

Who Am I? And My Limitations

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Thank you so much for the invitation to be here with you, and for the welcome I have received. I am grateful to be able to share these days with you, even though I am from the great imperialist power to the south.

Who am I? That is the question.

I will begin by saying I am hapa yonsei/gosei, a multiracial Asian American fourth- and fifth-generation American of Japanese and White Jewish descent. I am a descendant of Jewish people who fled the pogroms of Poland and promptly became Unitarians in Brooklyn, descendants of Jewish people who left Lithuania and the Ukraine via Russia in the early 1900s and came to the U.S. I am a descendant of Japanese people who left Japan during the Meiji Restoration, who flourished in the U.S. until World War II, were interned in concentration camps, and released to learn a new way to live immersed in hidden shames.

I am a descendant of a girl who was born in the U.S. in the early 1900s, and when she was relocated to Japan by her family, threw a fit until they agreed to send her back to the States, a woman whose proof of citizenship papers disappeared when she and her husband and children were locked up in a concentration camp in Poston, AZ; my great-grandmother. I am a descendant of veterans of the U.S. army. I am a descendant of people fired from their jobs for being Jewish.

I am a descendant of someone adopted due to economic necessity. I am a descendant of successful professionals and people who were failures as citizens and parents. I am a descendant of anti-Zionist atheist liberal Jewish people. I am a descendant of a rabbi. I am a descendant of Buddhists and Shinto-practising people. I am a double pastors' kid with a pastor spouse. I am Presbyterian. I am a citizen of the United States.

I am a proud graduate of Western Washington University, 20 miles south of British Columbia and the only university in the U.S. with a Canadian-American Studies Department. I am a Midwesterner, shaped and formed by the sensibilities of a libertarian and more secular Pacific Northwest of the U.S. I am queer—relationally fluid but not promiscuous—political and accountable to many communities, not just the gay, lesbian, and bisexual/queer community, under threat by a church that could revoke my ordination if it decided to prove I am not living in compliance with the heterosexual norm enforced by our church constitution.

I am a daughter, a niece, a granddaughter, a sister, a partner, a sister-in-law, a daughter-in-law, a cousin, an aunt. I do not claim to be an individual but a member of a complex web of relationships, of communities of accountability that shape me every day.

My limitation is that I am an English speaker. My French is weak; I never made it past the present tense. My German is forgotten. I know how to count in Japanese but little else. I remember three phrases in Egyptian Arabic. I am proficient in Spanish but can make a horrible mess of a

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conversation. English is a sparse language, anemic. So please think of me kindly when I am forced to use terms that are highly technical but lack depth or wealth.

My limitation is that I was socialized in the U.S. within a framework of triumphalistic dominance, that assumes its power is deserved, rather than brutally taken and enforced each and every day.

My limitation is that I am not Canadian. I cannot claim to understand your context, but I hope my reflections on my context may still provide one example for this liminal time, this set-apart time we have together, this holy time.

Culture

Culture is inherited. Culture is assigned. Culture is claimed. All culture is fluid, developing, changing.

Culture is inherited: we are socialized, given culture thanks to our families, our communities of faith, and our cities and villages. Thanks to them, we know what to do when a member of the community dies. We know what to say in worship. We know how to interact with our elders and what to teach young ones. Those who are deaf join a long-standing community of people with a distinct culture that is passed on.

Culture is assigned: We are socialized, given culture based on our gender identity (typically based on binary notions of male and female), taught whether we should move to the side of a walkway or taught whether we ought to walk right through the middle regardless of the presence of other people. One transgender person, who was born and socialized to be male, but felt she was actually a woman and so made the transition into becoming a woman, said one of the things she had to learn was that men take up space and she, as a woman, was supposed to move to the side, taking up less space than she did when she was a man.

We are socialized, given culture based on our racial identities, too far reliant upon phenotype, how we look, rather than relying upon our ethnic cultures. These imposed racial identities, such as black (ignoring distinctives such as origin in Ghana or Jamaica or Nigeria), or Latin American (ignoring distinctives that come with origins in Colombia versus Costa Rica, Belize versus Brazil) develop culture that is assigned based on how one looks or which broad grouping one is placed in.

Culture is claimed: Some identities are not visible, obvious, based on a quick visual assessment. Those who are queer do not have an option to be gay or lesbian, bisexual or queer, but those who are queer do have the option to join the gay/lesbian/queer/bisexual communities that have developed distinct cultural spaces that are not quite the same as the cultural spaces inhabited by heterosexual people.

Some identities develop based on individual or group choices to identify with one's birth culture as well as, or instead of, one's adopted culture. Some identities develop because culture was taken away years ago, or lifetimes and generations ago, but are reclaimed as best as people can, based on their understanding of the necessity of culture. Generations removed from a culture of origins, the descendants of immigrants choose to reclaim a language, a way of dressing oneself, a country.

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Generations after the first instance of attempted genocide, First Nations people continue to reclaim the inheritance that is theirs.

All culture is fluid, developing, changing: We are socialized in a world that develops rapidly. But many of us often interact from a place of assuming our worldview is *the* worldview. I found myself astonished last Monday evening at a presentation of a new resource for Asian American Christians upon hearing from the presenter and several participants in the room that as first-generation people (the newcomer generation) they worry about the second generation (those born in North America) losing their language (by that I mean the language of their parents) even though they are gaining a new language. As someone divorced from language by the sheer volume of time between my generation and the newcomer generation, and divorced by the incredible pressure placed on the “other” at that time, I found this assumption offensive, as though this loss equals a loss of culture, as though culture were only language, or that language were the only marker of significance...whereas those who are third, fourth, fifth and sixth generation can tell you language is not limited to tongue, but is also a way of speaking and forming thoughts. And language is only one of the first markers to change—there is plenty more culture where that came from.

To you who are newcomers, as the great-grandchild of the newcomer generation: culture is more than language. Your children may lose your language simply because you are raising them here, and they are here learning two other languages. Your very presence implicates your children and grandchildren in Canadian society. But just because people speak English or French instead of Korean/Cantonese/Spanish/Arabic/Creole/Akan doesn't mean they don't have a distinct way of understanding and processing information. Language is more than the words we speak, it is the way in which we arrange our thoughts, the judgment we apply to what is appropriate for spoken words. The next generations develop a fusion of lifeways, worldviews, and language that fit them.

To you who are next generations, those formed by Canada: all newcomers are your community of accountability, even if you aren't related to them. You have seen the newcomers in your family struggle to be a part of this society, and you have unique insights into how all newcomers must struggle. You can help translate to dominant Canadian society and The United Church of Canada the gifts and challenges offered by the newcomer experience.

The danger of embracing an intercultural way of being is to reduce culture to language or clothing. I do not want to be invited to pray in my native tongue or wear my traditional clothing. I think you don't mean English or blue jeans and a T-shirt. While I value these markers of culture and support the right of peoples to speak the language most appropriate to them, or to wear what is most comfortable, intercultural relationships recognize that culture is not a series of essentialized markers, markers boiled down to a few external indicators of gender, race, national origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation. Culture is not always easily marked but complex, hybrid, marked by adaptation and fluidity. New ways of communicating are developed, new dances are created, as we were blessed with yesterday, new arts forms are composed to make meaning out of the composer's cultural experience.

Intersections

The challenges of being intercultural are many. We are not just of one culture. We are not just of British descent, just francophone, just adopted, just a baby boomer. We are each members of multiple communities. Our various forms of diversity overlap, add, multiply, intersect, to form each one of us. These intersections we do not choose. We enter this intercultural conversation claimed and claiming intersecting communities. These intersections shape our experiences. Not all Korean Canadians experience the world the same way, because each Korean Canadian has distinctives of gender, family situation, class, education, sexuality. Not all White people experience the world the same way, because each White person has distinctives of region, religion, class, and spiritual experience.

People interact interculturally from their places of intersection.

This can be a little confusing, so I will elaborate. When I wake up in the morning, I don't just say, "Which way will I experience the world today? As a woman, or middle class, or Protestant, or a Generation X-er, or American, or biracial?" I experience the world filtered through all of these lenses provided by my intersecting cultures. I am never monocultural, and neither are you. I am not just Japanese-White Jewish. You are not just Black, just Latin American, just White. Even White people bring a multiplicity of cultures based on class, regional origin, educational attainment, and styles of conflict management.

Power and Privilege

Another challenge to being intercultural is that this is not a conversation, an engagement, between people meeting on a level playing field. There is no equality in this conversation. The legal construction of privilege and oppression that have embedded inequality in the economy, education system, job market, church structure, and culture means we are divided by violations of the marginalized and the seduction of the privileged. In other words, cultures are not simply divided by their language, lifeways, and worldview. Cultures are divided by how these interact in power structures designed to privilege the dominant and marginalize the rest.

Too often we dominant North Americans read ourselves into the story of the Israelites in exile, or read Jesus running from Herod as our experience and our story. Too often we read the Bible as a universal experience, when in fact it comes from the underside, from the colonized and dominated, from those who spoke the unofficial language, from those who ate poor people's food. We who are North Americans read the Bible from positions of personal power and privilege, which means we ought to consider reading ourselves into the stories of the Pharaoh in Egypt, of Babylon, of Rome.

Because we seek to come together in intercultural spaces, we must be able to deconstruct how power and privilege divide us from one another. To do that, we have to know where we have been and who we are, and develop a concept of our own personal power and privilege. Before we can reconstruct intercultural community, we need to be able to deconstruct the barriers to that community.

Relative Privilege

Another challenge of being intercultural is that those of us who are not of the dominant culture, gender, sexual orientation, ability, class, faith tradition, generation, or age are not exempt from power and privilege. Most of us, in one way or another, are recipients of relative privilege. Relative privilege is how someone like me, a young queer biracial woman of colour, is the holder of a U.S. passport, the recipient of a master's degree. Relative privilege provides just enough access to people like me so I am not tempted to protest in solidarity with other oppressed communities. If we are divided, we are easily conquered.

We the relatively privileged also have a responsibility to reach out, lift up, stretch ourselves to be present to others who experience oppression. We too have a responsibility to battle our own complacency.

This intercultural thing isn't about making White people feel good about including the other. To be truly intercultural is to live with discomfort, for those of us uncomfortable with discussions about sexuality and for those of us who come from the dominant cultural group who benefit from the oppression of First Nations and newcomer peoples. To be truly intercultural is to understand the complexity of culture and acknowledge that each one of us is ignorant about something. To be truly intercultural is to be able to say, "I am not comfortable with gay people, I do not know how to communicate with deaf people, I am afraid of people whose skin colour is different from mine," and to know we have a responsibility to move beyond that discomfort, fear, and ignorance. To be truly intercultural is not for people of colour to say, "I have enough to deal with, I don't need to worry about inclusion of gay and lesbian people", is not for gay and lesbian people to say, "I have enough to deal with, I don't need to worry about the inclusion of people of colour," is not for newcomers to say, "I have enough to deal with, I don't need to worry about First Nations peoples," is not for White women to say, "I have enough to deal with, I don't need to worry about men of colour." It is to say, "I am a part of a wider community of difference who help me be more faithful." To be intercultural is to say, "I might be tired, but I am not giving up. I need my sister or brother to snap me out of my ignorance, complacency, apathy, fear, inaction, and bigotry."

"Intercultural" is ethnicity, language, gender, sexual identity all wrapped up together.

"Intercultural" is choosing to live in messy, accountable relationship to multiple communities of which we are a part.

Theological Frame

So what? So what about all this culture stuff? So what about my limitations? So what about intersectionality? What does this have to do with the church?

So glad you have been asking. We are, after all, navigating muddy waters.

Church is the bearer of culture. Church socializes. Church teaches intercultural skills or lack thereof. Church provides a unique, set-apart community for all of us, with all our limitations, to come together not for ourselves, not for others, but for the glory of God. It is our limitations that make us human. It is the church that has the capacity to teach us how to reach beyond, to hope not for the best of our humanity, but for that fullness of humanity for which we were created. It is the

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church that has the capacity to provide a spectacular vision for things hoped for and yet unseen. It is the church that has the capacity to articulate an alternative narrative, one that emphasizes abundance over scarcity, justice over oppression, hope over despair, life over death, dancing over giving up. It is the church that has the capacity to give us all a reason to live. It is the church that has the capacity to tell the old, old story that will ultimately free us, in our complicated intersections and our intricate interculturalities, to be completely, wholly human, responding fully to the gift of God's most perfect love.

How do we, the church, tell our story? How do we paint with sand or words or music or dance or drums our narrative, with all its joy and pain, all its idyllic times and all its suffering, all its love and redemption? How do we bring a people, the people of God, together with our own story? How do we, as a church, tell *the* story given to us of our Christian identity?

In our theme scripture, Revelation 22, John of Patmos tells a story. It is a wild story. A story of the suffering of the people under Roman imperial rule, and a story of God's intercultural, uncontained, upside-down vision of the world. John wrote this as a prisoner of the Roman Empire, and the entire Revelation is a critique of imperial power, a critique heavily veiled in high-context cultural references meant to be hidden from the government of Rome. This is not a prophecy of what is to come, but a way of explaining John's own experience of the empire and his understanding of what work God was doing in the world.

It is said you can't know where you're going if you don't know where you've been. And where have we been? We have been slaves in Egypt. We have been Canaanites, demonized and colonized to make way for another group of people who assumed the land was their birthright. We have followed Jesus throughout Galilee. We have denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times.

We were from the banks of these rivers. We have landed on these banks, unbidden. We were relocated, stripped of language, culture, land, sweet water. We took land without regard for the people already here. We came here only to learn we had stepped into a place broken by exploitation. We learned we could no longer understand our children. We learned we had not a clue as to what our parents were trying to tell us. We have been in places where people have been divided by class, gender, sexual orientation, politics. We have ignored the deaf because we lack the tools to communicate. We have taken our power to strip others of their power. We have tried to recover our own power.

But we are more than this. This is not our only narrative. We are hope, art, music, life, partnership. We are new things and reclamation of old. We cannot wait. Slower, closer, lower. We can do this. We can do this because we are loved deeply in unimaginable grace. We can do this through relationship with the Creator and with those around us. We have seen the face of Christ in children and old people. We know the alternative narrative that despite what the 24-hour news cycle tells us, the world is good. We possess intercultural identities that endow us with the gift of prophecy, the gift of making something out of nothing, the gift of finding and building community in unlikely places with unlikely people. We can do this because we were created good, knit together in our mothers' wombs.

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These leaves are not for individual healing, although our experiences of an imminent God tell us individual healing and wholeness are important. These leaves are for entire nations, entire groups of people who experience trauma, relocation, colonial imperialism. These leaves are for those who are marginalized, displaced, colonized, as well as for those who through their benefiting from imperialism are stripped of their humanity.

As Katalina asked us Friday night, how does The United Church of Canada live into the intercultural vision of John of Patmos, God's intercultural future for us?

The river runs through the city for the healing of the nations. This is sweet water, unpolluted, sparkling and clear. This is water that is always moving, a river of life flowing long before we were born. We have been invited to this river of peace, clarity, and prosperity. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus consistently brings the disciples back to the water. They are always brought back to a place of abundance, to the place in which they were baptized. How do we join this flow? How do we come back to the places of our baptism in order to go out again? How are we a part of this river already in the streets, in our cities and villages? How do we respond to this river flowing, the tree that offers healing? How are you, the individual church members, not the national staff, the bearer of the healing leaves of the trees? What are you going to do? What is the story you will go out to live of this river running through this room today? The question Mary Oliver wrote seems apropos here: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

All of us will leave soon. We leave as human beings, as believers in the sacred, as ones who understand difference and diversity are gifts, not liabilities.

Friday night, we were asked if we could be the healing leaves of The United Church of Canada. Rivers shift and change the land through which they move; this river is shifting and changing us. We cannot be the same. There is a river of life flowing out from all of us, we the body of Christ. Stan talked about condensation—we here are the tiny droplets of water that float up, form a heavy cloud, and return to the earth to nourish it. Perhaps our part of the story is that we leave to be not the same people, but people disturbed by muddy waters to move into new intercultural relationship. Desmond Tutu said, "We can only be human together." Yes. We can only be human together. What are we waiting for?

Katalina got us to sing together. Will you sing now? "I've got a river of life..."

This we pray to the maker and mender of creation.