

The Len Cederleaf Award

Blessing, *Mestizaje*, and *Fiesta*: A Theology of Supervision

Marcos Collado



My pastoral theology stands on the ground that God as Creator of original blessing is a paradigm of the essence of God and of God's intentions for human beings. The metaphors I associate with this paradigm are *mestizaje* and *fiesta* (feast). *Mestizaje* is the experience of God's creative power beckoning us to go beyond our divisive boundaries and embrace mixture and interrelatedness. *Mestizaje* values and engages hybridity, the both/and in our lives. *Fiesta* is the experience of community recognizing and celebrating what has already begun to germinate but is yet to be fulfilled. *Fiesta* is those experiences of togetherness that "enable us to survive, to come together, to rally, and to begin anew."¹ In the pages that follow, I will discuss my understanding of God as Creator of original blessing via the aforementioned metaphors and provide examples of how it helps me encounter and engage adult learners. The theological resources that I will draw on for this paper are diverse, but I primarily rely on Matthew Fox's exposition of original blessing and the emerging Hispanic/Latino/a theology.² I will also weave in parts of my own context and journey to help illuminate how these theological concepts became central pieces within my theology of spiritual care and supervision.

I would say I have been on a journey to remember and live into the reality that I am a beloved child of God. Like many of us, as I began to develop and learn from others—my family, caregivers, society—I started losing touch with the inherent blessedness³ with which I was created. Because both of my parents came from tumultuous homes, they went to great lengths to

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shelter their children from the reality of family indiscretions and dysfunctional relationships. To speak truth or question openly in my family of origin was likely to get me verbally reprimanded or shamed. Growing up in a family where the messiness of life was swept under the rug, I received the message that showing my true self could disqualify me from experiencing love and grace. In many ways, this message was confirmed by my Nazarene heritage,⁴ which taught me that I was born with a condition called “original sin” that required moralistic vigilance and diligence if I was to be “saved” from it. Thus, the starting point for being in relationship with myself and others, including God, became my brokenness. My early experiences, with their emphasis on sinfulness, left me a stranger to myself as well as others. I kept parts of myself hidden for fear of rejection, which eroded my ability to be authentic in relationships.

Living into the original blessing that I am has taken many years, many people, and many places. I no longer find the “original sin” paradigm of my youth to be satisfying, primarily due to experiences within various communities—seminary, CPE, and 12-step groups—where I felt my true self affirmed. These experiences, together with Fox’s language, helped crystallize for me that God creates in and for blessing. Original blessing is not about dispensing with the real brokenness that is present in the world; instead, it calls for a different starting point, one that invites us to remember and witness the “beauty, wisdom, and wonder of creation.”⁵ Upon professing that God’s creative energy originates in and for blessing, I am simultaneously holding that God is in perpetual and profound relationship with all of creation. Again, Fox sheds light on this by affirming that “blessing involves relationship: one does not bless without investing something of oneself into the receiver of one’s blessing.”⁶ Far from being distant and impassive, the Spirit of the Creator is relentlessly flowing in and through all forms of life, bestowing upon each one the power and responsibility to birth new and transformative action in the midst of a fragmented world.

Being fashioned as original blessing then signifies that human persons have been bestowed both with the gift of the divine creative energy and the responsibility to express it in ways that foster growth and wholeness. Viewing the world through the lens of original blessing does lay a claim on us to honor not just what the world can give us but also what we can give back to the world. The creative energy we are called to make manifest is essentially the power of making connections in the direction of healing by way of mutuality, compassion, and celebration.⁷ At the same time, our capacity

to shape and connect with the world is intrinsically related to our freedom. Grounded in my Disciples of Christ tradition, which encourages me to see with my own eyes, I believe we are partially self-determining and self-creating, generally capable of deciding how we understand and act upon ourselves and the world.⁸ This means the expression of the divine creativity in us and its potential to spring forth blessing and transformation is not a given; it stands in a dialectical relationship with our freedom. Freedom to create my own meaning from experience is a value I have come to cherish as I have moved away from the theology of my childhood, one that promoted either/or thinking and strict adherence to authority and tradition.

Informed by Hispanic/Latino/a theology, I believe being-for-others is fundamental to being created as original blessings.⁹ Since the beginning, the divine-human narrative is a story driven by relationship and interdependence. When the creation story in Genesis says, "It is not good that man should be alone" (2:18), I believe it speaks to our deep yearning for mutuality and companionship. We are born into and need to be in community. The self does not develop and is not sustained in a vacuum. Relationship is the matrix in which the self can flourish towards wholeness by experiencing a sense of belonging and connectedness. Though our awareness of it might fluctuate (we might even downright deny it), we have an essential need to feel "part of" a community that understands and accepts us as we are, with our beauty and flaws. We have a need to know and be known, to have the expressions from our deepest selves be received with abounding love. At their best, the various communities and relationships in our lives have the ability to preserve and nurture the original blessing within us, emboldening us to act in mighty and transformative ways in the world.

As I continue to expound my theology of pastoral supervision, I want to be cautious not to romanticize the concepts of creativity and community. Each of these bear within them strengths and limitations, a dialectical tension characterized by Fox as the process of befriending both the *via positiva* and *via negativa* of life.¹⁰ Pain and suffering are undeniable realities of our existence and need to be taken seriously if our divine creativity is to become truly transformative and not be reduced to mere optimism. In a paradigm where original blessing is interpreted as our propensity to be creative and in relationship, there is an ever-present possibility that we might misuse and/or abuse our power to create, individually as well as collectively. I find Fox's view of sin helpful here. He defines sin as our refusal to make connections with self, others, and God.¹¹ I believe this leads to separation and distortion,

which are both sources of suffering. When we stand at a distance from one another, we are more likely to operate out of assumptions and not see the other wholly. Sin stymies our ability to move beyond labels of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and the like. When we treat others, especially the vulnerable, or allow ourselves to be treated as an object—disregarding or distorting others' or our own original blessedness—sin is present.

Gary, a United Methodist student who viewed Scripture as unchanging and inerrant, could not bear to participate in a centering devotional that his Unitarian Universalist peer offered to the group. While she guided the group in a mindfulness exercise, Gary took out his Bible and read it silently. Later, during covenant group, his peer expressed her anger over his actions and wondered if Gary saw her as doing the work of the devil. In no uncertain terms, Gary responded that he considered her to be pagan, and as a result, he felt he needed to be cautious about what he was exposing himself to. This was hurtful to his peer. Her hurt carried over into the following week, resulting in her retaliating against Gary during covenant group. Gary, in his defense of his theological conviction, and the peer, in her anger and hurt, were unable to see one another in the fullness of who they were, God's original blessing. This distortion led to mutual objectification and, ultimately, to sin.

That humankind has been endowed with the power to create implies that most, if not all, creative activity pushes us to the edge of the familiar. Birthing new life involves loosening our grip on the "old way" of seeing and doing things, moving beyond what we know, and risking entering into a mystery that might transform us. This is what lies at the heart of the creative process of *mestizaje*.¹² The experience of *mestizaje* begins by acknowledging that persons have concurrent identities and a multiplicity of realities that need not be regarded as distinctions in opposition to each other. In my own life, this is reflected in my process of coming to terms with who I am as a Puerto Rican in diaspora, as I have experienced the uncertainty of living in two worlds while feeling at home in neither.¹³ As it translates to pastoral supervision, *mestizaje* helps me be sensitive and attuned to the disorientation that many students feel when they step into the "foreign" world of clinical pastoral education. Accordingly, when I ask students to make an initial visit, provide advance directive information, or attend their first trauma or death, I am keenly aware that they may experience their own *mestizaje* as they struggle to make meaning from pastoral encounters that are beyond the scope of their frames of reference. Learning, like *mestizaje*, requires an

openness to discovery as well as courage to move from what was or is to what might be. Part of the supervisory task is then to create a safe space in which students, supported by their supervisor and peer group, can productively engage the unsettling experience that often accompanies critically reflecting on and transforming embedded attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions. My hope is that as I help students become more aware of and able to live with the tension of *mestizaje* in themselves, they will become more comfortable and competent in caring for persons who are in the “inbetween” of life.¹⁴ *Mestizaje* calls for supervisor, students, and careseekers to learn to trust that which cannot yet be named.

An example of facilitating transformation through *mestizaje* is my work with Pete. He was a student seeking ordination in the Church of God, and he was passionate about Scripture and understood it as the ultimate source of authority. Seeing Scripture as a set of propositional truths, Pete’s outlook in life was predominantly either/or in nature. Being in CPE provided him with many experiences in which his dualistic mindset was challenged. This was especially true when Pete had the opportunity to be in relationship with a peer who was gay. Believing homosexuality to be a sin, Pete struggled to find appropriate ways of being hospitable to his peer. Significant conflict arose when Pete had a conversation (outside the group) with his peer and shared his disapproval and theological stance toward homosexuality. My approach to both Pete and the group was to encourage them to not run away from the tension but to engage it through active listening, openness, and empathy. The turning point in the unit occurred when Pete, after having watched the movie *42*, shared with the peer group his increasing awareness of his own biases and prejudices and stated that he wanted to ultimately be on the side of love.¹⁵ By the end of the unit, Pete’s theology on homosexuality had not changed, but his willingness to enter *mestizaje* put him on the path of discovering what it truly means to “love your neighbor as yourself.” From that point forward, his pastoral visits reflected a greater sense of empathy toward people who were different from him.

Grounded in the “mixed” experience of Hispanic/Latino/a people, *mestizaje* reality is “inherently inclusive and breaks away from dualistic exclusionary notions.”¹⁶ It reveals that God’s creative energy, with which we are imbued, refuses easy dichotomies. I see this both/and reality uniquely, although not exclusively, in the person of Jesus as the transformation of the divine-human paradox. That the “Word became flesh” indicates that Jesus embodied a kind of *mestizaje*, manifesting unity within distinct identities.

Viewed through the lens of *mestizaje*, the incarnation means that being hospitable to that which cannot be named with precision is an important undertaking of theology. This is especially important in the context of CPE, where students are challenged to be increasingly open to themselves and another's way of being. For students whose frame of reference is steeped in dualism—right/wrong, good/bad, spiritual/profane—*mestizaje* is a call to move beyond their assumptions in order to see the blessing in the stranger. Likewise, when students discover parts of themselves they did not know before, such as their feeling world or their woundedness, they might be tempted to label these as “not me” because they threaten their current self-understanding. As a supervisor, I seek to acknowledge and normalize the anxiety of holding contrasting experiences. I also encourage students to remain open and curious to differences in themselves and others and also to notice how these can be a source for connection, healing, and growth.

Because *mestizaje* can be an unsettling yet holy process, it is best supported in the context of mutual relationship. *Fiesta* is the experience of a sustaining community. Within Hispanic/Latino/a theology, *fiesta* is not just a party. What is important “is not the merriment, but the activities' character as commemoration, or celebration.”¹⁷ *Fiesta* consciousness reminds us that life, which originated in blessing, should be received and responded to as a gift of absolute value.¹⁸ That all of life is celebrated implies that each of our stories, with our experiences of the Sacred, ourselves, relationships, and the world, ought to be valued and honored. As it translates to CPE, *fiesta* promotes a kind of leveling of power that allows for the development of mutually empathic relationships.¹⁹ *Fiesta* challenges students to approach relationships from a power-with standpoint. When I see students override, change, or distort another's story, my task is then to invite them to be curious and listen deeply to the original blessing each brings to the relationship. This is a model of supervision and spiritual care in which growth takes place as a partnership.

In light of my Disciples tradition, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is an important source for my supervisory theory and practice. Among the various metaphors Jesus used to describe the realm of God, I find the image of the host of the Great *Fiesta* (Luke 14:15) congruent to how I understand my role as pastoral supervisor. I invite students to bring their whole selves to the table—their strengths as well as their limitations—to taste and see the goodness of having their story and identity affirmed and understood. In *fiesta*, the group becomes the community that can hold both the successes

and the failures of the students. Such an experience can instill hope in students that change and better outcomes are possible.

Obviously, *fiesta* is not devoid of conflict. Fears of being vulnerable, rejected, misunderstood, or judged can inhibit students from participating fully in *fiesta*. My supervisory task is then to model support and challenge for the group to help students make an honest assessment of themselves to determine how their beliefs and behaviors help or hinder meaningful relationships. I seek to invite students to speak from their souls while also calling attention to the times we enact or fail to enact original blessing for one another. Thus, I convey to students that our particular experiences of God and the world need not drown out those of others. I invite them to imagine and experiment with new ways of being by actively participating in the process of reflective discourse—affirming and confronting, giving and taking, sharing and appropriating.

Mestizaje and *fiesta* were a part of my supervision of Kevin. He was a Euro-American man raised in the Episcopal Church who was later “adopted” into the family of a Native American religious elder of the Plains Cree. Early in the unit, he felt challenged to live openly out of both traditions (*mestizaje*). He felt significant apprehension about how his Cree identity would be received by his patients and peers. During a covenant group seminar, he was challenged by a peer to be more forthcoming with his wisdom. I invited Kevin to share how he felt about the challenge, and he voiced his sadness due to being the only member of the group who had not attended seminary. That his Cree tradition was not “officially” recognized was painful for him. I then prompted Kevin to explore his emotional response with his peers. Kevin was surprised by how attentive and supportive the group was to his hurt. More importantly, he realized that his Cree identity was wanted and welcomed in the group (*fiesta*). This helped Kevin to extend similar hospitality in his spiritual care to persons who were trying to lay claim to their experience of self, other, and God.²⁰

As I reflect on spiritual care and supervision, *fiesta* is powerful for creating relationship because it welcomes difference. *Fiesta* calls me to fully acknowledge and affirm the mixture and diversity of experiences that my students bring to the process. It reminds me that because God has a penchant for both/and thinking, I am to resist the temptation to reduce relationships with students to either/or, good/bad thinking. I have found this has allowed me to become more comfortable with mystery in the supervisory relationship. Personally, this gives me the freedom to be more gracious with

myself when I do not seem to have the “right” answers. Relationally, it conveys to students that the original blessing in me should not override their divine creativity, that although I can shape their experience, I am not called to control it.

Pastoral supervision is about the interplay of *fiesta* and *mestizaje*. It is a blending of the already and the not yet. In my own Disciples tradition, this is embodied decisively in the sacrament of the “breaking of the bread,” a symbol of God’s ultimate act of creativity.²¹ This is the transformation of food within and food without, the divine and human, suffering and hope, into the experience of abundant life. Through my supervision I hope to create the conditions where students can learn that their stories, as broken and beautiful as they may be, can be transformed and become a source of healing and connection. In this sense, my supervision is an expression of “life in the subjunctive mood,” meaning the mood of potentiality and imagination.²² I seek to foster the spirit of *fiesta* and *mestizaje* when I invite students to re-member and re-claim their original blessing as a means of providing more competent spiritual care. CPE can be such an experience where students and supervisor alike can become fully alive amidst the struggle of creating a new thing.

NOTES

- 1 Virgilio Elizondo, “Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection,” in *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from the Latino Perspective*, ed. Arturo J. Bañuelas (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 25.
 2. Within Hispanic/Latino/a theology, there is the ethos that theology should be done jointly and collaboratively. In fact, a significant portion of its texts exists as anthologies, thus reflecting the primacy of communal discourse within any theological endeavor. Accordingly, my theological position on supervision does not draw on a single author within this tradition but is buoyed by a diversity of theologians.
 3. From here out, I will use the words “blessedness,” “blessing,” and “goodness” interchangeably.
 4. From my Nazarene upbringing, I also learned to engage the world through a dualistic lens. My either/or thinking left no room for the ambiguity and mystery of life. This frame of reference would later help feed the shame and guilt I experienced in recovering from addictive behaviors.
- tuality Presented in Four Paths, Twenty-Six Themes, and Two Questions* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2000), 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 44.
 7. *Ibid.*, 234.

8. The right to private interpretation of Scripture, experience, and tradition is fundamental within my Disciples of Christ heritage. Of course, this presents challenges in that it inevitably leads to divergent perspectives on various issues. Seeking unity in the diversity of voices is an unfolding process for Disciples. This parallels the dialectical process within a CPE community and fits well with transformational learning theory's call for reflective discourse.
9. Justo Gonzalez, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 131–34
10. Matthew Fox explains the significance of honoring both the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* in order to create something new: "In letting both pleasure and pain happen, both light and darkness, both naming and unnaming, both cosmos and void, we allow a third thing to be born: and that third thing is the very power of birth itself." This power of birthing or creating anew is at the heart of Fox's *via creativa* and my understanding of original blessing. Fox, *Original Blessing*, 175.
11. *Ibid.*, 234
12. *Mestizaje* began as a way of naming the "mixed" reality of Hispanic/Latino men and women. Our history is one characterized by conquest and colonization, resulting in the blending of distinct worlds, that of the Spaniard, Amerindian, and African in the Americas. *Mestizaje* is a radical form of otherness that beckons one to live in the border of cultures. *Mestizaje* has come to represent the painful, complex, and creative process in which Hispanic/Latino/a persons name themselves in the face of the dominant, often exclusionary, culture. I believe both pastoral supervision and spiritual care call for the kind of self-authoring and self-direction promoted by *mestizaje*. For a thorough exposition of this fundamental concept, see Bañuelas, *Mestizo Christianity*
13. I am a Puerto Rican who was born and raised the first nine years of my life *en la isla* (on the island), and I have now lived over twenty years in the United States. When I reflect on my experience, I am aware that I have assimilated to the dominant North American culture to such a degree that I am now too Americanized for the Puerto Ricans on the island. At the same time, I find that am too Puerto Rican for the dominant culture I find myself in today. The question I had to wrestle with was, "Who am I?" Am I Puerto Rican, American, or Puerto Rican American? These concurrent identities have required that I create a third "new" thing that captures my hybrid experience. This has been my *mestizaje*.
14. The parallel here is that students will be caring for persons who are also experiencing their own *mestizaje*. A patient recently diagnosed with cancer must now reassess who he is and what his life will look like from then on. A mother's prayer goes "unanswered" when her only child dies, and she struggles to create a new understanding and relationship to God.
15. This film chronicles the story of Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play professional baseball in the United States. Pete and I engaged in the process of *mestizaje* by exploring in individual supervision his feelings and sense of meaning regarding distinct experiences: (1) commitment to his convictions, especially his biblical interpretation of homosexuality, (2) acknowledging and understanding the hurt his peer felt, and (3) awareness of his own prejudices and biases.
16. Nestor Medina, *Mestizaje: (Re) Mapping Race, Culture, and Faith in Latina/o Catholicism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2009), 41.

17. Roberto Goizueta, "Fiesta: Life in the Subjunctive," in *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espin and Miguel H. Diaz (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 90
18. *Fiesta* means that life is no longer viewed as an object to be controlled but as the Greater Reality to be honored. "For [Goizueta], celebrating *fiesta* is acting subversively, counterculturally, in defiance of the reigning ideology that life is about controlling and producing." Goizueta, "Fiesta: Life in the Subjunctive."
19. Suggesting that *fiesta* levels power differentials does not mean that I am either blind or seek to abdicate the power I have as the supervisor. Obviously there are situations that call for a power-over approach. For example, I set the parameters for the formulation of learning goals, ensure students are in compliance with hospital and departmental policies, and write a final evaluation at the end. *Fiesta* reminds me to hold my power loosely, to use it in ways that strengthen and empower the lives of my students.
20. On one occasion, he found himself caring for two nurses with very different views on faith. His care upheld the sacredness and dignity of each of the nurses in the face of possible conflict
21. I chose "breaking of the bread" because it keeps at the forefront the idea that our brokenness can be a source of power and transformation when it is shared. The "real presence" of Christ in the "breaking of the bread" has been a point of debate among Protestant traditions. I understand "real presence" as the actual experience of love, grace, and forgiveness. I find this concept of "real presence" helpful as I seek to encourage my students to have greater awareness of what they are sensing and feeling in the here-and-now of pastoral encounters and peer group interactions. The here-and-now is important in my use of Yalom's group theory.
22. Goizueta, "Fiesta: Life in the Subjunctive," 93.