

## Rodeo teaches diversity appreciation, pardner



**BARB GUY**

I like to imagine that I'm someone who appreciates diversity, someone who seeks to learn from the new, the different, the not-like-me. But it's one thing when you choose the milieu; when it's imposed, then things get interesting.

The unchosen experience, the compulsory encounter with "the other"; that's where we're really tested.

My husband Chris and I recently found ourselves at the Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo as faithful participants in his family's reunion. (The family is spread from coast to coast and the triennial get-together changes location each time.).

I'm prepared to abstain from alcohol when socializing with Muslims or Mormons, use no silverware in an Ethiopian restaurant, wear a head covering

if visiting the Vatican, remove my shoes at a Buddhist or Hindu temple, and use only my right hand for dining in India.

Before a trip abroad, I excitedly research country and culture - puzzling through differences in eye contact, gift giving, greetings and touching. I love to learn a few words in other languages. Around the world or down the street, I know not to assume that the people I meet are heterosexual - or Christian.

I only mention all this to illustrate my own amazement at how ill-equipped I was to enjoy, or even willingly attend, this rodeo.

Chris's dad spent part of his boyhood in Wyoming and he was so excited to be back, he wouldn't rest until we got to the arena. When you're going to an all-day event against your will, sitting on metal bleachers in blazing sunshine, it's great to be an hour and a half early.

The second we arrived at "The Daddy of 'em All, the World's Largest Rodeo," I began involuntarily talking like a cowboy. I told Chris I was "fixin'" to find the restroom, I got a "hankerin'" for a beer (a sure sign that I was not myself) and I took a "mosey" around the arena.

I commented on the ubiquitous cowboy hats and boots, giant belt buckles, long-sleeved Western shirts. Chris pointed out that I was using stereotypes, something I'm normally against. My sister-in-law Mindy, a diversity-friendly advocate for international students at a university, was not herself, either.

After all 8,229 spectators arrived, a group of 40-some identical, gorgeous black horses rushed into the arena. They had checkerboard patterns shaved into their behinds and neat, white socks. Their riders wore red pants, black and white shirts and black hats; each one carried a big American flag.

The visual effect was thrilling, and Chris's dad, the World War II conscientious objector, was instantly on his feet, hat in hand. Besides our group, maybe 40 people in the arena spontaneously stood as the American flags came in. But later, when whipped into a frenzy by the announcer, everyone stood reverently for "Proud to Be an American," many men removing their hats. For a country song.

By nature, the rodeo causes discomfort among steers, calves, bulls, vegetarians and urbanites, but it also offers funny cowboy names like Dusty Orchard and Tucker Sheets, marvelous horses,

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great clowns and white-knuckle action.

The daredevil riders were amazing. They risk their lives. The announcer told us, "Yesterday a bull ripped this fella's scalp off, but we nailed it back on, and here he is, folks, ready to ride!"

The rodeo was much more fun than I anticipated, and as always, I learned through my cultural exposure. But there was a scary dark side. While the cowboys were cool, there was an uber-red-white-and-blueness, a cockeyed hyper-patriotism, that creeped us out.

Many folks wore T-shirts that brought a chill: "Kick Their Ass Take Their Gas," "The best way to change a liberal mind is with a rock," "Club Gitmo" and "U.S. Armed Forces World Tour: Afghanistan Free 2001, Iraq Free 2003, Iran TBA, France TBA"

We felt like we'd been beamed into Sean Hannity and Ann Coulter's wedding reception.

Mindy said, "I can't believe that the Army isn't a sponsor of this event." Minutes later, Army people began dropping out of the blue Wyoming sky. One after another, soldiers with yellow parachutes emblazoned "ARMY" descended slowly until their black combat boots hit the dust in the arena's center, to the crowd's thunderous applause.

Later, we all stood while 10 new Army recruits were inducted.

What that had to do with the rodeo I'm not sure, but those recruits will face death without the cheers the bronc riders hear. Mindy and I held our breath, making a silent prayer for their safety and hoping they're not hyped up to go to Club Gitmo and kick some ass.

I'd give myself a "D" for my diversity appreciation at the rodeo. That really takes me down a peg, pardner. It was a good exercise, this unchosen experience. Maybe I should seek out more things that are likely to challenge me. When do the monster trucks come to town?

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*Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.*