

Homeward Bound

By Pastor Alan Lai

I have said to different people in the church at different times, let me say it again: I am deeply grateful that you have called me as your pastor. I am humbled by your courageous act and your willingness to take a risk. Frankly, many Caucasian churches are not ready to take me as their pastor; and many Chinese churches do not understand why I serve a Caucasian church. At present, Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in North Vancouver is the only Caucasian church in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada who has called a first-generation Asian immigrant as their solo pastor! I am not kidding. We have a lot to celebrate and to learn!

We come from different worlds - literally and metaphorically. I grew up in Hong Kong, a place which I have not visited for the past eleven years. Although I have lived in Canada for twenty-three years and have embraced the Canadian way of life, I am shaped by the Confucian culture. Language wise, I am still learning.

Let me share my story with you: I was born and raised to a middleclass Chinese family in Hong Kong. I am the oldest and only son in the family. I have three younger sisters. It has taken me many years to come to an understanding of what it means to be a son in a Chinese family. My earliest contact of Christianity came when I studied at a Roman Catholic Primary School. Later when I was seventeen, at the invitation of a friend, I attended and was baptized in a United Methodist Church in Hong Kong.

Two Cultures

For the past few years, I taught as an Assistant Professor of Religious Education at Vancouver School of Theology. During one of the faculty retreats, one of the faculty members asked me, "What does Hong Kong look like?" I said, "It looks like Manhattan with Asian faces." Overcrowded and congested, the city of seven million is hard-pressed by cars, people and high-rise apartments. In Hong Kong, I finished the compulsory education.

Growing up in Hong Kong, I always had to struggle with two cultures. This is a realization I discovered later. I lived at the time when Hong Kong was under British rule. Legally, China was not my country, nor was Britain. I possessed the kind of British passport that had prevented me from being a British citizen. Being raised in Hong Kong under British rule meant an identity crisis from day one - I was a Chinese without a home country. My understanding of China as my motherland was very weak. While I do not know China's National Anthem, I can sing *God Save the Queen* with gusto. After making several visits to China in the early eighties when China had just re-opened its door to outsiders, I was glad that I had been born in Hong Kong. Secretly in heart, I was glad that Hong Kong was taken over by the British. I liked the British way, not the Chinese. I surrendered to the British Empire one more time. Unknown to me at the time was that I was "homeless." At nineteen, I left Hong Kong for Canada by myself. I landed in Toronto to begin my quest for higher education. Alone and knowing only one person at that time, I arrived at the Toronto International Airport on December 24, 1982.

I have a love-hate feeling about airports. They are the places where the drama of alienation and reunion occurs. This drama has repeated itself many times in my life. The strongest feeling was on August 30, 2000 when I left my family behind and went to New York City to pursue a Doctorate in Religion and Education. Gloria was just seven months old. After a five-hour flight from Vancouver, I finally arrived at the JFK International Airport. To my astonishment in the Customs area, I found myself lining up beneath a sign that read "Alien." I asked myself, "Why am I here? Do I look like an alien?" At that moment, I felt like one.

The idea of commuting between cultures is not new to me. I was married in Montreal on a cold day in December. What an idea! Fanly flew over from Hong Kong to marry me. The wedding ceremony was a bilingual service (Chinese and English) conducted in a Chinese church in Montreal. After the wedding ceremony, we traveled one and a half hours back to Lennoxville, Quebec, the town where I studied as an undergraduate. Grace Chapel was a tiny small English speaking church. There were quite a number of seniors in that church who could not have traveled to Montreal for my wedding. Instead, they hosted a banquet as a gift to us. As an international student trying to find a home church, I helped out as their pianist for Sunday worship regularly. As a native Cantonese speaking Chinese, getting married in the middle of a snow-covered December month, attending a banquet offered by an English-speaking Protestant church in a French speaking province of Canada is something Fanly and I will never forget. This experience may have deposited my desire to claim more fully the multicultural nature of my ministry.

The Idea of Home

In the movie *Patch Adams*, the opening scene is a narrative by Robin Williams (he plays Patch). He says, "Home, according to the dictionary, is both a place of origin and a place of destination." I see wisdom in this line. I think the theme "Searching for Home" is evident in the first half of my life; and it continues to unfold as I serve you as your pastor. Maybe my longing for a "home" led me to Christianity. However, my academic journey has taken me to other places in which I am eager to share with you. At the time of this writing, I am preparing my first sermon at Mt. Olivet based on Deuteronomy. Joshua was given the Israelites a prep-talk as they were about to enter the Promise Land. The "Promised Land," hitherto, was still an idea to these people. Excited as they were, they were still standing at the fringe and had not yet experienced the fullness of the promise. Like them, we are tempted to hold on to what we already know and back away from venturing into a new path. That being said, I do not suggest the past cannot guide us or the past is not in the present. The invitation, however, is to journey to the unknown future with a God who is amazingly graceful. I cling to the idea that our search for home is an ongoing adventure of life. Thinking too much that we have reached our destination is a dangerous thought. It fosters nothing but complacency.

May the unfailing grace of Christ guide, nurture and sustain us to be God's agents of peace and reconciliation, and may our humble service enlighten the path of others.