
Introduction

While there are many similarities among women's experiences, there are undeniably many differences as well. In her book *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus*, womanist theologian Jacqueline Grant describes the triple impact of sexism, racism, and classism as distinctive markers in the lives of women of color. When thinking multiculturally about the care of women, it is important to keep these variables in mind, for inevitably they set up differences and disparities in the lives and experiences among all women. For instance, although many people generally regard sexism as something that most women experience more or less similarly, one must always be aware of the cultural nuances of sexism. The sociopolitical history of any given culture will dictate the level of sexism that is condoned, supported, tolerated, ignored, or challenged within a particular culture. The ways in which the culture has or has not engaged sexism may differ as well as the way in which change has or has not occurred around the appreciation of women's voice.

When women must also contend with the variable of race, it is easy to see how some women's experience may differ from others. For example, when the society sees one not only as woman but as black woman, that woman's access to education, career options, and other social experiences may be limited because of racial history. The same is true when considering the variable of class. So pervasive is classism in a global economy that any effective pastoral/spiritual caregiver must always give consideration to the impact of economics and social location when considering appropriate interventions for any specific woman as well as in understanding her particular worldview.

A final variable that most certainly has an impact on women's experience is that of generational location. An effective pastoral/spiritual caregiver understands that the worldview of a baby boomer is different from that of a Generation X-er. In the same way, the worldview of a twenty-five-year-old woman in

Iraq differs from that of her counterpart in the United States. Women's lives are shaped by the events of the larger world, so caregivers must always be willing to be informed about and aware of the global context in the lives of women.

Teresa E. Snorton, coeditor

While there are many differences among women's experiences, there are undeniably some similarities as well. One similarity is the childish dream of a land called "make-believe." It is a state of utter goodness and fine intentions, of perfectly formed people, and of happy endings. There is abundance and fairness. There is no famine of body or loneliness of soul. It is like a promised land.

As women mature, we note that both the various socioeconomic and racial-ethnic subcultures are like distinct countries touching each other at the boundaries. Women are well aware of the borders or borderlands that form around our cultures of origin or cultures of affiliation. While fluent in our own tongues, we can slip into a common language. I believe that versatility comes from land that we hold in common. This land has been cultivated out of stories of hope; it has been ploughed with stories of harm until seeds of promise have rooted in the furrows. We tend this land in common as we women nurture the narratives of new life and transformation. I call this common land the land of "we-believe."

As the statistics of intimate and impersonal violence, sexual abuse, rape, exploitation, cultural shaming, degradation through stereotyping, and disempowerment are compiled, we have the empirical data to substantiate what we had intuited: "all women grow up within a context that includes the threat of violence, particularly sexualized violence."¹ Therefore, the land we have in common is cultivated with these principles:

- a. a recognition of interconnection, particularly that of body-mind-soul-culture;
- b. a stance that no one deserves to be exploited, violated, degraded, or suppressed;
- c. a resistance to any culture that does so;
- d. awareness that the body is a place where God or the holy or the Higher Power can dwell, which results in actions that respect that sacred space;
- e. a belief that the worth of a person is not based on contour, color, clothing, creed, or capabilities;
- f. a commitment to the importance of community in upholding these principles.

Recently, I was in a workshop to raise cultural sensitivities. The facilitator designated four chairs as representative of four emotions: anger, sadness, happiness, fear. We were asked a series of questions and had to stand by one of the predominant emotions. The group was a mixture of gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic background, and nationality. We were moving all around the space, standing beside different “emotions” until the facilitator asked, “What feeling did your family [family of origin] try to convey to the world?” The majority positioned themselves by the “happy” chair for that was the “face” their families tried to convey to the world. However, one lone woman stood by the “fear” chair. It made such a singular impression that the facilitator veered away from her protocol and asked if the one woman might share why the family chose to exude fear. First quietly, then with great emotion, the woman said her father was proud that he ruled the family with intimidation tactics.

What happened next illustrated to me the “land we have in common.” Unrehearsed, as gentle as a flow of wind, there was a spontaneous wave of connection and support for other women. The arm of a second participant reached over and rested on the lone woman’s shoulder, a third participant stretched to connect with the second, then a fourth participant reached her arm to touch the third participant. Each of the women said in turn: “I can connect with that.” While remaining at their respective stations, three women were able to remain distinct yet connect with the narrative of fear. Their connection is a narrative of hope.

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