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## Life in the Borderlands: Lessons from the Saints on the Diversity of the Body of Christ

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# Life in the Borderlands

## Lessons from the saints on the diversity of the body of Christ

BY TRACY SAYUKI TIEMEIER

**H**ERE IS A TYPICAL conversation from my childhood. It took place in the second grade in the school cafeteria with one of our room mothers:

“Excuse me, little girl, but.... What are you?”

“Huh?”

“You know.... Where are you from?”

“Uh.... I was born in Washington, D.C.”

“Yes, but, what are your parents? Where are they from?”

“My dad is from Cincinnati, and my mom is from Los Angeles.”

“Noooooooooooo! I mean, you look so...different! What are you?”

“Ooooh! I’m half-German.”

I, of course, knew exactly what she meant all along. But as the woman in the lunchroom of my St. Louis grade school walked away exasperated, I, a particularly willful child, walked away feeling triumphant. Even then, I resented that I was a what and not a who.

I am fourth-generation (*yonseï*) *bapa*, a Japanese-German mutt who was dressed by my mother in shirts from Little Tokyo that said “Hapa, and Damn Proud of It,” even though I was anything but damn proud of it. I always knew I was different. I looked nothing like my cousins, not white, not yellow. I defy easy categorization, which arouses many people’s interest. The dreaded question, What are you?

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followed me wherever I went. I wanted desperately to be normal—that is, to be American. People who treated me as a what inevitably followed one of two paths: either they romanticized me (and my exotic cultural background), or they made fun of me with racial slurs and taunts, almost none of which actually applied to me. The question, What are you? stayed with me, even as I challenged people and began to reclaim myself as a who.

Religious issues heightened this crisis of self. My mother had become a Catholic when she married my father, and I was raised Roman Catholic. I also practiced Shinto and Buddhist traditions, however, with my grandparents, extended family and cultural associations. I learned to create an altar for my ancestors, to talk to them and feed them. This side seemed at the time to be in deep conflict with the Catholic education I was receiving. I was told that ancestor devotion, or ancestor worship, as it was called, was idolatrous, that non-Christians were not saved and that truly committed Christians did not concern themselves with anything non-Christian (which also seemed to mean nonwhite).

I found this to be confusing and embarrassing. But while it was difficult for me psychologically as a mixed Asian-American girl in the very white suburbs of St. Louis, it was not usually cause for public humiliation. I blended into my white school as much as possible. But my private, hidden struggles threatened always to break through the surface and were profoundly concretized through my middle name. I am named after my great-grandmothers, Sayo and Uki. This is a great honor and a grave responsibility. Yet I did not see it that way as a child. I was the

kid who deliberately got myself kicked out of Taiko drum class and begged to eat at McDonald’s every chance I could.

### The Saint Project

It was well known in our Catholic grammar school that we would have to do a project on the saint after whom each of us was named. It was assumed that we were named after a saint—that’s what Catholics did. If it was not your first name, it was your middle name. But I did not have a saint’s name. What was I supposed to do? What would people think? I dreaded the assignment, since I often lied and told people my middle name was Mary. In my private games, I would pretend to be Mary the mother of Jesus, transforming myself into what statues told me she should be, a blond-haired, blue-eyed white girl, clad in flowing blue robes, clearly American and obviously Christian. In these games, I could finally be beautiful.

The school project was not nearly as traumatic as I imagined in my grade-school angst. My teacher was happy that my first name could be a nickname for Theresa; I could choose between Thérèse of Lisieux and Teresa of Ávila. As a child, I felt more of a connection with Thérèse, so I picked her. While I felt rootless at the time—not quite Catholic, not quite American, not quite Japanese—the project actually freed me to construct my own connection to the saints and my own identity. I took the project very seriously and saw it as my chance to define who I was. I was ecstatic to take a saint’s name truly and legitimately at my confirmation. I took a proper saint’s name: Joan of Arc. She was a fighter—like me.

My desire to claim a Catholic, American identity conflicted with what I

was learning about my Japanese identity. My grandmother's home shrine was both fascinating and terrifying for this reason. Ancestors continued to be with us through this shrine, and we continued to owe respect and honor to them. We had to feed them and keep their space clean so that they would want to be with us. They were given rice and water every day, and sake, mochi or oranges on special occasions. They may have been dead in body, but they were very much a part of our lives. You honored and took care of them after death, too, just as in life. They in turn took care of you.

When my beloved Uncle Victor died from a blood infection, I was devastated that I could no longer hang out at his liquor store and play silly games. But I felt him with me at the funeral, not just in spirit, but palpably in the stars and in the wind. Spirits, ghosts, divine signs and revelations were seen to be a common part of life and death. This Japanese-ness I encountered was wondrous, but terrifying when I was told that it was superstition and idolatry. Nevertheless, I lived in a world of cosmic visions, ancestors and duties to the dead.

### Family and Hospitality

Family and hospitality were—and are—unquestioned values. We have sacred duties to one another. Elders, for example, are obliged to pay the check at meals; there is an elaborate ritual of fighting over the check (loudly) that is required for anyone who has reached adulthood. But junior adults must always know the appropriate time to stop fighting and gratefully thank the winner, so that you do not embarrass the generosity of elders. Elders negotiate within an unspoken hierarchy of family place, birth order and that bitter-sweet moment when the family patriarch becomes too old and his son or son-in-law takes the place of honor. These rituals and family passages are masked by feigned anger and firm speech: “You paid last

time,” “You’re my guest,” “It’s my treat.” You are obliged to follow the rules of hospitality not only with close family and friends, but with all extended family and friends, friends of friends, and strangers.

The home shrine is an extension of sacred kinship and hospitality. My grandmother says that her shrine is a part of the home, the room that hosts ancestors; it is essential to keep it as you would any other part of the home. It must be clean and



desirable. In tending to it, you host your ancestors and take care of them, just as they continue to take care of you. She says that a well-kept and beautiful shrine is the best way to ensure that family (living and dead) will be happy and return. When I talk with her, she always speaks of our ancestors in the present tense, for the worlds beyond death are not so far away as we might imagine. Our relationships cross time and space, are physical and real and are just as important in death as in life.

It was my great-grandmother who taught my grandmother the rites of the shrine. She emphasized that tending to the family shrine was an essential component of being a good homemaker. My great-grandmother could connect to Japan through the shrine, hosting relatives long gone and very far away. In the difficult times of World War II at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center, an internment camp, it was her way of main-

taining a connection to family.

My grandmother offers water and rice daily to her family at the shrine. Vertical tablets display the posthumous Buddhist names given to my great-grandparents at their funerals. A bottle of Scotch is a permanent offering to her father; it was his favorite drink. Pictures of deceased family members provide images for devotional focus and prayer. The shrine itself is modeled on the much more elaborate Japanese Buddhist shrine, called *butsudan*. Although my recently baptized Christian grandmother's shrine serves a function like that of shrines in Japanese Buddhist homes, she insists that her shrine is in no way Buddhist. Still, the prayers she recites as she tends the shrine are Buddhist.

### Unclear Boundaries

As a child, this multireligiosity confounded me. I was taught in school that the boundaries between religions were clear and absolute, and that Christians should not be messing with things like Buddhism. But in Asian America, the boundaries are not clear. The religions Asians bring with them to America have already con-

tended with thousands of years of religious pluralism. And Asian-American Christians, Confucians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Taoists will therefore inevitably practice multiple traditions, as successive generations live and work in America. The lines between religion and culture are not clear either. Christian Japanese-Americans who celebrate Bon (a festival for honoring ancestors), for example, may do so in order to celebrate their Japanese heritage. But Bon is a Buddhist festival. Does this mean that they are no longer Christians? Or does it mean that we must rethink the meaning of Christian traditions today in light of Japanese-American practices?

Given my struggles to understand what it meant to be both Japanese and American, my efforts to understand my name, my culture, my religion and myself, it is probably not surprising that I focused on saints as a child. The saints helped me

# Who Cares

## 1. The Reading

I see you everywhere, that bald crown bent forward almost against your  
puffy waist-length winter jacket;  
shoulders hunched, head down between your sheltering hands against the  
blowing wind, the lit match touching your cigarette,  
standing there in front of a string of stores at dawn, as I pass by in the  
rumbling bus, now that you're gone.  
Two years and I see you everywhere as I travel to my tedious, irritating,  
terrifying job.  
I look out and for an instant you are still here, standing on a street corner,  
or walking hunch-shouldered along.  
You rode the bus to tedium over half your life, as I do now these  
only last few years.  
I'm sorry!

## 2. The Critique

"What does 'I'm sorry' mean?" All fired up the Professor asks, and they  
strain  
to analyze, those darling college children.  
"And what do you think?" the Professor asks, looking to me, while  
for one instant I think I'll answer:  
I'd like to write a poem called WHO CARES, about a young (I admit  
sullen)  
student who is just questioned about the meaning  
of some obscure phrase in some enigmatic poem, written by a nobody,  
and I'm forced by the pure integrity of my mind  
to think WHO CARES; let them say what they mean outright! But instead,  
I mumble; "I think she was married to him  
and he died, and only now she realizes all that he did, and that through  
all his years  
he suffered."

*Marilyn Brusca*

**MARILYN BRUSCA** is a retired nurse, who was a later-life student of English Literature at La Roche College, Pittsburgh. This poem is one of three runners-up in the 2008 Foley Poetry Contest.

make sense of my Japanese-American and my Buddhist-Christian identity. I took what I learned of the saints and constructed my own family shrines to them, adopting them as my spiritual ancestors, talking to them and offering them toys and candy. I would set up an altar outside my door and go to sleep. My offerings disappeared during the night, confirmation that my devotion would be rewarded.

It never occurred to me that this strange act of devotion was not properly Christian. Instead of water, sake and rice, I offered action figures, stuffed animals and lollipops. But in my attempt to hold together all the worlds to which I struggled to belong, it made perfect sense. Just as my ancestors enjoyed food and gifts, it seemed obvious to me that Catherine of Siena would enjoy offerings. This may sound naïve and a little bizarre, but it is not without insight. By connecting the worlds of ancestors and saints, I was able to reconcile my inner confusion about what it meant to be both Asian and American. Ultimately it allowed me to embrace a wider, more complex understanding of myself, my religion and the world.

The Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints is a profound expression of the diverse body of Christ, our fellowship here and now with each other in a mystical body. We explicitly call saints those who have gone before us, crossed the border between life and death and are confirmed to be with Christ in heaven. But they are still with us; the communion of saints includes all of us together, living and dead, all bound together in Christ. It may sound old-fashioned, even strange to 21st-century ears, when we sing the Litany of the Saints or pray for their intercession. But I think we can all learn a lesson from our ancestors about a renewed Catholic imagination as we see the communion of saints as a real, vibrant (and sometimes difficult) family. We are dedicated and committed to one another, in this world and at this time; but this dedication includes those ancestors, those saints who have passed on before us, yet who are still with us today. Let us not lose sight of the divine signs and wonders all around us, of the lessons of the living and the dead, and of Asia and America. May we embrace a wider vision of the cosmos, live in the borderlands and search for meaning in a wider community of relationships. 