

JoAnne Chung Yan LAM

Venturing Outside the Lines

Having restarted writing this article more than once, I have found it difficult to define spirituality in any description. From my own experience, it has proven to be a mosaic of spiritual practices. When colouring, children are told to colour inside the lines. However, why not go outside the lines? Would it be so detrimental to be different from conventional expectations?

Each week I stand in the English-speaking Evangelical Lutheran Church in Geneva, reciting the Lord's Prayer in my own language (Cantonese). There is a sense of celebration of diversity as the people around me most often recite the prayer in English. If I were lucky, there would be a variety of languages all around me, creating a worshipful humming rather than recitation in unison.

We are all Chinese people at my home congregation in Toronto, Canada. Most times the congregational recitation of the Lord's Prayer is like "follow the leader"—everyone speaking with care not to step outside of the clear, group-formed rhythmic recitation. Being a mischievous Pastor's Kid (PK), I have tried to race the rest of the congregation during such parts of the Sunday service and often, it would result in much pain for my "derrière" when I got home. Uniformity became one of the most essential elements in the worship style in my home church, Toronto Chinese United Church of Canada, because it represented order and organization within the community, two things Chinese people strive to instill in their children even at a very early age.

Familiarity is definitely a disadvantage more so than a benefit and I sought out common patterns in all things. Change is something of a struggle in everything that I do. Even giving thanks before meals, my parents taught me a prayer to be recited as grace. I do not think it was because they wanted to eliminate all forms of diversity in my life, but it was often difficult to know exactly what the "right" things to say during prayer time. My pastor and father prepared prayers to be recited at different times of the day and occasions. In some ways, this has hindered my communication with God. I truly thought that God did not have much time to listen to all the things I needed to say and it was almost like a voice recognition software that would simply take notes that I

am saying my mealtime prayers and I was a good Christian. Prayer was more in the form of paying dues rather than building a relationship with God.

I began to fear prayer just as I feared snakes, small spaces, and heights. This limited my ability to communicate to God the worries and struggles in my days and I became anxious in unresolved issues. God truly takes care of me. God brought a lovely couple as our Sunday School teachers who taught about prayers. Of course, being the PK, I thought that I already understood prayer perfectly. Trying to show how well versed I am, I often volunteered to pray for the group. After the Sunday School teachers told us about praying and the power of prayers a few times, I realized that my concept of prayer might have been slightly distorted. They often prayed in tongues and laid hands on my head and shoulder, which sent a tinkling up and down my back. This was a new experience, but I really enjoyed it because it made me smile and light-hearted. I was not scared, but happy and relieved of my burdens.

From that point onwards, I paid close attention to the way they prayed and took careful notes. They did not form any patterns, there were no repeated phrases other than "we love you, God" and "in Jesus' name we pray. Amen." I had no idea as to how to copy their method of prayer in order to achieve a similar level of spirituality. Then it sparked a realization in me. Neither of them recited anything written. This allowed them to speak directly to God. That approach of conversing with God was a groundbreaking concept for me, as I thought God liked my recited prayers quite a lot and I was not sure if God would be ready for some change.

It took quite a few years before I realized that I did not even have to be kneeling with my eyes closed to communicate with God. My relationship with God accelerated dramatically once I learned that God is present in all settings and every word that escapes my mouth is heard. That scared me a little bit at first, because it was even more serious than my parents hearing everything that I have said, this was GOD listening! Therefore, I would ask for God's understanding often, especially when I have been really upset about something.

Sometimes, words can only



express so much. For me, music has been a major part of worship. Being a part of a worship team has taught me that bodily movements and my voice can be tools of praise and worship. Learning worship songs has brought me even closer to God. Through music and song, my gratitude and appreciation for God's awesome blessings in my life is expressed. Music is dead without soul, and I have found that only in songs of praise am I able to sing the 'soul' into the music, because I truly experience the caress of God's unconditional love and grace pouring into my life.

Therefore, as I stand in my new home church in Geneva, there is a sense of wholeness with the multi-lingual hum of the Lord's Prayer and the diverse selections of songs from around the world. Although we have not yet sung any Chinese songs, I am sure that my presence in the choir will make some impact. Maybe before I leave there would have been one Chinese song sung during worship. Either way, the celebration of diversity in spirituality does not come from theory or definition. Rather, it is through experience and appreciation of diverse worship styles that



one will grow to appreciate the multi-faceted God that we worship.

As there are many methods to making tea, the end product is still having a cup of warm tea, sending waves of reassurance and comfort to every part of the body. So it is with spirituality and worship. Uniformity creates patterns, yet diversity brings freshness and a global approach to spirituality. Only by embracing diversity can we realise true spirituality. I offer much encouragement for the reader to seek out a new worship style and appreciate the different level of spirituality it will help to achieve within the uniformity that has formed from patterns and habits. Try to colour outside the lines—it can result in quite an interesting artistic creation.

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