Countercultural Remorse: The Importance of Attending to Grief in Transforming Our Embedded Beliefs

Julie Hanada

When I think about my role as an educator, it is not to change my students' minds, politics, beliefs, or relationship with their religion. Rather, it is to help them to open their ears, their minds, and their hearts so they can listen cleaner and longer and deeper to others' experiences and engage in difficult or painful conversations. In my own experience, this developed when I was aware of my own story and learned to attend to my own discomforts, anxieties, and emotions that arose from remembering and challenging memories, learnings, and beliefs. This paper was written to support those of us who teach and/or engage in supporting and caring for other's spirits as they, and we, navigate this process within a compassionate framework.

My Cultural Experiences

As a third-generation Japanese American, cisgender woman, and Buddhist priest,[1] my life has been a constant practice of dropping and embracing new and old traditions.

Julie Hanada is an ACPE certified educator who has worked on the West Coast. She semi-retired in 2019 and has since been doing contract supervision.
Email: hanadajulie@gmail.com

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I grew up with a significant amount of fear and anxiety in my life, family, and community. Of course, we would not have named it that, but fear, distrust, and separation were the underlying feelings that guided accepted norms and behaviors. I grew up with my extended family, my father's business, the Japanese business community, and our temple all within a five-mile radius of our home. My extended family was close, with the lessons of my grandparents, great-aunties', and great-uncles' voices at times more prominent in my ears than even my parents.' What I learned about being a Japanese American was connected to their identity, understanding, and experiences, which had developed in their village-oriented community.[2] After their move to the United States, they were unjustly incarcerated during World War II because of their national heritage.[3] It is common for immigrants to hold pride in their cultural heritage while seeking success and desiring to fit into their new homeland. The incarceration trauma that Japanese and Japanese Americans endured amplified their need for safety and protection, which they found within the Japanese American community, and so "fitting in" to the larger American society was complicated and confusing at best.

I am a first-generation college graduate and the first in my family to work in a large corporate environment.[4] I have been in leadership positions in male-dominated corporate and religious organizations. At times, nobody is more surprised than I am at my career and educational successes.

As I moved into less homogeneous cultural and religious environments, I needed to learn to develop, connect, and grow into relationships with others whose looks and beliefs were different than what I had grown up with. In every phase of my life I have needed to find balance in how I embrace, incorporate, and sometimes move past the cultural norms of my familial, cultural, societal, and religious heritage. In working with my students, whether they are intending to go into religious communities as ministers or serve as spiritual care providers in healthcare environments, I have learned that we all seek community and individualization—we all want to have a sense of belonging and independence. Our evolution into professional and skilled care providers takes place when we move from unconscious to conscious choices about our beliefs, attitudes, values, and assumptions and find and maintain a balance of community and individualization in our own lives.

It was in CPE that I was challenged to take a closer look and deepen my understanding of my cultural and religious foundations, not because they were right or wrong but because they were subconsciously guiding and directing me, causing me to react rather than respond to situations and circumstances. This limited and restricted my options and growth in the new environment I had entered. I began to consciously look at what was engrained in me, investigate the source of those beliefs, and question whether they continued to be true for me.

Two overlapping areas that I became quickly aware of were my tendencies to comply and conform. Japan, as an island, is isolated, and the Japanese have a strong sense of geographic limitations. As such, community and harmony are strongly valued and thus are maintained through compliance and conformity. Both compliance and conformity are necessary to maintain order, albeit, an order characterized by acquiescence and thus harmony in a community-oriented culture. However, most beliefs and values have costs as well as benefits. In Japanese and Japanese American culture, individual thinking is often discouraged. For example, in Japanese we say, "The nail that sticks up gets pounded down." This is a poetic way of illustrating what can happen when someone from a culture that highly values conformity speaks out. The lesson learned is that your opinions do not matter and you will get hurt. In American culture writ large, where individualism is encouraged, conformity is not seen as a virtuous quality. In the CPE culture, it is seen in students as hiddenness, not knowing one's self, or, worse still, having an issue with learning.[5]

I also investigated my culture's emphasis on compliance. A term frequently heard is *shigattaganai,* meaning "It cannot be helped." This term honors the Asian pragmatic approach when encountering the reality of situations, even if painful or harsh. If typhoons came and wiped out the crops, farmers might figure out how to protect themselves better in the future, but they could also be heard saying *shigattaganai*—it can't be helped. Basically, you cannot fix the past or control the future. Perhaps this is similar to the British World War II slogan, "Keep calm and carry on." Unfortunately, sometimes values in one era or context do not translate well into another era or context. When World War II broke out and the Japanese were being incarcerated, *shigattaganai* would often be heard on the lips of those being unjustly imprisoned. Some Japanese and Japanese Americans used this part of their culture as a way to justify acceptance of a dangerous situation over

which they had no control. Those who spoke out against the government's incarceration were labeled "disloyal."[6]

My own understanding of *shiggattaganai* needed to be developed, deepened, and challenged. I struggled to learn to be my own self-advocate. Advocating for others was an even more complex learning process because it meant standing up for others as well as myself. In the beginning of my CPE experiences, I only knew I felt tension and fear when speaking up for myself and/or others. I began to make the connections with compliance and conformity. I learned to identify these core beliefs and values and had to figure out when to hold onto those values and when to challenge them. This is when I needed to step beyond the familial and cultural orientations that have been a part of my embedded understanding of myself. Initially, this felt like I was leaving and abandoning my cultures and communities.

CounterCultural Remorse

As I learned and grew in settings outside of my culture of origin, particularly in CPE, I experienced a particular feeling that came up when I would begin to challenge the beliefs of my communities and step outside those protective circles. I gave it the name *countercultural remorse.* To understand what I mean by countercultural remorse, I need to begin with the basis of my understanding of myself in relationship with my communities, the basis of my cultural identities.

Although I was born and raised in the United States, my cultural heritage and sense of identity was grounded in Asian communal cultures. This meant my identity was not my own but part of a community. In Buddhism, community is so important that it is one of Buddhism's Three Jewels.[7] The term for this is *Sangha*, a Sanskrit word meaning a religious or political community, assembly, and/or company. So important is community in Buddhism that each of the recorded Buddha's lessons begins with who was present and/or in attendance.

In a community-focused culture, our humanity is expressed in our relationships with others. The Japanese language teaches meaning with the use of pictorial Chinese characters. For example, the character for "person" (人) is made with two sticks leaning on each other. This signifies that a person does not stand alone. The character for "human being" is a combination of two characters (人間): the character for "person" and the character for

"space between." What makes us human, or what is human about persons, is the *space between* or the relations created between persons. In a similar sense, a colleague of mine uses the term *ubuntu*, the Nguni Bantu term for humanity, which is often translated "I am because we are."

Yet, we don't just belong to one community; we belong to a wide range of communities simultaneously. I have referred to my religious and ethnic communities. I also belong to work communities and several professional as well as social communities, within which I have varying levels of participation. I also belong to a variety of societal communities that are broader based and in which I may not be an active participant. Regardless, my participation with these communities is a vital part of my sense of self. For me, I relate to these groups because they support my sense of identity related to my sexual orientation, semiretired life stage, political views, beliefs, and affiliations, and generational identity. As a minister, I have officiated funerals where the deceased's bowling, AA, and mall-walking communities were well represented.

When I refer to *countercultural* I mean the process of pushing against the ongoing conforming and complying behavioral requirements of one's group. For example, when I decided to leave temple ministry[8] and move into the multifaith healthcare environment, I knew I was challenging the accepted norms of ministry held by my religious community in this country. I was scared I might be ostracized. As one of three women priests in our ministerial association of nearly one hundred priests at that time, I had already experienced a significant amount of discriminatory "isms" and, at times, harassment, in my twelve years in the association.[9] A small number of colleagues were excited for me and even envious. However, the bulk of the ministers turned their back on me or criticized my decision. Some leaders privately admitted that they could not support me. They feared that to do so might lead to others following my lead. While I hoped I could offer what I was learning in CPE to the ministerial association as an asset, I was shamed for "leaving." My wounds from losing this community have been deep. I frequently doubted, questioned, and even strongly considered returning to temple ministry. I name those moments as remorse.

Remorse is the emotion experienced when a person has a sense of regret, shame, guilt, and/or self-directed resentment due to their action or failure to act. It is not easy or simple to hold such negative emotions. Indeed, it is painful. To find relief from such hard emotions, one apologizes, cre-

ates self-imposed punishments, or backtracks on one's behavior in attempts to repair or minimize what one did. At times, it is necessary to physically distance oneself from one's community. I had all of these emotions and experiences while I grieved the loss of my community. When I was assigned to work with addiction patients, they shared the loneliness and isolation of no longer belonging to their drinking crowd. They knew they would not be able to maintain their sobriety if they rejoined their friends because they would feel pressured to "have just one drink." Because of my own story of remorse and pain within my cultural and spiritual context, I resonated with their loss.

Grief and Compassion

My fears of losing my community came true. For a long time, my remorse was persistently present to me, and, to this day, my grief continues. I lost a significant community in my life as well as a part of my identity as a priest. In addition, there are additional loses that my heart still yearns for: my dreams and joys of serving a temple; working in and caring for temple's beautiful sacred space where rituals were conducted; developing long-term intimate relationships by walking with families during rites of passages; and fostering the religious and spiritual experiences of people of all ages. All this is gone.

And yet, I knew that shifting from temple ministry to a multireligious medical and educational environment was the right decision for me. I was tired of dealing with the "isms" directed at me and repeatedly being the "nail that gets pounded down." I was angered by the discriminatory and petty behaviors I witnessed. I felt oppressed in communities that worked hard to make decisions to preserve their homogeneous ethnic culture rather than using their energy to focus on a life-giving religious foundation. I am much more discerning now about saying *shigattaganai* and thinking that things "cannot be helped." Grief is complex, and the feelings of relief can complicate or cause confusion.

Within the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, I was the third Buddhist to be granted supervisor certification status.[10] I was uncertain as to how I might fit in with this new association even though I found this ministry and community stimulating, challenging, and affirming. It took some time to find a way to balance the conflicting feelings of joy and excite-

ment with the remorse feelings. Besides grieving what was lost and being relieved by what I was leaving behind, I started to focus on what was important and valuable to me that I was retaining: a strong academic foundation in the Buddha's and Shinran's teachings; a love of Buddhist and Asian aesthetics; a passion for going on Buddhist pilgrimages; and a commitment to the temple community from my college years and close friendships. I continue to nurture the pieces that I have retained—they sustain and enrich my life daily. I also realized that shame was a major part of my remorse feelings. So, I explored how my shame comes from my cultural heritage and my Buddhist dharmalogical foundation.[11]

Asian Cultural and Dharmalogical Foundation

Every culture seems to define shame as a negative emotion that combines feelings of regret, embarrassment, dishonor, and unworthiness. At the same time, there are distinct differences between the usage of shame in Asian and Euro-Judeo-Christian cultures. The Asian cultural understanding of shame is based on Confucian teachings. In order for harmony to exist in a defined society, one must conform to the expectations and opinions of others. Thus, besides the emotional experience of shame that comes up with an event, there is an additional cultural and societal understanding of shame. This is that shame is an expected way of being, a state of mind that ensures safety and stability in the society. In contrast, shame seems to have an inference of scandal in Euro-Judeo-Christian cultures. As a Japanese American, I had incorporated both aspects of shame—the Confucian-influenced ongoing state of mind and the Euro-Judeo-Christian sense of scandal.

In the CPE process, I learned to integrate Buddhist teachings into my movement toward a stronger sense of self-worth and self-acceptance in new ways. In looking deeper into shame, I realized there are two types of shame that Buddhism addresses. The first is the transitory one connected to the emotional experience of shame. The second is more personal and is connected with my own sect's founder, Shinran.[12] Shinran's reference to shame was not about how others in society viewed his ability to meet their expectations but rather his experience of how honest he was being with himself about entrusting to the truth reality he understood as Amida Buddha.[13] Shinran's experience of shame was, like the Confucian influence, an ongoing, ever-present experience of being mindful of the Buddha's benevolence. It was a

spiritual experience of seeing and accepting his regrets, embarrassments, and unworthiness simultaneously with feeling gratitude and joy at the realization of being embraced by Amida Buddha.

Both of these types of shame now guide me in my religious practices and spiritual life. In working with the transitory nature of shame, I utilize the skills developed in meditation. I experience the emotion, breathe it in, observe it objectively, and allow it to inform me of behaviors that need modification, and then I let it pass on. Working with the spiritual experience of shame, I examine my ego nature and cultivate compassion toward myself, knowing that the infinite wisdom and boundless compassion of the Buddha embraces me. I am accepted and loved just as I am.

Working With A Student

A student with whom I worked had been addressing her need to strengthen her pastoral authority. She was grounded in a faith tradition that does not ordain women and limits them in ministry leadership positions. She voiced her sadness and anger about the challenges she faced in getting endorsed in the future for a career to serve in military chaplaincy. She was aware she had learned to acquiesce to and appease authorities, especially male authorities. She chose setting boundaries and standing her ground as learning goals for her CPE learning. At one time, she needed to set boundaries with the department director regarding her schedule during a medical leave, which she did in a dialogical and professional manner. Yet, instead of feeling accomplished and pleased with herself, she contacted me because she doubted her actions, questioned her behavior, and basically second-guessed herself. Because I had presented material on shame and remorse to the group just a few weeks earlier, she identified her feeling as "countercultural remorse" but was not sure what to do next. In our conversation, she said she felt clear in the moment that in setting a boundary she felt she was honoring her medical needs without compromising her responsibilities to the department. She liked and respected the department director but felt she had to push back and set a clear boundary on what she was not willing to do in terms of the schedule. She felt confused by the competing feelings of satisfaction with setting a boundary with an authority and fear due to pushing her own boundaries. My role was to support her as she acknowl-

edged these competing feelings and to hold space with her as she named this as countercultural remorse.

We talked about the process for someone engaging in new behaviors not supported by their cultural tradition (in this student's case, boundary-setting and standing up to authority). Because remorse could be a natural reaction to this new behavior, not having a plan would result in maintaining those feelings of remorse, guilt, and shame. It was no wonder she second-guessed her actions and wanted to resort back to complying and conforming behaviors. We developed a plan to address remorse when it arises.

I told the student that I thought she had set an appropriate and reasonable boundary with an authority and had done so with respect and professionalism. I then encouraged her to consider what would support her to maintain her feeling of satisfaction that she had advocated for herself. Her initial response was that I had named her growth and accomplishment. She said she felt relieved I had affirmed her actions. I realized my response had not empowered her.

I wanted more for her and said so. I told her I wanted her to be able to move beyond her countercultural remorse without my, or anyone else's, affirmation. Since she was now able to identify her countercultural remorse and was aware that it was competing with her sense of satisfaction, we turned our focus to self-soothing practices that would support her in staying with the positive emotions since those were the ones that were moving her forward toward her goals.

The student talked about her relationship with Jesus and identified self-affirming mantras, Scripture, and breathing practices. As she practiced these with me, she started to identify feelings of remorse she had whenever she attempted to move beyond others' expectations of her. She named her griefs, sadness, and anger about the patriarchy and restrictions on women in her faith tradition. She said she would continue to integrate these self-soothing practices more into her ministry since she wanted to both continue to stay committed to her faith tradition and not be limited by it. This would be essential if she was to continue to evolve and transform into the minister she sought to become.

A key point in this student's learning or process was her acknowledging her griefs without striving for an *either/or* mindset of choosing between her faith and her expanded authority. What was important was a *both/and* balance of committing to the competing feelings so that she stayed connect-

ed to her community and her faith while grieving her losses and, simultaneously, not being limited by her grief. She realized that staying in her patriarchal faith tradition would require her, at times, to differentiate, to be out of step with those in her faith community, and would open her up to criticism. At those times, countercultural remorse might rear its persistent head. But the student came to believe she would not regress but would be able to practice self-compassion and move deeper into her faith.

The Summer of 2020

This piece was written in the autumn of 2020, after the heat of summer with the protests calling for our society to change. It was agonizing to see the senseless deaths of so many Black lives. Equally, it is infuriating to observe the resistance of so many to acknowledging the systemic racism that is embedded in this country and is the root of continued oppression and injustice for so many. I kept asking why it is that people turn away when they see and hear of senseless violence against others. How are they not changed? Can they not see that their very behavior validates and defines systemic racist actions?

I believe a few things. We are born loving one another. We learn greed, hatred, and how to ignore.[14] Peace begins with me.[15] We can all change.[16]

I understand that fear of others, like attitudes, values, and assumptions, in large part comes from the embedded thoughts, beliefs, and teachings of our elders, ancestors, and society. If we are to expand our perspectives, understanding, hearts, and relationships with others, we need to be able to examine our embedded attitudes, values, and assumptions, to challenge what we have learned, and to find resources to support ourselves through this transformation. Undoubtedly, some remorse, shame, and grief will arise. Attending to these feelings, caring for them compassionately, helps us honor where we have come from and where we can go.

NOTES

1 My ordination is conferred by the Jodo Shinshu tradition, headquartered in Kyoto, Japan.

2 Life in Japan for many first-generation immigrants in the early 1900s was based on small, village-oriented communities before their migration to the United States. Upon arrival in the United States, they, like most immigrants, established close religious, business, and social communities.

3 My grandparents were Japanese nationals, but my parents, their siblings, and all their cousins were American-born citizens when they were incarcerated.

4 My father had his own small business. My older siblings and I had our first jobs in family-owned businesses in the Japanese American community. After I graduated with my BA, I worked as a marketing representative for Mobil Oil.

5 Educators need to exercise caution to avoid identifying a cultural norm as a learning issue.

6 During World War II, all adults of Japanese ancestry were required to fill out a "loyalty questionnaire." "No" responses to two specific questions labeled the person "disloyal." That distinction and others divided the community between the loyal and the disloyal. "No-No Boys," *Densho Encyclopedia*, http://encyclopedia.densho.org/No-no_boys/. http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Loyalty_questionnaire/.

7 The Three Jewels are the Buddha—Enlightenment itself or, for some Buddhist denominations, it is the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni; Dharma—the teachings of the historical Buddha as well as the teachings of lineage teachers; and Sangha—the community or assembly.

8 Temple ministry in our national association was primarily within a homogeneous community of Japanese Americans and narrowly within the Jodo Shinshu tradition.

9 These "isms" ranged from genderism, ageism, sexism, and classism to nationalism. As a Japanese American, one is not seen as Japanese in Japan and often is not seen as American in America.

10 Supervisor was the term the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education used at that time for certified educators.

11 I use the term dharmalogical in the same way that others may use the word theological, as Dharma refers to the Sanskrit word for the teachings of the historical teacher, Shakyamuni, and the lineage teachers.

12 Shinran Shonin (1173–1282) was the founder of the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist sect, the tradition in which I am affiliated and ordained.

13 In the Buddhist Pure Land lineage, Amida Buddha is not the historical buddha Shakyamuni but the Buddha of infinite light and immeasurable life, the dynamic aspect of infinite wisdom and boundless compassion. Shinran experienced Amida Buddha as the truth-reality of this wisdom and compassion directed toward him and embracing him.

14 This is based on the Buddhist principles of the Three Poisons.

15 After the tragedy of 9/11, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama's commented to Americans, "Ultimately the answer to whether we can create a more peaceful world lies in our motivation and in the kind of emotions and attitudes we foster in ourselves." "Relevant Comments by HH the Dalai Lama Subsequent to the Sept. 11, 2001 Terrorist Attack on the US," His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, https://www.dalailama.com/messages/world-peace/9-11.

16 This is based on the Buddhist principle of the three marks of existence: impermanence, dis-ease, and the emptiness or absence of self-nature.