

When I was in college I took a class on postcolonial historiography. Now historiography, as I understand it, is basically the history of the study of history. And Lyn is probably more than a little freaked out right now because she told me no more than 5 minutes and I just brought up the history of history. Which is kind of the way I felt when I learned that I had to take this class. The skeptic in me was thinking, "Ok, in about 20 years they'll add another layer to the onion and people will be studying the history of historiography..."

But I ended up actually being fascinated by the main point of the class, which was that "learned people's" understanding of basically everything has undergone a radical shift, from this "modernist" belief that western culture was the right model that would only keep improving until it reached perfection, to this "postmodern" approach that embraced a cacophony of different voices and perspectives all existing at the same time. There was the story told by the British colonialist, but then there was also the story told by the Hindu man living in colonized India. Then if you really wanted to break it down further there was the story told by the Hindu woman living in colonized India who was of course sub-colonized by her gender, and the story told by the Hindu woman living in the part of colonized "India" that would later become Pakistan who was colonized by the fact that she belonged to a religious minority... And so forth until you reach the point where anything that I have to say can only be really understood by and is only relevant to other 27-year-old single mothers from UU backgrounds with divorced parents who wear glasses. Which rules out pretty much everyone here.. but thanks for listening anyways!

But something about this class and this idea really spoke to me because it helped me to understand the environment in which I grew up a little bit better. And I do actually think that anyone who grew up as a UU might especially relate to this, because my church school experience contributed to my belief from a young age that there was no such thing as a truth or a common perspective or a universal experience. I have always lived in a postmodern world full of voices, where you need to look at every issue from every side, until you don't know which way is up or down anymore. And I think, from my conversations with other people my age, that many members of my generation feel similarly. We don't really believe in simple answers and our worlds are filled with shades of gray.

This is all well and good, and leaves many of us very sensitive to the complexities of life- but it can also be really isolating, and makes the idea of commitment or conviction difficult. In a planet that many of us see as full of problems, we don't know when or where or how to act, or even how to be. I experience this uncertainty personally all the time, but it was most obvious to me when I was living and working in Africa. The difficulty of trying to do anything positive in an environment that I didn't belong to and could never fully understand while carrying the weight of some ugly history on my shoulders was enormous. Something as simple as giving a woman crippled from polio a wheelchair was never that simple- the parts of the chair were made in Zambia but the recipients were returning to the Congo where the parts couldn't be found and the Congolese person who made wheelchairs from

bike parts had one less customer, plus the woman who received the wheelchair could of course be seen as suspiciously lucky by her neighbors who would attribute her good fortune to witchcraft, and the woman with this new means of transportation might now be forced to start a small business selling fish door to door so that her husband could take the money to get drunk and neglect his farming.. When all you can see is complexity, it can be easy to be paralyzed by despair. In a postmodern world how do you ever know what is right? How do you know that your fire of commitment isn't really burning down your house? Or the house of your neighbor?

The one belief that I have found to sustain myself and to support my life is grounded in community- in the belief that people can create spaces for listening to the many voices of their neighbors. Where not everyone will necessarily understand what I have to say, but where there is a common covenant to listen and to speak together and to look for the areas of overlap where we may find common purpose and our own form of truth. To seek to move forward together from that place of, if not understanding, at least hope and trust. Because I think that hope is the wick that supports the flame of commitment and action, and that it is the job of community to develop and provide that hope even in a postmodern world. Because I think that many people of my generation are desperate for some kind of hope- for a future that for themselves and others and for a future that they can imagine having children for. I don't know yet what that future might look like, but I believe that it is our job to reach out to each other and to form a community where we can build that future together. And a community like that is something that I'm willing to commit to.