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Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound: A Journey in Four Verses

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Cover Page Footnote

I extend loving gratitude to all who have accompanied me on this journey, and to those yet to enter my world.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound: A journey in four verses

I open this work by invoking Gloria Anzaldua's (2002) concept of the Nahuatl term *nepantlera*, which she describes as those who "facilitate passage between worlds" and who engage in thinking that seeks to "question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another" (p. 1). In this way, I identify myself in this role, as the *nepantlera*, being moved and torn between multiple poles (Bright & Kasun, 2016). Although I include possible implications as the final portion of this article, I frame this paper as an autoethnography, centering my own lived experiences and making no explicit claims for generalization. Ellis (2004) provides a description of autoethnography that may be useful to consider when reading this paper:

The author usually writes in the first person, making ...herself the object of the research. The narrative text focuses on generalization within a single case...The text is presented as a story... The story often discloses hidden details of private life and highlights emotional experience. A reflexive connection exists between the lives of participants and researchers that must be explored. And the relationship between writers and readers of the texts must be one of involvement and participation. (p. 30)

Building on this idea, Chang (2008) explains, “Every piece of writing reflects the disposition of its author” (p. 10), which is certainly the case with this piece, wherein I, at times, identify as what Kreb (1999) would term an *edgewalker*. Kreb explains that edgewalkers feel, “comfort, if not identification, with a particular ethnic, spiritual or cultural group” (p.1). Herein, I provide what Ellis & Bochner (2000) describe as a work which “focuses as much on examining [the] self autobiographically as on interpreting a culture for a nonnative audience” (p. 740). As I have moved into, through, and out of multiple cultural identities as related to faith, I provide a first-person account of a “cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details” (Chang, 2008, p. 46). Thus, this narrative is not shared simply as a wistful account of my lived experiences, but rather, as a part of a broader press for understanding of others through this process.

I offer my narrative in four acts, followed by implications for professional and scholarly practice as an educator.

Verse I: In the beginning

“Angel Anne, My guardian dear,
To whom God’s love commits me here.
Ever this day, be at my side,
To light, and guard, to rule, and guide. Amen.”
In the beginning, I believed.

In 1969, I was born in the US to a faithful Catholic (my mother) and an ambivalent Christian (my father). Because of the obligations set forth by the Catholic church, to which my mother unwaveringly adhered, I was baptized into the Catholic community, with a paternal aunt and uncle as my godparents, and began attending obligatory worship services starting as an infant. This meant attending Mass every weekend (Sundays, although a late Saturday afternoon or evening mass would “count” for the obligation), along with a specified list of particular “holy days of obligation” which might fall on other days of the week. Once I began school, I was enrolled in catechism classes and attended each week with other same-age/ same-grade children from my community. I said my prayers every night, and as I settled in to sleep, I purposefully arranged my stuffed animals to allow space for my guardian angel (whom I had named Anne). This set of experiences established my then-unquestioned version of “normal,” and became the yardstick against which I measured and evaluated the experiences of others.

Being a child in an active duty military family, we often lived either on or proximal to the Air Force base at which my father was stationed. This meant that our closest Catholic community—our parish--- was always the Base parish, and we participated in Mass in the multi-use chapel on the base. As such, the building was clearly a house of religious worship,

but didn't have the trappings one might typically find in a Catholic-use-only church. This made my visits to any "real" (dedicated) Catholic churches all the more thrilling, given the typically more ornate and elaborate adornments found within.

Like many worship services, the Catholic Mass follows a specific structure, rhythmic and predictable, repeated with little variation from week to week. As I entered adolescence, I felt a flash of insight when I realized that almost all of my favorite television programs echoed this balanced pulse, and also included these same predictable patterns, with subtle variations on the theme each week. The television program Saturday Night Live would have different hosts and musical guests, but I knew the monologue would occur after the cold-opening skit and the opening credits. Episodes of Charlie's Angels would involve an instructional telephone call from Charlie at some early point in the show, and would bookend with a congratulatory phone call at the end. Similarly, the Mass would open with a reverential, collectively voiced song or chant (the antiphon), while the priest and his accompanying corps proceeded in, arranged according to instructions from the United States Catholic Conference (Moroney, 2003):

Once the people have gathered, the priest and ministers, clad in the sacred vestments, go in procession to the altar in this order:

- a. The thurifer carrying a thurible with burning incense, if incense is used;
- b. The ministers who carry lighted candles, and between them an acolyte or other minister with the cross;
- c. The acolytes and the other ministers;
- d. A lector, who may carry the Book of the Gospels (though not the Lectionary), which should be slightly elevated;
- e. The priest who is to celebrate the Mass. (p. 42)

Detailed directions like these provide structure for every moment of a Catholic Mass, which I found not only deeply familiar, but deeply comforting, as well. I reveled in the familiar rhythms and looked forward to my favorite parts, which were those that seemed to most closely echo my school experiences. I loved the read-aloud portions, while the lay minister—a member of the community, sometimes someone I knew—would read a selected passage as we followed along in our missalettes. I loved the choral recitations of prayers we had all memorized (or were working to memorize), noting every time that my mom, always seated beside me, radiating warmth, spoke hers not in her normal voice, but in a kind of loud whisper, and slightly faster than everyone else. And most of all, I loved the music, especially when we went to the Saturday evening Masses, because these were often designated as the more informal and

slightly shorter, “guitar Mass,” with the music tending towards more folksy and less formal, more (Woody) Guthrie than Gregorian.

When I was a young adolescent, the music director for the guitar Mass was a fortyish woman named Terry, who was gifted at guitar, keyboards, and musical arrangement. As a seventh grader, I was overwhelmed with delight when she welcomed me-- with my unremarkable singing skills and passable clarinet playing-- into the musical ensemble. As such, the “guitar mass” became my point of entry that moved me from a passive participant, sitting in a pew somewhere near the middle of the church, to an active facilitator of the service, seated in the little cluster of chairs *at the front*, off to the side.

However, I quickly realized that although I was quite flattered to be included in what felt like an important part of the religious ceremony, the truth was that I had very little understanding of what was actually going on in the Mass, or what any of it meant. As a congregation, we recited words I didn't understand; we moved or held our bodies in particular ways at designated times (kneeling, genuflecting, using our thumbs to draw a cross on our forehead, lips and heart); we followed unspoken codes of behavior that didn't necessarily make sense (like *don't look around* and *don't flinch when you drink the actual blood of Christ*). My understandings about what was going on were superficial at best, such that when Terry

used words like “the recessional” and “homily” and “bearing of the gifts,” I didn’t recognize what these terms represented, and simply tried to mask my ignorance with knowing nods.

But I learned. And Terry, unintentionally, helped me further understand that she was matching the music to the overall content of the week’s readings or to the specific events being described. That was quite a revelation to me, as I had previously only noticed that Christmas-themed songs were sung during the Advent season. As my understandings of the functions and interconnectedness of the rituals began to clarify, my participation in--and contribution to-- the ritualized Mass newly felt more serious and meaningful. I felt reverent and solemn, enlivened by the Holy Trinity, and connected to all Catholics through our shared faith. In my heart, my warm and loving musical collaborators represented the Catholic community at large, and I felt that my inclusion in this small group of musicians was a microcosm of my “fit” into the worldwide congregation of believers. I had a shared-- and deepening-- set of beliefs and understandings, and it warmed me from within, and felt beautiful.

Although I was enthusiastically in the throes of romantic involvement with my boyfriend at the time, I wondered what it would be like to be a nun. I wondered if my wondering about it was actually a “call” to become a bride of Christ.

I was 16 years old, and I believed. My heart sang.

Verse II: The falter

Being a child in an active-duty military family meant that “home” was where the armed forces told us it would be. My stint as a member of the guitar band lasted for four years, through my early adolescence, and was ended when our family received orders to relocate to another military installation 1000 miles away. I was heartbroken at this move for many reasons, not the least of which was being that it would mean leaving my dear musical faith community.

As my family transitioned to the new locale, working to adjust to a vividly different culture, we joined an off-base, non-military-oriented parish for the first time ever. Now an older adolescent, more confident musician, and more established member of the Catholic faith, I approached the music director at the newly-chosen parish and asked to join the group. I was surprised to find myself coolly offered the chance to “try out” for membership at some later date. My previous experiences with Terry and the rest of the rotating members of the guitar band had been so different--welcoming to any and all, and willing to make any voice, any instrument, any contribution-- work out for the best. I had come from a community that was elastic, flexible and warm, which was what I thought it meant to be

Catholic. I was genuinely shocked at the hesitation with which my offer was greeted, and found disappointment creeping into my heart.

At around the same time, I was shocked and a bit outraged to learn that some of my extended family members--lifelong Catholics-- had openly wondered about the constructs of the Catholic faith, having dinner-table conversations about things like the wrongness in following “man-made rules.” At first, I honestly did not understand what they meant, because I had been taught that the practices (and “rules”) of the Catholic faith were from God himself, and I found these challenges to Catholicism to be disconcerting and even a bit frightening. Striking a dissonant chord in my heart, I was quick to reject and discredit these challenges. But as I began to read more broadly, and to talk about faith with others from outside the Catholic community, their questioning began to make a lot more sense. These challenges to the “rightness” of Catholicism, which at first felt like assaults on my very spirit, gradually began to take on a different presence in my thinking, moving into greater focus, and carrying some sensibility which younger-me somehow hadn’t noticed.

While I continued down that path of questioning, I continued to participate in Mass, although my experience began to change. What had once felt comforting and familiar began to feel like a more robotic experience. I found myself mindlessly reciting the communal prayers and

texts, still not fully understanding what they actually meant. I wondered if those around me held deeper understandings which perhaps I somehow hadn't learned yet, or whether they, like me, simply repeated and recited as directed, because that's what we were taught to do. The process of Mass-- and of membership in this faith community-- began to feel more like continuous exercises in *conformity* more than any kind of rewarding membership or contribution. I began to wonder what good it did, to gather in a dimly illuminated space once a week, and to be what felt like a passive participant in an old ritual, motivated by historical forces which were perhaps not relevant (in ways I could understand) to my contemporary existence. The priest and his acolytes did all the work, while as a congregation we mostly sat, stood, or knelt in silence, voicing only what was literally scripted for us, and nothing more.

I was frightened by and shaken at my own doubt, and ashamed as I felt my beliefs-- my faith-- begin to waver. My faith, which had for so long felt like a warmly *comforting* and *comfortable* garment, began to feel ill-fitting and unfamiliar. How could something which had been so very urgently meaningful to me have become so restrictive, so dissonant? I longed for my old way of knowing, my former trust, my previous sense of belonging and rightness.

I was 19 years old, and I desperately wanted to believe. My heart wavered.

Verse III: The fall

The ground upon which my thinning faith stood shifted greatly when my brother—five years younger—began to more openly protest his obligatory attendance at and participation in Mass. I was genuinely taken aback at his increasing defiance and resistance to go, which was utterly confusing to me. We were both born into the same family built around deeply held constructs of *conformity and compliance*, both having been born and raised on US military installations wherein so many aspects of life were highly regimented and bounded. Even as I grappled with my own sense of commitment to the faith community and belief system, I could not make sense of his personally agentic press to avoid going to Mass, as it was our *obligation*. It was one thing to have doubts, but quite another to actually *resist*.

My brother's rejection of Catholicism became more clear as new life events emerged. When he was 16 years old, our family learned that he was gay-- a facet of his identity which he did not *choose* to reveal, but which was made known through a sorrowful turn of events. The exposure of his sexual identity was a deep blow to our family in several ways, including the stance of the Catholic church on homosexuality. As I read

more literature on official Catholic doctrine relating to homosexuality, my spirit grieved, realizing that this faith community into which I had been born, did not accept my beloved sibling for the person he was (and remains). I felt deeply conflicted, disappointed, and betrayed.

Around the same time, my eyes also began to widen as I learned more about historical foundations of the Catholic faith across different planes. I was deeply saddened to learn of the many, many atrocities committed in the name of Catholicism, and by high-ranking members of the Catholic faith, which led me to explore other ills perpetuated in the name of other faith communities as well. I began to learn about inequities. About injustices. About suffering.

And then I came upon the realization that the innocent can suffer.

That the innocent *do* suffer.

That a benevolent, all-powerful deity *permits* this suffering.

During Mass, we prayed for baby Ramona to “get better,” or for congregant Jessie to “heal,” or for community member Lawrence to “be comforted.” Why, I wondered, would this all-powerful God require our pleas to provide relief? Why allow the pain, sorrow, and suffering in the first place? For me and my understandings, original sin wasn’t enough to account for this. Although many have tried to explain this suffering to me over the years, or have asked that I simply chalk it up to “one of the great

mysteries of the universe,” it is this deeply held and irreconcilable reality-- the suffering of innocents-- which fully extinguished my belief in a divine, omnipotent power.

It was with a deep and long-lasting grief that I realized I had been wrong in my earlier trust of and faith in the Catholic church and in God himself. I had taken such joy and comfort in that shared time with my mother, singing and murmuring in unison, and in my relationships with Terry and the members of the guitar band, that I had conflated all of this kindness and warmth with an ascribed kindness and warmth of the Catholic Church as a whole, and with God, as well. I realized that it wasn't Catholicism or even the belief in a deity which I found to be so beautiful and sustaining--- it was my relationships and sense of belonging that had mattered. My faith was fading, until one day, it was gone. Gone was the warm flame of my faith, replaced only by a tendril of sweet smoke, a memory of what once illuminated my spirit.

I was 21 years old, and I did not believe. My heart grieved.

Verse IV: Today's path

The more I studied the works of Marx and learned about hierarchies, and then the works of second-wave and third-wave feminist scholars, and informed by standpoint theory—the easier it became to critique Catholicism, and to feel clarity in my lack of belief in a

supernatural being. My grief is mostly resolved, rising up only on rare occasions, reminding me of the succor and innocence I once enjoyed. But the layered complexity in living as an a-theist remain, and continue to present challenges in my life. This non-belief can, at times, feel vulnerable and even shameful. I conceal it more often than I reveal it, wary of being candid.

Many—if not most—of the people I care for most deeply are people of faith, to at least some degree. As noted, much of my beloved extended family identifies as Catholic or another form of Christianity; my dear in-laws are Muslim; my close and most trusted friends are Jewish, Buddhist, Quaker, Hindu, Baptist, Mormon, Evangelical, Church of Christ, un-affiliated Christian.... And I see, repeatedly, how deeply enriched each individual can be by their faith and membership in the faith community. Their faith is genuine, and provides comfort, guidance, clarity, joy, and sustenance. While I do lament and rail against movement-wide practices that exploit or oppress others, in no way do I find myself judging or evaluating these dear individual people for their faith or faith community membership. I value the comfort and joy -- as trite as that may sound--- their membership provides them.

And although I genuinely loathe non-believers who feel compelled to ridicule or challenge the faithful, I admit a sense of relief when I

encounter others who are quiet non-believers like me—those who don't feel the need to denounce others or interrogate belief systems. And in academia, this is perhaps more common than in other professions, which may then serve to create an unusual tension for the believers in the community.

As such, I often find myself sidestepping direct conversations about faith with people I care for. I worry that by not holding the same core beliefs to be true, our friendship might take on a more distant or superficial status. I navigate the tension in being fascinated by belief systems, but don't believe myself, which introduces the possibility that I am no more than a religious voyeur. It reminds me of a friend, Allison, who passed away from Huntington's Disease. During the parts of her illness where she could not eat and was instead nourished through a port, she watched cooking shows obsessively. Somehow that experience—being distanced from food while also watching *others* enjoy it—was gratifying. I somehow feel the same way.

This begins to speak to the notion of performed identity (Derrida, 2002), in that in part, our identities are not only what we purposefully choose and construct for ourselves, but are also imposed upon us, "read" by those near us and who may know (or think they know) our histories. As such, I've lived in an identity space of *knowing* that those around me may

view me as a believer, while at the same time, knowing in my heart that I just don't think any of it is real.

Some of these tensions—being a non-believer but loving and valuing those who believe—come into play in my professional practice as a teacher and teacher educator. Although I have worked almost exclusively in secular contexts, the evidence of faith community membership and belief in a deity/ deities is vividly present and palpable in my work. When directly asked about my faith identity, I often choose to hedge, anxious, somehow, at “coming out” as an a-theist. It's a purposeful dodge, somehow intended to re-create that warmth of membership I recall so fondly, by perhaps hoping I will “pass” as a believer. I verbally duck, bob, and weave so as to avoid answering directly.

I am now 47 years old, and I do not believe. My heart still grieves at times, but mostly sings.

Implications

But I am reverent.

So what, then, might all these mean for my professional practice as an educator? First, it serves as a lived reminder of the incredible challenge that may be presented when attempting to speak our truths, particularly when speaking these truths may lead to a compromised relationship or loss of esteem in the eyes of others. The weight of faith identity is so great

that there is great pressure, in some cases, to keep it shielded and masked. Smith (2011) likens this to “coming out” as gay or lesbian, and explains, “Because of the stigmatized and deviant status of atheism, it can initially be difficult to claim the identity in a social setting” (p. 229).

To this end, at times, I neither confirm nor deny my genuine beliefs, fearful of the implications of speaking my heart’s truth. When directly asked if I am a member of a particular faith community, I am as likely as not to respond with, “Not exactly.” And what are the implications of these half-veiled truths? In what ways are these “not exactly” response and expression of my privilege? Are these acts of self-preservation, or perhaps a manipulation of “the system” as a way to maintain relationships with others I care for? I’m reminded of those actors who possess a particular look such that they may be cast for characters who appear Latino, or Italian, or First Nation, or Greek, or Turkish.... Or of tofu, that can take on the flavor of things around it, much like Crenshaw (1991) might describe as intersectionality, or the suggestion that people are composed of different selves which may be revealed at different times, or as Duffy, Weltsek & Marin (2013) summarize, one’s “concept of self is constantly in flux, rearranging depending on who is around us and where we are.” In this turn, my work takes a reflexively critical nature, in that I seek to both problematize my own positionality (Duffy, Weltsek, & Marin, 2013) and

speak to the idea of performed identity (Derrida, 2002). I can *elect* to perform-- and pass-- in different faith settings, to my own privileged advantage.

Finally, there is something to be said for holding fluency in faith, even when it's not a native tongue. Akin to being bilingual, this intimate familiarity can offer insights that may speak to ways to deepen relationships.

At the core, this work is postmodern in nature and unresolved. It is my hope that through this reflexive acknowledgement of the privilege I enjoy in both having the freedom to proclaim my belief system, while also knowing I can mask it at will, that I can somehow draw from the wisdom of McIntosh (1988) and “choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage” and use my “arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base” (p.192).

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