

A JOURNEY TOWARD LOVE
OF GOD, SELF, AND OTHERS

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Contents

ABSTRACT	i
INTRODUCTION	1
LOOKING BACK	2
Culture and Realizing My Social Location	3
Identifying my Sub-cultures	5
The Iceberg – Underlying Beliefs and Values	7
OLD BELIEFS	8
Hierarchy and Individualism	9
Christianity as the One True Religion	12
Race - Black and White	14
Identity as a Woman	17
EMBRACING NEW BELIEFS AND VALUES	19
Non-Dual Thinking	20
Interconnectedness	21
Implicit Bias	22
Compassion	23
Suffering and Acceptance	24
Feminism, Womanism and Intersectionality	26
God	27
LIVING INTO A NEW THING	29
Actively Loving My Neighbor	30
What is required of me?	31
Staying Awake	33
INVITATION TO CONTINUE THE JOURNEY	34
BIBLIOGRAPHY	36

ABSTRACT

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By
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One of the biggest divides in the author's Southern U.S. location is between Black and White people, including among Christians, because of the continued oppression of Black people by White people and the inequity still faced by Black people in all facets of life. At a turning point in her life, the author began a journey of looking deeply at her White culture and its history and theology upon which she based her identity. She shares the process she has gone through to understand how culture shaped her, let go of old beliefs that limited her, and find new beliefs and values as she pursues loving relationships with God, herself, and her neighbor. In addition, the author outlines the need for continuing to work on learning and growth through action, reflection, contemplation and spiritual practices. These are the foundations needed to stay awake to the work that is yet to be done in herself and in finding her role in solidarity with her Black sisters in working for social justice and building loving community. She shares her story in hopes that other White people will join in the journey.

INTRODUCTION

Like many White, middle class people, I spent most of my life with people who were like me in theology, lifestyle, or opinions on what was right and proper.¹ I didn't really notice the pattern or look for alternatives until a series of life changing events occurred within a couple of years of each other. My parents' illnesses and deaths, my only child going to college, the three-month deterioration and death of my husband from lung cancer, and being swept out of a job by a radical change in corporate direction all lead to the realization that it was time to reassess.

After much reflection, I chose learning how to live Matthew 22:34-40 as my guide toward the next stage of life. In a nutshell, Jesus says that what God really wants is for us to love God, love ourselves, and love our neighbor. I decided to attend Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur as the first step. I sold my house, rented a place near the school, and lived alone for the first time in my life. I started on a journey to find out what I believed about God, God's way of interacting with humanity, who I was created to be and what loving my neighbor might look like.

My approach to sharing my journey comes from two scriptures which reflect the process I have come to believe is necessary to create personal change. The first is Psalm 90:12 (NRSV) which says, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." The chapter begins with an affirmation that God, the Creator, is where the people find their home and security. The Psalmist continues with a reflection on how displeased God has been with the way the people have been living their lives. This verse seems to be a plea for them to review their history and learn from their mistakes. It has been necessary for me to look back and assess what

¹ Christine Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2013), 27.

might be learned from my successes and failures in life. What had influenced the choices of my life, spouse, participation in church outreach and missions, and in the corporate world? I had to see and let go of the habits and beliefs that had not served me or those around me.

The second scripture that guides this paper is Isaiah 43:18–19 (NRSV). Isaiah brings a message from God to the people of Israel and tells them, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” God is telling the people not to get hung up on the past, but to use it to inform the future. I had many new things to learn. From these new things is emerging a new way of living and being in the world.

The path from old to new has not been linear but has looked more like a spiral of discovering the ways that my theology “trickles down” into everything I believe. I have found joy in finding ways to heal the wounds inscribed on my heart from my past. There is freedom in learning and integrating them to create something new. By sharing my story and what I have learned about the process, I hope others will be inspired to join me on the journey. Their social location and life experiences will differ from mine, however, we all must come to terms with our beliefs about God, ourselves, and whoever we call the “other” if we are to fully live as Christ-followers in the world.

LOOKING BACK

In one of my first classes at seminary, we began to discuss the need for attention to the cultures that both parties in a conversation bring to an encounter. We began to name aspects of culture and I was surprised when someone said, “White.” I had never thought about “popular” or “American” culture as really being “White” culture. I am grateful that a few of the Black women

in the class were quick to bring me up to speed on that topic. The discussion opened a whole new world of thought that was very confusing considering my preconceived notions. I had lots of questions and was encouraged to educate myself. I began to read and look for classes that could help. I found a class on cultural intelligence I could cross-register for at McAfee School of Theology taught by Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes. Having read her book, Too Heavy a Yoke, I knew her class would help expand my understanding.

Culture and Realizing My Social Location

The first thing I learned was that culture is more than just the surface level preferences expressed in everyday living that I was considering to be culture. Culture is inclusive of the entirety of the “artificial, secondary environment that is superimposed on the natural.” It encompasses the way people, individually and collectively, think, feel, and react to the world around them.² It gives meaning and creates norms that control group behavior and help people define themselves and others.³

The metaphor of culture as the technology or software programs that we are individually “born into and acquire,” used in unique ways based on our own personalities, is a useful way to describe how subcultures intersect within each person.⁴ This definition particularly resonates with me after working for so many years in the software industry watching users adapt and use our software in creative ways that we could not have foreseen. This metaphor also reinforces for

² David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 80.

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴ Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 24.

me the understanding of culture as not being genetic, or pre-programmed, but individually constructed by the layers of subcultures in which we participate.⁵

Drawing on my experiences of marketing software to enlarge Rah's metaphor of culture as a software program, I saw how groups of users can evolve into a system that ensures a long and profitable future for a software company. Insider user groups are formed, all utilizing the same software from their unique location, that can become cult like in their devotion to share and promote ways to use the software. Their point of view about the software becomes a unified belief that it is better than any other software that seeks to provide the same functions. In fact, their beliefs function in similar ways to a religion with the production of "bibles" on how to make the most of the software, "evangelists" on social media promoting its use, and "tent meeting" like conferences with swag to mark yourself as part of the group. Certifications in the intricacies of the software design and the "proper" way to use the software are created. A hierarchy of elite users is formed that others look up to and are utilized as gatekeepers that feed the system with information on how to keep its position against any competing software and recruit new users.

I found it fascinating to learn how cultural theories describe the system of Whiteness and how similar they were to systems created in the software industry. White culture has become a machine of self-perpetuation and reinforcement for maintaining the group integrity by enforcing in-groups and out-groups. It receives validation from the larger society and maintains that position by building in rules for its own legitimacy. According to Berger and Luckmann, "techniques of intimidation, rational and irrational propaganda, mystification and, generally the

⁵ Ibid., 23.

manipulation of prestige symbols” are used. To keep insiders from leaving the group, “practical and theoretical procedures” are used to keep individuals from being tempted to expand their horizons beyond the group.⁶ They go on to theorize that eventually reification, or the memory of the group being self-created, morphs into the illusion that the group is “natural” or the “divine will.”⁷ I see the reality of these theories in the rhetoric of politics, economics and religion that have solidified positions on each side to the point that we vilify those that disagree with us.

Identifying my Sub-cultures

Depending upon the environmental context, a particular part of our identity may become “the primary lens” for interpreting that experience.⁸ While identifying the components of our identity is helpful in understanding ourselves, we need to recognize that some of our “layers seem to oppose one another” causing internal conflict.⁹ Our layers are not “discrete or separate; they are fused” and build on each other. Our race, our sexual orientation, and all other parts of our identity permeate all the other layers.¹⁰ As I began to think through the impact of living at the intersection of the ways in which I identify myself, I realized how much overlap there is and how much they are intertwined. Internalized messages from the subcultures of my youth often create internal conflict with the cultural content of the wider world even today.

After carefully looking back, I can now see the elements of culture that were uniquely combined in my life: White, middle class, professional, Christian, woman, feminist, Southern, American. I needed to understand how this had come about and integrate, rather than simply

⁶ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Kindle. (New York: Open Road Media, 2011), 87

⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁸ Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People I Bring the Voices of My People*, Kindle. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 1427.

⁹ Ibid., 1415.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1454.

reject, parts of myself. I needed to ask why I had made these choices. I needed to identify the beliefs underlying the cultural choices I had adopted. I wondered if I truly held those beliefs, or if I had allowed my “culture” to dictate my choices.¹¹

My family’s White, Southern, rural roots influenced my parents’ paths to becoming middle class. They were reared in poor, working families and both joined the Navy attempting to build better lives financially. Christianity has also been a strong influence on my identity and how I see other people. My family was fundamentalist Baptist with an emphasis on avoiding “hellfire and brimstone.” Much later, my husband and I were part of the reformed Presbyterian church which is more oriented towards a loving God. As a young girl, I was only somewhat aware of the changes in cultural norms taking place in the United States in the 1960’s and 1970’s because church was the focus of our social life.

My parents had not really felt a need for women to have a college education. Women were to work at home taking care of their families. But, after I was married, I took advantage of my employer’s tuition reimbursement plan and continued to work while I studied marketing. My husband and I became “yuppies,” buying a house, and striving to be upwardly mobile. Work was our primary identity and we both adopted the coping mechanism of workaholism to maintain the lifestyle we had chosen. In adulthood, I called myself a feminist and spoke out against misogyny while moving into a professional career. In the professional world, I had to learn to adapt myself to organizations still dominated by authoritarianism and paternalism.

Our daughter was born in 1994. Life expanded somewhat to a more suburban lifestyle but work remained the primary focus. We joined a “family oriented” White Presbyterian church and

¹¹ Livermore, 84-85.

we lived in a mostly White suburban neighborhood. Our social circle was our church and our daughter's private Christian school and activities, simulating somewhat the insular world within which I had grown up.

Throughout my seminary classes, I focused on learning ways to unravel my beliefs about God, the dichotomy of right versus wrong, what it means to be a woman, human bodies, and living with others. My beliefs were mixed up between what my family had taught me and what White culture told me I should believe. I had carried them, twisting together and pulling against each other through marriage, building a career, and raising a daughter. It has not been easy to untangle where certain beliefs had come from within my family and in the light of history.

The Iceberg – Underlying Beliefs and Values

Dr. Walker-Barnes' class also introduced me to the concept of the "iceberg model" of culture where, beneath the surface, artifacts, style preferences, and customs lie unconscious, shared beliefs and values.¹² I started digging deeper within myself to uncover the beliefs and values that lay beneath the surface of my version of "White culture" and where they came from. I discovered these beliefs were a result of a long history that had been handed down in my culture, through my family, to me.

From a sociocultural perspective, Katheryn Tanner's book, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*, helps me understand how the social groups I participated in had reinforced my beliefs, both positively and negatively. I could see how, when changing social groups, my actions and beliefs adapted to the change in culture.¹³

¹² Ibid., 82.

¹³ Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*, Kindle. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 585.

Growing up, I thought history was boring and irrelevant to my own life. The biographies of individuals were interesting but most of my teachers had only required memorization of names and dates. They did not draw out the meaning of changes that had occurred and how they influenced people's actions and attitudes. As I studied the history of Christianity, I began to see the pattern and evolution of beliefs that resulted from the social structures of the time periods we were studying. I could see how the theology was constructed as a means of explaining what was happening around them.¹⁴

I learned that even the ways in which the Bible was interpreted is based on the ways of knowing that were prominent at the time.¹⁵ It made sense now that philosophers spent so many words trying to explain how we know what we know. Descartes, living in a time when scientific discovering was growing, wrote about objectivity and reason which he considered the most important way to know.¹⁶ Modernism gave way to Postmodernism and the "possibility that truth is not singular or static" and is influenced by our social location. In a similar manner to philosophy, I can now see how theologians have been trying to work out how to know who God is and ways God reveals God's self to humanity.¹⁷

OLD BELIEFS

With a new understanding that there was much more beneath the cultural norms that I lived by, that these were the result of behaviors and attitudes stretching back into history long before I was born, I turned my attention to examining what beliefs are below the waterline of my

¹⁴ Laurel C. Schneider, Stephen G. Jr. Ray, eds., *The Work Group on Constructive Theology, Awake to the Moment: An Introduction to Theology*, ed. Laurel C. Schneider and Stephen G. Jr. Ray, Kindle. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press., 2016), 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

cultural iceberg. Beliefs about social structures and the place of the individual, Christianity as the only way to God, my race and gender identification as a woman were important areas of discovery.

Hierarchy and Individualism

I found that religious beliefs are a form of culture¹⁸ and that my Christian beliefs provided a lot of the structure for how I interacted with others.¹⁹ I realized how intensely the theological beliefs of my family of origin could still “infiltrate and inform . . . the very understanding and formulation of proposals of proper comportment” in my mind so many years later.²⁰

Kathryn Tanner provides me some insight into how our understanding of the ways God relates to the world have been used to justify a hierarchical view of relationships. God is seen as transcendent, out there, above everything, and humanity is far below, fallen, and sinful.²¹ God wills that human society be structured in a way that maintains social order²² just as the realm of God is ordered with God above the angels.²³ The Bible has many more stories that describe how people high up in a hierarchy exhibited strength and power than it has stories showing the power of collaboration.²⁴

Throughout history we see the many ways this belief has led to the creation of defined hierarchies of superiors with power and privilege, and subordinates that lack access to

¹⁸ Tanner, 156.

¹⁹ Ibid., 149.

²⁰ Ibid., 186.

²¹ Ibid., 1639.

²² Ibid., 1753.

²³ Ibid., 1656.

²⁴ Livermore, 129.

“rewarding work, goods and services, economic power or prestige.”²⁵ This belief in hierarchy has been used to support the idea of a militaristic chain of command where God is the “supreme commander” with “lieutenants leading to an understanding of God relating to the world through power and force of will.”²⁶ Churches presume a chain of command from God to ministers who prescribe God’s way and will to the people.²⁷ I thought I had escaped these beliefs when I stopped attending an evangelical church. But I found hierarchy embedded even within the structure and theology of the Presbyterian church. The attitudes and patterns of behavior associated with patriarchy also result in a hierarchical model of God’s relationship with the world.²⁸ Patriarchy is used to delineate between what women and men are capable of and the areas of life in which they should be able to participate.

I can now understand how the directive I received as a child to “do as I was told” and not ask questions or “back talk” my father was a judgment on my right to be openly curious. My father, being a pastor, was doubly sure that he was the final authority. Unfortunately, I still hold somewhere in my body and mind the imprint of the belief that I was simply to obey, which conflicts with my adult belief that I have the responsibility to speak up. This has made it difficult for me to have open relationships with people above me in the hierarchy of an organization.

As a child, I also assimilated into my thinking a very Western belief in the importance of the individual. It is embedded in the foundation on which America was built. Robin Diangelo, author of *White Fragility*, identifies individualism as one of two most challenging Western

²⁵ Tanner, 1648.

²⁶ Ibid., 1672.

²⁷ Ibid., 1682.

²⁸ Ibid., 1691.

ideologies for White people to overcome.²⁹ Individualism sees success as based on our level of desire and how hard we “search for something better and for something more fulfilling.”³⁰ Even while we claim identity with our social group, we believe being a member of a particular group is “irrelevant to our opportunities.” Structures and systems have no bearing on whether or not a person can be as successful in any way they choose.³¹ I was taught that anyone, man, woman, White, or Black, could achieve whatever they put their mind to.

Living between a strong belief in hierarchical authority in my family and the increasing culture of “it’s all about me” culture in society has caused me great internal conflict. As part of the second half of the White baby boomer generation, culture exhorted me to see others as useful, or not, and relationships were built accordingly.³² I was taught that learning to think for myself, being self-directed, and following the rules was extremely important and would lead to success. As a woman, I knew that was not completely true. When I continued to experience paternalism and authoritarianism in my work environment, I was perplexed and disoriented.

Of course, I did not consider that this culture of building success extended primarily to White people. I did not recognize at the time that I needed to dig deeper to understand the wide-reaching harm caused by individualism. I can now see how these embedded beliefs provide the opportunity and justification to marginalize others³³ and support the structures meant to maintain authority over those lower in the hierarchy.

²⁹ Robin DiAngelo and Michael Eric Dyson, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, Reprint edition. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 9.

³⁰ Livermore, 128.

³¹ DiAngelo, 9.

³² Linda P. Morton, “Segmenting Baby Boomers - ProQuest,” *Public Relations Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 46.

³³ Rah, 120.

Christianity as the One True Religion

There is a “double edge capacity” to religious beliefs. They can provide “belonging, purpose, and clearly defined direction in life” and can also create a “sharp distinction between them and us.”³⁴ The “them” might be “non-religious” cultural activities, other denominations, or other religions. When examining the relationship of religion to culture, Soon-Chan Rah points out that there are even divisive between beliefs in Christian faith and Westernized Americanized form of Christianity. As Americans, we “assume the Western paradigm is normative” and do not see the ways in which we privilege our White form of expressing our faith in “styles of worship, theological priorities, and methods of evangelism.”³⁵

The idea of the church as keeping Christians safe from the world, or as depicted by Soon-Chan Rah as “Noah’s Ark”, is a fitting description of my family’s belief.³⁶ Their fundamentalist theology taught that Christians should be separate from the world. The preaching I heard emphasized the sin of being worldly and the songs we sang emphasized all the ways we should consider that “this world is not our home.”³⁷ Socializing primarily with other people whose beliefs were similar to ours fostered a deep distrust of the ways in which the secular world was changing in the 1960’s and 70’s. We needed to look, sound, and act differently than the “world.”

³⁴ David R. Brockman, “Introduction,” in *The Gospel Among Religions Christian Ministry, Theology and Spirituality in a Multifaith World*, ed. David R. Brockman and Ruben L. F. Habito (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 6.

³⁵ Rah, 124.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁷ Calvin P. Van Reken, “Christians in This World: Pilgrims or Settlers?,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 43, no. 2 (November 2008), 236.

George Lindbeck envisions religions as “language-like entities” that define the “experiences and beliefs of adherents.”³⁸ My father, more than my mother, believed that isolation kept a Christian from straying into wrong beliefs including those of strands of Christianity other than his own. Even the timing and form of baptism was so important that he would not attend my daughter’s baptism in the Presbyterian tradition of sprinkling babies. But when my husband was ordained as an elder, that event fit his theology of men as leaders of the family and the church, so he attended the service.

Even though I grew to accept the “cultural, social, economic and even political dimensions of life in post-modern times,” like many Christians, I had little interest in learning anything about the actual beliefs and practices of other religions. Even in my early explorations, there was always a line drawn, a clear dualism defined to ensure we were sure of what was not only different, but incorrect, about other’s beliefs.³⁹ However, even when I was in elementary school, I remember having some vague understanding that my beliefs were really my parents’ beliefs. I had that conversation with my mother’s sister on my grandparents’ porch one summer when we were visiting them in Alabama. I do not know how we started talking about religion, but I remember her outrage when I told her I was only Baptist because my parents were Baptist. With childish conviction, I assured her I would probably be Hindu if my parents had been from India.

What I did not know at the time was that the struggle to keep religion beliefs separate from one another had a long history. I learned that in 1883, in conjunction with the World’s Fair,

³⁸ David R. Brockman, “Thinking Theologically about Religious Others: Christian Theologies of Religions,” in *The Gospel Among Religions Christian Ministry, Theology and Spirituality in a Multifaith World*, ed. David R. Brockman and Ruben L. F. Habito (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 29.

³⁹ Amos Yong, *The Missiological Spirit: Christian Mission Theology in the Third Millennium Global Context* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 49.

representatives of religions and faiths were brought together to initiate a global dialogue. In Chicago again, over a hundred years later, the Parliament of World Religions was held. The task in 1993 was the “healing of wounds of the global community.” They wanted to share resources from their own traditions and a declaration was made that “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among religions. There will be no peace among religions without dialogue among the religions.”⁴⁰ This suspicion is especially prevalent in more fundamentalist Christian denominations over a hundred years later. A friend of mine who utilized yoga during her chemotherapy treatment felt guilt about its association with Hinduism and sought out a “Christian stretch” teacher instead of asking “what can I learn” or “how does this expand or clarify what I already know to be true.”

Race - Black and White

While ascribing to the belief that all people are created equal by God, my parents believed in the “separation of the races” and used Old Testament injunctions against the people of Israel marrying outside their own community in support of this belief. This belief was intertwined with theological beliefs about hierarchy and the lingering influence of pseudoscientific teaching about race. I now see the unspoken influence of their Southern upbringing during a time when Jim Crow laws were prevalent.

The concept of race, while having no basis in fact, grew strong as a result of the European advancement of colonialism and empire dominating the lands of people of color⁴¹ and has become deeply embedded in American life. Depending upon what part of the country the speaker or their family lived, the reason given for the Civil War may vary. My mother firmly

⁴⁰ Brockman, “Thinking Theologically,” 6.

⁴¹ Walker-Barnes, 747.

believed that the war was a result of the Supreme court cases in the 1820's and 1830's that established the "supremacy of the federal law and limited the rights of states."⁴² However, states' rights were only one of the reasons for secession. The use of slaves to build the economy had created a culture and lifestyle that became part of the Southern identity and they did not want to relinquish it.

Christian theology was used to justify both sides of the slavery issue. The people supporting slavery used Calvin's theology of providence to defend the practice. They argued that since "slavery does exist, then it must be the will of God, otherwise He would bring it to an end."⁴³ Slaveholders rationalized that any "brutality of slavery" was mitigated by conversion which would bring "bliss in the more important afterworld."⁴⁴ Protestant denominations split, North versus South, over slavery.

As the Civil War ended, Southern Protestants had to determine how to cope with the possibility that God's providence towards slavery was ending and the Confederacy was facing defeat. Hoping that this would not happen, a Macon pastor "staked out a pragmatic middle ground" that continued to support White supremacy while speculating that "an elevated status for Blacks might soon be at hand."⁴⁵ By the 1880's, liberal Southern theologians had accepted the

⁴² David Phillips Hansen, *Native Americans, The Mainline Church, and the Quest for Interracial Justice* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2016), accessed December 5, 2019, <https://login.web2.ctsnet.edu:2248/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1449478&site=eds-live>, 56.

⁴³ Steve W Lemke, "The Uneasy Conscience of Southern Baptists: Support for Slavery among the Founders of the Southern Baptist Convention," *American Baptist Quarterly* 34, no. 3-4 (2015): 261.

⁴⁴ John B. Lexington Boyles, *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

reality of freed slaves as the providence of God and were supporting the continuing religious development of Black people.⁴⁶

More than one hundred years later, *The Bell Curve*, published in 1994, encouraged a new round of racial hierarchy with its theory that intelligence test score differences between racial and ethnic groups reflected genetic makeup. Today, scientists have debunked these efforts to maintain white biological supremacy.⁴⁷ These beliefs, however, continue to be embedded in White cultural memory. Some people believe we should eliminate “race” from our social discourse because of the lack of scientific basis while others acknowledge that our understanding of race is a “social construction.”⁴⁸

Dr. Walker-Barnes, in *I Bring the Voices of My People*, talks about her experience of teaching cultural intelligence, the course I took with her, and other classes where students are asked to think deeply about their race. She notes the reluctance White students show for making more than a passing mention of their racial identity.⁴⁹ She explains that, for White people, White Culture is theoretical and goes “unnamed and unseen in day to day lives.” To explain why this is, she uses the analogy of “fish don’t know they’re in water” and aren’t aware they are wet because they have never experienced dry.⁵⁰ Whether this obliviousness of race is a result of trying to distance ourselves from the “mean racist” or because we endorse a “color-blind racial ideology,”⁵¹ it has prevented us, White people, from identifying the social structures, beliefs, and habits that continue to function in ways from which we benefit.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 171.

⁴⁷ Walker-Barnes, 708.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 721.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2547.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2839.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2790.

Identity as a Woman

Eco-social theory tells us that we “literally incorporate, biologically, the material and social world in which we live.”⁵² Not only do women embody the distortions of self that are placed on them, unconsciously they are passing it on to the next generation.⁵³ My identity as a woman, and how I live and move in my body are deeply tangled up with the theologies of hierarchy and patriarchy. Thinking back through the previous three generations of my family, cultural as well as religious beliefs about women have evolved.

My maternal great-grandmother was born in the United States during the period of change brought about by the Civil War, westward migration, and industrialization. During this time, the Cult of True Womanhood (1820-1860), promoted beliefs that have had long lasting effects on how White women view their role in life today. The movement had four core tenants that were ordained by God as the ways in which women should be judged – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. By exhibiting these characteristics, women become a “better Eve” and they can participate in the world’s redemption through their suffering.⁵⁴

My maternal grandmother was married and had her third child when political and social structures changed again as women gained the right to vote. I do not know how much the suffrage movement and voting affected her personally as, at the time, she was living at a turpentine camp in a dirt floored cabin provided by the owner. But by the turn of the century, the

⁵² N. Krieger, "Embodiment: a conceptual glossary for epidemiology," *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 59, no. 5 (2005): 352, doi:10.1136/jech.2004.024562.

⁵³ Joy Ann McDougall, “Rising with Mary: Re-envisioning a Feminist Theology of the Cross and Resurrection,” *Theology Today* 69, no. 2 (July 2012), 171.

⁵⁴ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): doi:10.2307/2711179., 152.

ideas about the “New Woman” became a “mixture of challenge and acceptance, of change and continuity” that brought opportunity as well as guilt and confusion about a woman’s role.⁵⁵

My mother was born at the end of the Great Depression and grew up during World War II as Americans became more globally aware. There were no jobs for women in her Alabama hometown and she made the remarkable decision to join the Navy. She enlisted and rode a bus to Virginia for basic training. When she married in the early 1950’s, America was booming economically and moving into the Golden Age of Television.

In the 1960’s and early 1970’s, as I grew up, young women drew courage from the anti-war and Civil Rights movements to demand that patriarchy end and the equality of women be acknowledged. Many people, both men and women, expressed confusion and anger about this disruption of the norms of women’s behavior.⁵⁶ Within fundamentalist groups, *The Total Woman*, a book by Marabel Morgan, started a counter movement that provided validation for traditional marriage roles. Drawing heavily on the Bible as the authority, the book promoted “the four A’s” of marriage: accepting, admiring, adapting to, and appreciating their husbands.⁵⁷ My mother, in her desire to keep me close to God, gave me a copy of the book in hopes that it would prepare me properly for marriage.

What I learned, much later, was that the second wave of the feminist movement with which I identified was made up of mostly White, middle class, college-educated women who were focused on achieving equality with men. Individual achievement defined success, and

⁵⁵ Ibid.,174.

⁵⁶ *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, dir. Mary Dore, perf. Pamela Allen Chude, Judith Arcana, Alta (United States of America: Independent, 2014), Netflix.

⁵⁷ Janet Laurentia Fallon, B.A. "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Total Woman Movement." OhioLINK An OH-Tech Consortium Member. 1979: 130. Accessed January 18, 2017. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/osu1262703480/inline.

money and power were the signs of achieving equality within the existing capitalistic system.⁵⁸ We never considered that we were also buying into individualism and self-sufficiency or that becoming “like men” was becoming the means to achieve equality. We thought we had no choice but to live up to being invincible as declared in the feminist anthem of our time, “I Am Woman.”⁵⁹

I find it difficult to reconcile the patriarchy I still see, in the church and the culture, with the theological claim that we are all made in God’s image. I wonder how God, if really male, Father or Son, can truly relate to and love women. Pronoun changes, by themselves, do not create the needed emotional and spiritual effect.⁶⁰ Along with reimagining the images we use in worship to include both male and female, and that reflect a variety of cultures and races we can begin to embrace multiple facets of God’s nature.⁶¹ This gives me hope that I can find myself in a broader aspect of God’s image.

EMBRACING NEW BELIEFS AND VALUES

But how do you break out of the patterns of thinking that have been taught and modeled from birth? In the churches I attended, we were exhorted at the end of every service to “Go out into the world and spread the love of God.” We were inspired but not given the tools necessary to be able to see and replicate what loving in the world looked like. I needed concrete tools and practices as well as input from a wide variety of new perspectives. Facing how we arrived here is painful but it is not something that can be shrugged off as if it didn’t exist.⁶² Looking back has

⁵⁸ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 92.

⁵⁹ Songfacts, “I Am Woman by Helen Reddy - Songfacts,” accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/helen-reddy/i-am-woman>.

⁶⁰ Jennie S. Knight, *Feminist Mysticism and Images of God: A Practical Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2011), 3-4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶² Rah, 21.

cleared the way to move forward into the new thing that God is creating in me through new beliefs. I have been introduced to the fact that everything is not binary, is interconnected, and full of unseen bias. I have been introduced to new ways to foster compassion and engage suffering with acceptance that are life changing.

Non-Dual Thinking

As I wrestled with the problem of how to move out of old ways of thinking, one of my practical theology professors, Dr. Bill Harkins, listened thoughtfully and suggested I needed to learn about non-dualistic thinking. I had never heard of it but was willing to investigate and read Fr. Richard Rohr's book, *Falling Upward*. I learned how to hold in creative tension the possibility of holding awareness of two ideas when it appears both cannot be true.⁶³ This is useful whenever I am struggling with something that I cannot analytically reason my way into an explanation.⁶⁴ Rohr provided me a path to combat reactivity and judgmental categorization by examining a situation or feeling and giving myself permission to take time to examine and learn what it may have to teach me.⁶⁵

Nonduality was new to me but has a long history of use in Eastern traditions. As I studied this contemplative way of thinking, I saw how it could slow down my automatic labeling and categorizing. It can lift me out of the norm of linear thinking that leads to a finite answer and prevent me from becoming extremely attached to "a truth" and not wanting to rethink it. Rohr says, "'Presence' is my word for this encounter, a different way of knowing and touching the moment. It is much more vulnerable and leaves us without a sense of control." At first this loss

⁶³ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, A Wiley Imprint, 2011), 35.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

of control was scary but, with repetition, allowed for a greater ease and openness with life and other people as well as an interest in meditation and Buddhist theology.⁶⁶

Interconnectedness

Once I relaxed into the opportunity to take in new information without instant evaluation and began to let go of the need to be self-sufficient and invulnerable, it was easy to accept that all things, people, animals, plants, and all creation, are interconnected. Rather than viewing the world as “mechanical structure”, the body as a “machine”, and “life as a competitive struggle for existence,” I could see the web of life that Fritjof Capra describes. He points out that there is a spiritual aspect at the core of deep ecological awareness that is “the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging or connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole.”⁶⁷

Tibetan Buddhist medicine teaches that our bodies are porous, interdependent, and interconnected with human, spiritual, and ecological communities.⁶⁸ This teaching reminds me that I affect and am affected by everything and everyone I come in contact with. When I took the Cognitive Based Compassion Training, a partnership between Emory University and Tibetan Buddhist Drepung Monastery in Atlanta, we did an exercise that helped me visualize and feel the connections shared among the group. We stood in a circle facing inwards and the instructor asked us to step into the middle of the circle if we agreed with a series of statements such as foods we liked, color preferences, places we had visited. Very quickly we saw that we had much

⁶⁶ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2016), 35.

⁶⁷ Fritjof Capra, “Deep Ecology & The Rise of Systems Thinking,” in *The Web of Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 7.

⁶⁸ Linda Barnes and Ines Talamantez, eds., “Religion, Healing and the Body,” in *Teaching Religion and Healing* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 34.

in common even though we had never met before. Laughter rippled across the room as we stepped forward to acknowledge the quirky or awkward things we loved or had experienced.

Implicit Bias

As a White woman, my first reaction to implicit bias mirrored a common reaction described by Robin DiAngelo. I was defensive.⁶⁹ I believed the myth that I was only accountable for actions of intentional harm. But then I read the Implicit Bias Research Report which emphasizes how important it is to become aware of our gut reactions to others and hold ourselves accountable to not act on that implicit bias. I realized that it is not about being guilty because a feeling comes up within our body because of our cultural influences and experiences. However, there is a responsibility to know ourselves well enough to acknowledge the feeling or thought so we can change the way we act. The legal argument for negligence or responsibility is that a reasonable person, “not driven by self-interests or self-deception, has the ability to recognize their behavior” as negatively impacting someone else.⁷⁰ The report references an anonymous quote that brought this idea home for me: “It may not have been your intention when you were crossing the road for you to step on my foot, but the impact of you stepping on my foot, it still remains.”⁷¹ I am responsible for harm that I unintentionally cause by my thoughtlessness or lack of awareness of my biases toward other people.

The process of uncovering our biases can be distressing, and, if we face our humanity and imperfection, we may experience pain and awareness of where we have inflicted pain on others. Dr. Kristen Neff, psychologist, researcher, and writer on self-compassion, suggests that the way

⁶⁹ DiAngelo, 42.

⁷⁰ “2016 State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review,” n.d., accessed October 22, 2019, <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/my-product/2016-state-of-the-science-implicit-bias-review/>, 67.

⁷¹ Ibid., 66.

to alleviate the pain of acknowledgement is to remember that everyone has unconscious bias; it is part of what we all share as humans. With this understanding, we can also extend compassion to others who are dealing with their own biases. When compassion has lowered our defenses, we can address issues that have been brought to our attention.⁷²

Compassion

I realized, while taking the CBCT class, that compassion and empathy were not among the foundational tools for living in my family culture. Perfectionism and judgment were more the norm, so I spent an entire semester doing a deep dive into the work of some great writers on compassion. The Dalai Lama defines compassion as the “wish for the other to be free of suffering.”⁷³ Even more, he says, we show compassion when we “cherish the wellbeing of others.”⁷⁴ One of the exercises in our CBCT class asked us to choose a common food or clothing item from our everyday life and think backwards from this moment and list all the people that had a part and bringing it to us. This exercise helped me recognize how interdependent I truly am on the work and contribution of others in all aspects of my life and to think more deeply about the people and their working conditions that provide me with these items.

I also learned that the work of building compassion is both an internal and external process. According to the Dalai Lama, in order to build the capacity to extend compassion to others, we must learn to recognize ways in which we suffer and how to have compassion for ourselves. Then we will be able to “extend that recognition to the suffering of others.”⁷⁵

⁷² Dan Harris, “10% Happier Podcast with Dan Harris,” Kryptonite for the Inner Critic, Self-Compassion Series, Kristin Neff, PhD, n.d., <https://www.tenpercent.com/podcast>.

⁷³ The Dalai Lama, *An Open Heart Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2001), 91.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

Becoming aware of and letting go of my reflexive judgments allowed me to become more open to seeing other people's behavior or a difficult situation as a call to compassion instead of something that sets off alarm bells.⁷⁶ The practice of compassion often brings up a fear of feeling pain. However, moving towards that pain, knowing that this "courageous work of opening to suffering" will be worth it in order to build relationships with others that recognize our equal participation in a connected web of life.⁷⁷ Through the practice of compassion, we increase our ability to notice pain and respond with an urge to help ourselves as well as recognize and alleviate the suffering of others.⁷⁸

We then learned a form of meditation that helps us extend compassion to ourselves and then to those we love. But the training did not stop there. We then practiced sending out compassion for those we felt neutral toward and then towards those we found difficult to interact with or even hated or despised. Since then, I have practiced this technique when I knew I was going into a difficult conversation or had to engage with someone whose mannerisms or actions annoy me. I have been amazed how it grounded and connected me with their humanity and that they, they like me, wanted to be safe, happy and find peace and joy in life.

Suffering and Acceptance

Pema Chodron teaches that by practicing compassion through meditation, we will come to understand more clearly that all humans suffer. This meditation practice opens us to an increased desire for those around us to be free from the actions and ways of thinking that lead to

⁷⁶ Gabrielle Bernstein, *Judgment Detox: Release the Beliefs That Hold You Back from Living A Better*, Kindle. (Simon & Schuster Inc., 2018), 18.

⁷⁷ Pema Chodron, *The Places That Scare You A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2002), 50.

⁷⁸ Christopher K. Germer, *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions*, Kindle. (New York, NY: Guilford Publications, 2009), 1321.

them/us thinking, division and close-mindedness.⁷⁹ She says, “we suffer when we resist the noble and irrefutable truth of impermanence and death.” We want to have order and predictability in the world around us. We act as if we, and everyone else, should never grow or change and dislike having to adapt to change. We look for ways to distract and deny our interconnectedness with others through anger, work, food, and other addictions that lead to suffering for ourselves and everyone around us.⁸⁰

Pema Chodron teaches that opening ourselves to suffering is “courageous work” and that “when we know our own darkness well,” we can “be present with the darkness of others.”⁸¹ My primary form of distraction is work or action. I still struggle with allowing myself to be still and present to what is going on in my body so that I can be truly present with others. I had to practice presence with suffering in my Clinical Pastoral Education class acting as chaplain and case worker for those experiencing homelessness in downtown Atlanta. Each morning that summer, I talked with fifteen to twenty people and tried to help them obtain food, medical and psychiatric care, clothing, shelter, and government approved education. People lined up before the doors were open and the waiting room filled up with more people than we could possibly see.

Because of the gravity of each person’s need, the difficulty of trying to navigate complicated systems and the pressure to serve everyone who came in, I reflexively fell back on my workaholic task orientation to get through each morning. We had class in the afternoon, and I found I had to practice meditation at lunch time to try to slow myself down internally enough to participate. As I continued to meditate each day, the enemies of compassion, pity, overwhelm,

⁷⁹ Chodron, 53.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁸¹ Ibid., 50.

and self-protective distancing,⁸² fell away. I found I was slowing down as I talked with people, taking time to really listen to their words and the feelings behind them. I stopped seeing them as helpless and myself as the helper which made room for true connection.⁸³ I began to see that the practice of self-compassion was allowing me to be vulnerable enough to feel the client's and my own suffering caused by the limited ways in which I was able to help. The concept of how I am connected physically and emotionally with every person I encountered became very real for me.

Feminism, Womanism and Intersectionality

Reading Womanist theologians and ethicists has helped me understand that patriarchy should not be the primary focus for feminism. Among others, Emilie Townes helped me see that there is no “universal” woman whose story expresses the totality of what all women face in the world. She points out that each woman has a unique story that comes from their particular experience and location at the intersection of race and class.⁸⁴ Reading the writing of Emily Townes also made me aware of the need for a new vision of wholeness and how deeply separate we keep our mind, body, and spirit.⁸⁵

I cannot assume that my experience as a White, middle class woman is every woman's experience or even that the issues I find important are the most important issues for other women. There may be some similar experiences from which I can learn new ways to interpret and act. However, in order to truly be in relationship with other women, I must listen, prioritize

⁸² Ibid., 77.

⁸³ Ibid., 77.

⁸⁴ Emily M. Townes, “Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emily M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 37.

⁸⁵ Emily M. Townes, “To Be Called Beloved Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emily M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 185.

their unique experience, place attention on the details of their story, and set aside my habitual response of putting forward any experience of mine that might be similar. In addition, I had been living either in the world of mental or spiritual thinking and doing while neglecting to see the experience in my body. Through yoga and meditation, I started to understand the connection between my thinking and the physical sensations. As I realized how much body mattered in my context, I could begin to take in the impact that living at the intersection of racism and classism has on the bodies of Black women and girls.

Advances in health sciences have made it possible to study how “stress, social and economic inequality produces measurable changes in the human body at the genetic and synaptic level.”⁸⁶ Thinking back on the programs where I had volunteered that were attempting to “help” or offer “a process” that would solve women’s economic issues, I could see them as just another way of trying to fit each woman into a White, middle class framework. We missed seeing the whole woman, in context, and the importance of her unique experience of body, mind, and spirit.

God

After all this studying and reading many books by old White men of history, wise Womanist, Feminist, and post-colonialist theologians and ethicists, I have come to understand God is primarily interest is relationships and desires for all creation to flourish.⁸⁷ While I grew up with a theology that God’s relationship with humanity was one on one and personal, I now recognize it as both personal and universal.⁸⁸ I’ve come to see Jesus as the primary means of interpreting the true nature of God and he never exhibited any of the dominating supremacy of

⁸⁶ Lucy A. Jewel, “The Biology of Inequality,” *Denver Law Review* 95, no. 3 (July 2018): 611.

⁸⁷ Schneider, 185.

⁸⁸ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 20.

the God I was shown as a child.⁸⁹ Jesus was all about non-violence, service, giving of self, and relational love.⁹⁰ Now, I see the Bible as the story of how God has been present in creation, in every historical event, evil or good, compassionately witnessing everything and calling us to “justice, joy, love, wisdom and peace.”⁹¹

This concept of God changes everything because “our God concept reflects back to us the image of what we aspire to become.”⁹² My first spiritual director asked me, “Where do you see God working?” I did not have a clue what she was talking about. But, with the understanding that “the world around us is both the hiding place and revelation of God,”⁹³ I see God working everywhere and in everyone. There is beauty in both the diversity and unity of people, animals, and plants. The physical and the spiritual life are no longer separate. What I do individually, matters in the corporate life of the world.⁹⁴ Richard Rohr describes love as “the attraction of all things toward all things, a universal language and underlying energy that keeps showing itself despite our best efforts to resist it.”⁹⁵ My job is to resist trying to make life a project of mind over matter or willpower. My job is to love God, myself and neighbor. To keep myself, mind, body, and spirit, in God’s loving “flow of energy willingly allowed and exchanged, without requiring payment in return.”⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration How the World’s Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (New York and London: Convergent Books, 2016), 92.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁹³ Rohr, “The Universal Christ,” 15.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹⁶ Rohr, 71.

LIVING INTO A NEW THING

I am coming to the end of my time set aside for studying academically. I have seen how my identity shaped me to fit-in and succeed within the system of White supremacy. However, I am also learning that my true identity is not in my theological history or my Southern heritage. My new understandings are helping me let go, loosen my attachment to my stories and “understand that they are part of the stream of human history.” The people who taught and influenced me were just playing out their own histories. I cannot despise them but do not want to replicate what has gone before me. Without taking the time to see these things, nothing would have changed.⁹⁷ Using the analogy of culture as the software on which our lives run, I have updated some of my software and acquired some new programs.

I am moving into the season of the “something new” God promised in Isaiah 43:18–19. I often find myself in conversations that eventually become a lament about everything that is wrong with our world and with the people and situations of daily life. These conversations are the “easy way out” when we are overwhelmed and looking for consolation by angrily speaking out against people who we deem to be “wrong.” I want to stay grounded in the love God extends to us and the strength provided by the Holy Spirit to live a liberated and liberating life. I want to stay focused on Matthew 22:34-40. I am looking forward to new ways of loving God and myself and utilizing the tools I have acquired to find effective ways to love all my neighbors, not just the ones like me. I want to be in community with others who are on this journey.

⁹⁷ Wanda V. Magee, *The Inner Work of Social Justice Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities Through Mindfulness*, Kindle. (New York: Tarcher Perigee, an Imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, 2019), 290.

Actively Loving My Neighbor

It is important that I expand my concern for justice beyond traditional feminism, equality to men, to intersectional feminism, the understanding that there is great diversity in the ways each woman is impacted because of their particular embodiment of race, age, class, socioeconomic status, physical or mental ability, gender, sexual identity, religion, or ethnicity.⁹⁸ Because of my social location and history, I'm called to learn to love my neighbor beginning with relationships between Black and White women. It requires not just looking at the history of oppression that Black women have experienced but seeing it as a "hidden part of the present as well."⁹⁹

Dr. Walker-Barnes recommends that White women like me need to choose to "become more Christian than White." She describes this as a process of "rehumanization" or recovery of "the fullness of the image of God through dialogue, self-examination, confession, repentance."¹⁰⁰ It is not a one time action, but a wholistic and iterative, cyclical process that I must commit to for life with the "goal of building beloved community."¹⁰¹ This term, most widely known through Martin Luther King, Jr., was coined by Josiah Royce, a teacher of W.E.B. Dubois. He envisioned this community as one "united in love by persons who have been transformed by the power of love." Love is seen as the "antidote to individualism, egocentrism, moral independence and separation."¹⁰²

⁹⁸ "What Does Intersectional Feminism Actually Mean? | IWDA," accessed April 23, 2020, <https://iwda.org.au/what-does-intersectional-feminism-actually-mean/>.

⁹⁹ Magee, 277.

¹⁰⁰ Walker-Barnes, 3610.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 3777.

¹⁰² Ibid., 3643.

The result of this transformational love requires a new definition of what it means for me, a “White woman,” to accept Dr. Walker-Barnes challenge of a “commitment to justice in a concrete particular arena” without losing sight of how it is connected to other social issues that also need justice making.¹⁰³ Simply having the “intention and desire for love” is not enough. My actions must express that love¹⁰⁴ through solidarity, not support. bell hooks defines support as actions that prop up a weak structure which has resulted in portraying other women as “helpless and powerless” and pitting women against each other instead of in solidarity with each other.¹⁰⁵ This is the type of relationship I see in the mission and outreach programs or nonprofits where I have volunteered. These programs were built on the premise of a small group of people, usually White, setting the rules by which others could receive help with some problem.

I have seen very few examples of solidarity, mostly between individuals but rarely between groups within organizations. Dr. Walker-Barnes describes solidarity as a “network of mutual support and empowerment, experience of love, affirmation, support and respect,”¹⁰⁶ a safe friendship.¹⁰⁷ Solidarity is not coming together with hatred toward a common enemy¹⁰⁸ as often occurs in our society. Instead it requires an alignment with one another in ways that embody the society, envisioned by Royce, that we are attempting to build.¹⁰⁹

What is required of me?

As I move into this new phase of life, I am considering what will be required of me to accept the challenge of committing to a specific area of working toward justice. Finding an

¹⁰³ Ibid., 4069.

¹⁰⁴ Livermore, 233.

¹⁰⁵ hooks, 69.

¹⁰⁶ Walker-Barnes, 4045.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 4057.

¹⁰⁸ hooks, 162.

¹⁰⁹ Walker-Barnes, 4066.

organization with which to work whose culture is not supportive of but in solidarity with people is going to require some research and experimentation. Understanding my values and how they form a framework of touchstones for successfully moving forward seems a necessary foundation for this work.¹¹⁰ I have been thinking about what values I need to embody that will be the most important to nurture. I have identified vulnerability and humility as key to learning to live in this liminal space where there is no sure path, no process to follow or clear destination. However, it is an opportunity to listen to the Spirit, continuing to enjoy the people I meet and learn new things.

I do not enjoy feeling vulnerable. Vulnerability generates fear in me that I must not turn away or push down. I must lean into it with compassion if I am to let go and learn from the stories and wounds that being vulnerable brings up.¹¹¹ Sharing what comes up with others and acknowledging the attached feelings diminishes the story's power to harm myself or others and can generate healing.¹¹² It is especially hard to lower my defenses when I am confronted with ways I maintain the illusion the supremacy of my White racial identity.¹¹³ However, I have experienced the value of staying with the discomfort often enough to know that it opens up the opportunity to engage with others in deep ways.

To be vulnerable will require me to surrender to a mindset of humility, releasing my inner drive to categorize, evaluate, and process information to arrive at an opinion. I constantly need to “pay attention to thinking,” turn off “cruise control,”¹¹⁴ question what I am assuming and be open to new interpretations.¹¹⁵ I will need to pay attention to how my responses might silence

¹¹⁰ Magee, 274.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 278.

¹¹² Ibid., 265.

¹¹³ Ibid., 291.

¹¹⁴ Walker-Barnes, 152.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 153.

others by minimizing¹¹⁶ or disputing the truth¹¹⁷ of their point of view. By consciously celebrating difference and commonality will allow growth.¹¹⁸

Being vulnerable also requires that I be unyieldingly honest about my motivation in relationships. It would be extremely easy to fall back on habits of generosity as “helping” or “saving” others.¹¹⁹ Allowing myself to believe I know what they should do or how to fix a problem puts me in a position of domination and control. This not only dehumanizes both of us but re-inscribes the harmful stories of White supremacy and a powerful, manipulative God.¹²⁰ Instead, relationship and solidarity require a mutually enriching partnership and reciprocal learning.¹²¹

Staying Awake

No matter how well intentioned and committed I am to loving my neighbor, I must understand that true participation in this process is more than “abiding by a set of rules.” It is a process of making a “wholistic reorientation towards God and away from supremacy”¹²² in all my actions. It will require practice. Not just repeatedly doing the next right thing but having a supporting praxis that orients and re-oriens me towards love. I have begun and will need to distill a cycle of action and reflection that keeps me focused on living out my values and continuing to grow and change¹²³ in ways that link knowledge and action.¹²⁴ This type of praxis

¹¹⁶ Walker-Barnes, 3221

¹¹⁷ Magee, 293.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 220.

¹¹⁹ Walker-Barnes, 220.

¹²⁰ Livermore, 233.

¹²¹ Ibid., 224.

¹²² Walker-Barnes, 3635.

¹²³ Livermore, 193.

¹²⁴ Walker-Barnes, 150.

requires balancing time for action and noticing the presence of God¹²⁵ with time away from the familiarity of everyday life.¹²⁶

Thankfully, being in solidarity is not an either/or proposition of reaching perfection or becoming a complete failure. It does, however, require “active striving.”¹²⁷ I will need to use spiritual practices to guard myself from losing track of the way I wish to be and live in the world. Embracing contemplation helps to see wisely beyond the parts to a larger wholistic view of a connected creation.¹²⁸ I will need to embrace practices that draw on multiple ways of understanding and interpreting the world around me and within me. Mind, body and spirit must be honored, and experience must be given precedence over scripture and tradition as I engage in loving relationships.¹²⁹

INVITATION TO CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

I did not have to go to seminary to wake up and move in a new direction. It was a necessary process for me to have enough space and time to dig deep. I had a lot of history and buried beliefs to unlearn and a focused community of learning was the right place for me. The diversity of people I met and the learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom were critical to being willing to change habits and behaviors that can have an impact for a better world. I had the opportunity to experience reciprocal learning relationship and they changed me and I saw others around me grow and change.¹³⁰ This process of seeing and then releasing is necessary if we are to create a more equitable and loving world.

¹²⁵ Livermore, 155.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 230.

¹²⁷ Walker-Barnes, 4066.

¹²⁸ Rohr, Universal, 205.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 213.

¹³⁰ Livermore, 237.

Two years into my studies, my daughter came back home to live with me and was struggling with anxiety and depression. We have always been close and very honest with each other, so it has been a great training ground for living into the practice of what I was learning with someone who I love unconditionally. The combination of love and suffering has opened us both to a relationship of more compassionate patience and soft hearts.¹³¹

My intention now is to continue the process of action and reflection, to learn from those already on this journey and invite others to join us. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote in the *Divine Milieu*, “God does not offer himself to our finite beings as a thing all complete and ready to be embraced. For us, He is eternal discovery and eternal growth.”¹³² The journey to love is ever unfolding, never complete and filled with both joy and suffering which we can use to co-create with God a new and free life for all of us.

The following quote from Richard Rohr sums up the process towards a loving life:

“Faith at its essential core is accepting that you are accepted! We cannot deeply know ourselves without also know the one who made us, and we cannot fully accept ourselves without accepting God’s radical acceptance of every part of us. And God’s impossible acceptance of ourselves is easier to grasp if we first recognize it in the perfect unity of the human Jesus with the divine Christ. Start with Jesus, continue with yourself, and finally expand to everything else. . . To end in grace, you must somehow start with grace, and then it is grace all the way through.”¹³³

¹³¹ Rohr, “Universal Christ”, 208.

¹³² Ibid., 77.

¹³³ Ibid., 29.

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