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Precarious Positionings

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“3. (1) It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to (a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage.”

Canadian Multiculturalism Act¹

A Faculty Christmas party with all the trimmings of a brightly lit tree, a myriad of decorations and a stream of greetings and well wishes for a merry Christmas. And so yet another season begins and once again we wonder where we fit.

I looked at my Jewish colleague and wondered if she was feeling what I was experiencing.... a strange sense of not belonging, or looking from the outside in. As usual I searched for something vegetarian to eat amongst the array of foods spread out. It was interesting, but not surprising that there was not much of a choice. As a matter of course I scoured the beverage table for something non-alcoholic. As usual a friendly face approached me and I found myself being pulled into the age-old debate about Muslim customs and traditions. I put on my best smile and found myself responding in the most politically correct manner, whatever that entails.

Suddenly, face to face with my Jewish colleague, I am not quite sure what happened but whatever it was prompted us to explore the premises of this tension that we experience virtually every day of our ‘public’ lives.

Rahat: So, what do you do around Christmas time?

Cynthia: Well, actually we do not celebrate Christmas. We celebrate Chanukah. I always find this to be a rather tense and awkward time for me in terms of fitting in.

Rahat: That is interesting and something that I too experience. I am so tired of giving explanations to people of why I do not celebrate Christmas. I always feel the pressure to maintain a façade of enjoying and being part of the celebrations.

Cynthia: I constantly feel the tension between simply blending in to the Christmas spirit, being part of the celebrations vs. feeling that every time someone wishes me a merry Christmas or asks what I am doing for Christmas, I want to respond by saying that I do not celebrate Christmas. So then I feel that I may either embarrass the well wisher or find myself steeped into a religious or cultural explanation about Chanukah.

As the Christmas mood accelerated and the animated voices picked up, the glow of the lights seemed brighter than ever. Under this glare we began to explore our precarious lives.

The Precarious Nature of Life

The word “precarious” comes from the Latin “precorious” which means ‘obtained by asking or praying’. It was originally used in English as a legal term, in which ‘obtained by asking’ had undergone a profound change in focus to become “held through the favour of another”. This implied that favour could be withdrawn, and that the possession thereof was uncertain. The adjective came to be used to describe something ‘depending on chance or caprice’ and, later, in the 18th century, “risky”.

Judith Butler² uses the word “precarious” to help us understand the tension that is created when immigrants are caught in the struggle of balancing what they believe to be true within their own private, cultural identity and what they experience in the public cultural makeup of where they live and work or go to school. A migrant is somebody who has crossed a border and settled in a new place in order to start a new life. With this new life comes the implication of coping with the pain of separation and loss. The implication also carries with it the responsibility of keeping one’s own culture and language alive through the next generations.

"Being held through the favour of another": The precarious nature of finding oneself on the other side of the gate

By the very nature of its population makeup, immigrants to Canada have to embody many cultures from the moment they settle within its borders. This is precarious because one’s own culture remains

the culture of one's origin even though with both Cynthia and I, Canada is ours. The duplicity that results from this situation incorporates the precariousness that is embodied by the feelings of separation and loss. Coping can be difficult, even amongst generations. A person like myself of Asian descent is already multicultural of necessity when he/she arrives in Canada. White Anglo-Saxon culture in North America is premised on a distance from ancestral roots. Part of the reason for this, of course, is that previous generations of immigrants did not have the technology or the resources to be able to take a plane and within hours be back "home". There was a sense that once someone crossed the ocean, they were there for good and "home" became the new land. Today, for someone like myself the idea of roots and home are deeply embedded in the place of birth as well as in my parents' home in Pakistan. This summer we are preparing to go home to Pakistan, where my parents live, in Islamabad. My two daughters, aged 6 and 3, are very excited and are counting the days. My eldest has been telling her friends that she is going "home". Interestingly, I find myself correcting her, "*You are not going home, Maria. I am. You are going to my former home, your grandparents' home. Your home is in Calgary, Maria. After I say this, I cannot help but wonder where home really is for someone like myself. Is it in Calgary, in my house that I share with my husband and two children, or is it in Pakistan where I have my roots and my ancestral home? In a way, Maria is right. She is going back home to her ancestral abode. However, I feel confusion discussing this with her. I am sure she feels the same. Imagine telling your child that his/her home is not the same as yours. Maria must be feeling precarious at this thought.*"

I remember my daughter's first day at school. It was an extremely important day for me as I realized that the time had come as a parent to let go. We held hands as we walked to the school, and when we arrived the teacher came forward and greeted us telling me not to worry, that things would be okay. Eventually, I let go of my daughter's hand. She entered the classroom and the door closed behind her. I stood outside for a few minutes thinking about that other side of the gate. Richard Rodriguez, in the *Hunger for Memory*, likens this to a similar experience of opening and closing a screen door. "For me there were none of the gradations between public and private society so normal to a maturing child. Outside the house was public society; inside, the house was private. Just opening or closing door behind me was an important experience." (p. 15 *Hunger for Memory, the Education of Richard Rodriguez*. R. Rodriguez, 1982).

For me, Rodriguez's symbol is an intriguing one. As a Muslim parent, I expect my child (rather naïvely, I suspect) to come back in to her private world, unchanged and unmarked by the ideological framework of public education in Canada. I expect her to be able to open and close the screen door easily, as she moves back and forth between the two worlds. However, and as I am discovering, such a journey is by no means easy.

Crossing Over into the mosque

The crossing over into a different world continues after school as well. Maria attends classes at the mosque four times a week to learn the Quranic verses and the fundamentals of Islam. As a Muslim she is expected to wear the hijab (head scarf) and be appropriately dressed for the class. We follow the rituals and everyday I help her wear her headscarf before heading out to the mosque. I rarely enter the mosque, as I myself do not cover my head and therefore I feel somewhat of an outsider. As I wait for her outside the mosque everyday, I see her coming through the glass doors, smiling, happy. She jumps into the car, we drive off and she pulls off her scarf as we chat about school. I cannot help but feel the same sense of precariousness here. She must be one way in the mosque, be expected to learn the fundamentals of our faith, and yet not be required to fulfill all of its expectations once she exits the door.

Mom Why Can't We Have A Christmas tree?

Walking my daughter to school in North West Calgary, it was the month of December as we made our way along the snowy sidewalks. Maria, who was five years old at the time, looked up at me and threw out the question for perhaps the hundredth time that year, "But Mom, why can't we have a Christmas tree.... Elizabeth has one, Sophie has one, so does Andrew," and the list went on...

Maria had crossed over from her private world, family, home and culture, through the gate, into the public world wherein lay the mainstream, dominant culture. Her questions were again demonstrating the first inklings of the precariousness that would no doubt increase, as she became more a part of that mainstream culture.

I know Maria will continue to feel precarious as long as she remains a part of a society and culture in which her faith and lifestyle diverge from that of the mainstream. The cultural realities of, for example, Christmas season in her school are realities I, as a parent, must face. I try to keep our culture and traditions alive by telling my daughter stories of our family traditions that stretch out across India, Iran, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia; stories about our family lineage, our Muslim heritage. I also tell her stories about her grandparents and other family members and the infinite number of times we all united under the same roof to celebrate Muslim traditions such as Eid. At the same time, I often feel as though I am swimming against a strong current. At times, during the year, like when the Christmas fervor begins and gains momentum, my swimming gets even more difficult. Sophie, Elizabeth, Lisa, Andrew...all meet after school to put up decorations on their Christmas trees. The number of Santa exercises given in class increase and Maria brings home a chain made of colored paper green and red. She is supposed to take off one loop everyday, as they get closer to Christmas day.

So the question, "Where are we in all of this?" becomes more and more important.

Finding That 'Place': Negotiating Space As A Second Generation Immigrant – the Jewish example

The sense of family and traditions was and is vital to the preservation of our religion and culture.

Christmas Concert Revisited

My mind was racing as I followed the choir in a single file into our elementary school gym for our Christmas concert rehearsal. As we proceeded up the gray wooden 'risers', I once again found myself in the front row, being one of the shortest in the group.

So now my dilemma began. How could I mouth the words 'Jesus' while singing the Christmas carols. Surely people would realize that I wasn't singing!

I loved to sing and I loved to sing out. A year ago I wouldn't hesitate to sing all the words but someone, somewhere had recently told me that because we are Jewish and do not believe in Jesus, we should not say the words 'Jesus' or 'Christ'. What would happen to me if I said 'those' words? Would I be 'struck' down? Would I be punished in some way? Then the rational side of me would kick in and say that these were just words. But who am I here? I don't want to be singled out or recognized for being different as I was one of two Jewish students in the school. No one would understand. Everyone celebrated Christmas. Everyone had Christmas trees. We did not celebrate Christmas.

As I wrestled with these thoughts, the choir began to sing....

Growing up as a Jew, as a member of a minority, I often felt out of place with the rest of society. Within our family and greater Jewish community we celebrated and maintained the customs and rituals of our traditions that the culture of which we were a part did not always understand.

Who was I, growing up? The product of a Russian immigrant father whose family was plagued by pogroms, or organized attacks against the Jews in Russia during the 19th century, they fled the country to Canada, a land of freedom. Observance of Jewish traditions was forbidden in their country and therefore Judaism took on a different façade as they found a new life in Canada.

My mother, first generation Canadian, tried her best to observe and instill a sense of Judaism in a household that was pulled by many challenges both within and outside in the greater world around us.

It has been a constant struggle in my mind as to who I really am and what I have done to continue our heritage and religious understandings, to maintain a Jewish household. I often regret that as a parent I felt that I relied on the Jewish schools to ensure the preservation of our heritage and culture and therefore perhaps did

not do enough to model what it means to be Jewish. Maybe it was the dominant voice that surrounded my narrow world, a greater world that celebrated traditions such as Christmas, with all the glitter and attraction of colored lights and beautiful trees.

Perhaps I worked too hard at not bringing attention to my culture, religion or heritage outside of our home but rather found my family blending into a world of Christian culture and traditions.

Kalmar³ reiterates this thought through his commentary on how many Jewish people combine the public with the private aspects of their life, trying to alleviate the tension that exists between their culture and that of the mainstream:

“Let us start with the issue of Christmas. In public many Jews love to praise Christmas to the hilt, to make absolutely sure that they do not appear “different”. Only in private, amongst other Jews, do some of them admit that their enthusiasm may have been a bit of a show”.

This behaviour seems to negate the spirit of Canadian multiculturalism that aspires towards honouring diversity. The process of honouring, however, is not an easy one, particularly when it touches issues of language, culture, religion and belief systems.

The implications of our observations

These are reflections of two people from two different Worlds, Muslim and Jewish backgrounds. We met and found a very strong connection in our journey towards understanding who we are and the importance of the deep level of lived experience. What we have in common are stories that go beyond the religious divide. So what is it that brings us together? Questions, worries, struggles, doubts, uncertainty, despair, conflicts and above all irreversibility all combine to answer this question. This article draws on stories; narratives and their power to build “BRIDGES” that will help people such as our future teachers, among others, to better understand the “otherness” from different cultures and to promote parental involvement within the classroom context. As Sarup⁴ elaborates, “Whilst writing I often keep thinking of home. It is usually assumed that a sense of place or belonging gives a person stability. But what makes a place home? Is it wherever your family is, where you have been brought up? The children of many migrants are not sure where they belong. Where is home? Is it where your parents are buried? Is home the place from where you have been displaced, or where you are now? Is home where your mother lives?”

The journey of a migrant is often a painful one and it elicits questions related to different positionalities, displacement, migrations and communities living in diasporas. Immigrant children in our schools need to position themselves amidst a myriad of challenges. As Sarup⁵ further elaborates, “When migrants cross a boundary there is hostility and welcome. Migrants are included and

excluded in different ways. Whilst some boundary walls are breaking down, others are being made even stronger to keep out the migrant, the refugee and the exile..."

Both my reflections and those of my Muslim colleague have given rise to some important questions. As children enter the public culture of education, are the schools and educators, in particular, considering the cultural values, religious background and heritage of the children in their classrooms? What is the goal of multicultural education? When educators embark on such activities as making turkey at Thanksgiving, wearing green for St. Patrick's Day or creating poppies for Remembrance Day, are they ensuring that their students really understand the reasons for partaking in such rituals?

Sharon Friesen and Pat Clifford share a story, "David's Story: On Keeping Things Connected".⁶ Their work reflected a careful examination of the children, their culture and background woven into the lived experiences of the classroom. David, born in Africa, was shy and withdrawn in his classroom. One day he came to school with a book about the Masai. His teacher immediately encouraged him to share his book with the class, and the story developed into a study of David's world in Africa. Steven and Clifford state, "Determined to foster continuity between personal and school knowledge, we work in a constant state of watchfulness. Children's authentic offerings are often made tentatively. It is our belief that when curriculum is divorced from real life, children often lose connections with their own memories and histories."

Teachers need to develop an awareness of appropriate activities that weave throughout the year to embrace the unique cultural differences within the classroom. In her article, "Creating World Peace, One Classroom at a Time", Marquez⁷ embraces the diverse cultures in her classroom by learning to count in the individual languages represented. "Each year we learn to count to 20 in the home languages of all the learners in the classroom community. The counting is used throughout the day and the curriculum."

Her class also incorporates discussions about the students' countries of origin using maps, stories and relevant art activities. Marquez talks about "Jamal creating an elaborate structure using various types of blocks." He was replicating his vision of his home back in South America. Marquez seized this as an opportunity for Jamal to describe his country and share his story with his classmates.

In a different example, one of my student teachers keenly observed a child whose first language was German. He seemed quite shy and withdrawn in classroom activities. This student teacher, who began her full time teaching responsibilities in the classroom, pondered how she could involve this child to feel more a part of the class and decided to invite the boy's mother to join the class for the morning. She suggested that perhaps the mother could read a book to the classroom. The mother chose to read a German fairy tale. As the children huddled together for story time the boy's mother began in a quiet and expressive voice to share a little history of fairy tales

and then began to read a beautifully illustrated book to the children. Her son sat close by with his eyes wide open and a proud look on his face. There was no doubt that his mother's presence that day gave him confidence to interact and feel more of a part of the classroom.

Teachers, especially those involved in early childhood education, need to develop an openness and understanding for the individual children in the classroom. In the early grades, it is important to develop the sense of community and a sense of belonging in the classroom that can create a more welcoming environment to all children. This, in turn, will help these children to foster more of a sense of belonging and further nourish their individual identity within the larger group/culture. Nel Noddings⁸ in her book "Happiness in Education" speaks about the need for community and in particular the importance of schools where "teachers must work toward the inclusion of all students and they must help students to understand the lure of gangs, cults and intolerant ideologies." Long before any of these temptations have a chance to gain a foothold in a child's life, educators can help their young charges to complete their sense of self and their role in the public culture while marrying that with their private world. This can help to remove the precarious sense of confusion to the point where each student feels a solid connection to his or her world.

Concluding Thoughts

Immigrants and their families are faced with a vast space of cultural dissimilarity. As immigrants move across different spaces and times, their original culture fluctuates and evolves. New avenues open up and culture in a traditional sense, mixed with culture in the new context, continues to broaden and change. The hybrid identity that results is certainly cause for confusion, as the immigrant attempts to assimilate his/her ancestry and heritage into the present day culture. The questions beg to be asked: Can these two cultures co-exist? Should they be made to? And if they should, how?

Is this new generation of hybrid students being provided with sufficient references to make a strong, meaningful connection between the past and the present? These immigrant children should not be forced to "drown in the mainstream", nor "tear down the old house" – given its historical and sentimental value. Educators should be encouraged to expose their hybrid students to both the new and the old perspectives, blending the Canadian and former culture, the public and private lives of these children in order to help them create a balanced identity. Educators can help this new diverse generation find their "place" in society by focusing on the similarities and the fundamental values that we all share as humans that transcend geographical, cultural and religious boundaries.

The following lines from a poem called "The Bridge Builder,"⁹ as described by Condo, tells the story of an old man on a journey who, as darkness is falling at the end of the day, encounters a deep, wide chasm with a treacherous river flowing through it. He crosses the chasm with little difficulty, and then, in the fading light, turns and builds a bridge across the gorge. Another traveler asks the old man

why, having already crossed, he is wasting his energy to build the bridge.” The poem concludes with his response:

“The builder lifted his old gray head.
 Good friend, in the path I have come,’ he said,
 There followeth after me today
 A youth whose feet must pass this way.
 This chasm that has been naught to me
 To that untried youth may a pitfall be.
 He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
 Good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”

Endnotes

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