



Plenary address at 2006 MC Conference
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I am certainly at home at a multi-cultural conference. Of the three emphases for this event presented at our first meeting – adopted, new immigrants, cross/multicultural marriage – I am two. When I was born I came home from the hospital to a *bracero* camp in Southern California. Couple of years later I was living in a project in what is now South Central LA. Back then it wasn't South Central, just "that place". At Age five I was adopted by Gervacio Bagasao, a Filipino man. In time, I adopted his culture. But, I hardly knew him. Even after the adoption, I was raised by my grandmother. Throughout my life I have been claimed – and rejected – be different cultures. As a teenager, per still seeking a father, I developed a father-daughter relationship with an African American man married to a Korean immigrant. I call him Papa. I'd seen a particular friend of his on several occasions, but never met the man formally until the day Papa introduced his "daughter" to the friend. This man looked at me and very sincerely said, "I've been wondering where you got your looks."

All my experiences with "otherness" don't compare to one I had with my Southern Boy with a III after his name, who went to college at the Citadel, my husband. Early in our marriage we had an argument, about money – they were all about money back then.

PART I

When I received the materials I was so delighted to see that the logo for this event was a mosaic. A mosaic to give us the visual image of Many Peoples One Family. Today I'll be using the mosaic as the metaphor for our family. I'm going to talk about the pieces in the mosaic that are Asian peoples, about the gifts and presence that the Asian aunties, uncles and cousins bring to our Many Peoples One Family in Christ. I'll begin by reflecting on the nature of mosaic and then look at application for the Many Peoples One Family.

---A mosaic, a design composed of  different independent bits,  different perhaps in color, size or shape,  texture but each piece complete in itself in many ways.



Complete also when experienced together with the many other pieces. For the individual pieces and the complete picture to be fully appreciated perhaps we can apply two Hindu principles. The Vedic religions took root and flowered in Asia, although they are global religions today. The first principle is ANEKA – not oneness; the second ADVAITA – not twoness either. Each piece is a totality, sharing its many characteristics with the whole. And the whole is not quite complete when even one of the pieces is missing.

---A mosaic may be appreciated BOTH as wonderful pieces AND as a WHOLE, not EITHER as one OR as the other. This willingness to allow BOTH/AND is an Asian contribution to philosophical reflection.



The I CHING, one of the oldest written books of China, bases a world perception on BOTH/AND – the yin and the yang. Recall that one of the greatest heresies in Christendom arose because people wanted Jesus the Christ to be either a human or a God, and was not either/or. He was both/and.

---You may be familiar with Tie-Feng Jiang, founder of the Yunnan school of visual art. His creative efforts were crushed during the Cultural Revolution, when he painted political posters and illustrated children's books for a living. But all the time, he was developing on handmade rice paper at night on his bed a style that would be emulated by many young Chinese artists. It has influences from nature, from symbols found drawn in caves along the old silk routes, from Picasso and Monet, Buddhist Grotto paintings. Subject matter are derived from the cultural heritage of the 22 ethnic minority groups that inhabit the area where he lives – mosaic of inspirations - all combined with that divine gift we call genius. The first of his works to come out China were smuggled out by a National Geographic reporter. A predominant characteristic of Jiang's work can easily be identified as MOSAIC.



This is Blossoming Flowers. You can see the flowers. Then depending on angles or distances, an individual piece might "jump out", or a set of pieces that reform into non-flowers. Part of a flower is a face, then a body emerges from the face and the flower. Jiang's Blossoming Flowers is not flower or body, nor a series of smaller flowers nor just shapes filled with color. It is a glorious coming to life of flowers and bodies. Perhaps you catch a hint of pain or even the shock of death in an extended hand, that hand that becomes part a flower's center, offering the hope new life, of life that would not die and which is even now trying to blossom from the winter of political destruction.

In the Yunnan school of art is captured the yin and yang, the aneka and advaita, the both/and that characterizes two influential Asian world views. Our branch of the family very much depends on our ability and willingness to become comfortable with the idea of both/and. This is who we are. This is nature of Asian-American. And this piece of the mosaic we would like to share with the One Family.



---Another element of our nature is that we aren't constrained by a frame. Our parts of the mosaic have not been set into permanence, they are always moving.

The great credo of the Children of Israel, the first of God's many peopled family, begins, "A wandering Aramean was my father..."

Movement exemplified that community. As it does ours.

Our ancestors were wanderers and we are the ancestors that our children will call wanderers. We came here, to the US, to what is or was a new land, and we continue to move, some of us in location, some in educational or professional tracts, as we seek to widen the spectrum of options that will be available to our children.

We re-affirm in our lives the observations of Confucius.

It is told that Confucius stood on a river and looked into the water and spoke about what he saw. Some of the water moved swiftly, paying no attention to rocks or logs in its way, hitting them squarely and breaking into sprays of countless droplets who laughed because they knew they would come together again and continue on their way. Some water moved slowly, stopping in depressions on the bottom of the river to circle around and settle for a while. But eventually even the slowest and most settled of the waters moved on. Other water steadily, steadily continued on course, rarely changing speed, just moving. The three types of waters are three types of people, moving at different speeds, but always moving.

We are a people who move outward and onward constantly, but we identify ourselves by where and who were.

- We wandered, but we are still Aramean.
- We are American, Asian-American
- We are eager to take a once-in-a-lifetime trip to a newly-opened heartland to see where our grandparents lived and died.
- We are the "balik bayan" going home each Christmas loaded to the teeth with goodies that say, "We have moved on."
- We are old peoples from civilizations that were shining like noon when Western Europe was just waking up to morning.

But we somehow retain a sense of being new peoples in this place, especially as we – the individual pieces of the mosaic – attempt to come together to become a larger picture within the whole.

So this is some of our mosaic: new and old, constantly moving, many and not-many, fluid, transcending borders of town and nation, but irrevocably tied to a part of the globe known as Asia.

PART II

To encounter fully this mosaic, it is not enough just to "see" – to be aware of external or surface reality. Masao Takenaka in his introduction to The Bible through Asian Eyes notes that traditional oriental painting stresses the import of listening in addition to seeing. Beiu Iizuka, a leader in black and white Nanga painting has said:

"While Western painting stresses the color and shape, Eastern painting emphasizes the voice. When we see the waterfall we listen to the sound of the waterfall. When we see the birds we listen to the singing of the birds. When we see a flower, we listen to the song of the flower."

So, in keeping with this tradition we will be listening to as well as looking at the mosaic – what is the shape, what is the sound – of our many peopled family.

---Our place, what we have to offer to the rest of the mosaic, is shaped by what is important to us. And what is important to us, the Asian branch of the family? Probably many of the same things that are important to us all. It is important that we are a chosen community –that we have a name. In music and lyric, Sameul Liew of Singapore offers insight into the importance, the poignancy of this concept.
SING

Alone I am yet not alone; there're people all around
I bear a name, yet I have none. I'm lost, can I be found?
Refrain: Just call me by my name, O, Lord.

There is a problem here, though. What is our name? Asian American? Pacific Islander? Filipina-American? Nisei?

Maybe we don't know our name. But our name is known:
But now, thus says the LORD, your creator, O Jacob.
The One who formed you, O Israel,
"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are Mine!" Isaiah 43.1

Maybe we do not know our name:

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land. 2 Chronicles 7.14

Or, more succinctly

So all the peoples of the earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will be afraid of you. Deuteronomy 28.10

We have a name. We are called by God's name. Each piece of the mosaic responds when the name of the LORD is proclaimed because we are called by – and called forth by God's name.

"Just call US by our name, O Lord."

---It is significant that the Many Peopled One Family *itself* is one of the most important concepts of our various cultural experiences.

We don't need to remember far back to the Conference of Faith (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. The document developed for that began

"We believe God gives the human person dignity, ability, responsibility and a homeland, so that he/she may participate in God's creation."

HOMELAND remains a crucial concern for many of our brothers and sisters. Think of the peoples of Myanmar, Tibet. *Homeland*. The possibility of Homeland comes into question especially when adherents of two great faiths attempt to occupy the same political region. Mindanao, Philippines is the locus for a longtime struggle that turned out to be a harbinger of similar conflict throughout the world. Christians in that area hoping to live in peace with their Muslim neighbors wrote,

"Stripped of pretense, with no ready-made answers, with God's help we sincerely desire to achieve a more comprehensive viewpoint of God's plan which includes all of us as brothers and sisters."

Some concerns chiefly connected with experiences here in the US should be recognized. The Asian American gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered population is one the most silent of already faint voices. Where is their homeland? And there are others in search of homeland.

Many of our Asian ethnic-cultural groups stress education, perhaps too greatly. About a decade ago, there was a plan to launch a new, slick magazine in the Filipino-American community. It was to be called "Intelligentsia." Education is important. But as it becomes more and more so, the risk is that the voices of those within each ethnic/cultural group with less education will be come fainter and fainter, the color of their pieces in the mosaic less vivid.

Women, significantly women in ministry, comprise an under-heard, under-seen segment of our culture. People in mixed marriages, the children of those marriages. Where is their homeland?

We have come from nations virtually all of which were colonized to some extent. We cannot as a Many Peopled One Family "colonize" those of us who do not fit the shape our idea for our completed mosaic. We are not designing the mosaic – God is.

While each branch of our One Family has its unique, historically rooted concerns, each concern must belong to all of us. As Paul told the Philippians, we are not to look only to our own interests but to the interests of others.

Or perhaps we can be moved by the words of Ruth to her mother-in-law Naomi, women from two different cultures, two nations who are about to become a mosaic of two. How touching are Ruth's word's, "Your people will be my people; your god my god."

---We have a name, we share our concerns. It is important to us that we are, we should be, a just, egalitarian family. It is in the Exodus story that God forms God's first new Many Peopled family – the *ipiru*, from which we get the word Hebrew. The best understanding we have of what *ipiru* actually meant was "rabble", "menudo", "les miserables", the bottom of the barrel. They were not an ethnic group per se.

They were people who couldn't make it in Egypt. So, the people who came out of Egypt were quite literally a many peopled family. The story contains an interesting account of the gathering of food – manna – in the wilderness.

When God sent manna to feed the people, they were instructed to gather one *omer* – a unit of measure – and one only. Some gathered more; some less. But – then the manna was measured out, everyone – whether they had gathered more or less – had exactly one omer of manna.

God intervened to make sure the goods were evenly distributed. If this weren't enough to get the point across, when God gave the Law to the new family, God commanded the Yobel – Jubilee (Leviticus 25.10). Just in case things got uneven from time to time, every 50th year, the people were to even out again, return what was borrowed, mortgaged, bought or sold back to the original owner; return to the beginning at start over, each person once again equal to the next.

A final observation about what is important to us. It is important that we are a flexible community. In the Tao te Ching, organizing principles preserved by Lao Tsu from the 4th century BCE, we read:

A man is born gentle and weak.
At his death he is hard and stiff.
Green plants are tender and filled with sap.
At their death they are withered and dry.
Therefore the stiff and unbending is the disciple of death.
The gentle and yielding is the disciple of life.
Thus an army without flexibility never wins a battle.
A tree that is unbending is easily broken.
The hard and strong will fall.
The soft and weak will overcome.

If we are to be a part of this vital community that is always moving and changing, we must be pliant and flexible. To be stiff and hard, to resist movement and change, is useless. Remember, John wrote in his revelation that the one who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new."

We are rooted, we are alive, we are flexible. Supple and pliant connote an inner strength. And we are strong because we know who we are,

- we have a name
- we care about each other
- we recognize the equality of each other, each gifted, each challenged, each placed into the design by the artist God.

PART III

The final aspect of our family branch that I will address is our task in the mosaic. To do this, I would like us to remember some of those tasks for which we originally came to

this land of promise, experiences which were painful, humiliating, but which can help give us an idea of who we have become and who we are yet to be.

Traditional culture meeting historic movement – it creates the matrix into which we set our mosaic pieces. Who we *were* meeting who we *are*, our historic tasks envisioned in the eschaton, in God's kingdom. What are some of those tasks?

---Laying railroad tracks, providing transportation for his fledgling land to bring its ends together. Blasting away at the land with explosives that would just as soon take a human being as a rock, tree, or mountain. Not an easy take, none of ours were. But it was done. A few generations later, we are laying tracks for a different kind of travel – space, seas, not just to bring to the ends of our land together, but the ends of the universe.

Our track-laying task doesn't stop here. Listen to the words of the Lord through Isaiah: In the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Yet another track, prepare yet another way. Announce the coming of our God. We don't have to blast away at anything. Cataclysmic events happen. Without our help valleys which would hold us in, mountains which would stop our movement are leveled. Once we begin to lay the track, the earth prepares itself for us, so we can do our work. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

---Laying track, harvesting fields, picking the crops. From the Central Valley of California to the Midwest and northeast, follow the crops, pick fruits and vegetables for someone else's stomach and strength while we were hungry and weak. We harvest now in places my grandfather would never have dreamed – under the sea, hot houses in the snow. The harvest goes on.

What is the eschaton task of harvest? Matthew 9.37-38

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

But not just harvesting; sowing also.

SING

The grain is ripe: the harvest comes
Good seed of hope, your time is now
Justice will stream from hill and river,
More than you dream and running over.
The righteous God gives this and more-
Grace is the mode, mercy the key,
God comes in truth the sharpest laser
to scan the earth to take our measure.
The work of peace is all for all

Face turned to face in open trust.
All famine gone and thirst and bleeding,
The harvest comes from love's good seeding.
Shirley Murray, New Zealand, Philip Nunn, Australia

---Make a way, gather crops. COOK. Prepare nourishment. Bring together the best and the worst of the country's bounty and make it palatable, spice it up. "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot." What a wonderful calling, no longer just the cook, we are the ingredient, the spice. How do we spice things up? Sometimes by asking to be recognized, asking to get our representation, asking for our story to be included. We are salt, part of the food that will help the world to live. We deserve to be known.

---Laying track, harvesting fields, cooking. Doing the Laundry – washing, cleaning, it's a great tradition. Jesus was always cleaning up – the temple, a body filled with demons, washing the mud from the eyes of a blind man he'd healed. Those people whom Christ has healed of all sorts of brokenness and disease, in themselves, between one another, between governments and systems and individuals. We are the ones who must take up the dirty clothes and rags of sickness and launder them, so that those who have been healed by Christ can live in newness, not hampered by the dirt of their past, the stink of illness that is gone. The laundryman. A stereotype – is there anyone here who doesn't remember Hop Sing on Bonanza? The laundryman, a stereotype, certainly. But in the eschaton, he is also a follower of the archetype.

---lay track, harvest and sow, cook, clean -- be beautiful. I end with this task of our Asian foremothers. Come to this land and be beautiful, let them look at you, let them desire you. The most degrading of tasks. But as an eschaton task, it is a necessity. Our mosaic should be beautiful. The world is aching for something beautiful. We reflect the beauty of the creator of the universe, of the savior of humanity, of the Spirit that breathes us through each day. It is our task to live so that people will want to look, so they will desire to know the love of God the artist who fired us into being, cut us into unique shapes and then placed us into this mosaic together.

Blessings on you all, my many peopled family, our likeness shining from a mosaic carefully crafted by the creator of the universe. Each of us a whole, each of a part. Bound by a love that lived for us and died for us and now lives for us again so that we too might live. Amen



Sound of the Bamboo

The Asian Institute for Liturgy and Music and the Christian Conference of Asia
1990

The Bible Through Asian Eyes Masao Takenaka and Ron O'Grady

Pace Publishing in Association with the Asian Christian Art Association 1991

Tao Te Ching Lao Tsu translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English

Vintage Books/Random House 1989

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