APPALACHIAN NARRATIVES, CULTURAL DISCOURSES, AND THEOLOGICAL WITNESS

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Appalachia is a region of the United States that is largely ignored and ridiculed at the same time. As a native Kentuckian, I have always been aware of its existence. While growing up in the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky, I possessed an unannounced sense of superiority about not being from Appalachia. The most reviled thing I could imagine was to be equated with Appalachia and identified as a "hillbilly."

Then, my attitude changed. When I entered Princeton Theological Seminary as a M.Div. student, I remember vividly my purchasing a small item in a store. New in New Jersey, I timidly asked, "Could I have a sack for this?" The sales person glared at me replying, "Ma'am, we don't have sacks, only bags!" At this point, I realized that all my Bluegrass superiority had quickly evaporated with the utterance of a word, "sack."

Since that experience, I have gradually taken on the cloak of Appalachia with some pride and reverence. It has caused me to look very closely at cultural discourses that we often take on as truth. Thus, this essay will explore my personal experiences with cultural discourses and the way in which I now use my training as a pastoral theologian and narrative practitioner to identify and deconstruct cultural discourses. I will further limit, however, this personal exploration to the cultural discourses that relate to Appalachia and the ways in which they have challenged me.

When I moved to New Jersey, I soon learned that somehow the whole state of Kentucky was thought of as being "Appalachian," "mountains," and "hillbilly." In addition, having a Kentucky accent
certainly did not help me. It seemed a little impossible for people to separate my hailing from the Bluegrass from Appalachia. So, the fence I had built to protect me from Appalachia no longer helped me. Appalachia was lumped with Kentucky.

After a period of resistance and subterfuge, I gradually began to craft an identity that made friends with Appalachia. I thought more of my mother who was from Casey County, Kentucky, nestled in the outer knobs of eastern Kentucky. I always talked about her education and her love of teaching, but now I began to look to those discourses of Appalachia that made my mother who she was—a gracious, resilient person.

What do We Mean by “Cultural Discourse?”

For years, the cultural discourses of Appalachia have plagued the region. The general conversation in the public domain is that people in Appalachia are generally uneducated and lazy. While it is true that some people in Appalachia are uneducated and lazy, that is certainly not true for the whole region. And there are people in many parts of this country who could be labeled uneducated and lazy. Further, the oppressive structures that perpetrate educational and work malaise are privileged by society and an individualistic indictment is given to the people themselves in the region.

The concept of cultural discourse I am discussing in this essay is influenced by understandings of narrative approaches to therapy and community that was co-developed by David Epston and the late Michael White.¹ Recent developments of narrative work that focuses on community work is influenced by the methodology of Pablo Freire.² Blending these two approaches, cultural discourse includes those public conversations that are either explicit or implicit and contain values about people and places that take on a life of their own.

² David Denborough Collective Narrative Practice: Responding to Individuals, Groups and Communities Who Have Experienced Trauma. (Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2008).
These kind of public conversations generally focus upon some kind of understanding about a person or his or her representative group that becomes generally accepted as true or the norm. As these values and norms circulate in the culture, it gradually takes hold as the dominant understanding about a specific group or community. As individuals become socialized, they can very easily take on this cultural discourse as the norm. This would apply to both how individuals understand that they should act as well as how they think others should act.

In understanding how cultural discourses impact Appalachia, I will share a vignette that will illustrate the impact of cultural discourses upon life in Appalachia. Identify information has been changed to preserve confidentiality. I will then identify how those discourses create prescriptive narratives for people living in Appalachia. Finally, I will demonstrate how theological discourses can witness to the oppressive effects of dominant cultural discourses.

Conversations with Jennie: A Case Study

Jennie was a white woman of 24 years of age who was struggling with depression. She learned of my pastoral counseling services at a local church in eastern Kentucky through some friends whose friends were members at the church. Jennie herself described herself as depressed for longer than she could remember. As she talked, long stories of hopelessness flowed out.

Her facial expression was flat seemingly devoid of feeling. Jennie shared that she had been unemployed for almost a year and was living with her parents. At one point, she had enrolled in the local community college. But, her mother became ill and she needed to take care of her. The added stress complicated her study schedule and she dropped out of school.

During one counseling session, I began to gather information about Jennie's family—parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. She had a large extended family. We finally moved to her mother's brothers and sister. I asked Jennie what they "did for a living" in the vernacular. Jennie mumbled something that sounded like "they're on the state." I blithely assumed that she was referring to her relatives being state employees.
As we continued with our conversation, I soon realized that “on the state” referred to her relatives receiving welfare assistance not only for a short time but for several generations. We discussed the effects of welfare assistance on her and her family. As Jennie talked about her family, she described the situation of her uncle.

Jennie shared that her uncle had worked steadily for years until the coal mines had laid off workers. He was one of those workers. Her uncle looked for work in many places but jobs were scarce. The jobs he could find paid less than what he could receive on welfare assistance. So, as depression took hold of him, he quit looking for a job and received welfare assistance. The pattern has continued with his children.

As we talked further, Jennie shared that her immediate family as well as herself struggled with the image of Appalachia that unemployment produced. She talked about how the unemployment of the region produced pallor of hopelessness from which it was hard to escape. Jennie said that when she was in school and made good grades, it was easy to think of herself as a strong woman. Now, she felt further pushed down. Often when she approached employers, she was told that of the few jobs available that paid well, they would go to men who needed “to make a living for their family.”

Jennie and I then proceeded to talk about ways in job scarcity and hopelessness affected her. She said that after years of trying so hard to find a job and be valued as woman, she began to believe that she was indeed not worth of a job or value. With tears in her eyes, Jennie said that maybe she was only “fit” for taking orders at the local fast food drive through window. “A woman don’t count much for much in these parts,” she said.

We then talked about ways in which her story had a few glimmers of hope—ways in which she had stood up to the brooding depression that threatened to snatch life from her. Our conversations soon developed into thickening her experiences of overcoming the discouraging discourses around vocation, gender, and marital status. Jennie recounted a time when she was able to secure a minimum wage job. She did well at the job and received accolades from her boss. But, then the business collapsed due to lack of customers.
Through the remainder of our counseling sessions, Jennie and I visited her stories of perseverance and creativity. As time moved, Jennie began to edit her life stories including these instances of competence and hope. She then, one day, when her face reflected lightness in it, said to me, “I think I’m a different person. I don’t need to believe what everyone else believes about me.” From that point, we then began to explore ways in which her Sunday school class at church could support her and how she could have the courage to share those times of hopelessness.

Our session soon ended after this point. I do not know what happened to Jennie. I wish her a thicker story of her life that while including the discouraging parts also includes those flashes of light that give hope. I also think about the many Jennies in eastern Kentucky who are not able to share their story of hopelessness with someone. They think that the cultural discourse of a limited world for woman who already lives a limited world of Appalachia is the only message.

Some Appalachian Churches Reinforce Oppressive Cultural Discourses

The cultural discourses of the Jennies who live in Appalachia is a powerful oppressive story that many people embrace as their own stories. They either are isolated or helpless to stand against the message that mountain women are not worth much. It would seem that Jesus’ liberating message of worth for male and female would equip Appalachian churches to nurture and champion the Jennies in their flocks. Yet, sometimes that is not the case.

What then is the relationship between Appalachian churches and the cultural discourse that mountain women are not worth much? It is here I believe that one can see the interweaving of the cultural discourses that have little to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It seems that mountain churches often connect with “what the Bible says” while perhaps not taking a second look at how accepted norms about women block their spiritual growth.

A few years ago, I taught a cultural immersion in eastern Kentucky. As I traveled through the mountains, I saw a wealth of strength from women who sought new things for themselves in terms
of their vocation and family. A wellspring of political action is bubbling there—women who preach sustainability and fight against mountaintop removal. Yet, these same women told me that they are not able to talk about these kinds of things in their churches.

Admittedly, this story is not true everywhere. I do believe, however, that this reflects the tendency of dominant cultural discourses to exercise their oppressive power even in the pews of churches. At the same time, I do not believe that this crumbling under the power of cultural discourses is inevitable in our churches. Other options exist.

Theological Witness as Challenge to Oppressive Cultural Discourses

Theological witness can be a powerful challenger to the passive acceptance of cultural discourses from a secular society in the sacred stories of believers. Liberating messages of Jesus included looking at those marginalized people society had written off—the Samaritan woman, the Syrophoenician woman, the woman hemorrhaging. The discourse about these women said, “These people are not ‘fit’ for any kingdom, much less the kingdom of God.” Jesus’ response was to identify the spirit of hope within these women and elevate it to the point of transforming their identities and lives.

Some thickening of our theological stories can then, indeed, become a witness to oppressive cultural discourses in the lives of people—here specifically Appalachian women. Liberative theologies from feminists, African-Americans, and Latino-Latinas have been helpfully illustrated in working with clients from a pastoral counseling perspective.³ In this approach, broad narratives from the client’s life is placed in its context and strengths are developed that serve as a way for the client to choose different stories for life. The client is empowered to engage with the counselor in living out these different stories.

In a different yet allied approach, I am suggesting that theological discourses can be lifted up that has the potential to diffuse

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the oppression of cultural discourses through the ministry of not only a pastoral counselor but also the pastor and church member. Liberative theological understandings have at their foundation an understanding that God’s love can transform oppressive structures as well as offer hope to individuals and families who live in those contexts.

The Appalachian context is rife with destructive discourses around ‘laziness’, ‘uneducated’, and ‘male domination’. Jennie’s life was affected by all these discourses. While she had life experience with exceptions to these powerful discourses, Jennie’s community of family and faith did not initially encourage her experiences that countered the oppressive discourses. It was only through the pastoral counseling relationship in which we engaged that she received support and eventually saw that she could have a different relationship with laziness, lack of education, and male domination.

Theological beliefs in an Appalachian context can lift up the exceptions that Jesus made when dealing with marginalized women in his cultural. This can be illustrated by the theological discourse in Appalachian churches that the main purpose of Christian faith is to become more Christlike—to be like Jesus. An approach to looking at what culture tells mountain women to be can be likened to that phrase of years ago, “What would Jesus do?” as a call to re-examine the stories of the Samaritan woman, the Syrophoenician woman, and the woman hemorrhaging as challenges to stand up to discourses that preach defeat for the Appalachian woman. This discourse has the possibility of changing to a story of discipleship that puts away cultural roles as focal and offers spiritual roles of discipleship conformed to the image of Christ.

In this way, pastors and laity as well as pastoral counselors can engage in a theological witness to cultural discourses that may create oppressive narratives for Appalachian women in outside the counseling room. Bridging the gap between individual and community care of persons also offers the possibility of the church to engage actively in creating discourses in our culture that nurture rather than oppress.

Clearly, this possibility is not limited to Appalachia and the women who live there. But, the stark realities that live there should
help us to envision more clearly the possibilities that exist for us as Christians wherever we may live. The narrative of our lives are interwoven with the narratives of faith. And our everyday lives are also examples of our interdependence.

We Hoosiers in Indianapolis who turn off our lights at night can think of all the mountain tops in Appalachia that were removed to provide the coal for our electricity. The Jennies of Appalachia know all too well the impact. We are indeed connected. May our theology transform us so that we may challenge the oppressive structures in which we all participate.