

Brenda Seat: Tales from the Borderlands

Tales from the Borderlands

Seekers Church

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I found the theme for this season very intriguing. The concept of an intersection, or borderland as Countryman calls it in our reflection piece, between our daily lives and the Holy was a new image for me. When I first read that word, borderland, my immediate thought was of the borderlands in the sci-fi books I have read which describe them as dangerous and unpredictable places where the normal rules do not apply. Then I thought of the TV show that started "doodoodoodoo – Welcome to the Twilight Zone." Nevertheless, the guidelines from Celebration Circle brought me quickly back to reality. They wanted the focus to be on our work in the world – signs of God breaking into **our** world. I, and maybe you too, give lip service to the fact that God is with us in our daily lives, but do we, **do** I, really see the Holy in the midst of my work, in the midst of my daily life? Isaiah, in our Hebrew scripture reading for today, exhorts and challenges us: "Have you not known? ... Have you not heard?" Alternatively, as the Living Bible puts it more bluntly: " Are you ignorant? ... Are you deaf?" To be perfectly honest, I am not sure that I am ready or willing to catch glimpses of the Holy too often in my everyday life. Like the people of Israel in the text from last week who said, "If we hear the voice of the Lord again or see the great fire anymore we will surely die," I too am afraid.

And yet, at the most unlikely times and places I catch

glimpses of the Holy and I wonder what glimpses I have missed by not being aware – of being too focused on the daily-ness of life.

In some traditional Japanese dances, the dancer appears on stage with a fan covering her face. As the dance progresses, the dancer turns her back to the audience or uses the long sleeve of her kimono to continue to hide her face, all the while making intricate movements with the fan. If you watch, focused only on catching a glimpse of her face, you will miss the wonderful movements of the fan. If, on the other hand, you focus only on the fan, you miss seeing the face of the one who is holding the fan. It is only when you see the dance in its totality that you understand the story that is being told through movement. My awareness of the interaction and intersection between the Holy and my daily life is like that too. When I focus too much on one or the other, I lose sight of the whole. I miss a part of the emerging story. I am Ignorant, and I am Deaf. However, there is Grace for even those of us who focus too much on our daily lives and cannot recognize the borderland, or see the glimpse of the Holy. Just as Isaiah reminded the people of Israel of God's hand in their story, we too can look back on our own lives and see the places where the Holy has intruded and maybe even begin to pick up the pieces of our emerging story with the Holy.

My work in the world is a bi-cultural litigation specialist. I was not so much called to this work, as I was born to it. It uses each of my skills and gifts: my Japanese language ability, my bi-cultural awareness, and my legal knowledge and ability.

My job covers a lot of territory. In addition, as the lawyers get used to having me around, my responsibilities grow. Nevertheless, basically, I am hired by lawyers to help them understand their Japanese clients or their Japanese opposition. I oversee and manage the translation of documents. I advise lawyers on how to frame questions that will be

interpreted at deposition or at trial. I work with Japanese witnesses to prepare them for their depositions or trial. I help them understand the American legal system and their American lawyers. At trial I sit at the lawyers' table, listen to the official interpreter, and make sure there are no mistakes in English or in Japanese. I work in borderland of sorts – the borderland that occurs when there is a collision between American and Japanese cultures in a courtroom.

I want to share two stories from my work life with you. Two points in time where I have glimpsed the Holy. One of the things that I work on constantly is instilling in Japanese witnesses a sense of confidence and authority in what they will say on the stand. For a Japanese, having to stand on your own and say with confidence what you know is true is a very anti-social act and disruptive to the consensual nature of their culture. I warn the lawyers about this ahead of time and we practice many hours, making sure that the witnesses are very comfortable with what they are going to say. In one case, I thought that we had done everything right, but at trial, Mr. Hirata, who had intense preparation, including practice in a mock courtroom and in front of a mock jury, got on the stand and when asked questions by his own lawyers that he had practiced answering for almost 4 weeks, lost it and was reduced to saying, "I can't remember."

After two hours of this, we broke for lunch. Everyone was grim. I could not understand what had happened, but as thoughts churned in my head, I remembered a conversation I had with Mr. Hirata one evening a week or so before. He had told me then that he had never been in such a strange situation as this one. Before this lawsuit, he said, "I had never exchanged one word with the Mr. Yagi, the president of my company, or the Chairman of the Board. I saw them once a year from far away as they gave the annual New Years' speech. Now I see them and have conversations with them everyday at breakfast! It is very uncomfortable." As I remembered this, I wondered if he

was intimidated by having Mr. Yagi in the courtroom listening to what he said. I talked with the lawyers, who were totally panicked, and suggested that maybe Mr. Hirata, who was fairly low in the company hierarchy might be intimidated or afraid to give his testimony because Mr. Yagi, the president, was sitting right there listening to him. He might be afraid that he would contradict or say something different from what Mr. Yagi or the others in the company were going to say later on in the trial. I told them that I thought it would be important for Mr. Yagi to reassure him, and to tell him that all he needed to do was tell his story and not worry about anything else. Mr. Yagi was consulted and he agreed. Mr. Yagi strode into the lunchroom, which was filled with lawyers, and the other Japanese witnesses, went up behind the younger man, and put his arm on his shoulder, something very unusual for a Japanese to do. Addressing him as a father would a son, Mr. Yagi said to him in Japanese, "Hirata kun, don't worry about my being in the courtroom. Do not worry about whether your testimony will match mine. Just focus on what you know is true and say what you need to say. If there is any problem later, I will take responsibility for it, not you. I will protect you."

Mr. Hirata's eyes filled with tears and all he could do was bow his head to Mr. Yagi. The lunchroom became still and several lawyers blinked away their tears, even though they did not understand anything Mr. Yagi had said. Mr. Hirata went back on the stand a changed man. He spoke with confidence and authority. Moreover, like the people in the synagogue where Jesus preached, we were astounded. During this same case, I was invited by another member of the legal team to go to dinner with Mr. Nakajima, the former president of the company. This was to be a working dinner, not a social event. Mr. Nakajima was an important witness in this case since he had negotiated the contract with the American company who was suing them. Nevertheless, he was being treated like an outcast by the Chairman of the Board and held at a distance by almost all the other Japanese witnesses, except Mr. Yagi. It was

beginning to affect Mr. Nakajima's performance and we began to wonder if there was something we didn't know, something else that might have happened during the negotiations... and could that possibly be brought out at trial by the other side and bite us in the butt. (Thinking about every possibility is considered being thorough by lawyers; others call it paranoid.) I liked Mr. Nakajima. He was in his seventies and had grown up near my hometown in Japan. We found many things in common to talk about like the sweet red bean paste with chestnuts, a specialty from that region of Japan that we both loved. He was also a Christian and a deacon in his church, something very unusual for a Japanese. He had gone to a Catholic high school and University. His nickname was Babe Ruth, a nickname that an American priest, who was his baseball coach, gave him when he played for the Sophia University team.

At dinner that night, he began to talk about what had happened to him. He began talking in English but as he told more of his bitter tale he switched to Japanese and I began interpreting. He spoke of his vision of getting a new American brand name shoe to distribute in Japan, how he overcame the opposition of the Chairman, and the Board of Directors voted to go ahead with this new plan. The Chairman however, without consulting Mr. Nakajima, signed a contract with the American company. The contract contained some unfavorable terms and was not one that Mr. Nakajima would have signed, and yet he had no other choice but to make the best of it. Unfortunately, the American brand did not do well in Japan, partially due to the unfair terms of the contract and partially due to the economic conditions in Japan. Eventually, the American company sued. Mr. Nakajima told about the screaming rage of the Chairman when he realized that his company had been sued. He blamed Mr. Nakajima and began to countermand all his orders so that Mr. Nakajima lost face. Soon, the Chairman began threatening to transfer Mr. Nakajima's son, who also worked for the company, to the Japanese equivalent of outer Siberia. When that happened Mr. Nakajima resigned, publicly taking responsibility for the

lawsuit. As I listened and interpreted this story, I began to feel the anguish and betrayal that this man had experienced and the tears started rolling down my face. I was appalled! This had never happened before; I was working, I could not cry... and yet the tears kept rolling down my face. I hoped no one saw, since we were in a dark restaurant. I was able to make it through the story and, during a lull in the conversation, I surreptitiously wiped my tears.

After dinner, as we waited for the car, Mr. Nakajima said to me. "I have never shed any tears about the unjust way I was treated. However, you have cried for me. I can now put aside my pride and endure whatever is necessary so that we can get the best possible outcome." We did win the case. In addition, Mr. Nakajima sent me a box of sweet red bean paste with chestnuts.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? ... the borderlands to the Holy are indeed dangerous, exhilarating, and life-giving.

Amen.