

Deep Narratives: The Japanese Internment as an Intergenerational Story

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My family has a story. Here is the way it was passed on to me: On December 7, 1941, my grandfather (Ojiichan) was picking up a birthday cake for his two-year-old son. On the way home from the bakery, he turned on the radio and heard the devastating news of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. "Well now we're in trouble," he thought.

Ojiichan was right. Two months later, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 allowing for the internment of over 120,000 Japanese, many of them American citizens. Japanese in San Francisco were given less than a week to shutter their businesses and pack up their homes. My grandparents and my Uncle Bob were loaded onto train cars, the window shades drawn, and taken to Los Angeles, where they spent six months living in roughly adapted racehorse stalls. When the desert camps were completed, they were transported to an internment center in Topaz, Utah. Ojiichan worked in the mess hall, where he was sometimes able to bring home extra cleaning supplies to my grandmother (Obachan), who disapproved of the personal hygiene of the woman who used the public tub ahead of her. My Aunt Yuko was born in Topaz.

When Obachan died in 2018 (at age one hundred and one!), my cousins and I spent several emotional days going through her belongings, including all the records she had kept of their time in the Internment. There were Camp newspapers addressing things as mundane as trash disposal and of such national importance as *Korematsu vs. The United States*. There was a letter of encouragement from Emperor Hirohito, which must have been copied and distributed to each household. My favorite is a crayon drawing I assume must have been created by my Uncle Bob, in which one can make out the U.S. flag, the Japanese flag, something that looks suspiciously like a swastika, and the barbed wire fence that framed his world for almost four years.

Though it's been eighty years, this remains our family story. I mention it to my children regularly. Every couple of years, someone gets married or dies, and the Nakamura aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws gather together in one place. After the typical check-ins about family, work, and politics, we always work around—sometimes briefly, sometimes deeply—to the family story. "Oh, well that was when they were at Camp." "Ah, that must have been before the Camp." "I sometimes wonder if that was because of all the years at Camp."

When I was a kid, and even a young adult, I thought of the Internment as something that had happened to my ancestors but not necessarily anything that had to do with my own life. However, as I've gotten older and have done work to examine my own relationship with my family of origin and my experiences of racism, I've begun to realize the immense effect that my grandparents' story has on my identity. I have realized, for example, that cultural assimilation I saw in my father, born in 1952, wasn't a choice so much as a necessity. His parents worked long hours at multiple jobs—the typical immigrant experience. He loved spaghetti, The Beatles, and speaks no Japanese. It was not hard for him to move across the country for law school, marry

my mother, and live contentedly in Alabama for the next forty years, apart from any Japanese American community. For me, however, this created a sense of disconnect that is shared among many Sansei (third generation Japanese) my age. We may at first glance look foreign, but we have little to no connection to our ancestors' country of origin. Furthermore, Asians are often perceived, and perceive ourselves, as ethnically "in-between," sharing neither the White nor the Black experience of America. My whole life, I have carried the sensation of being *from* and even loving my hometown, yet never fully belonging there.

Though my own experience of disconnect can partly be attributed to growing up apart from my grandmother and her culture, I have observed Asian American friends who were raised in Asian households say something similar. For them, the disconnect is between the culture they experienced at home—Asian cooking, practices around taking off shoes, the language spoken at home by their parents, the cultural expectations put on their academic pursuits, etc.—and the more "mainstream" culture they saw lived out by their peers at school. From these friends, I tend to hear things like "It makes me uncomfortable to be around this many Asians," "I don't date Asians," or "I can speak Cantonese/Japanese/Thai, but I like to pretend I can't." And, of course, as an Episcopal priest, I hear Asian American friends say, "I hated the Asian American church we went to when I was a kid. There were too many... Asians there."

I occasionally attend conferences that bring together Asian American leaders to discuss topics like ordination, preaching, teaching, and pastoring. These are always joyful and insightful. There is also almost always a palpable disconnect between the leaders who immigrated to the United States and those who were born in the U.S. Of course, there are bridge-builders—usually people who immigrated as young children or who have natural gifts for cross cultural communication. But in most keynote addresses, sermons, and workshops, a conscious decision must be made by the presenter to speak either to the "Americanized" second and subsequent generations *or* to the immigrants. If the former, the immigrants typically smile and gracefully tolerate a presentation that leaves them wondering "what are they talking about?" If the latter, I watch the U.S. born leaders try not to roll their eyes while thinking "why the heck am I here?"

I have heard wise leaders question whether intergenerational ministry is even possible in the Asian American community. Many, perhaps most, young adults end up finally leaving that Asian church they grew up in. Is it possible that the spectrum of experiences is simply too broad, the languages untranslatable, and the central spiritual questions too different?

Of course, these generational questions are far from limited to immigration and ethnic minorities. When I was recently ordained, at about 28 years old, I was invited to have lunch with a small group from the church who self-identified as "the old, liberal women." At one point, a lady asked me, completely sincerely, if, as a priest, I struggled with how I was going to teach my one year old daughter about Noah's Ark. "Because, of course," she said, "it's a story that's both historically and scientifically false."

It struck me then that while I might have called myself a "young liberal woman," the historicity of Noah's ark had never particularly bothered me. I understand, of course, that since the Enlightenment, religious and scientific leaders have often been at odds with each other. Older people in my congregations often look to writers like

Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg, theologians who attempted to make the teaching and miracles of Scripture more palatable for thousands of members of the Silent and Baby Boom generations. But I'm a Millennial—a member of the Harry Potter generation. We long to believe in a hidden world of magic and miracle, with shifting staircases and guardian spirit animals, and letters that arrive mysteriously in the mail to confirm that our identity crises don't indicate deficiency but membership in a different world.

From my observation, the Millennials' spiritual questions are less about scientific plausibility and dogma and much more about relationship. We are less likely to question the existence of God and more likely to frown upon the Church's exclusivity. We're less likely to doubt the historicity of the Old Testament and Gospel stories than we are to dismiss them as irrelevant to our own lives. Many times I've smiled while listening to my Millennial friends express emotionally charged skepticism about the Virgin birth, while enthusiastically affirming Jesus' Resurrection from the dead. The Virgin birth really seems to strike Millennials the wrong way, not so much because it is biologically impossible, but because a sex-less conception feels suspiciously like a denial of Mary's humanity and therefore an incomplete Incarnation.

Add to these differences in spiritual perspective the oft mentioned "generational warfare" among Gen Z, Millennials, and Baby Boomers (culminating in the "okay boomer" phenomenon of a few years ago) about everything from the climate crisis to the decline of indoor shopping malls, and you have a recipe for disconnect. We see it in the graying Mainline, as fewer younger people understand the connection their parents make between following Jesus and showing up for worship on Sunday morning, and those who do attend hipper, "more relevant" churches. Occasionally I mull this over, wondering if the disconnect is becoming so great that intergenerational ministry might truly not be possible, at least not for much longer. Can we really sustain being one church when our experiences of the world are so different?

In some sense, however, it may be that intergenerational ministry is one of the most important things we Christians do. Storytelling and preaching across generations is the only real way that I believe we can arrive at *deep narrative*, the kind of narrative that is often so powerful that it permeates the boundaries of time and culture. I've always carried the feeling that good pastoring is about more than "relevance." Stories don't have to be contemporary in order to connect. Deep narrative might not be about me or even occur in the world that I myself inhabit, but it somehow helps me understand who I am, why I am the way I am, and who I have the possibility of becoming tomorrow.

Scripture offers the epitome of this kind of deep narrative. The biblical Exodus and Exile happened to a relatively small group of people, yet they spiritually frame not only the rest of the biblical narrative, but also the experiences of millennia of Jews and Christians around the world. The Exodus, for example, is used to justify future generosity toward resident aliens, reminding subsequent generations that "you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Christians understood that Jesus' death and resurrection had allowed them to be "passed over" and thereby freed from sin and judgement. Harriet Tubman was nicknamed "Moses." During the darkest days of Covid lockdown last year, my church community in Birmingham sang Don McLean's "Waters of Babylon" at our virtual worship.

There will, of course, always be youthful shrugging off of the deep narrative. As

the young man sings to his scandalously non-Jewish lover in Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years*, "But the minute I first met you, I could barely catch my breath; I've been wandering through the desert, I've been beaten I've been hit; my people have suffered for thousands of years, and I don't give a s—!" this is perfectly fine. The strength of deep narrative is that it is deep enough to outlast our distraction, cynicism, and overconfidence. When we are ready, it will be here, waiting to help us make sense of the world and of our lives.

Soon after our wedding, I brought my husband Josiah out to California to meet Obachan, who was then in her early nineties. Josiah was eager to ask her about the camps, and she was eager to comply. "*We were Americans*," she insisted in her tiny yet ferociously indignant voice. "*They had no right to do this to us.*" Then, she said something I had never heard before: "On the day Japan surrendered, they announced it to us, to the whole camp. And we stood there and watched the setting sun... ; you know, Japan is called the Land of the Rising Sun. We watched the sun go down, and people cried." A decade later, I visited the little that remains of the Topaz Relocation Center. The detail Obachan didn't mention was that sunset there—a backdrop to the Rocky Mountains—would be one of the most magnificent natural sights I might ever see.

By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and there we wept;
when we remembered Zion.
How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?

As I watched the sun set behind the stretch of mountains and an endless expanse of tumbleweed, I wondered what it was that brought tears to the eyes of those Topaz prisoners. I imagine few of them were actually hoping that Japan would win the war. Maybe some still believed that Emperor Hirohito was a god, and his defeat came as a moment of devastating disillusionment. Others may have been weeping for the victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet when I hear this story, what I most resonate with is the deep identity crisis Japan's surrender must have invoked for people like Obachan—proud American citizens, betrayed by the president they had voted for. People who remembered Japan as the land of their mothers, friends, and teachers—yet also knew that its military committed unspeakable atrocities. People like members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team of Nisei, whose families were feared and segregated, but who gave their lives to defeat Hitler and defend peace and justice for the world. It is these complicated tears that, for me, define the deep narrative of the Internment.

Our deep narratives do more than unite generations. They show us new possibilities for who we might become. I am repeatedly drawn to Deuteronomy 26, regarding the offering of first fruit from the Promised Land:

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there

as an alien.. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD have given me.”

The true questions for all of us are “Who is my ancestor? And what fruit does his or her story compel me to now offer before God?” In other words, what deep narratives have shaped you, and what difference have they prepared you to make in God’s world?