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AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A PRIVILEGED WHITE MALE

CHAPTER ONE

I'M STARTING WITH THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

I was born into privilege. My father was exempt from service in World War II because he was a petroleum engineer for one of America's larger oil companies. Mom was a fulltime mother and homemaker, raising my brother and me to expect privilege yet never to embarrass the family. My younger brother (born in 1948) and I were not close as children; forty years later I learned that he still has no memory of his childhood before age 16. My training as a psychotherapist convinces me that he was in a great deal of psychic pain, but he doesn't know why, nor do I. From him I have also learned the importance of telling our own stories. Theories are fine for engaging postcolonialism, but they need to be incarnated in human personal narratives.

I was born with access to privilege. As a young child, I begged for a doll every Christmas from Santa, and still remember the particular delight I felt when I found a "Sparkle Plenty" doll under the tree. I also remember how shamed I was when mom allowed me to take that doll to school to show the other kids. While I feared horses, I loved sheep. Every year I was given a live lamb to raise and then take to the county fair several months later, put the lamb up for auction, and deposit my earnings in the bank for the future. (When I was 27, I emptied that bank account and used the money to pay for my first trip to study biblical archaeology in Jerusalem.) I loved tap dancing as a young child and ballroom dancing as a teenager. I loved playing the piano and the organ, and majored in keyboard in college because it seemed to extend some logical trajectory. And through it all, I had no idea who I was—really. I knew then that I was privileged but didn't know what to do with that. I only sensed what others wanted me to be. In the 1950s, that meant I was to act just like my dad and grow up to wear a gray flannel suit. Because I was pretty sure I didn't want to do "that," I was often bullied at school.

From birth I wore an invisible knapsack on my back.[1] When I was younger, my brother and I spent our summer holidays on my grandparents' farm in rural Kansas. I learned early to drive a tractor, and then would leave that to go build giant castles out of grandpa's hay bales in the barn—castles where princesses could be happy. When I was a teenager, I began to travel with my father on business trips, and the thrill of my first ride on a private company plane in 1958 remains fresh in my memory. Summers as a teenager were spent in an elegant fishing lodge in the mountains of Colorado, or on the beach in Hawaii. When it came time to go to college, I wasn't limited by the price of attending the school I chose, but only by the fact that my parents were scared

[1] See Peggy McIntosh's brilliant essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" in *Re-visioining Family Therapy: Race, Culture, and Gender in Clinical Practice,* edited by Monica McGoldrick (New York, Guilford, 1998), 147-52. On p. 148 she writes, "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks."

for me and would let me go no further "east" to college than a day's drive away from the small town where I had grown up.

In essence, the world was mine to seize, undergirded by privilege and money and education and parents who denied me things only because they weren't appropriate or good for me, but never because we couldn't afford them. And while I quickly learned to take all these things for granted, something was terribly wrong. With all the privilege, I had no idea who I was, or what would become of me. My outside didn't match my inside.

When I was young, mom took us annually to the "Wild Onion Indian Dinner" (or the "Wild Indian Onion Dinner," as my mother kept mistakenly calling it), staged by the descendants of the Trail of Tears—largely Cherokees driven from their native lands in Georgia to "Indian Territory," before that too was settled by white people in the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889 who in turn banished the Indians to reservations. We went to see these "cultural exhibitions" in the same spirit that we would go to the annual outdoor production of the musical "Oklahoma," somewhere over near Muskogee. Dad travelled internationally with his job at that point, and told us stories about "street urchins" in Caracas, for example, who played naked in the gutters. The stories disturbed me, which I think was the beginning, at about age 8, of my discomfort with the privilege in which I grew up. Otherness made me sad sometimes, yet it was also offered to me as a form of entertainment.

In college, I naively launched myself for the first time into a world that was very different from my familiar childhood world. In 1963, I went to work part-time as a tutor near the notorious Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project in St. Louis. I stumbled into the realities of black ghetto poverty, and to make matters more complex, I had a "Joseph Conrad moment," in which I fell in love with an African American woman. I was also robbed in the housing project, losing the jewelry I had inherited from my grandfather. Over time, I began to understand better what restrictions came with growing up black and poor in a housing project in the 1960s. Perhaps being there part-time was all I could handle. I could see difference, but didn't have to figure out how to live in it, or how to really see the world without my invisible knapsack, without looking through the spectacles of privilege.

I was privileged to be ordained to ministry. I was privileged to earn a PhD, and to land a postdoctoral fellowship that allowed me to live in Switzerland for nearly a year. I was privileged to become the father of two healthy, intelligent, and loving children, and to have the family financial security that they both could pursue a graduate school education without incurring any significant debt. My children are children of children of privilege.

From 1971 to 1994, I spent at least part of every year in Israel. Most of my friends there were Jewish, but I also sought to understand something about the Palestinians' daily lives. At the Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem, that didn't work well. The clergy called me "Father Jew" because I lived in a Jewish part of town and was working on my PhD at Hebrew University. I didn't understand at the time how much the pseudonym was driven by rage. Eventually, while working at the Shalom Hartman Institute in West Jerusalem, I made a close Palestinian friend, named Issa. His English was good, and he was both courageous and gracious in teaching me what the world

looked like through the eyes of his difficult existence. At the same time, I worshipped regularly in a neo-Orthodox synagogue on Saturdays, where many of the graduate fellows at the Hartman Institute also attended. I learned to chant prayers in Hebrew and to understand the TaNaKh when it was read aloud. I immersed myself in the study of the Talmud with a private teacher, Rabbi Zev Gotthold (now deceased). He became a “second father” to me; I was with him when his wife died and again when his young nephew died suddenly, and I became friends with his children and grandchildren. He encouraged me to write my fourth book, vetting every word along the way. I loved him both through our differences and because of them.

In 1993 I joined the theology faculty at St. Johns College in Auckland, and thereafter the faculty of the School of Theology at the University of Auckland. When I interviewed at St. Johns in late 1992, I did a “trial lecture” before the students. Sitting before me was a group of students, half of whom were white (though culturally quite different from me) and the other half were brown—Māori, Tongans, and Samoans. I knew immediately that I wanted to teach in that mix. The classes that I had taught up until then, at the School of Theology in Sewanee, Tennessee, were composed nearly exclusively of white students who, like me, had grown up in some atmosphere of privilege. In Auckland I found what I had been looking for so long: a chance to live deeply inside other cultures, understanding them from the inside, at least to some degree, rather than as an outside observer. I became the welcomed stranger, eager to learn from my colleagues and students what the world looked like to them, and along the way to give up a great deal of what I thought I knew and my assumptions about where I fit within the larger scheme of humanity.

In Auckland I finally began to understand postcolonialism. I saw how damaged the cultural traditions and heritages of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific had been—some more so than others. I supported as many as I could through their post-divinity graduate work; most were writing theses in which they attempted to reclaim some part of what had been lost or damaged through years of contact with non-Pacific cultures. I learned to speak some Māori, some Samoan, and some Tongan, for any effort to engage postcolonialism demands learning to think in the language of those whom the white world assumes it has colonized.

After fifteen years in Auckland, I returned to the US because my mother was dying. Today I live in Southern California, on lands that were once the property of the Cahuilla Band of Mission Indians (obviously, a white man’s name for these indigenous peoples). I live out my commitment to postcolonialism by including postcolonial theory in my courses at the local community college, by offering as much help as I can to my young Hispanic students who seek to get a degree from an American university and thus secure a life for themselves here, by returning to Auckland regularly to teach at a graduate level, and by supervising Polynesian Masters and PhD candidates at New Zealand universities as they write their graduate theses. I understand that one of the most important tasks in my life is to stand below these students on whatever staircase they are climbing and support them, or to stand above them and beckon them. This is the least I can do for them as a white man of privilege. And having myself succeeded in academia, I can share with them the contents of my knapsack.

But, in so many ways, I do not belong here in this beautiful valley. Perhaps this is what this valley's indigenous people also feel, at least in part, as their tribal lands become golf courses for wealthy Republican businessmen. Certainly, that was the message that the anti-immigration forces in Arizona and Alabama sent to their resident migrant workers recently: "You don't belong here; you're not one of us."

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I was born into privilege. I was born with access to privilege. From birth I wore an invisible knapsack on my back. And yet, something was not quite right. I have very dark skin for a white man, so that I am brown in the winter and black in the summer. I have peasant feet that look misshapen from working in the fields barefoot (though I never have done manual labor; in college a fraternity brother told me that I had feet "like Jesus," and as an art major he wanted to draw them). Two different dentists—one in the US and one in New Zealand—commented that I have quite unusual teeth. The US dentist asked me if I came from Marrano stock, while the New Zealander asked if I came from Basque or North African stock. To the best of my knowledge, I come only from British and Scottish stock, many generations ago, and am left puzzling whether my teeth have their own story to tell that would differ from the one my "official" family tree tells. I am 67 years old, and am increasingly unsure that I know how to accurately tell my own story, much less the story of anyone else. My story seems to repeatedly deconstruct itself every time I approach it.

In 1998, I published an article on men's bodies entitled "Designing Men: Reading Male Bodies as Texts." The article has been anthologized widely. There, I wrote about how men measure each other's bodies—how they read other male bodies as texts. In many cases, these readings of the bodies of others are forms of colonization, for we each can see only what we have been trained to see by our own culture, however vaguely that may be defined. I believe we are genetically programmed to see difference but that we have a lot of choice about how to react to that. We humans do measure each other's bodies, noting the traces of race, the veils others wear to cover their differences, but we also have the ability to define and change the way we evaluate and measure and sometimes envy the differences that ethnicity produces. Only as I age am I willing to write my struggle publicly. Only now can I see how egregiously offensive my assumptions have been—that "our" knowledge was categorically superior to "theirs." When I was younger, I could not see that, in part, I believe, because I was so shaped by the missiology of the 1950s and '60s that asserted the superiority of the western world and its theology. I remember asking my mother if I could send some of the toys I got for Christmas to the children in Africa. I thought a game of Bingo might help them feel better about their error of being born heathen.

How do people my age do postcolonial theology honestly? I was taught that God looked exactly as portrayed on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—male, elderly, commanding, with a long white beard. The image is stuck in my head permanently as a result of my childhood in the 1950s, long before postcolonialism was born. A filter between my brain and my mouth fortunately keeps me from calling God "he" or "him," but the picture remains. "That" God is the product of the colonial heritage into which I was born, and I cringed every time I discovered that some of my Pasifika students carried the same image I do. If we follow the lead of Anna Maria Rizzutto, in her *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1981), we carry throughout

our lives those earliest images of God that we construct as small children, made of pieces of things we've heard on television, our perception of our parents, snippets of Sunday School lessons, images picked up at school, and metaphors used by our older siblings or other authority figures. All of these are, of course, snapshots of God, and we are wrong to put our snapshots in other people's photo albums. Instead, I believe that in postcolonial dialogue, the job of white people is to listen for a long long time before saying anything.

I recently became a grandfather to twins. Young Harrison and Gwendolyn will also grow up with some element of privilege. They will grow up wearing invisible knapsacks, as I did. I hope that one day I can help them confront their colonial inheritance and make the choice to become part of the limen. The limen is the place where the safety of the harbor meets the power of the open sea. It is often not safe there, just as postcolonialism is not always safe for people like me, but those who learn how to cross that limen understand that without crossing, our privileged lives become a prison of fear and our faith becomes cowardly.

My head is often very busy, and my involvement in postcolonialism increasingly overlaps with my involvement in men's studies and body theology. And so I sing:

CHAPTER TWO

HIMNING THE HE(TE)RO: THE OTHERNESS OF THE HOMOEROTIC GAZE

E.L./Il–Elle/Elial/Lui/Eli/Belial—
Eliab: handsome but unsure of God's favor.
He is everyman, he is no man but his own man, he is my man.

My beloved's ears are like the alpine scree.
His legs are rock-hard, gym-toned,
His back sprouts tiny hairs, lichen in a hostile surround.
His toes curl down, like gnarly roots.
His touch can tickle me, making me laugh, or it can draw blood.
A Janus line marks his chest, the ends facing top and bottom. The hairs above point up, up, to where Jezebel the Temptress stands framed in the windows of his soul. The hairs below flow down down and taper to a fine bush which frames the root of Jesse.
He whistles while he works. He is Dwarf #8, and his name is Comely.

His male member hangs upside down, sleeping, like a fruit bat,
Or perhaps, wily, like a (flying) fox, a wily willie.
Grown wiser over time, it no longer stands to salute every fantasy, but opts for selective service.

In the night, two bodies gaze blindly upwards, hands intertwined. He is ezer kenegedi, the opposite same who mirrors me.
In the night, two bodies gaze blindly outwards, Janus-like, toes intertwined. He is ezer kenegedi, the ger toshav who completes me.
In the night, two bodies gaze blindly inwards, like God, panim el-panim, arms intertwined like tendrils of the grape.

He is ezer lo negedi, the twin in the mirror I can never know.

He is J.C./J.D./J.B./Archibald McLeish;
He is Benjamin, my favored hand for stroking.
He is yod, the small one without whom no man can possess the divine name.

Each time I explode into his mouth
He iterates me until I bleed.
Our love, God's love, is polysem(en)ic, polyphenomen(arch)al
Fiery reds and creamy whites
The homoerotic brit writ large again.
Be-yad ramah, he reads every yod and tiferet of my body.
Litter me, LETTER me, mi-she-karah-ve-hayah-ha-olam
and lying, spent, I am his and he is mine
and the read and the unread are ever(y)one.

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Translation key:
be-yad ramah – with upraised hand (see Exodus 14:8)
ezer kenegedi – my mirror opposite (see Genesis 2:20)
ezer lo negedi – not my mirror opposite
ger toshav – a resident alien, one who sojourns on the turf of another (see Exodus 12:45; Lev. 25:45, 47)
mi-she-karah-ve-hayah-ha-olam (Sifrei, Davarim 49, perhaps based on Psalm 33:9. One of the traditional names of God is "He who spoke and the world came into being.)
panim el-panim – face to face (see Exodus 33:11)
tiferet – a crown, an adornment, or the diacritical marks above a letter of the Hebrew alphabet
yod – the letter Y, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, known in the New Testament as a "jot."