

A Spirituality of Creative Marginality

ERIC H. F. LAW

By the time I was a junior in college, I had tried for two years to become as "American" as possible. At that time, "American" meant white American. Most of my friends were white. I joined a fraternity. With my college being in central New York State, I was far away from Chinatown in Manhattan, which had been my total reality during my teenage years.

I thought I had it made until one day, during rush week, I was in charge of greeting freshmen in the foyer of my fraternity house. It was still pretty early and I was the only one around. A blond, boyish freshman walked through the door.

"Hi, welcome," I said and extended my hand. He did not extend his hand in return but looked up and down and around the foyer as if I were not there.

"Would you like to sign our registrar?" He looked around some more as if he was trying to find "real" people in the house. Without a word, he turned around and walked out.

Alone, I did not know how to react to his behavior until I turned around and caught my reflection on the face of the grandfather clock. "I don't look like everybody else in this place," I said to myself. He was looking for a white man. He must have thought it was an Asian fraternity. I felt like I had just crashed into a brick wall filled with graffiti that said, "You are not one of us!"

How did I fool myself into believing that I could melt into this melting pot? How foolish I was to deny my Chinese roots in order to gain acceptance by a world that would never consider me as one of them! On that day, the world I tried so hard to become part of no longer had its appeal.

As the walls of denial tumbled down, I discovered another part of myself that I had kept hidden all my life in order to fit in: I was gay. "Coming out" was not very hard at this point because I no longer cared whether people accepted me or not. One more thing

would not make that much difference. So I came out to my fraternity, my priest, and my Bible study group. That all went very well.

Then I set out to look for another community in which I could fit. "There must be a gay and lesbian community," I said to myself. "When I find it, I will be home." I romanticized that this community would be open and accepting independent of people's color or race because we suffered a common oppression. With some research, I discovered the only gay bar in town. One evening, after regularly attending for several months, I found myself standing alone in the corner of this dark, smoke-filled room, waiting. No one talked to me. No one even looked at me. No one invited me to dance. When another Asian came in, I felt competitive. I went to the college gay and lesbian dance; the same thing happened. When it came to race relations, the gay community, which I dreamed would accept me, was no more than a micro version of the straight world. "You are not one of us!" echoed in my head again and again.

Home was not in the gay world. Home was certainly not the white world. Perhaps, my only home was to go back to the Chinese community. I would graduate from college, find a well-paying job, get married, buy a car, buy a house, and have children. This way I would always have my family, my Chinese community, and my security. But I could not do that. I had changed since my arrival in the United States eight years before. I could no longer buy totally into the Chinese culture, with its emphasis on group, not personal, identity and behavior. There was too much individualism in me. I could not be the perfect, obedient Chinese son, never asserting my personal needs over my family's desires. "You are not one of us!" also echoed here.

All that time, my operating assumption was that I needed to belong to a community in order to have an identity. There was still a lot of Chinese collectivism in me. In this lonely desert experience, I discovered that this assumption might not be valid. I discovered a spirituality that I call "creative marginality." The lack of acceptance by any one community had caused me to feel marginalized—that I did not belong anywhere. I discovered that, if I accepted this marginality, I could use it constructively to enhance my ministry and to build bridges between very diverse groups.

In Jewish and Christian tradition, there is much to be said about a spirituality of the marginalized. Many in the Scriptures were marginalized people. Abraham and Sarah and the generations after them up to Joseph were sojourners. Moses started out in Egypt and, in his adult life, found himself in between the enslaved Israelites and Pharaoh. He never could return to Pharaoh's court again, and he never entered Canaan, the promised land, with the Israelites. Jesus was very often in the company of the marginal people. In another

way, Jesus was marginal in that he was stuck between being divine and human.

A constructive way to look at being marginal was to see myself as in between—part of both ends but not fully one or the other. Being in between is like a string on a musical instrument, nothing more than a wire connecting two points. If there is no tension, there is no sound. If there is too much tension, the string breaks. If the string is tightened with the right amount of tension, it makes a beautiful sound.

I was pushing myself too hard to choose one group over another, so I snapped and lost connections with all groups. In this desert experience, I was lucky to have a very supportive Christian community that did not perceive me as a lost person wandering from community to community like a string lying loose between two points. Instead, my Christian community affirmed my marginality and nurtured me to a point where I could use this marginality creatively and constructively. My friends reconnected me and wound me up just right so that I could make music at an in-between place. I might never fit in the Chinese community again, but I had the experience from that culture to understand and have compassion for that community. I might never fit into the “mainstream” gay community, but my experience as a gay person enabled me to support its course and, at the same time, challenge its prejudices and stereotypes. I might never fit into the dominant culture in the United States, but my education and experience in that culture gave me the skill and knowledge to work with and challenge the systems on behalf of the oppressed groups with which I was connected.

Spirituality to me is the ability to make connections: connection with myself, especially parts of myself that I dislike and deny; connection with others, not just those who are like me but also those who are different and even my enemies; and connection with God through Jesus Christ, not just the compassionate God but also the part of God that judges and requires me to do justice. To make connection requires me to stretch, to step out of my boundaries, to take risks. To make connection might mean leaving what is comfortable and secure. To make connection might mean risking being rejected by where I come from and by where I am going. I have been blessed with the experiences of being in between two cultures and between the gay and the straight worlds. Painful as it might have been, these experiences have given me a foretaste of what it felt like to be in between the divine and the human. To use my marginality constructively means having the ability to connect with both ends, wind myself up with the Gospel with just the right tension and sing.

The realization of the “goodness” of marginality contributed to my pursuing the ordained ministry. I went to seminary. The following years brought many more stories of rejection and acceptance, of

being connected and disconnected. But that would be another essay. I am an Episcopal priest now. I am connected with one more community that does not fully accept me. So that is life for me. “You are not one of us” still whispers in my ears, but that is okay, and that is where I should be.