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Breaking Stone Tablets, Rejecting Binaries: A Culturally Affirming Approach to Embracing Differentiated Aspects of Identity

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I see the world and act in it using *a loving epistemology*. Liable (2000) explained that to utilize a loving epistemology, a Christian educational researcher must advocate for marginalized individuals just like Jesus sought to improve social conditions of lepers (the infirm), Samaritans (outsiders), publicans (marginalized vocations), women, sinners (sidelined social status), and other oppressed populations of his time. Indeed, the very essence of the Christian faith was taught by Jesus in the *New Testament*:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Bible, Matthew 22:37-39).

Likewise, other researchers have labeled this form of research, informed by spiritual epistemology, yet aimed at social justice a *prophetic framework* (Slattery, 2013; West, 1994). A prophetic framework encourages moral reasoning of perspectives independent of political, racial, or religious stereotypes. Thus, a researcher seeks justice, transformation, compassion, solidarity with, and understanding of, the “other” or the “least of these” in society (Smiley & West, 2012). Morality or right-ness in a loving epistemology is the action or thought process that leads to equity and improvement of the lives of historically underserved individuals. Furthermore, a loving epistemology rejects binaries of “us vs. them” to avoid essentialism, tokenism, and stereotypes that alienate many

who understand the world differently (Hooks, 1994; Steele, 2009). Accordingly, a loving epistemology serves to accept and embrace the rich complexity of navigating between two seemingly contradictory worlds in which I lived, yet passionately care about. In reality, I was *both* a social justice-oriented researcher *and* a religious educator. *Both* were my truths; *both* informed the way I see and act in the world.

However, this construct is not the guiding epistemology of many Latter-day Saints. For a decade, I worked as an educator for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church). Throughout my career, I noticed many of my colleagues conflated LDS Church doctrine with ultra-conservative political ideology. It is important to note that the official position of the LDS Church is political neutrality (<http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/official-statement/political-neutrality>), and that the *Bible* and the *Book of Mormon*, which Latter-Day Saints revere as sacred scripts, are full of instructions to seek out the poor and marginalized. Nevertheless, Mormon culture—especially within LDS Church employment—is saturated with right-wing ideologies.

As an example of this phenomenon, I describe the discrimination I witnessed over a period of three years on a LDS faculty that was toxic for those who did not adapt to norms represented in ultra-conservative television and radio shows. I observed and wrote about multiple examples during the time I was on this faculty as a way of coping with the discriminatory dynamics. For instance,

one faculty member weighed 350 pounds and uncomfortably sat through a conversation about how many of his fellow coworkers would rather “kill [themselves] than weigh over 300 pounds.” Another quiet teacher with a mild case of Tourette syndrome was regularly mocked for his mostly unnoticeable ticks. Moreover, a male faculty member who had majored in ballet for the first few semesters of his undergraduate degree was continually ridiculed with homophobic remarks. Furthermore, I was told I was a “tree-hugging hippy with poop on my shirt” when the group found out that my kids wore cloth diapers. Another teacher was told to “quit walking like a retarded person” after an invasive back surgery. Lastly, the only female member of the faculty was often disregarded or silenced in group planning and discussions (despite being the most requested teacher by students), for simply being a woman in a male-centric and male-dominated faculty.

Most depressing was to watch *students* marginalized by the faculty members lacking a loving epistemology. For example, one student walked in during lunch, showing external signs of emotional hardship. A teacher asked him how he was doing. The student said, “I’m having a bad day.” Another teacher retorted, “That’s because you’re Mexican!” Many of the coworkers present laughed. The student said, “I’m from Guatemala.” The teacher replied, “Same difference.” And the student walked out of the room even more discouraged than when he walked in. In addition, homophobic slurs were used regularly. “Gay”

was used to describe anything disliked or remotely outside of ultraconservative gender norms. On several occasions, I challenged the use of these terms, pointing out that some of the students I taught at the school questioned their sexual/gender identities. I was asked, “Whose side are you on?” and called “Nancy” for the rest of the year (both for the homophobic insult and reference to Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic Speaker of the House at the time).

These comments/actions went unchallenged and uninterrupted by any other faculty member. I tried discussing with both my principal and superintendent the frustrations I felt. I explained how these actions went contrary to the subject matter we were teaching. In both incidences I was told not to say anything to my colleagues or the “hazing” would simply get worse. In the conversation with the superintendent, I felt like his friendship with the offending individuals was more important than their oppressive actions. In essence, I was told to not bring discrimination up again if I valued my job.

During this hostile work environment, I started an educational doctorate focused on educational justice, hoping that the classes would be an outlet for the social-justice orientation I have and teach me skills to advocate for those who are discriminated against within my old work setting. It was in this degree where I discovered literature about a loving epistemology and a prophetic framework. However, I quickly observed that while graduate school provided a wonderful

outlet for the social justice side of my identity, I had to conceal the Mormon side of my identity to avoid microaggressions about being a person of faith.

Rather than overt discrimination like in the workplace scenarios above, microaggressions are exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership (Sue, et al., 2007). For example, a member of my doctoral cohort told me he did not want to sit by me when he heard I was a religious educator. He stated that it took several semesters for him to realize that we were on the “same social justice team.” Moreover, I was repeatedly asked what I was going to do for a “real job” after my doctorate was over, or that if I were a “real teacher” I would understand what the cohort’s topics. At that time, I was teaching hundreds of students a year and being an administrator over dozens of teachers and thousands of students. Furthermore, one of my professors displayed an open disdain for my religious background and demanded I pick either Christianity or social justice. Likewise, one student I taught during an academic internship made unjustified complaints about me every week to the professor with whom I worked once my religion was accidentally revealed in a class discussion.

These microaggressions and fear of fully revealing both sides of my self created a daily struggle of an insider/outsider role. Similar to research about individuals who identify as gender or sexually queer, I daily struggled in choosing whether or not to perform an identity on a binary that was not fully me in both

work and school to conform to societal norms (Gamson, 2003; Youdell, 2004). Although, I could “pass” in either situation, I felt I was trespassing and transgressing the laws of each society because I was not what others expect from either a religious educator *or* a social justice scholar. This choice to conceal or reveal was similar to a story Harris (1993) voices of a Black woman transgressing social boundaries in a white-collar job during the 1950s because she could pass as White when she went to work. Harris states, “Day in and day out, she made herself invisible, then visible again, for ...a cost too precious to conceive. She left the job some years later finding the stress too much to bear” (p. 1711). Like the woman in Harris’ counter story, although I could “pass” in either environment, I had to “closet” part of my identity and lose part of the richness that made me, well me.

Toward the end of my doctoral degree, I realized I had been complicit in my own oppression by concealing my identity for my own security (Bell, 2009). I also realized that it was a privilege to be able to decide whether to conceal or reveal parts of my identity that caused me to be marginalized (which is a privilege that many marginalized individuals do not enjoy). Although many categorize identities into single social components, intersections provide powerful rich new categories to study and understand (Crenshaw, 2009). Indeed, Anzaldúa (1990) maintained, “Necesitamos teorías ...that cross borders, that blur boundaries.... We are articulating new positions in the “in-between,” (Anzaldúa, pp. xxv-xxvi).

However, few people are comfortable discussing, celebrating, and revealing the borderlands in our lives, because dominant Euro-American culture is extremely competitive, rather than cooperative (Mezirow, 2000). Yet, I felt that both people in my school environment and my work environment would lessen their stereotypes of the “other” if I were able to expose my whole self.

Rejecting Prophets, Embracing Pluralism

Many years have passed since this situation wherein I felt forced to conceal aspects of my identity. Yet, the lesson learned from this experience can best be portrayed through a metaphor taken from the *King James Bible*¹. The book of Exodus tells a story of the Hebrews leaving captivity in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. While wandering through the wilderness, Moses climbed a mountain to seek knowledge from God, wherein he communed with the Lord. During this conversation, Moses received instructions on stone tablets on how to guide the people out of the wilderness toward the promised land. As he descended the mountain, Moses saw the Hebrews worshipping a golden calf, which differed from the way *he* had been taught in the mountaintop. Consequently, Moses broke the tablets of stone that contained what *he* saw as the word of God, or absolute

¹ The purpose of this section is not a socio-cultural or religious examination of idolatry in the book of Exodus, but rather the use of one Biblical story to serve as an educational analogy.

“truth.” As a punishment for not aligning to *Moses*’ transformative experience, the Hebrews were compelled to live a set of prescriptive policies for their transgressions against what Moses perceived to be the “right” way. However, rather than “fixing” the behavior of the Hebrews, more than a thousand years of wars, famine, rebellions, and pestilence ensued as self-proclaimed prophets repeatedly called them to repentance and mandated *they* live the prescribed system imposed on them *by* the prophets.

This history of prophets, saviors, and missionaries permeates the very epistemological foundations of Western civilization. The prophet is often seen as the intercessor between God and the people. Subsequently, God—through the savior figure—commands the people to *become* a treasure by assimilating to a prescribed system of laws and policies put in place *for* them *by* the prophet to “fix” the people. Instead of evaluating why the *system* does not support the people, the *people* are always presumed to be at fault for unfavorable social conditions. I often find myself wondering how the narrative of Western civilization would change if the golden calf the Hebrews created in Moses’ absence was not perceived a “wrong,” but rather *their* way of knowing and experiencing the world. Rather than trying to compel the Hebrews to *become* a treasured people, I wonder how the story would be different if they were seen for who they were as an *already* treasured people. How might history—and the accompanying binaries of “right” and “wrong”—have unfolded if the *people*’s

ways of knowing were valued and harnessed throughout Israel's history as conveyed in the *Bible*? How might the interchange and history of wars and misunderstanding among the Abrahamic religions have been different if we simply listened to each other and valued each other?

Likewise, in education, when strategies fail to achieve desired results, it is often the *student*—not the strategy or strategist—who is found to be lacking (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This deficit model places the entire burden on children, who are often placed in the most vulnerable positions in the educational system (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). Once again, the deficit approach is based on a binary system that attempts to “fix” students through a total erasure of the historical realities of systemic oppression that stole labor and denied humanity from entire swaths of our country's ancestors. Furthermore, deficit viewpoints obfuscate the same racialized experience and economic pillaging continues and informs present-day legal, economic, and educational systems.

In contrast, an assets-based approach fights for justice while acknowledging that educators do *not* have the answers, but are willing to work *with* students—real kids—who are confronting false saviors every day. An educator from a prophetic framework seeks transformation, compassion, solidarity *with*, and understanding of, those who see the world differently than they do (Smiley & West, 2012). Justice in a loving epistemology is the action or thought process that leads to equity for historically underserved individuals. A

prophetic framework recognizes the talents students bring daily to class that *they* value and honor instead of prescribing assimilation to a colonized way of knowing. As educators embrace, study, and highlight intersectionality, students will bring forth whole new categories of understanding permitting us to grow and learn together toward pluralistic ways of knowing and being (Slattery, 2013).

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