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Alone in a Sea of Crosses

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Alone in a Sea of Crosses

Abstract

I grew up in a country where I was part of a religion practiced by few, while always surrounded by people who were like me. We had constant gatherings filled with music and food. There were bright, colorful, weddings that spanned four or five days. There were *mendhi* parties to help the bride get hennaed with her friends, the *sangeet* to bond the two families with song, the wedding itself, followed by a second ceremony at night, and finally a reception. All of this was interspersed with large meals, a time to breathe and laugh. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Hinduism, religious education

Disciplines

Hindu Studies | Religion | Sociology of Religion

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

ALONE IN A SEA OF CROSSES

November 30, 2015

I grew up in a country where I was part of a religion practiced by few, while always surrounded by people who were like me. We had constant gatherings filled with music and food. There were bright, colorful, weddings that spanned four or five days. There were *mendhi* parties to help the bride get hennaed with her friends, the *sangeet* to bond the two families with song, the wedding itself, followed by a second ceremony at night, and finally a reception. All of this was interspersed with large meals, a time to breathe and laugh.



But, as a child in Tanzania, I didn't want anything to do with it. Most people practiced Islam, Christianity or Indigenous Beliefs. I hated that the only box I could ever check off for my religion, much like with my ethnicity, was "other."

I hated going to community lunches, dinners, bazaars, and weddings. The excuses poured from my lips: *but I don't know anyone, but I get so bored, but it's going to be five whole hours*. I wanted to crawl into another skin, go to Halloween parties and Christmas events, and eat spaghetti instead of traditional *daaland rotis*. I couldn't see the value in my own culture, and I did not appreciate the weight of tradition that it held.

While I tried to run and reject, that was something my parents never let me do: they firmly pressed me back into my seat at these events, with the small and energetic crowd that would be singing loudly, and everyone knew: I was Hindu.

As I came to Gettysburg, I carried this internal tension with me. But, two months into my First-Year Seminar, the mention of Hinduism made me perk up. I was given the space and opportunity to learn about my own religion. What I learned about were stories. Hinduism is built on mythologies that range in their understanding of the world. They combine the start of the universe and the necessity of eunuchs in modern society. They tell stories of long wars between brothers, and of great rescues of the women that they love. I used to revel in Greek mythologies as a child, ignoring the ones that my grandmother would try so hard to tell me about. I did not realize how similar the stories were, comparing Ravan (the demon) stealing Sita with Paris abducting Helen for his own. Perhaps I did not want to see the similarity.

At times it's felt incongruous to be reconciling parts of my identity while at Gettysburg, a place where representation of my faith is so hard to find. Perhaps it was feeling alone in a sea of crosses that motivated me. After being invited to Bible Study by a new friend, I jokingly responded "I'd love to, but my mom might prefer me going to Gita Study," knowing full well that it wasn't an option. Perhaps that feeling of isolation allowed me to be honest with myself – I *wanted* to have that option so I could learn more about my religion. I no longer want to shrug my shoulders and feel humiliated that I don't know the answer when someone asks me, "why do you do that?"

I now go home, Google it. But as ashamed as I am, I learn. And educating myself is nothing of which to be ashamed.

What I've discovered is that my religion is inextricably linked to my culture, my values, my heritage – to me. My mother's explanation of religion is finally understood: "It's there to make sure that you know to make good choices, and to know in the face of choices are incredibly difficult to make – to make the right one."

We have the tendency to internalize negativity about ourselves when we are in the minority and, as a result, may desire to erase aspects of our identity to accommodate the majority. It's a long, hard process, but I'm learning that in all its difficulties, consequences, and nuances, my religion is a place of comfort. It provides me with a connection not only to my home and to my community, but also to Hindus all over the world, and to anyone who believes that religion can be used as a source of good.

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