

Bridging the Hearts
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"Somewhere between your heart and mine, there's a window that I can't see through." Do you know this song? I think most of you know it. It is an old song from the United States. Today I am glad to be invited to open a window and ask you to join me to see the hearts of Indonesians, hoping that you will also open your hearts to Indonesians or any other nations to see.

"Happy Easter. You must be very happy to have the opportunity to celebrate Easter in a Christian country!" "How is Easter celebrated in the US? It must be a great celebration!" These are among the comments sent to me last Easter by friends back home in Indonesia.

All Westerners, including Americans, seem to be considered Christians by most Indonesians. Few Christians in Indonesia do not know Billy Graham. Much American Christian literature has been translated into Indonesian. Christian songs and Christian traditions, such as Christmas with its Christmas trees and Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* or the Easter celebration with its egg-hunting and Easter Bunny, are widely imported from the United States through books, films, media or other ways. Thus an image of the United States as a Christian country is inevitable.

How does Christianity affect the perceptions of other Indonesians, especially those who are Moslems, who constitute 80% of the population? The Dutch, who occupied Indonesia for hundreds of years, first introduced Christianity. Consequently, Christianity was and still is regarded by most Moslems as the religion of the oppressor. As a mission-oriented religion, it might also be regarded as a competitor and threat to Islam, another mission-oriented religion. Over the years, as Christianity has been growing in Indonesia, some Moslems have been suspicious that Christians are trying to convert them to Christianity. These suspicions affect Moslems' views of the United States as a Christian country, and this is made even worse by the fact that the American government seems to side with the Israelis on the war with the Palestinians. The long-standing war between the Palestinians and Israelis is not just a war between these two countries. It is viewed as a global war between Moslems and Jews. Moslems in Indonesia consequently regard the United States as the "friend" of the "enemy." In addition, the United States' "war on terrorism" and attack on Afghanistan, an Islamic country, creates new antagonistic attitudes among Moslems, especially radical Moslems, and thus puts the Indonesian government in a very difficult position. No country wishes to be accused of supporting terrorism, yet the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan has forced the Indonesian government to deal with angry people, not only Moslems but non-Moslems as well. A lot of Indonesians joined in prayer and concern for those attacked on September 11th, yet

based on a survey conducted in October 2001, almost ninety percent of the people in Indonesia did not agree with the U.S. attack on Afghanistan.

How can Indonesians know that not all Americans agree with this war either; that not all Americans are against Moslems; that the American government does not necessarily represent the voices of the whole nation? Most of them get impressions from what they see in the media, just as Americans get the impression that Indonesia is a Moslem country which does not like Americans, from the same sources.

Indonesians are constantly exposed to stories and pictures in the media of rich people living luxuriously in big, tall, modern apartments, going to splendid restaurants, wearing expensive dresses. Because a great number of Indonesians are still relatively poor, mixed feelings emerge, and various images develop. A gap between poor and rich Indonesians is a big problem in itself. It becomes wider when other issues make the situation even worse.

Indonesia, with its large population, is known for its low-paid workers. Some American companies build factories in Indonesia to take advantage of this cheap labor. With no bargaining power, it comes as a shock to workers to learn that the shoes, garments or other products they make are sold at such high prices in the United States, and are worn by rich people.

Indonesia, still struggling with its own problems as a developing country, continues to need loans to build. It feels humiliated, angry, and helpless at the same time at the difficult pre-conditions for approval of loans or grants from the IMF and World Bank and the threats of embargo by the United States. Many Indonesians feel the United States is imposing its influence as a superpower both politically and economically. Indonesian youth who are learning democracy by trying to express themselves become angry when they learn that Indonesian soldiers who try to silence them have been trained by the United States army.

Now listen to Indonesian families, especially what mothers say to their children: "No television, no internet. It's not for you; it's for adults: too much violence, too much sex." "My daughter saw too much television, now she dares to talk back to me. She never listens to me anymore." "My son keeps chatting on the internet and playing computer games. His world revolves only around his computer." One mother asked my advice: "My son is going to graduate from high school soon. He wants to continue his study in the United States. What do you think? Isn't it dangerous? Will he forget his family?"

Violence, a free lifestyle, narcotics, pornography, drinking and suicide are images that Indonesian mothers get mostly from the American media. Indonesians are quite religious people, or at least, they are trying to cling to traditional values. They are desperately trying to protect their children from being influenced by those issues mentioned above. I remember searching in vain for non-violent computer games for my nephew. All those products come from the United States or Japan, and they are full of violence, yet full

of enchantment for children.

Another issue that worries Indonesian mothers, which they learn from the media, is that American families and schools are too permissive in educating their children, which leads to what they regard as "rude" behavior towards parents and elders.

How do they know that the United States is not only Hollywood? How do they know that many American parents share similar struggles as Indonesian parents? How do they know that within the educational system in the United States there are constant arguments on issues such as disciplining children? A developed country, advanced technology, and the world of higher learning are the dreams of Indonesian students and parents.

"How are you?" This greeting and many other expressions, such as "good morning" and "thank you," are basic English idioms we learn in Indonesia. These idioms give us the impression that Americans are friendly and extroverted. However, listen to what a friend of mine who is studying in the U.S. said: "I still have difficulties in how to respond to the expression of "How are you?" As a foreigner, he was initially delighted to be treated in such a friendly manner, as he interpreted the expression as evidencing genuine concern for him. He was ready to share his feelings, so he was surprised to find out that it was only an expression of politeness. I have to admit that I am also still confused as to how to respond to this greeting. Sometimes, even before I finish answering, "I am fine, thank you. How about you?" (the lesson I learned from home) the person who asked the question has already passed me by. He/she seem not to expect any response, while most Indonesians interpret this phrase as a friendly gesture, genuinely asking how they are doing.

The definition of being friendly seems somewhat different from one culture to another. The Indonesian definition of being friendly is something personal and allows people to enter their private lives. For Indonesians, Americans are considered distant and unapproachable. Many Indonesians, even after they have been living among Americans for some time, have encounters with Americans that are only casual or business-like.

Twice I have lived in this country. I observed that most Asians, including Indonesians, do not hang out with Americans. They tend to hang out with their own countrymen/women. This is quite natural as one can speak one's own language and feel at ease with people from the same homeland. Indonesians often seem to find it difficult to enter the life of Americans who seemingly have more self-composure.

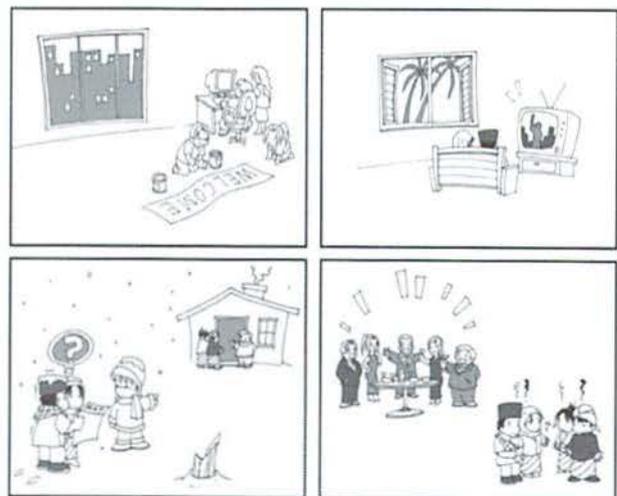
During this visit, I am doing research on the Internet and its capability to connect people and accelerate globalization. I have been somewhat surprised to observe that people from different cultures do not really communicate although they are living and learning in the same environment. How then can they communicate well in the virtual world, when in the real world they meet daily but don't really communicate or learn much from each other. I have observed that most foreign students, especially Asians, are unfamiliar with the American way of living or its educational system.

They are far from their families and have to struggle by themselves. They listen a lot and Americans speak a lot but no communication is created. How should American universities prepare themselves more efficiently to deal with the world coming to their campuses?

Many opportunities to learn from each other are passed by. Most Americans know little about the cultures of the rest of the world, even when they live with them. Must foreign students studying in the U.S. go home without a deeper understanding of Americans? People who have prejudices continue to maintain them, indeed might even see them grow, because they do not experience a personal touch in their lives. How can mutual understanding and a real partnership work well in this era of globalization without people really knowing each other? No window is created between the two hearts.

These last few months, I also experienced some difficulties entering the hearts of Americans. I was fortunate to be introduced to an American family before I came here and they have always tried to make me feel at home. Except for them, my relationships with other Americans were all formal ones. I decided to take a more proactive approach and become involved in a range of social activities. It worked. I got to know more American people and enter their personal lives. It's just a matter of someone making the first move to increase personal communication. It's just a matter of reaching out. It's just a matter of listening more. It's just a matter of opening a window for other hearts to see through.

Drawings by Andrea Ind



The alienation Indonesian students face in America