plays a role in this. Maybe the fact that transportation has become so much cheaper and more effective plays a role in this. And also that globalization, though it has had many positive outcomes, also has created greater inequalities and inevitably people are going to move from locations that are insecure

and economics unviable to areas where there is more opportunity and more stability and prospects of prosperity. It’s going to be a big challenge to recognize that the world is shrinking and people from different religions, different cultures are going to have to learn to live with each other.”

So, because children are the center of my life, my question is, “How do we protect children and prepare them to be global citizens who can care for this world and the people who live in it?”

Part of the answer comes in this quote, also from the documentary, from Mohammad Fares, former Syrian astronaut.

“When I was an astronaut, I saw from space how each human being on Earth is a universe. All human beings live in one big nation as brothers. Syrians, Indians, Chinese and Americans all live together on this beautiful planet and all of them must share. We must all share. Protecting the planet can only happen with solidarity and love, without manipulation, without injustice, without killing and without suppression.”

For me, figuring out how to be an advocate for children is grounded in owning my own humanity. I am awed when a person is asked where they come from and the reply is, “I’m a citizen of the world.” Yes, but I am also a citizen of my community, a member of my family, an advocate for children. Most essentially, I am human. Just one human being. Alone or together—my choice. Sometimes I hear my ideas in the words of others; sometimes I feel that I speak alone. All of that matters less than knowing with clarity what my life is about.

Once we know that our lives are about supporting families, protecting the rights of children, and making the world a good place to be, then children are first in our minds and hearts. Always first, children.



Above: A young Bonnie Neugebauer with their family piglet in Fertile, Minnesota.



Bonnie Neugebauer is founding editor of *Exchange* magazine and co-founder of the World Forum Foundation. You’re invited to visit Bonnie’s Global Café: [WorldForumFoundation.org/cafe](http://WorldForumFoundation.org/cafe)