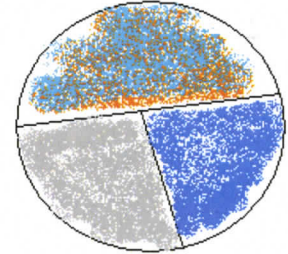
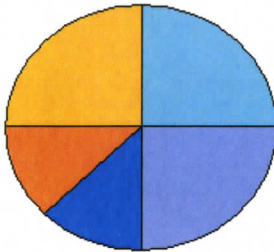


Qui Perd Sa Langue Perd Sa Foi Who Loses His/Her Language Loses His/Her Faith
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From a presentation to members of a course entitled "Education for Ministry" at St. John's Episcopal Church Bangor, Maine, October 2008



I am presenting you my spiritual autobiography by way of illustrating it in color segments in circles to show you overlays and differences in my awareness development over the years.

The first circle displayed of color identification comes from the middle 1970's when I was attending the University of Maine the first time, trying to obtain my doctorate in Canadian-American history at that time. I was in my early thirties when I was in a workshop with other women who were asked to draw a circle and place colors in that circle that could later be explained as identifying oneself. Because there were other Franco-Americans, other than myself, in that group, we were also asked to identify language issues by color also. Hence, I have recreated what I remember from that original exercise, and then, how this circle would appear to me today. I did not have full awareness in the 1970's and therefore did not recognize identity combination issues that I missed then, but now know.

What I had originally drawn in the first great circle of the 1970's was a quarter area in orange representing my Franco-American heritage, with a quarter circle in blue next to it, representing the Catholic Faith. This was followed by another quarter of the circle in lavender, symbolizing my newly-recognized lesbianism. The last quarter of the circle was divided in two, one section for my emotions, expressed in French, colored dark orange and thus related to the Franco-American area next to it, and finally a section colored in dark blue, representing my intellectual life, expressed in English. At that time, I felt as if I were divided in two, between my emotions expressed in one language and my intellectual life in another.

And now I will start this presentation with the French words that begin the presentation and are also translated there because they are crucial to my identity development, which integrated religion and culture. Those words were part of La Survivance (Survival) for Franco-Americans during a long period of their establishment and life in the United States.

I was born into a mixed Protestant (Baptist)-Catholic family. My father's family was the Protestant side, my mother's, the Catholic. However, both sides of the family were French-Canadian in origin. My widowed paternal grandmother, who spoke French fluently, had converted to the Baptist faith and took all her children, including my father, into this new faith. My father would later convert to Catholicism on his deathbed, when I was five years old. I myself was baptized in my mother's faith in a Catholic hospital when I was three days old in order to avoid as much bickering as possible between the two matriarchs of different faiths in

my family. And what was already accomplished, baptism in the Catholic faith, could not be undone. Therefore, Catholicism via the Franco-American culture was deeply imbedded in me since my early childhood, despite religious differences in my family make-up.

At the age of two weeks, my father placed me in a Franco-American foster home, run by Catholic Charities, with three unmarried sisters, retired from work in the textile industry. Those were the years of World War II, and my father, already too old for that particular war, had to find employment across the country. I remained with these foster mothers, the Jalbert sisters, until I was four years old, and even after I rejoined my family I visited with them on weekends. It is with them I learned all my Catholic prayers, the French language and all the songs and games of my culture. I was raised completely in French and did not know much English until about the age of seven when I made my First Communion in the Catholic Church.

In order to make one's First Communion in my community in Lowell, Ma., one had to know how to read French because one had to memorize sections of the Baltimore Catechism, translated in French. You were lined up against the wall with others in the class, facing a Sister who had a big ruler. You were asked a question, such as what was the Holy Trinity, and then you had to spout back, from memory, the answer in the catechism. If you said something incorrect from memory you were hit on the fingers with the big ruler the Sister was carrying. She had taught you your French letters in the same manner. In this way, I learned how to read French and memorize the Baltimore Catechism in French very fast. I therefore made my First Communion at the age of seven with everyone else and I saved my fingers for my future life.

I continued my education in the Little Canada of Lowell, Mass., where I was raised. Other than a few Greek-American families who had migrated to the Little Canada, perhaps because of inter-marriage with the French, all of Little Canada was both French and Catholic. From the possibility of your birth in a Franco-American Catholic hospital; to your education, up to and including your high school years in Franco-American schools, taught by Franco-American or French-Canadian nuns; to all your shopping needs; to social activities and social clubs; to French undertakers (and there were many in the community) for wakes; to burial services in the French-Catholic Church and then to final burial in a French-Catholic cemetery, all your needs were met in French in Little Canada. Going to other parts of Lowell that were not French, (at that time Lowell had four other French sections, not including Little Canada) was always an adventure in foreign travel. I suppose when I grew up in that Little Canada I thought the whole world was Franco-American.

I graduated from a French-Catholic high school for girls in my community and was torn between two vocational possibilities: going on to college, because by then learning had become a deep calling for me, or choosing the other vocational path, open to Franco-American girls who did not wish to marry, religious life. I chose to go into training to become a nun in the order that had educated me, hoping that they would also help educate me further if I proved to be of service to them. I didn't last very long in the training for convent life, perhaps as far as the later years of novice training, close to the taking of temporary vows. I was never much the obedient type, and besides other things were beginning to stir in me. What I remember the most from those years in the convent was that I loved to pray and those prayers have been left as a huge legacy in my life from that time.

From my trial period in the convent I went to college in Lowell, graduated with a combined history, education degree; then went to graduate school at the University of Virginia,

graduating with a Masters in International Relations; and from there to an attempted doctorate in Canadian-American history at the University of Maine. Still, my Catholicism came with me to Maine, though it had begun to change in Virginia. I had arrived somewhat Catholic in practice but hateful of my Franco-American culture. It took a few people here to turn my attitude around. One was my first academic advisor in the history department, a solid Yankee woman, but respectful of Francos in this state, to convince me, despite our many conflicts and disagreements, to use my French language and thereby get involved in studying the history of my own people. Only then, she believed, would I grow to love my people, and perhaps even myself as a branch of those people. I did finally do this. It also helped that I came in contact and joined with a fledgling organization of Franco-American students called F.A.R.O.G. (Franco-American Resource Organization Group) organized to give mutual support to students and even staff at the University. They were a continued source of support for me and also contact with other Franco-Americans statewide.

However, there was a price to pay for my concentration in my newly-discovered self-esteem in regard to my culture. Catholicism was shelved and I officially adopted agnosticism while at the University. Instead I concentrated in re-discovering myself as a feminist and a lesbian. This became my first real separation of Franco-Americanism from Catholicism. This period lasted a long time.

In 1979, I returned to Lowell with my doctoral exams passed but my dissertation incomplete. I did have a newly-arrived sense of lesbianism and feminism that I felt I needed to understand more fully. But, I did also get involved in a conflict of values when I returned to my hometown. I took a teaching job in a Catholic High School, with the nuns who had taught me, teaching mostly history and French. This might have been alright except that I was still an agnostic, and a feminist, and a lesbian. I remember saying prayers with the students using the feminine pronoun for God and being hauled into the principal's office to be accused of being an atheist. At least I could safely say I wasn't an atheist. I was only an agnostic after all, and so this phase with them passed. I remember those years as kind of rolling along in some kind of religious daze. But I enjoyed teaching, and mostly being with the Sisters again and perhaps their influence re-converted me later.

But late in my high school teaching career I felt something was terribly wrong. I was becoming depressed and irritable, with no sense of inner drive anymore. Luckily, I had been going out with a woman who introduced me to the ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics) Twelve-Step Program. After some initial difficulty, I took to the Program, began working very hard at my recovery from the behaviors inherited from the alcoholism of my family background, and most importantly, found God again through this most spiritual Program. I'm not sure I was in the Catholic frame of mind at the high school but I certainly believed in God and things ran much more smoothly in a religious way at the high school. Moreover, by this time I had befriended a Catholic priest at the high school who became my best buddy for awhile and thus influenced my spiritual growth. It's as if I had received a much-needed injection of spirituality in my life. To this day, I thank that Twelve-Step Program for my return to God.

At the end of my Catholic High School teaching days, I moved to New Hampshire and returned full-fledged to the Catholic faith I had abandoned many years before. But, I also simultaneously dropped my Twelve-Step Program, believing I was cured of all the alcoholic

behaviors stemming from my childhood home. I thought all I needed was the Catholic Church again and all would be well.

Things were not so well last year in New Hampshire. I finally realized I couldn't combine my lesbianism, or even my feminism, with the Catholic Church's teachings. I could combine my Franco-Americanism again but only in the conservative way of my childhood, something I could not do anymore. I was beginning to have that love-hate relationship with Catholicism I still have. And so I began looking for religious alternatives.

I started attending Episcopalian services in Concord. At first, those services seemed very similar to Catholicism, other than the use of the Book of Common Prayer, but I don't believe now that I ever felt that comfortable with the Faith itself. It always seemed a bit foreign, especially in regard to including many people of different ethnic backgrounds in that Faith. But I did take the training in the Faith and I truly desired to be received by Bishop Robinson, in order to show another gay person as much support as possible. However, I really don't believe now that I thought through this conversion very well at the time.

I arrived in Maine late last year to continue my degree, abandoned so many years before, to settle in a small Episcopalian parish, close to the University. My first pastor, no longer there, became a supporter, counselor and wise teacher. But she told me she had noticed I was constantly drawn back to Catholicism and feared I would return. Unfortunately, I am still in that never-never land of not knowing where I really belong religiously. I am still an Episcopalian, but one with doubts. However, my spirituality grows again by virtue of the Twelve-Step Program, which I rejoined when I returned to Maine last September. For this, I will remain incredibly grateful.

Finally, to finish this presentation, I would like to show another circle that could describe an understanding of myself and my identity much better than I did in the 1970's. In this new circle, almost half the circle, but not quite now, is colored a combination of orange, overlaid with blue, in a kind of a mesh, not in orange, representing Franco-Americanism, next to blue, representing Catholicism. They were never side-by-side, but rather enmeshed, as described. This is why it has been difficult for me to separate one from the other throughout my life. The other part of the circle is divided between lesbianism, again in lavender color, and now a new large section in gray which represents the alcoholic traits I have inherited from my family of origin and which I am still trying to overcome. It is fitting that this large section should be colored gray because in French, gris(e), in addition to translating the color gray, also means tipsy from drunkenness. But now I know that this new color circle makes much more sense in terms of my self-identification.

Irene Simoneau