

Affirming and Transforming Relations: Refugee Women and Imperial Violence

DENISE NADEAU
Canada

“The treatment of refugees – at a legislative and socio-economic level – has become one of the most urgent tasks confronting anti-racist groups. Refugees are without question the most vulnerable section of society, stripped of even the most basic human rights and relegated to not even second – but third-class status.”

Pragna Patel, Southall Black Sisters

In January 2003, there was an estimated 19.783 million “persons of concern” under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Persons of concern include refugees, asylum seekers (people who arrive at a country’s borders and seek refugee status), returnees and internally displaced persons (Moussa 2003: 14). The term “forced migration” most aptly describes the reality of circumstances that cause these people to leave their homes and communities. They are forced to leave because if they remain they risk persecution or death. This may include the slow or eventual death brought about by an inability to feed their families – whether because of war, civil conflict, persecution, poverty and lack of employment, environmental destruction, human rights violations or imposed development projects that displace whole populations. Forced migrants have no status or claim to rights as citizens and it is totally the prerogative of the states to which they flee to decide whether to grant asylum, refugee or immigration status, migrant worker status or to deport them.

In North America, specifically Canada, from where I write, the term “refugee” carries a lot of implicit meanings. While implying protection, it seems to also signify powerlessness and subjection (Moussa 2003: 378). At another level, magnified in the recent context of global capitalism and the “war against terror,” the refugee is perceived as someone outside the nation who threatens “the national order of things” (Ong 2003: 78). Both in Europe and North America asylum seekers are demonised as bogus, as “illegal immigrants and economic migrants scrounging at capital’s gate and threatening capital’s culture” (Special Report on Xenophobia 2001: 1).

The changing discourse is reflected in a 2002 Canadian immigration law that undermines the human rights of refugees and all those seeking asylum. Instead of treating refugee claimants as people needing Canada's protection from persecution, the state is now treating them as a potential threat to the country's security. In December 2003 Canada transferred immigration enforcement activities from the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration to the new Canada Border Services agency under the new Ministry of Public Safety. The term refugee is also slowly being dropped from government language, to be replaced by the neutral and ambiguous term "protected person."

This article challenges the image of refugee and asylum seeker as victim and threat. This ideological construction serves Western states that are determined to close their borders, yet it belies the reality that 175 million people will cross a border every year. People are being displaced by the multiple effects of the neo-colonialism that is at the centre of the neoliberal economic project. This movement of peoples is an act of resistance against domination and oppression, and a search for justice. It also is justified by the basic human right to move and to seek asylum.

I am choosing to address the issue of women refugees in this context, as women and girls are 80% of the world's forced migrants (Moussa 2003: 14). Women who risk their life and livelihood to flee persecution, poverty and violence, by their very presence in our countries, challenge us to rethink our relationship with migrant peoples and, in turn, to act in a way that we can be allies with them in their fight for dignity and justice. I have privileged women and girl asylum seekers, and specifically women and girls from the Majority World, for several reasons. First, I have worked with some of these women in Canada and am familiar with their issues. Second, I have also observed the specificities of their struggles and needs ignored both by male-dominated groups in their own communities and by advocates and allies outside their communities who work with them. The intersections of gender, race and class oppression that affect these women make them more vulnerable to violence, erasure and exploitation as refugee women. These are rarely named or understood. At the same time, it is important to underline the extent to which entire communities are being criminalized and racialized in the post 9/11 context and how often it is the

adult males who are targeted for arrest, detention, secret trails and deportation. In acknowledging that racial profiling is directed at entire communities of men, women and children who are deemed inferior and a threat to the national order, I here highlight the conditions of refugee women, of uprooted women, in this context.

I use the term "uprooted women" interchangeably with forced migrants as part of a theological rethinking of refugees. This term was adopted by the World Council of Churches (WCC) to broaden the scope of naming all those who are subject to forced displacement and are compelled to leave their homelands because of the breakdown of social, economic and political conditions. "Uprooted people are those forced to leave their communities: those who flee because of persecution and war, those who are forcibly displaced because of environmental devastation and those who are compelled to seek sustenance abroad because they cannot survive at home" (WCC 1996: 10). The concept of uprootedness, like the terms displaced or forced migration, challenges the terminology of "illegal" which is now used in North America and Europe, not only to hide the causes of the movement of peoples, but also to criminalize refugees and asylum seekers. Rootedness and uprootedness are terms that address a connection to land, earth and place.

My perspective is that of someone who is in a "receiving" or "host" country that accepts migrants. My starting and ending point are the same: a politics and practice of accountability in the relationship between Westerners and women migrants from the Majority World. More specifically I address how we as Christians from a European heritage can draw from our faith, from our understandings of the Sacred, from our history and our biblical tradition, to think and act in solidarity with migrant women. I do this with reference to a biblical theology of "indigenous place" (Taylor 1998) and within a spirituality based on a cosmology rooted in relationships. I apply these to the reading of the stories of the haemorrhaging woman and Jairus' daughter and I conclude with some reflections on how Westerners can be effective allies of women refugees and asylum seekers.

Reading from an Indigenous Place

As a white middle-class woman living in Canada I approach with caution the use of the Christian scriptures as a resource in a call to solidarity with

uprooted women. The Bible has been, and continues to be, used to culturally reinforce the genocide, displacement and stigmatization of indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, the land that the colonizers named as North America. The missionary efforts that supported the expansion of Christian European civilization in the Americas were underlain by an explicit racism. The belief in the superiority of European civilization informed the missionary project not only in the Americas but in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. As the emerging field of post-colonial biblical scholarship demonstrates, the bible has been and is still used to justify and maintain the suppression and domination of Two Thirds World peoples and, in particular, women. Musa Dube's work specifically has addressed just how the message of the superiority of European religion and culture was coded into biblical interpretation and was linked to biblical typologies of women as representing land – metaphors that justified entering, possessing and controlling distant lands (Dube 2000).

The new American/British imperialism that is emerging today under the guise of neoliberal economic policies is underlain by the presupposition of all empires – of a superior civilization and race ruling over an inferior one. Neo-colonialism has added the words “democratic” and “legal” to the coding of superior and “undemocratic” and “illegal” to the meaning of inferior peoples. The aim is the same: to control and exploit the land and resources of distant places for the benefit of the imperial power. The Christianity of the ruling elite in Britain, the United States, and even Canada plays a significant factor in this new imperialism, reflected in the rhetoric of “clash of civilizations” used by both George W. Bush and Tony Blair.¹

I therefore approach using the Bible with full awareness of its past and present use by imperial powers. I propose an approach to reading scripture which Mark Lewis Taylor calls “reading from an indigenous place” (Taylor 1998: 117). This is an anti-imperialist reading of the Bible that

¹ I prefer the term “imperialism” rather than “empire.” Recently the term empire has gained currency in some North American Christian circles. While it recalls the biblical Roman Empire and often is used to refer to the United States, at the same time it frequently gets used in a deterritorialized and dehistoricized way, a vague metaphor for the “bad guys.” Imperialism, specifically Western imperialism, describes a historical process that is based on unequal power relations between geographical regions and races. If we shift our focus from the symbols or markers of oppression to the processes through which we are implicated, this can aid us in understanding our role in both domination and subjugation.

combines recognition of the history of colonialism in this hemisphere while incorporating a fundamental element of indigenous spirituality – our relationship with the land. Taylor bases this reading strategy on two conditions: a) a multi-vocal/global criticism that foregrounds “one’s own voice and position,” while critically engaging in dialogue with voices of others and b) the privileging of “the voices and needs of indigenous peoples and their lands” (Taylor 1998: 124, 123).

My voice is shaped by my multiple locations. I write this in Quebec, a territory that is home to eleven Native nations. I have just recently returned to this place where I grew up. I am conscious that my paternal lineage includes generations of French Catholic settlers who intermarried with and displaced Mic’maq peoples on the Gaspé coast. My maternal lineage includes women of Ontario Irish Catholic and American Methodist heritage, the latter pioneers in the Mid-West land grab that forcibly removed Native peoples to Oklahoma in the infamous Trail of Tears. My way of naming this relationship comes from lessons learned in twenty five years of on-and-off-again interactions with Natives peoples – ranging from friendships to working with missionary orders in the North, healing work in a Native family violence program and in a program for displaced Native women in an inner city.

In the last five years I have been involved in supporting women asylum seekers. I first learned about the issues facing women refugees with Direct Action Against Refugee Exploitation (DAARE) – which worked with Fujianese women who, in 1999, arrived by boat on the shores of British Columbia and were immediately placed in detention. In Montreal, I have been part of a team supporting women and children who have sought sanctuary in local churches. I have also worked training staff in a Women Abuse Violence Prevention program at a South Asian Women’s Centre that works with refugees and I support and participate in anti-deportation campaigning of Solidarity Across Borders, a coalition of anti-deportation groups from several immigrant and refugee communities. All these experiences have shaped my analysis and position as an anti-racist feminist who comes from a middle-class European-Canadian background.

As an anti-racist activist, I see Taylor’s call to “privilege voices and needs of indigenous peoples and their lands” as necessarily foregrounding the complexities of displacement that is past and present product of imperialism.

Both the indigenous peoples in North America and indigenous and peasant populations in the Two-Thirds World have had their relationships with their lands disrupted or destroyed. People who come to North America seeking asylum come to a land where Native claims have not been recognized and where a colonial relationship still exists between the state and Native peoples. It is in effect still “stolen land.” It is important to recognize the link between the sovereignty and justice claims of Native peoples and the struggles for justice, asylum and freedom of movement of all refugees and displaced persons. Rather than ignore the fact that this is contested land, we need to foreground the ways we can revision our relationship to this land – all newcomers in the last 500 years. Reading from indigenous place allows us to acknowledge the complexities of place and land, geography and history, in how we read the Bible and do theology.

A Spirituality and an Ethic of Relations

I understand our relationship with the land within a cosmology that affirms the interrelationship of all beings. This involves shifting one’s perspective of the world from one based on hierarchical relationships of power and domination – man/woman, culture/nature, white/black, humans/nature – to one where we are all interrelated and where our difference and diversity are integrally part of our interconnection. Both indigenous spiritualities and ecofeminism affirm humans as merely part of the cosmos, not superior, and in continual relationship with plants, animals and minerals. The Divine is not outside and above, but within this cosmos and yet beyond it. We exist within this Divine web of relationships as part of what Ivone Gebara, the Brazilian ecofeminist, calls the “Sacred Body of the Cosmos” (Gebara 1999: 53).

The term “relations” is often used in some North American tribal religions to name this interconnectedness of all beings and the interrelatedness of humans to the natural world around us. A relative is someone with whom you have a relationship; they are part of your family. A rock, bird, or tree, is a relation. The purpose of ceremony and prayer in North American indigenous traditions is to restore our place in the web of relations – to restore connections that have been broken.

The ethic that follows from this relational richness of life is the recognition that my body does not literally end at the borders of my skin,

but that in different ways we continue in others and are connected. In awakening in our bodies to the flow of energy between us and our relations, it is easier to move from a relationship of power and domination, which implies separateness and disconnection, to one of solidarity, justice and equality (Ajo 2002: 39). The task of restoring connection is based on the acknowledgment that our bodies are all part of this larger Sacred Body and that just relations between us transforms and heals the Sacred Body of which we are part. An ethic of relations requires that we not only cease viewing the other as a stranger, but also finding a way of balancing our relationships so they become equal. This includes taking historical responsibility for imbalances created by colonial policies that have contributed to the inequalities in the present.

Honour and Shame: The Deserving Versus the Undeserving Refugee

In Mark 5: 21–43, the healing of Jairus’s daughter and the healing of the woman with the flow of blood, has often been interpreted through the lens of a socio-cultural dynamic of honour and shame that has been seen as central to all status relationships in the world of first century Palestine (Myers 1990: 198–200). In this honour culture, gender and class status were deeply imbedded. Honour was acquired through birth, family connections and associations. Likewise shame came with natural groupings – being a woman, poor or sick – and being associated with these groupings. Sexual/body relations fell within this pollution/purity code. The function of this code was to set group boundaries – to demarcate socio-symbolic taboos which functioned to maintain internal order in the world (Myers 1990: 74). Those who were clean were the insiders; those who were unclean were the outsiders who threatened the order.

However, the honour/shame dynamic functioned to cover-up the gender, race and class dynamics of power and control in colonized Palestine. I want to caution against using the honour/shame lens in a way that fixes both Jewish society and the Hebrew bible as representing a more primitive culture than that of the Christian reader/interpreter. The honour/shame, purity/pollution dynamic, reflects a system of classification based on binary opposition, a system that still permeates Western Christianity and culture and which supports imperial claims representing the superiority of Western civilization

over other cultures and religions, including Judaism. The honour/shame framework functions with different terminology to support structural oppression of women, outsiders, and poor people, and it is still used to both maintain power relationships in North America as well as to justify imperial relationships of domination elsewhere in the world.

In first century Palestine, the haemorrhaging woman was treated as a double outcast. In terms of the Levitical purity code, she had to be segregated from the community because of her continuous bleeding. Not only did she bear the signs of the impurity of the female body but also she was poor, as she had spent all her money on medical care that had not cured her. Both conditions stigmatized her socially; she was shunned and shamed. Because she was unclean, she was not allowed in certain places and had no means of social support. In terms of the dynamics of power and control she was a person who was isolated, marginalized and therefore vulnerable to further violence and exploitation.

While we have no idea of the racial-ethnic background of the haemorrhaging woman, it is clear she experienced both gender and class discrimination. If we turn to the refugee woman in Canada we see these two factors compounded by race. At the same time the woman refugee claimant is described by the dominant society in terms of the language of the “deserving” or “undeserving,” the “good” or “bad” claimant or the “true” political refugee versus the “bogus” economic refugee. This language has complex roots in Canadian history and in the construction of the Canadian nation as a white settler colony. Like the honour/shame construction in the text, there is an opposition here that covers up the power dynamics in Canadian society.

The concept of Canada as nation, similar to the United States, has been shaped by Anglo-Saxon Christian gender, race and class interests. As Aihwa Ong has illustrated so powerfully in her study of Cambodian refugees in the United States, this “racial anglo-saxonism” prescribes the value of who is a worthy citizen and who isn’t, which informs government, social work and church practices (Ong 2003: 72). Those persons who are economically self-sufficient and productive are seen as inherently white and “good,” while those who lack the appropriate work ethic or the ability to perform economically in order to become worthy, i.e. white, are seen as irresponsible

and a burden, i.e. not white.

In the United States, with a legacy of plantation slavery and Native genocide, this value structure has played out in the bipolar racial formation of black and white that defines all those who are on the “black scale” as not belonging to the nation (Ong 2003: 73). In Canada, the same bipolar formation exists, with the Native side of the pole playing a significant role. The Native, the Aboriginal, symbolizes the Other who is outside the nation as both ward and liability. The tradition of paternalism and coercive tutelage that has underlain care of Natives in residential schools, missions and social work practice, is now reproduced in social service agencies, settlement programs and church programs that aim to reform, cleanse and assimilate the less worthy immigrants and refugees.

Some ethnic groups move in and out of the category of deserving citizen. In Canada, Jews, Irish and French Quebecers are groups now considered white and worthy citizens, though previously they were not considered “real” Canadians. People of African heritage in Canada are usually on the permanent side of the divide. South East Asians, Latinos, or people of Arab heritage, depending on the potential of individuals to become “white,” i.e. economically self-sufficient, have difficulty moving out of the undeserving category, as race and class dynamics keep them poor. In the eyes of the dominant culture the term “Canadian” seems to be reserved only for whites of English or French origin. Within Quebec, which has a separate nationalist dynamic, the term “cultural communities” is used to describe all newcomer groups, reflecting the dominant gaze of the white Quebecois.

The supposed distinction between the “good” and “bad” refugee claimant is also connected to a historical distinction between political and economic refugees. The beginning of the 21st century is a totally different world than the one in which the UN Convention of 1951 first described a political refugee. Then a political refugee was defined in the context of the genocide of European Jews and the desire to liberate people from the “evils” of Communism. From the 1960’s to the 1980’s a new class of refugees emerged, those who were caught in the civil wars and ethnic or communal divisions of the nation states that were struggling to shrug off colonial rule. By the late 1980’s and 1990’s the emerging neoliberal economic order, controlled and originating in the West, enforced political and economic

choices on these new nation states – policies like structural adjustment and privatization – which have further impoverished populations and contributed to civil wars. The new imperialism allows giant American, Canadian and European corporations to roam the world, exploiting land and labour and selling military hardware, leaving more and more people who are unable to feed their families and displaced from their homes or countries. As the categories of political and economic migrants are collapsing we find more and more women fleeing both political and economic repression.

In the hierarchy of deserving and undeserving, women refugee claimants and asylum seekers are seen as undeserving by the very nature of their gender, race and class status. Despite, as mentioned above, 80% of the world's refugees are women, the percentage of women claimants accepted in Canada ranged between 18% and 33% in the period between 1989 and 1993 (Moussa 2002: 402). Even when in 1993, Canada agreed to adopt Guidelines on Gender-Related Persecution, which more broadly defined "women at risk," only 290 refugee women (who were not sponsored by their husbands) were accepted over a period of seven years (Moussa 2002: 385). While refugees should be accepted on the basis of the risks and dangers (including extreme poverty and deprivation for one's children) in their home country, what is increasingly happening is that they are being judged by their ability to meet immigration criteria – a point system in Canada that favours the highly skilled, well-educated, English or French speaking upper class male. Refugee women and their children, in particular those who are poor, not white and from Southern countries, are considered both undeserving and undesired. These women experience both being shamed and shunned and are treated as a burden on Canadian society. The message is clear – they are of no value. They are triply "outside the nation."

Challenging the Hierarchy: The Healing of the Two Daughters

My starting point is that the hierarchy implicit in the interpretive formulation of honour/shame has no place in cosmologies of interconnection. Mary Churchill, in an article examining how the purity-pollution lens was used by anthropologists to interpret Cherokee religious traditions, calls for "an indigenous-based model of complementarity rather than

opposition" to understand Native religions (Churchill 2000: 225). While we can not transpose an indigenous principle to other religions directly, I would like to suggest that it frames a way of rereading the stories of the haemorrhaging woman and the daughter of Jairus that can help us transcend the more familiar portrayal of Jesus as liberator of the oppressed (Schotroff 1991: 97-98). In doing this we can reframe our understanding of the reality of refugee women's experiences.

Let us first read the story of the healing of two "daughters" in Mark through the lens of the gendered racism that affects refugee women. This text has been identified as a "sandwich construction," i.e. a story wrapped within a story in order that the reader relates to the two together (Myers et al. 1997: 64). As the story slowly unfolds we realize a major reversal of the social order is taking place.

Jairus, unlike the woman who is bleeding or his daughter, has a name in the text. He is a synagogue leader, the patriarchal head of the family and a member of the ruling class. He has a sense of his entitlement. He approaches Jesus easily, and speaks for his daughter, who has no voice or name in the story. Jairus represents those who presume they are at the center of power. At the same time another woman with no name approaches Jesus from behind. As someone with a bleeding disorder she is considered unclean. The Levitical purity code ensures that she stays both poor and an outcast, perpetually segregated. Her condition deteriorates further as her last funds are wasted on spurious healers.

This woman is the refugee claimant or asylum seeker. She has no status, no name and is invisible to dominant society. The causes of her bleeding are multiple. In her home country she has suffered from one or many forms of violence: economic exploitation, psychological abuse and sexual violence – which may include sexual assault, wife assault and psychological abuse, sexual slavery, and war rape. She may have been persecuted, arrested or been sexually tortured for political participation or for that of her family members. Her freedom and mobility may have been restricted and she has had no recourse to protection of the police or the law. While crossing borders to the country of asylum, often at great physical risk, she may once again have experienced intimidation, sexual harassment or rape. Once in the asylum country, with no rights as a citizen, she is

vulnerable to sexual violation and economic exploitation, enduring further financial hardship and emotional distress. As she awaits her claim, she is asked to provide endless documentation, justification of present and past activities, go through security and medical checks, and reviews of her economic and political background. What little money she has goes to immigration lawyers or consultants, leaving her penniless.

The bleeding of the refugee woman is compounded by the stress of waiting and the constant fear of deportation. If she finds work, she is ghettoized into low paying, marginal jobs, where her precarious situation is exploited, either through being paid below minimum wage or being subjected to sexual harassment. The pressures to find housing, schools, work, learn a new language and to deal with a new culture, the maze of institutions, and the need to provide emotional refuge for her family from perpetual racism, leave her little time to grieve the losses she has suffered. Losses include home and country, a network of family and friends, a community of support, cultural food and language, familiar religious institutions, and citizenship (Moussa 2002: 388). Fear of deportation or being seen as a burden to the state can lead to reluctance to go to a doctor when ill or seek help when she is a victim of violence. She will not complain about poor salaries and working conditions, racism or sexual violation or do anything which she thinks will jeopardize her status.

In the story, the woman with the issue of blood breaks the rules of the Palestinian honour culture. She goes into the crowd and touches from behind the man who is a wellknown healer. In doing this she risks being abused by the crowd and by the disciples. Yet she persists with a faith that she is doing the right thing.

Refugee women also reach out. They are not just victims, as they are so often portrayed. Each woman, often travelling with her children, who leaves her home country to seek asylum, risks first the journey and then the deprivations of being in the host country. The act of reaching out for asylum by the woman migrant involves considerable courage and faith, especially in this international context where they now risk detention and deportation. Unlike the 1960's and 1970's in North America and Europe, where there was respect for international law and the right of all migrants to claim asylum in another country, now asylum seekers have been recast

as illegal immigrants and are regarded with hostility and suspicion. Migrants are associated with traffickers and are seen as breaking domestic immigration laws if, for instance, they enter the country as a stowaway. Arriving in a country without permission has been redefined as a criminal act, "even though the 1951 UN Convention of the Status of Refugees upholds the right of refugees to break domestic immigration laws in order to seek asylum" (Emergence of Xeno-Racism 2001: 4).

If the woman asylum seeker comes to a country like Canada in an act of desperation and hope, the conditions she faces here require deep resilience. An example is the fate of 90 Fujianese women, who with 509 Fujianese men, survived a dangerous journey in the summer of 1999 in four old leaky ships, landing on the shores of the West Coast of Canada to seek asylum and safety. The majority were immediately put in prison. Most of the women were eventually deported; some were kept in jail for over a year and a half. After a year, suffering the effects of long-term incarceration, the women went on a week – long hunger strike to raise public awareness of their conditions. This is an excerpt from their Hunger Strike Declaration:

We are the women from Fujian province who came to Canada to seek refuge. In China, we were persecuted under the one – child policy. Since the day we arrived in Canada, we have been locked up in prison. . . . We hope that our hunger strike will raise Canadian awareness of how it feels to lose one's freedom. . . . Meanwhile, we are afraid of being sent back to China as we know we will be imprisoned and subjected to torture and fines. We are caught between imprisonment imposed by the Canadian government and persecution from the Chinese government. . . . However we would like to ask if 14 months of imprisonment is upholding human rights? All we have is our lives to risk for freedom. . . . We want freedom!" (Direct Action 2001: 16).

In 2002 the Canadian government passed the new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act which further limited options for those claiming both immigration and refugee status. The result has been a huge increase in detentions and deportation orders, with specific communities targeted – Pakistani, Palestinian, Algerian and Colombian. As well a significant number of single black women from Africa or the Caribbean, mostly with children, have been refused refugee status. For both women and men who have been unable to gain status the options are limited – to go "underground," seek sanctuary in a church or be deported. For women with

children the underground option is practically impossible. Some choose sanctuary, as did an Ethiopian single parent and her three children who has been in sanctuary 10 months at the time of this writing. Her words reveal the determination of the refugee claimant who refuses to give up despite being unjustly denied asylum: “I don’t want my children to live in war or a horrible place. It is better to die in peace than to die in terror. To wait with hope and to wait without hope is not equal.”

Despite the repeated denials of their human rights, these women are not just victims. They are “victim-survivors,” a term used by Traci West to acknowledge the myriad ways women who experience the routine oppression of gendered racism intersecting with intimate violence resist and survive – despite incredible odds against them (West 1999: 151). The different ways women asylum seekers and refugee claimants engage in the act of touching, of reaching out, is the very opposite of passivity. Despite being stigmatized, ghettoized, refugee women survive and resist in multiple ways – most of which are not seen or understood by the service workers and helpers from the dominant culture who interact with them.² The woman refugee claimant, faced with what can be endless months or even years of waiting to see how her status will be determined, responsible for maintaining the emotional health of her family in this context, ignored and forgotten by the dominant society, exhibits both resilience and a deep faith.

Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that the power had gone from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” And the disciples said, “You see the crowd pressing in on you: how can you say “who touched me?” Jesus looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before Jesus, and told the whole truth. Jesus said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

In returning to the story, the first thing to note is that the woman feels healed in her body before Jesus has even become aware of her. The

healing comes about through her effort and faith. At the same time, this is a story with multiple levels. It is not just about physical suffering and the reclaiming of strength and energy. In the exchange with Jesus, she finds repair for her emotional, mental and spiritual suffering. This is a story about restoring right-relationship.

Jesus is someone who is aware enough in his body to notice when someone touches him. He notices, stops and turns his attention to what has happened. In doing this, he lets this moment take priority over the request of Jairus, a man with status, and stops for a woman who has been shamed, excluded, and is nameless. The disciples are not happy with this and try to deflect him. But Jesus “looks around to see.”

The woman, still the initiator, comes up to him, and despite her fear of breaking the rules around purity – talking to a man in public – she tells him her story. What is important is that Jesus just listens. He does nothing else. In affirming her as daughter, he shatters the social norm of exclusion. She is now part of his family; she can be at peace because they have a relationship as people of equal worth and dignity.

What is significant here is the physical movement of Jesus stopping and engaging with a poor woman when he was on the way to help a dying young woman from a socially powerful family. The poor woman becomes the priority even when her situation can be judged as less urgent situation. But is it less urgent? Some interpreters have argued that what Jesus is doing here is enacting the priority of the periphery over the center, the option for the poor (Myers et al. 1997: 64).

At the same time, there is another subtle dynamic at work here. The story is marked by the extent of both the woman’s agency, her vulnerability, and the fact that Jesus just listens to what she says. Jesus is often portrayed as miracle worker and liberator, an interpretation that ignores that the key to the various healings lies in the relational dynamics between Jesus and the people who come to him. In this story he has adopted the only behaviour appropriate for an ally in this situation – to listen and learn about the realities of the life of this excluded woman and to accept her without judgment. The woman, who is courageous and determined, is also fearful and trembling. We must be careful not to create her as a counter-heroine and fail to notice her humanness. While it is true

² Aihwa Ong’s study of Cambodian refugees in the United States, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, The New America* (2003), illustrates well how refugees evade, negotiate, or deflect the various ways state policies and practices try to erase, reform, or assimilate refugees.

Jesus has stopped for her, perhaps this is also a story about response and presence – being able to notice and just be with the invisible and shunned. This is a story about “doing nothing” and just “being with.”

In this dynamic, the role of the disciples is significant. First the disciples cannot even figure out who has touched Jesus. To them the poor and unclean all look the same; they are faceless, invisible. They try to keep Jesus from stopping; their loyalty is to Jairus, an important synagogue leader. Their behaviour reflects a lack of faith in the ability of the excluded to liberate themselves – a distrust of the masses. They are not listening; they try to take over the situation and block the way when someone else is reaching for her liberation. In listening to and supporting the woman who reaches out to him, Jesus acts responsibly with his privilege as a Hebrew male. He does give priority to her, but he will not neglect Jairus’ daughter; he has faith that things will work out there as well.

If we replay this story in the context of the woman asylum seeker, it is in the contrast between the disciples’ behaviour and Jesus’ that we may find ourselves. The disciples’ way of relating to the haemorrhaging women is played out today in some of the relationships that develop between refugee claimants and their helpers – advocates, ministers, social workers, settlement workers, church sponsors, etc. Renny Golden and Michael McConnell, in writing about the American Sanctuary Movement that emerged in the 1980’s to support Central American refugees, describe the combination of paternalism, racism, and sexism that marked church-refugee relationships:

Refugees, at times, have been overprotected by host congregations. Planning committees have excluded refugees from decisions that affected their personal lives. When refugees did speak up at some gatherings, Anglos listened to them politely, but their suggestions were largely ignored (Golden and McConnell 1986: 5).

Despite efforts to educate churches about racism there has been little change. A woman refugee from Swaziland fleeing gender persecution, who was deported with her two children in 2003 after being here nine years, said to me, referring not only to the local Sanctuary Committee we were working with, but also to the larger Canadian society, “they never listen to us; if they had listened to us, Rwanda would never have happened.”

Not listening is the acting out of the binary opposition of the civilised versus the uncivilised, the deserving versus the undeserving, the superior versus the inferior. Underneath it is the inability to see the sacredness of the other. The “charity” which suffuses so much of North American Christian approaches to sponsorship or sanctuary of refugees is based on what Golden and McConnell call an “unbiblical, ahistorical pietism aimed at ministering to timeless refugees who are without concrete historical, political and moral claims on our lives” (Golden and McConnell 1986: 179).

In fact, our geo-political reality is closely tied to the refugee claimant. We benefit from global systems of domination that cause displacement by the very fact we live in the West. Our lifestyle in North America and Europe is based on the exploitation of the resources, land and labour of the Two-Thirds World. Canadians are complicit in the new colonial relations of global capitalism by the fact that Canada is part of the G8, is a big player in the WTO and the FTAA negotiations and supports the U.S. “War Against Terror.” We are complicit in these neo-colonial relations by our very location in this land and nation taken from indigenous peoples. Therefore solidarity with refugees is not about charity or altruism; it is about recognizing our historical responsibility as part of the fact that we are inter-related and interconnected with each other.

Taking responsibility for our location changes the way privileged Christians can be in solidarity with asylum seekers. A tactic like providing sanctuary can be more effective if it is part of a larger campaign to challenge not only racial profiling, but also the inequities of an immigration and refugee determination system. It becomes even more useful when the campaign can point to the causes of forced migration. For example, in Montreal, a group of South Asian and indigenous youth have developed a campaign against Alcan in solidarity with the Orissa peoples. Alcan, whose headquarters are in Montreal, is the largest aluminium corporation in the world and is investing in a bauxite mine in Orissa, India, which will displace 60,000 people, some of whom are beginning to claim asylum in Canada. This campaign makes the connections between indigenous peoples, refugees, imperialism, and the right of all to a homeland.

The motivation for this type of solidarity comes not from altruism. In returning to the example of Jesus in the story, the white North American reader is challenged

to reposition herself or himself as the “helper” like Jesus. Jesus chose to listen and to acknowledge the relationship between himself and the woman. In calling her “daughter” he was challenging the taboo that placed this woman outside social acceptance. She was not only to be acknowledged, she was to be treated as family. Jesus’ behaviour reminds us that we are not here to judge or to screen refugee claimants; rather we are called to accept our common humanity and interconnectedness and take responsibility for it. This means we cannot be selective about who is in our family and who is not.

This in turn means that Jesus does not abandon Jairus and his daughter, even though he has first stopped to be with the haemorrhaging woman. He is available to both situations, although there is a tone of admonishment in his voice as he speaks to Jairus and his community. Unlike the woman who has faith, this crowd of wealth and means has trouble believing. Fear is a constant in their lives and they have now despaired of the little girl living. Jesus has little to do with the crowd of friends and he goes inside only with the girl’s father and mother. Here he takes a more active role than he did with the woman with the haemorrhage, where he only listened. He takes the girl by her hand, he gives her a command and then gives follow-up instructions to the parents.

Two things happen here. First, Jesus addresses the girl-child directly. She is nameless in the story, known only through her father and through her illness. But Jesus does not despair; he speaks to her directly, calling her to life and to action. She walks and eats. She has awakened in a radical way, and she has been seen and recognized. Secondly, in healing her, Jesus collapses the distinctions in Palestinian society. She is no less important than the woman with the haemorrhage, even if she comes from a background of privilege. Yet her healing involves an awakening, a coming to awareness of how numbing and constricting the life of privilege that is led unconsciously can be. She is from a class where unbelief and fear are linked. Because her story is framed around the healing of the haemorrhaging woman we are able to make the connection – waking up becomes a metaphor for belief and action in a different way of being, one that links compassion and liberation and that transcends the dynamics of preference and exclusion that maintain patriarchy and colonialism.

As a privileged Western woman, I read the story of the second daughter who was healed as a call to rise up and be in solidarity with all those women who are “outside the nation,” those who are excluded and deemed

unclean. The fact she is identified as a girl of 12 has many possible meanings. Her age links her to the woman who has been bleeding for 12 years. Twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel and can refer to the collective that needs to be woken up. The girl-child also represents the most vulnerable population in the world. Girl-children everywhere are more vulnerable to violence and oppression and this vulnerability increases exponentially with race, class, culture. In addition, refugee girls are extremely vulnerable because they have been uprooted and do not have a sense of place. Fundamental change for all women must begin with change for girl-children. The girl-child here signifies the possibility and hope of youth, of new movements, of young women who are daughters of feminists and strong women of every nation who are taking up the call for justice for all women in new and exciting ways.

Conclusion

The story of the healings of the two daughters is about changing relationships. While much has been left unsaid in this text we have to speculate what happened next. Did Jairus tell his daughter that Jesus had stopped to heal another woman and that they thought she had died in the meantime? Did the daughter, having experienced a form of physical death, decide she wanted to find that woman who had known a living death? Maybe the daughter had learned from her suffering about the illusions of superiority and perhaps she became an ally of all those women declared impure. Did the healed woman go back and find other women who had been stigmatized and organize with them to challenge the purity code, i.e. the system of status and privilege that enforces gender, class and race power?

The lessons in these stories are vast for women from the North and South, the West and the Two-Thirds World. Uprooted women have the right to self-determination and to move and live in dignity and safety. Within the structures of domination that exist today they need allies. They cannot win this fight alone. “White imperial women” is a term that has been used to describe women from the West who have failed to recognize their privilege as people living in the countries that are recolonizing the Two-Thirds world. Our option is to awaken and find our own path as women who can challenge imperialism from within.

Besides listening to migrant women, we can support their self-organizing. The importance of refugee groups self-organizing cannot be over-estimated. It challenges

the “individual-case” focus that both the government and media promote and instead reflects how these injustices are directed at entire groups. Asylum seekers who band together can break the isolation and facilitate strategies that work for them. They can make their own decisions without “well-meaning” helpers imposing their ways of doing things. It is from self-organized groups like the Committee for Non-Status Algerians or the Committee of Palestinian Refugees in Montreal that demands to stop deportations and regularize status for all non-status in Canada come. Church and refugee advocacy groups have been much more cautious, requesting changes in the appeal process of the new immigration law rather than addressing structural issues. Ultimately, a group of self-organized asylum seekers can be a greater threat to state control of borders and will be more effective than any group of advocates fighting “for” the rights of others.³

In the beginning of this article, I wrote of reading from an indigenous place. In speaking of accountability we cannot forget our relations with indigenous people on whose lands all of us who are newcomers live. To make the land and this history invisible is as serious as making a human being invisible. To come full circle in our listening, we must go beyond the model of the relationship of Jesus with the “two daughters” to acknowledge the relationship with the land on which patterns of exclusion and marginalization are maintained. While there are arguments now for deterritorialized models of citizenship, I would argue that this would be irresponsible to the land to which immigrants have moved (Ong 2003: 281-286). Not only must all newcomers support indigenous claims to self-determination but we must learn how to develop a respectful relationship with the land that we inhabit. That means redefining the “settlement process” so that it no longer serves to assimilate and “ethnically cleanse” newcomers but that it also teaches all to see this land as our relation and not as inert territory to be exploited (Ong 2003: xviii).

The work of transforming relations involves repairing broken relationships. Jesus’ command to the 12-year old girl is to “rise up!” We do not know what she, or the woman who is no longer bleeding, do next. These are open-ended stories, leaving us with a challenge to restore relations. For those of us of European heritage in North America, standing with refugee women can be an opportunity to defy imperialism at home. We can denounce both the structural oppression of our racist,

³ In Montreal, the Committee for Non-Status Algerians was able to negotiate a stay of deportations for 1000 Algerians scheduled to be deported in 2001. Unfortunately, the ban on deportations to Algeria was lifted a year later but that victory continues to inspire self-organized refugee groups.

patriarchal, and classist immigration laws and we can challenge the global structures of violence that created the conditions that cause refugee women and their families to leave their homes and land in the first place. We can do this in a way that privileges learning to “listen” and “be with” refugee women and asylum seekers. In doing all this we acknowledge the interconnections and the web of life that not only bring us together, but will sustain us in this struggle.

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