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Shaking the Leaves of Identity

Rosalyn Kantlaht'ant Elm & Janaki Bandara¹

As Christian people, we intend to describe a sacred cosmos and to locate individuals within that cosmos. Peter Berger, in his book the *Sacred Canopy*, identifies that religion “legitimizes social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference.”² Religion is an institution that invokes roles such as marriage, sexuality, and gender. While these roles have had significant longevity and certainty over the centuries, we find ourselves locked into an essentialism or framework where we are asking the question, “where did this essentialism or framework come from, and why is this important?”

We are finite bodies, regardless of gender, facing an endless amount of experience within culture and society. We find that culture is just as important as biology, thus we continuously ask the questions of meaning for our culturally diverse experiences as spiritual people.

Consider, now, gender identity: in the realm of Christian tenets and spirituality, it can be argued that the body is male and female as God created us. As author Nancy Pearcey writes:

Scripture teaches that the creational differentiation of male and female is a good thing. Our complementary nature speaks of our yearning for union, which in turn reflects the divine nature. The question is, do we accept that created structure or do we reject it? Do we affirm the goodness of creation or deny it? Do we see the body as a reservoir of meaning, a source of moral truths?³

It is not a question of denying, it is always affirming the goodness. But our bodies are not only differentiated by biological reproduction. They are also differentiated by so much more: height, weight, motor ability, sensory perception, ambulatory ability. Thus, we can't essentialize the biological and physiological body as reservoirs of truth—especially when those reservoirs of truth are ensconced in racist, ableist, colonial, and patriarchal social mores.

If a female-bodied person of colour who experiences the world as a masculine or male persona reads into these reservoirs, they may look upon themselves and see *God's mistake*. This interpretation is dissonant for Christians who understand God's creation as being perfect, free from mistakes. Spiritually, we yearn for a place where our bodies are not mistakes. We yearn to understand that in our spiritual and bodily experiences we are created

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² Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, NY: Open Road Integrated Media, 2011), 44.

³ Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 33.

in God's image, meaning we search for a wholeness that means an intrinsic value to our bodies and selves.

Through our understanding of the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15 we find that, in truth, human bodies are mutable. We are never the same; there is no permanent state of self in our earthly bodies. While our experiences within a racialized body or a transgendered body leave indelible marks on our sense of self, there is not a human pinnacle that we are striving towards, there is not an average human experience that encapsulates God's desire. We are wholly and uniquely made, complete in our humanness and ever-evolving in our identity.

Paul pulls at our understanding of bodies and the resurrection body, breaks it apart, and puts it back together again. Ultimately, where our bodies fail is within the social norms that uphold a colonial, patriarchal, and anti-LGBTQ2+ structure designed to center whiteness, able-bodied-ness, thinness, and those who are cis-gendered as the true image of God and therefore perfection. This then denies the multi-faceted face of God viewed in creation and the specific individuation seen in the personhood of Jesus.

In our case study we are introduced to Rosalyn Kantlaht'ant Elm (Ros), whose spiritual life is predicated on giving thanks for the abundance in creation, including her body, while continuously cultivating the Good Mind. The process for her is deconstructing, breaking free of essentializing her female body together with her experiencing the world as a masculine being.

Between Biological Reality and Lived Experience: *latsina'tiyo* and *laksá*

Ros was born to a family of the Onyota'a:ka (Oneida Nation of the Thames). When Ros was about three years old, Olive and Leslie noticed that she was a boy—not by physiology, but based on their lived experience of this child, their last born, after having already raised two boys and two girls. There was no grand unveiling or “coming out,” rather a gracious and gentle recognition of her lived experience as a boy. That recognition meant that Leslie and Olive accepted her proclivity toward cowboy outfits, playing hockey, and shopping for clothing in the boy's section. That recognition meant that Ros's brothers' prayers had been answered, for they had prayed for a baby brother. That recognition also meant Ros was raised learning and experiencing the traditional roles of a male within the community: as brother, husband, father, caregiver, provider, and leader of a family according to the Haudenosaunee (matriarchal) traditions. That was how Ros grew up—as the youngest brother and son in her family.

Ros grew up learning the Oneida language and traditions and understanding that, although ceremonies that identified biological and chromosomal gender for reproductive purposes might mean she had to join the girls' line, her people understood her to be a boy. This understanding was so intrinsic to her self-knowing that leading with gender identification and pronouns was not necessary.

Ros's lived experience is approached as *latsina'tiyo*, a term meaning a smart or keen man as opposed to one who is born as a biological male or *laksá*. Ros was privileged to bypass the modern-day conundrum of gender identity, with all the requisite changes that might be required to be located on the gender spectrum—whether by changing pronouns, name, body parts, or hormones.

Genesis & *Kanehelatúksla'*—Thanksgiving for Procreation & Abundance in the Natural World.

Kanehelatúksla', meaning the Great Thanksgiving to the natural world, reflects the abundance of Mother Earth. It reflects the ceremonial calendar, beginning with midwinter followed by maple, thunders, sun and moon, seeds, planting, strawberries, bean, green corn, harvest, and end of season including feast of the dead, respectively.

In these ceremonies of celebration and thanksgiving for the natural world, especially the seed ceremony, it is important to recognize biological chromosomal sex as a gift from Creator. Thus Ros, born female, would join the girls' line in celebration of her body as a gift of Creator. Separating the biological chromosomal sexes is important in ceremony to recognize the gift of procreation, the gift of biological family. This is necessary for clan systems which, passed down through the mother's line, laid out the responsibilities within the family, within the (clan) longhouse, and within the nation. The Haudenosaunee culture celebrates the seed-bearer and life-carrier binary. This does not deny the existence of Intersex, or those with three chromosomes, but identifies biological chromosomal sex on the basis of reproductive capacity and responsibility within a community.

Similarly, in the story of Genesis we are introduced to the natural world in our creaturely existence as male and female in existence with all life upon the earth. The second account of creation offers man and woman: Adam and Eve. Adam does not create female; God creates female out of Adam for his partner. This is an important statement in the oeuvre of biological procreation. Adam and Eve have responsibility for biologically creating offspring, as God had intended male and female: God created them. This is kept whole in the responsibility of procreation. It describes two halves that God makes one to create life; it can be read as the fruitfulness into which God invites us.

Male and female are the names given, but in the story seen this way, there are no qualifiers or values given to *maleness* or *femaleness*. They are simply stand-in words for the processes at hand, the two parts needed: the seed-bearer and the life-carrier. These are two necessary biological components (male and female), but not attached to any social constructs of *femininity* or *masculinity*, even though some interpretations will use this scripture to define and enforce specific gender roles.

Is Genesis a prescription for the roles we are to play in life? Or is it a description of the social and intimate nature in which Creator has made us: the need for people to come together to create life, to create family, to create community? It is a story about the wonderful purpose we have been given: to build love and connection with others and the wonderful gift of life we carry within our created bodies. Because of this we can agree that nature does have a set plan, purpose, and order. We can draw upon these wisdom teachings for our moral decisions.

God's creativity is not made narrow by human (colonized) limits. Creator's magnificence is not zealously restricted by confinements that God will not own. It is understood that the love and creativity of the One who makes us all is broader than the measures of our minds.⁴

Focusing on only male and female bodies as reservoirs of meaning, we essentialize males, females, and their purpose. Our minds, our psychologies, our beliefs, spiritualities,

⁴ "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), Hymn # 588.

and cultural mores have something to add to how our bodies and our personhoods are defined. Consider a male who cannot physically seed, produce sperm, or produce enough sperm; consider the female that cannot carry a child. Does this make them less than a man or a woman? Does it mean that they cannot become fathers and mothers? We cannot be content in essentializing the body. We cannot be content by cleaving personhood so close to the body. Some creatures lose limbs, and every creature will grow old and lose faculties. After all, creatureliness is finite: all flesh decays.

The Good Mind: *Ka'nikohli:yo*

For Ros, who continues learning the stories of the Peacemaker and the Good Mind from elders, family, and teachers, a wisdom continues to be nurtured that fosters character and mental well-being. Cultivating the Good Mind is not only about delivering moral teachings but finding a way back when falling into grief, loss, anger, sadness, and illness. Cultivating the Good Mind is the treasured characteristic of the Haudenosaunee personality. The Good Mind is most essential to understanding humanity and social mores, and is cultivated in the traditional sense through ceremonial teachings.

Recognizing our own part within creation and cultivating the Good Mind is experiential and reflective. Tenets are taught by clan mothers, chiefs, faith keepers, and elders. To develop and preserve a Good Mind is to consistently develop balance, correction, reflection, and management of emotions such as anger, frustration, and grief. A Good Mind does not resist these emotions, but recognizes them and allows them passage through the person: body, mind, heart, and soul.

A directive that the Peacemaker set out for preservation of the Good Mind was to have the skin thicken seven spans (i.e., seven times the thickness of epidermis) through experience, error, and correction. This could take a lifetime. Cultivating this thickening of skin that serves to sustain the Good Mind guides us to relate as leaders; this cultivation allows us to have healthy participation in our roles within the clan and family system, based on gifts recognized by the community.

The Good Mind cannot be experienced and cultivated if there is unresolved turmoil within. This means that pathways for the resolution of turmoil must exist, be nurtured, and be supported. Such pathways are stymied when personhood is pathologized and essentialized on the basis of gender identification as defined for procreative purposes only.

Nancy Pearcey has discussed the problem of separating the mind and the body. She identifies that secular society has promoted the idea that biological sex subordinates psychological feelings. In her opinion, the body must give reference points for our gender identity and our moral choices. "In essence, the secular worldview has revived the ancient Gnostic disdain for the body."⁵

This is not Ros's experience. Ros does not feel that her personhood and body are separated, essentialized, or pathologized. Instead, her spirituality has taught her that body and personhood are being put together and continue to journey toward that eschatological hope of resurrection. Her transition happens and continues to happen on this journey as she experiences and lives out the roles carved out for her by Creator as One Who Shakes the Leaves. These roles include being a caregiver to the elders in her family and being raised as a spiritual leader.

⁵ Pearcey, *Love Thy Body*, 31.

She has lived and continues to live through the trials and tribulations of life and the intergenerational suffering of her people through the rage of colonialism, whose interpretive lens of gender identification poses a high risk for creating pathological turmoil that would poison the Good Mind. Her medicine for this pathologizing has been the hard-won Indigenous teachings and traditions that have been retained even though colonizing Christianity in history has tried to stamp them out. How can this medicine be brought forward as a hermeneutical lens for the Gospel and the ever-unfolding Kingdom of God?

Recognizing truth, *Kanehelatúksla'* does not require negation of the truth of Ros as *latsina'tiyo*. Recognizing truth, Genesis does not require negation of the truth of male femininities or female masculinities, created out of the sovereignty of the mind of God.

The Resurrection Body

But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.⁶

In this passage, Paul does two important things. First he differentiates the flesh and the body in terms of creaturely flesh and celestial body, the finite human and the resurrected body. Then he secures them both again: resurrected bodies will be incessant with earthly bodies like a plant is continuous with the seed.

He begins by identifying that the flesh is different from creature to creature. It is mutable and ever changing. The finite body changes with age, culture, mind, psychology; it changes, transforms, over time. The resurrected body is one with God. The resurrection body is of the spirit, our earthly body from the dust. It will age and transform over our lifetime. Finally, we are put back together again in the fullness of time. We are binary, we are fragmented, but our eschatological hope is to be put back together.

While Paul may describe different bodies, he assures us that, through Christ, we are transformed; we are made one in glory. Our differences and social dichotomies fall away.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:35–49 (NRSV).

For Ros, the Haudenosaunee perspective, philosophy, and spirituality provides an invaluable hermeneutical lens for theological interpretation. Bringing this lens to bear on 1 Corinthians 15:35–49, in which Paul, with characteristic Pauline fervour, explores the resurrection body, the questions are asked: “How are the dead raised?” and “With what kind of body do they come?”

Paul explains that there should be no question on the resurrected body. Resurrection occurs as a matter of course in nature: when a plant loses its fecundity through death, the seed becomes inert until fertilized and planted. Out of that seed new life emerges. Out of seeds we find that death is necessary for new life. The plant that grows out of the seed is completely different from, yet connected to, what has died before.

Paul discusses the different kinds of flesh and different kinds of bodies: from humans to birds to fish, from sun to moon to stars. Paul does not differentiate these bodies through a black and white hermeneutical lens, but rather identifies all of them as “glory.” This same “glory”—from the Greek root *dokeō* conveying *God's infinite, intrinsic worth* (substance, essence)⁷—is then used in verse 43 in relation to the seed of the plant which dies and then grows again.

The traditional Haudenosaunee hermeneutical lens is resonant with Paul's description here, and understands all things provided by Creator to be of infinite and intrinsic worth: all kinds of flesh, all kinds of bodies. All are Creator's glorious expressions in different ways.

Through this lens of Creator's all-encompassing glory in all creation, though we understand Christ made incarnate from Mary, created as male to function as biological chromosomal male, we also understand Christ as the seed of the kingdom in which his body transforms into something else: a glorified body with glorified celestial shine. In this we read that Christ's body is not the same as the functional biological body that he once had as human. Nothing separates Jesus from the Christ.

The Resurrection Body: Coming Together Again

As we live in these bodies that are constantly changing and functioning, we as spiritual people are growing in faith, waxing and waning on our spiritual trajectories. We continue to journey toward that glorified resurrection body in the fullness of time. In our time we understand our journey towards that glorified resurrection body as a story of transformation. We know that, like the changes we see in nature, our inevitable seeds break open and new life emerges.

Ros is *latsina'tiyo*. Ros lives in the midst of her tradition. For us, whether our flesh is as functional as we want or not, our bodies are recognized as wonderfully and fearfully created with differences and fault lines, scars and wounds. For us who live as *latsina'tiyo*, we are not afraid to live in and describe those journeys. We turn toward the strength of the Good News and the Good Mind. These are aspects of our lives that are fragmented and pulled apart, yet crying out for one another.

Our journey is ultimately about living into who we are meant to be, each and every one of us as human beings. That kind of living means different things to different people—it

⁷ “Glory,” HELPS Word-Studies taken from *The Discovery Bible* software. δόξα (DOXA) -- opinion (always good in N.T.), hence praise, honor, glory, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://biblehub.com/greek/1391.htm>.

is filled with fear and questions, determination and doubts, hope and wholeness, risk and affirmation. It is supported well by the toolkit that provides nurture to the Good Mind.

The body we are gifted with at birth will always change. Transformation is a part of its nature and is a sacred act in which we all engage as we become more and more ourselves. Earthly bodies are diverse in nature; they are unique and fearfully made, handcrafted by God for the purposes of love and life. But they are not static; they are not immutable. They are designed to change.

This changing should not be seen as a denial of God's purpose for us, but as a living into and finding of ourselves. As we age, as we grow, we discover more about what our bodies and minds are capable of, what they are limited by, and how we learn to find a path in the world that is not always designed for us. But this limiting is not a punishment by an uncompassionate God, but rather the colonial mindset that states there is one right way to be human and any who fall short of this are less than.

As we reach back into Genesis once more, we can see that this idea of the image of God being represented by perfectly male and female Adam and Eve, healthily reproductive and fully living into their "genderedness," is simply wrong. God's image is not the image of perfection in an earthly body, but found in the coming together of humankind to create new life from love and relationship. Our place as image-bearers stems not from our wholeness of body, not from our approximation to perfection, but from our ability to love, our participation in the creation of new life, and our capacity to be resurrected.

The deep sigh of Jesus on the cross begins for us a recalling back into wholeness, our promise that we too will sit at the table in paradise. Resurrection is the culmination of that journey of pulling apart and coming together.