

## **The gift of a second language French opened door to parallel universe**

Source: Nov. 8, 2005 as printed in *The Toronto Star* – Editorials and Opinions  
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On a recent trip to Vancouver, I began returning my phone calls from the back seat of the taxicab on the way downtown from the airport.

During one call, which happened to be in French, I noted my Sikh taxi driver studying me intently in the rear-view mirror.

"I have all three of my children in French immersion," he announced proudly when I finished my call. "I thought I'd give them an advantage to help them have better careers and earn more money."

I smiled and agreed wholeheartedly with him, having seen the numerous times in my own career where my fluency in the French language had given me an edge over any competition, particularly in a career centred around corporate communications and government affairs. Even as I was agreeing with him, though, I realized that in my case learning French had absolutely nothing to do with career advancement and monetary gain, but was rather a reinvention of my rather mundane youth. This occurred at least 15 years before anyone had heard of computer games and escaping into parallel universes.

My mind wandered back to a summer spent in the south of France on an exchange program, where I learned to sing medieval drinking songs under stars that danced across sand dunes, and climbed mountains with ancient fortresses at the top.

Then there was the summer in Québec City learning to appreciate the "joie de vivre" that comes with spending the day at a "Blueberry Festival," and watching the sun sink slowly into a golden haze over the mighty St. Lawrence River. Laughing more loudly and longer than I ever did in my small reserved city to the west, and learning to love the art of after-dinner storytelling that sent me into worlds I didn't even know existed until then.

Learning French was the greatest gift of my youth, a free ticket to an exciting new life with an entirely different way of perceiving reality.

There came with this new life an increased emphasis on conversation, wit, good food and lasting friendships.

It was something I could not share with my parents or largely disinterested siblings, but it brought me a feeling of joy I had never known before.

My Sikh taxi driver was still talking about the benefits of French immersion to his children's future when I drifted back from the reveries. I caught his eye as he finished stating that Canada was the best country in the world.

"Do your children speak Punjabi?" I queried.

"Of course," he replied, "as well as two other Indian languages, and English."

"You are a lucky man," I answered. "Now they speak the languages of your ancestors, the predominant language of Vancouver and another major world language that you don't speak. So you've allowed them to create a new space, discover another world that will enrich their lives."

"You mean make them richer?"

"Yes," I answered, "but not just in money. Canada is the only country in the world, including France, where the use of the French language is increasing. It makes us different than the vast uniformity of a globalized, or should I say Americanized, world. You have given your children the gift of being able to fully participate in this country, no matter where they end up living!"

My driver was still smiling as we pulled up to my hotel, and I knew that he had understood me. If I was enriched by my second French-language world, he knew his children would be that much richer for having multiple cultures, ready to take on any complexities the world could throw their way.

And perhaps one day they would sing medieval drinking songs on a southern French sand dune under a blanket of Mediterranean stars.

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