Malinda Elizabeth Berry

Malinda E. Berry graduated in 2000 with an M.A. in Peace Studies from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. In September of this year, she will begin doctoral studies in systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary (New York).

My brother, sister, and I are biracial, ethnic Mennonites. Our mother – a Swiss American Mennonite – is a Hostetler from the Oak Grove Mennonite Church community of Smithville, Ohio, where she grew up with Yoders, Ramseyers, Gerigs, and Mussers, among others. Our father – an African-American Mennonite – is a Berry from a small Mennonite mission church, Newtown Gospel Chapel, in Sarasota, Florida, where he worked as a migrant laborer during his childhood. Our parents both went to Mennonite colleges, participated in voluntary service, and served on various boards and committees in the denomination. We are Mennonites. We also have present in our collective experience the marks of segregation, racism, and difference. The following is from an essay written by my sister:

> Growing up in a family with a black father and a white mother never seemed out of the ordinary to me. I had a typical childhood and was raised in a typical home. . . . [My brother, sister, and I] attended a private Mennonite high school as well as a private Mennonite college. We grew up in a safe and nurturing environment. We took swimming lessons and piano lessons just like our friends. I now find myself expecting to be treated like everyone else, whether or not I happen to be a few shades darker.
>
> Unfortunately for me, the problem is not as simple as I often like to make it appear. Classification of a person's race is frequently dependent upon her skin color, probably because it is the easiest way to categorize her. . . . [I]dentity is not altogether cut-and-dried; it is not based solely on skin color. . . . People who fall between specific groups are tossed around, attempting to find where they "fit in" socially and culturally.

> I am proud, as a white Mennonite, to have such a fascinating history. I am proud, as an African American, to have such an inspiring heritage. These are two distinct characteristics that have created me. They have shaped me to become a mix and swirl of combinations of ideas, thoughts, and experiences. . . .[1]

I believe that when it comes to addressing questions of race, ethnicity, culture, and story we are dealing with issues of the psyche. I do not use this word as a technical term in the context of psychology or psychiatry; rather I use it to refer to the realm of internal and internalized constructions of our human experiences.

John Kampen's chief argument that themes of struggle and survival could and should provide the basis for shared identity is intriguing, but will it work? In addition to using particular narratives to make thematic parallels at an intellectual level, Mennonites desperately need to grapple with the Why? question. Why do they hold back when given the opportunities to bring together stories of suffering and persecution, stories of survival and peoplehood, under a common narrative? The answers to this question are deep and unending, so both the answers and the question must be processed with caution. In this spirit, I offer two observations in hopes that the path ahead might be cleared to a modest degree.

In order to create a common narrative, Mennonites have often searched for an image or symbol that is the foundation for this narrative and gives shape to a common culture. In the past, that image came from shared myths and stories of origin found in the biblical narrative, but in some ways the Bible has proved to be too broad.[2] The sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrs often appear too remote, not too remote to capture the imagination, but too remote to connect to the current reality of North American plenty experienced by the majority of Mennonites in the United States and Canada. Moreover, so many Mennonite meta-narratives come from a European context that some groups write these stories off as irrelevant, even if the themes of persecution and suffering mirror their own heritage. Are there images from secular history that might avoid this pitfall? In the days of Ellis Island, the "Melting Pot" became a popular image and metaphor for the American project of nation-building. For a long time this image held sway because boiling things down into the same goo was the dream. With the movement for multicultural diversity, however,

the Melting Pot was deconstructed and exposed as a racist, imperialist, colonial farce. The "Salad Bar" replaced it because human equality began to mean respecting difference – letting a carrot remain a carrot, a cucumber a cucumber, and so on.

Like all metaphors, images, and analogies, the Salad Bar becomes limp if its symbolism is stretched too far. However, its weaknesses point to larger, systemic issues related to multiculturalism that can help us grapple with some of the subtleties of today's question. Here are two observations about the reality of salad. On most salad bars, there are ingredients to build your own salad. Therefore, if I dislike broccoli, not only do I not have to pick it out of my salad, I can avoid it altogether. Most salad bars also have different kinds of ready-made salads available – potato, gelatin, three-bean, etc. These salads within the salad bar come with some kind of "binding agent" giving them distinct flavor, texture, and color unlike the containers of sunflower seeds, bacon bits, and garbanzo beans. In other words, as Salad Bar users we can make choices about what goes on our plate. We can pick and choose what items we want, either by putting together our own combination of ingredients for our ideal salad or by selecting a prepared salad that parallels real-life sociological patterns. We choose where we live based on who the neighbors are and what the surrounding community is like. For example, some of us move toward urban contexts where we will find cultural and racial diversity, while others move toward rural or suburban contexts where neighbors have more in common with each other.

If we use the salad image, we must also confront the role of the dominant culture often ignored by this image. I suggest that the dominant culture is like the salad dressing poured over a garden salad, coating every piece of lettuce – romaine and leaf alike, smeared across every radish, gluing every bean sprout to a tomato chunk or hard-boiled egg.[3] Perhaps our common narrative and the culture it creates and shapes could function like the orange gelatin that keeps crushed pineapple, pear chunks, banana slices, and shredded carrots suspended in a molded ring. There are limits to this image, though: unless it is kept refrigerated, gelatin becomes a gooey glob without definition or shape. I believe that we have the ability to affect and shape dominant culture – for good and ill – but the question at hand requires us only to affect dominant *Mennonite* culture.

Because many North American Mennonites are members of the western European diaspora, thinking about dominant culture is not always a priority. However, in order to effectively build relationships with other communities which also define themselves through stories of suffering and survival, Mennonites must work to recognize the power that the dominant culture has in shaping how others perceive them, even if they do not own the reality of that culture. At the societal level, this means that white Mennonites need to start thinking about themselves as white, and therefore as the benefactors of dominant culture, *even though historically Mennonites have defined themselves as separate from that culture.*

In his textbook about the dynamics of difference and dominance, Richard Burkey discusses the relationship between subordinate groups and the dominant group. In subordinate/dominant relationships, some groups "are expected to accept a variety of forms of discrimination, to discard their culture, or to adopt an extreme form of subservient behavior in the presence of dominant group members." In other cases, subordinate groups "may be given relative freedom to live in their traditional manner as long as they . . . accept the authority of the state."[4]

Mennonites in North America, as much as they may avoid owning it, have become a subordinate group fitting into Burkey's latter category. Mennonites are not a persecuted subculture based on ethnicity. A second reality is that as the Mennonite tribe has come to include ethnicities beyond the Germanic family, white Mennonites have become the dominant group within the tribe, and Mennonites representing other ethnic and racial groups are a subculture within a subculture. By shying away from this truth, nothing is done to examine how subordinate groups are treated. Instead, prejudice and harmful stereotypes go unchecked.

The catch-22 of being a minority but also a majority within that minority requires that special care be taken to listen to stories and not to force divisions of loyalty. That is, we must avoid making people choose one identity over another. This is also why Mennonites need to journey toward a more global identity in order to be a church of whole people. This journey requires divulging our secrets and listening to new stories. And perhaps in listening to new stories, old narratives may find new meaning and new heroes may be found.

Notes

[1] Anne Berry, "Race-related," in *What Mennonites are Thinking: 1998,* Merle Good and Phyllis Pellman Good, eds. (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1998), 5, 8.
[2] For example, the fact that slaveholders and slaves used the same text – the Bible -- to such radically different ends demonstrates the difficulty of simply appealing to Scripture to "make things right."
[3] The Canadian "Multicultural Mosaic" is not free of this problem either. Even though different colors of tile are used to make the entire mosaic, grout still holds the tiles in place, something that could easily symbolize both separation to preserve community distinctives and larger cultural expectations created by the dominant or majority group.
[4] Richard M. Burkey, *Ethnic and Racial Groups: The Dynamics of Dominance* (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1978), 103-109.