

## **Finding Balance and Harmony in our Wandering**

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When asked to present on the subject on the theology of wandering, I said, “Sure!”, not realizing the complexity that awaited me as I began to read and think through the idea of wandering. I also started connecting my own personal learnings of wandering and how they have helped shape my own theology and understanding of God.

My ancestors come from the great nation of Anahauc, a nation that included many groups and tribes, including the Toltec, Hopi, and others.<sup>1</sup> I learned a little Mexican history growing up and heard my grandmothers’ tales of our history. I also grew up with the Aztec calendar prominently hanging above our fireplace. A few years ago I was getting ready to attend a Mennonite Native American Assembly when I stumbled across an article written by Cecilio Orosco and Alfonso Rivas Salmon, who claimed they had discovered where the Mexica<sup>2</sup> people had migrated from and made connections between the Southwestern cultures, including the Mexica and all the Great Basin tribes.<sup>3</sup>

When I arrived in the summer of 2000 on the Hopi reservation in Arizona, I was immediately greeted by a sister who said, “I welcome you, cousin.” When she noticed the puzzled look on my face, she asked, “Aren’t you Mexican?” During my days on the reservation I started to make connections between the stories of my grandmothers and the stories I was hearing there. I decided when I got back I had to learn more of my history.

The history of my people – from a Mexican perspective – is hard to find in the United States. Therefore, many of my findings come from Mexican sources. The wandering of the Mexica began in 502 BCE. They left their home in Utah’s canyon lands, where the four waters meet – the Green, the upper Colorado, the San Juan, and the lower Colorado.<sup>4</sup> The Mexica were forced to leave their homeland due to a drought, which they referred to as the “Rain of Fire.” Rivas Salmon and Orosco found numerical representations similar to the Aztec numbering system, in addition to pictographs represented

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in Mexico City during the reign of the Mexicas. The Mexicas wandered for 1800 years. I have reflected on what they were looking for and why in 1325 CE they settled in Tenochtitlán, now known as Mexico City. It was a swamp not conducive to livable land. Legend says that they settled there because their leader spotted an eagle sitting on top of a cactus devouring a serpent, and that the Creator told them to look for the eagle and serpent. My first thought was, What does that mean, and How did this connect with their understanding of the Creator? Anahuac theology describes a self-created Creator. There is only one Creator who is the balance of life, mother of the earth, and father of humanity. The serpent and eagle represent opposites, therefore bringing about balance.

Victor Villaseñor speaks of how “balance” is sometimes said to be our sixth sense in Mexican folklore. Balance is what anchors us to Mother Earth and allows us to reach to Father Sky. In his memoir of his family, Villaseñor says that a person’s intelligence was measured by her ability to live a balanced life rather than by book knowledge.<sup>5</sup> We can also look at “balance” as setting things right. Jesus Christ came to set things right, to provide an avenue to bring all creation back into balance. Now, as we journey, whether we learn to use our sixth sense of balance or not, is up to us. We are the ones who eventually decide whether we will engage with the Creator or not.

The Mexicas did not see the land as swamp, something impossible to work, but they saw the possibilities the Creator had given them as a people. On this swamp they built three great causeways, a walled space measuring about 550 yards on each side. There was commerce, agriculture, art, music and poetry, which was the culmination of their 1800-year-journey. Two hundred years later, on August 16, 1521, the fall and capture by the Spaniards of Tenochtitlán, the capital, took place. Ninety-five percent of our people were killed within a period of seventy-five years.<sup>6</sup> Almost all our records were destroyed. Christianity was used as a weapon to kill and torture people and to take resources, including human beings.

As I look at this wandering of the Mexica people and reflect on my own life and on biblical stories of wandering, I try to make sense of my ancestors’ history and my life today. So, as I begin to share my own learnings of wandering, I must recognize that my own journey has also been with the women that have gone before me. It is on the journey of my ancestors, my

grandmothers Carlota y Valentina, my great grandmothers Maria y Barbara, that I come to share cooperative learnings. I do not stand alone, I stand with these courageous and loving women who are a part of me.

The most well-known story of wandering in the Old Testament is that of the Israelites. But I want to reflect on Hagar's story (Genesis 16) and the times she was forced to wander, as a woman *with* child, alone the first time, and as a woman *with a* child the second time. She finds herself in a situation not of her own choosing, as neither a servant nor a handmaiden to Abraham. The force behind her wandering was not a natural disaster, but abuse of power over another human being. What happens when we are forced to wander? Does God meet us in the wandering, or are we left alone, deserted by all, even God?

The first time Hagar is forced to leave, it is due to Sara's jealousy of Hagar's pregnancy. Even though it was culturally appropriate for Sara to give Hagar to Abraham, did Sara not think what it must have been like for Hagar? Do we automatically accept what is acceptable socially or culturally? I have often wondered about Sara's own experience of God. What touched her spirit, her very being? Why do women make other, less powerful, women suffer? Sara used her power against Hagar. Abraham didn't ask her to leave. In fact he told Sara to do whatever she wanted with her. So if he didn't care what happened to Hagar and his unborn child, why did Sara use her in such a manner? The arguments I have heard claim that Sara was forced by societal pressures or the patriarchy of that day. Those excuses sound like things I often hear today between white women and women of color. Even if we view ourselves as victims, do we treat others with that same self-hate? Unfortunately for women of color, we often turn our self-hate on ourselves and our own communities. The first time Hagar leaves it's due to the "harsh" treatment by Sara. We really don't know what Sara did, but I must assume it was pretty bad to provoke a woman with child to run away in the desert.

The angel of the Lord intervened and found Hagar by a spring on her way to Shur. The angel told her that she must return to her mistress and that she was to conceive a son. God sent her back. Some of us may gasp and ask why God would do this. Others of us know why. How many times have we had to return to unstable situations because we knew it meant survival for the time being? God knew if Hagar went forward she would not make it to safety

in her present condition, so God sent her back. I've been in the deserts of Ur in Iraq and know even today it would be very difficult for a person alone, much less a woman, to make it across the desert safely. As women we must be very careful not to judge other women who may have to return to an unstable situation. Not all women have the same options open to them.

Hagar goes back but, I am sure, not to a pleasant situation. I am sure that as women gathered in the Red Tent, servants were not treated as equals. In considering a place where women would bond, I have often wondered about the women servants. Were they allotted a small corner in the Tent? Were they allowed to converse as equals with the women in power? If Sara would not show respect to Hagar in her pregnancy, what makes us think things would be different in the Red Tent, an enclosed environment?

Maybe Hagar found comfort in God's promise in the beginning until Sara conceived a son, a development which put Hagar's own son second, like herself. One day as Sara saw Ishmael and Issac playing together, she decided Hagar and her son must leave. She wanted to make sure Ishmael would not inherit anything from her household. So for the second time Hagar was sent out with her son. This time Sara told Abraham to put Hagar and Ishmael out. This text seems to try to redeem Abraham and gives him permission from God to go ahead and send her away. I didn't read any text alluding that Sara had permission from God to send Hagar out the first time and God reassuring Sara that God would look out for Hagar. Here we may see how the writing and translation of this text protects the man's character and portrays Sara as an "unreasonable jealous woman." But it's also clear that Sara chose to stand with the powerful and to use that power to put Hagar and her young son out into the desert.

God's angel, hearing the cry of Ishmael, once again intervened. As the angel spoke to Hagar, she opened her eyes and saw a spring of water. The text goes on to say that God was with Ishmael as he grew up. Hagar went to Egypt, her homeland, to find him a wife (Genesis 21:21). What spiritual truths did Hagar gain from her experiences in the desert?

The Creator loves all creation and does not choose one person over another. That God personally intervened, not just once but twice, showed Hagar she was loved and was a person of value. Power abused is short-lived and corrupts those who continue to use it. If you look at Abraham's life, you

will see how he went on to use Sara by giving her to another man for his own gain and safety. He sought security through his use and abuse of power. Hagar and Ishmael waited upon God, and the text says that God was with Ishmael as he grew. Relationship with the Creator is about relying on God, and is not based on force or abuse of power.

Relationship with God cannot be forced, even though that is what western Christianity has done throughout history. The forcing of Christianity on people and groups has greatly affected my own spiritual wandering. In David Stannard's *American Holocaust*<sup>7</sup> I saw for the first time sketches of my ancestors strung up in groups of thirteen, twelve representing the disciples and one representing Christ. While strung up, their stomachs were gutted and left for wild dogs. They were killed because they would not convert to Christianity, never mind that they didn't even understand the language.

What does that mean for my own journey? How do I make sense of a Creator who loves me and a religion that has been violently used? Where do I find balance, harmony with myself and the world around me? I wonder if similar questions were asked by Hagar. How could she reconcile a merciful and loving Creator by the actions of the Creator's chosen people?

As Hagar found the spring to rest next to, we should ask, What are the resting places for women today? Where can we find places of refuge? Where can we find places that allow us to speak truth to ourselves and to each other? Where can we find honest dialogue in helping us reconcile the schisms in our own lives, our histories, and our world? Can the symbol of the Red Tent be transformed to be inclusive for all women? In order to have our wandering bear fruit, we must find places to rest along the way. How can we create Red Tents for each other in the midst of our wandering? Using the framework of Mujerista theology<sup>8</sup> I'd like to propose how we can make the symbol of the Red Tent inclusive and a place to find the balance and harmony we all desperately need in our lives.

First, we need to believe in ourselves. The Red Tent could serve as a place of nurture and building up of women who have had to struggle. As a woman of color I have had to return to abusive places for survival. Sometimes it has been the workplace, the classroom, and yes, even the church. At times discouraged, I could not see how God could work through me. Often I wanted the approval of white women instead of believing in myself. There have been

times I have waited for God to intervene, not seeing myself as someone God would work through for my own transformation. Both my grandmothers raised their children alone because their husbands died young. Both these women owned their own business. My grandmother Carlota owned a plant nursery. My other grandmother, Valentina, was a seamstress, sewing and selling curtains, slip covers, and bedspreads. These women believed they had what it took to make it through the Mexican Revolution and the depression as single parents. They had what we would call in Spanish “*ganas*.” They had strength and courage. They knew they were the ones who had to act.

Second, we must find a place where we can dialogue around issues of structural sin and how we all participate in it in various ways. We need to be able to talk together as women so that we can resist structural sin. We must stop sabotaging each other. In my experience white women often sabotage women of color by siding with white men in power. You can see the dynamic in the relationship between Hagar and Sara. Women of color often sabotage each other. We both miss opportunities for allowing God to work through us. We’d rather do the easy thing, take the path of least resistance. That path is deadly for all of us.

Often our society sets up the dynamics for women sabotaging each other. Within my own cultural myths we blame La Malinche<sup>9</sup> for the downfall of the Aztec nation, instead of blaming the real perpetrators for unleashing an unwarranted war on an unsuspecting nation. Women are looked upon as being deceitful and liars, and sometimes we have played that role against each other. Where did we hear the stories, how do we find ourselves sometimes repeating them, and how can we live a different story? These are the things we need to talk about with each other.

Third, we must recognize the breaking in of God’s reign in our lives. Hagar had to be open to see the spring of water and the angel of the Lord. She could have dismissed the whole experience and continued going to Shur, her first time in the desert. In addition to being open, we must come to the Tent expecting to see God’s reign. When we get a glimpse of that reign, we need to rejoice, even in the midst of *la lucha* (the struggle). Being able to rejoice in the midst of the struggle allows us to see the possibilities of a new heaven and a new earth. I’m sure we have all had a glimpse of God’s reign, but what did we choose to do with it? Hagar listened, saw, and acted. She

was given a place in history she could not even comprehend. We don't have to understand everything about God, but we must be willing to see the possibilities of a new heaven and earth, to take on responsibility in ways that partners with God in co-creating a new heaven and earth. These are the possibilities that our mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers and our ancestors yearned for, the balance of all of creation.

Fourth, we also must be willing to be transformed. Earlier I spoke of structural sin and how women sabotage each other. Our personal sin also holds us in bondage. It prevents us from seeing the reign of God, from seeing possibilities, and from becoming a new creation. We need to learn to be honest with ourselves by first seeing the sin in our own lives. We must refuse to allow others to name our lot in life. We need to envision our future, to give voice to our destinies and histories. In a recent lecture Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz spoke about transformation as changing our reality,<sup>10</sup> emphasizing that we must first be able to imagine the possibilities. We must also be involved in changing our reality, at both a personal and structural level.

Fifth, in order to face ourselves we must believe we are daughters of the Creator. We are made in the image of the Creator. Unfortunately, we have often allowed outside forces to determine how we see ourselves. Women in the United States are pushed to be the image of "Superwoman." We are expected to model white male work values, where our professional life is just as important or more important than family. Some women find success in the image of "Superwoman," some women feel like failures, and others just refuse to participate.

Some of the most damaging ways we see ourselves have been through the images of the church. Growing up with images of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, our subconscious image of God becomes white. At about age seven, growing up Roman Catholic, I asked my priest why God made people in different colors. His response was that God left some people in the oven too long. As a child, I translated that to mean God made a mistake with some of us. So I saw a white Jesus, a white priest, and a God who had made mistakes in creating certain people. It is no wonder as women we often find the hardest thing to do is love ourselves.

Our images must be re-imagined through the eyes of the Spirit of God, Sophia. She can help us create healthy images as daughters of the Creator

through stories of our ancestors, biblical stories of women, and the sharing of our own stories with each other. As daughters of the Creator we must be willing to listen to the Spirit. How can we do anything less? Loving ourselves translates into having the ability to love others.

Finally, we must believe the Red Tent can be a place of liberation. Can we see ourselves as daughters of the Creator? Can we see all humanity as daughters and sons of the Creator? Mujerista theology cannot talk about liberation for self without liberation for all of humanity.<sup>11</sup> The liberation must be for all women, men, and children. It must be both a personal and communal act. We must look for the safe places to explore the possibilities. Safe places must be created even in the midst of the most violent situations. There are places created by the Spirit of God and we must be open to see them.

In addition, we must also be willing to leave the comfort of the Tent to give life and vision to the possibilities for all humanity. There are times we may either choose or be forced out of our safe places in order to act in ways that help us resist both our personal and structural sin. Making contact with other people along the journey, finding soul mates who desire to take the risks in becoming a new creation themselves, and seeing the possibilities of a new heaven and earth are all part of the journey. It must be the liberating message of God that breaks us all out of our bondage.

Wanderings are spiritual. Finding the places of rest, places to meet others along the way, having faith to see the possibilities are all part of the spiritual journey. I believe my ancestors were right: Wandering is about finding balance and harmony with oneself and with all of creation. My prayer for everyone here today is that we take our wanderings seriously. Be open to hear God, see glimpses of God's reign in our lives and the lives of others, and be unafraid to step out and act on the possibilities God has for us. Being able to see the possibilities of God's reign is the beginning of our own transformation. *Dios les bendiga, hermanas.* God bless you, sisters.



**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Antoon Leon Vollemaere, *The Search and Discovery of Aztlan, Colhuacan and Chicomoztoc*; <http://titan.glo.be/~kg000407/explorat.htm>; 02/03/2000

<sup>2</sup> Definition of “Mexica”: People from Mexico, includes Aztecs.

<sup>3</sup> Cecilio Orozco, *In Search of Aztlan: Interview with Dr. Cecilio Orozco*; <http://www.insearchofaztlan.com/orozco.html>

<sup>4</sup> Lared-Latina, *The Aztec Sun Stone* 1995-96; [www.lared-latina.com/sunstone.html](http://www.lared-latina.com/sunstone.html)

<sup>5</sup> Victor Villasenor, *Thirteen Senses: A Memoir* (Rayo/Harper Collins, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 85.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha: Elaborating a mujerista theology* (Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> “History and literature have distorted and abused the story of the Aztec slave named Malinche, the interpreter for Cortez. . . . She has been blamed as the ultimate traitor to Mexico and she has also been used to symbolize the total negative essence of the Mexican woman.” Alma M. Garcia, ed., *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (Routledge, 1997), 116.

<sup>10</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Lecture on May 2, 2003 at Arch Street Quaker Meeting House, Philadelphia, PA.

<sup>11</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Orbis Books, 1996).