# “Who Are You? or The Sacred Journey of Being De-centered” by Anna Gilcher

## March 26, 2017

## Fourth Sunday of Lent

Here is the sermon I preached at Seekers Church this morning. It provides a report on my time in Vancouver a month ago. The biblical text is John 9:1-41, the story of Jesus restoring sight to a man born blind. (Quotations within the sermon come from the *Inclusive Bible*, an egalitarian translation not available online.)

The sermon began with the experiential activity outlined here: “Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

• Find a partner

• One minute each – one person asks “who are you?” the other

answers. “Who are you?” is repeated after every statement.
• Switch roles
• Find a new partner
• Same instructions– but no role or responsibility (no professional, no caretaker, sister/daughter/mother)
• Switch roles
• Find a new partner
• Don’t use anything you’ve used before in the other two minutes
• Switch roles
• Silent reflection: what did you notice?

My dear friend and work partner Rachelle Adams and I were invited to Vancouver last month to make a presentation to teachers on diversity and identity, and on how illuminating our own identity is a necessary step to cross-cultural dialogue and reconciliation.

British Columbia has recently redesigned its curriculum with two broad and drastic changes: the infusion of Indigenous ways of knowing on the one hand, and three Core Competencies on the other (Thinking, Communicating, and Personal and Social Responsibility). The ministry of education has pushed for the infusion of Indigenous ways of knowing or pedagogy to be used across the curriculum, moving away from content-based instruction that discusses Indigenous issues to the use of Indigenous pedagogy. The personal and social core competency includes: positive personal and cultural identity, personal awareness and responsibility, and social responsibility.

We were invited to Vancouver because we had done a presentation at a language teachers’ conference last summer in Reno, Nevada entitled “Creating Diversity-Positive Language Classrooms.” Our guiding principle was: Students deserve to see positive representations of themselves and those they love… both as they are now and who they may be in the future. In our session, we presented some basics of diversity

education including what are known as “the big 8 and little 4” social identifiers, and the importance of shifting from being just a multilingual classroom to being a truly multicultural classroom in which the community recognizes differences and similarities in different cultures, and supports equity and social justice for all members. (Language teachers are often given a pass on the hard work of multiculturalism because we assume that multiculturalism is inherent in multilingualism.)

(The social identifiers—in US American society—are:  ability, age, ethnicity, gender, race, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status + appearance, family structure, geographic region, military status)

One of the participants in our session, Natalia Mayor, a French and Spanish teacher from Vancouver, was deeply struck by the overlap between what we were presenting and the new pedagogy and curriculum in British Columbia, and she invited us to come to present to teachers who were wrestling with how to make this shift.

Additional context for the shift is work that is being done across Canada, both within education and outside it, to come to terms with Canada’s colonialist past and the many generations of Indigenous children who were forcibly placed in residential schools in order to solve the “Indian problem.” Over 150,000 children were stolen over the 150 years of the program. The last school in Canada did not close until 1996. There is a very powerful program called Project of Heart that is working to bring people across Canada the knowledge of this history, which has been hidden, and is working toward true reconciliation. (There is also a Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I had no idea. There is much we can learn from our neighbors to the north.)

The “Who Are You” activity we started with today was the first activity we had participants engage in before we stepped into the core of our presentation in Vancouver. It helped us hold a

lived understanding of our shared humanity as we looked at and honored the real differences that exist between us.

Rachelle and I divided our presentation into four sections, which I called “points de repère,” or geographical reference points. (I couldn’t resist using French in Canada.) The title of each one comes directly from the First People’s Principles of Learning, a list of principles published by the First Nations Education Steering Committee:

• Learning requires exploration of one’s identity.
• Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story.
• Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations.
• Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one’s actions.

Finally, as an overarching principle, we used “Learning is a journey that takes courage, patience, and humility,” taken from the version of the principles published by the BC Teachers Federation entitled “Indigenous Ways of Knowing.”

I want to take a moment to note that this process is taking place, not in a church such as we stand in this morning, but in public school.

There is an immense amount to say about this. But that is all I will say for now. (Let’s take a breath.)

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In our gospel reading today, Jesus gives sight to a man blind from birth, and many of those who are around, either to see the miracle happen or to hear about it later, find themselves exceedingly de-centered. For those on the margins, being de-centered is just the way things are. They’re not at the center, they’ve never been at the center. The closer people are to the center, however, the less accustomed they are to being de-centered… and with less practice comes great fear.

Let’s go back for a moment to the principle “Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one’s actions.” As we know,

consequences are both positive and negative; consequences go beyond our own individual lifespan – there is collective trauma across generations and there is collective oppression… we suffer and profit from them both, whether we like it or not, and this was as true in Jesus' time as it is in our own. The more privilege we carry, the more we profit from the oppression. Recognizing this as a truth is a crucial step, and from there, our work is to take responsibility: (even if) it's not my fault, it is my responsibility.

This recognition is highly de-centering to those of us at the center, and the more social identifiers we carry that are the "default," the less practiced we are at being de-centered. The willingness to be de-centered is a sacred journey.

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to be de-centered as a white person, and the sacredness of being de-centered. The Pharisees in this text show exactly what it's like to suddenly be de-centered and how fearful we become when we find our own identity at the center at stake. Without having a conscious understanding of their own identity as socially constructed and privileged by the social constructs of the day, they quickly move to close the gap to re-center themselves… without regard to the cost to others around.

Now, it is important to note that the Pharisees do not hold privilege in every aspect of society—far from it. They are living as an occupied people under the Romans. White people, too, can hold positions not at the center (I'm a woman, I'm bisexual), and in many contexts, we experience what it's like to be at the margins. Nor are the Pharisees a monolithic group—indeed, they are "sharply divided." In this encounter, the Pharisees hold the privilege, as we white people very often do as well, and they quickly re-center themselves and find belonging in their commonality. Who are you? "We are disciples of Moses. We have no idea where this Jesus comes from."

How many times have I, as a white person, clung to the comfort of staying at the center?

If we take “seeing” as a metaphor for whiteness and for being at the center, it becomes clear why it is so important that we “become blind.” Jesus says: I came into this world to execute justice—to make the sightless see and the seeing blind. This is a sacred journey, and an invitation to true liberation.

Are we willing to become “blind”… so that we may actually begin to see?