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About the Cover

The cover art is by Taiwanese artist Jen-Wen Wang and is called "Tree of Life". She explains her art this way: "The tree is a supporting power when you are frightened by the power of death. With the support of the tree, you will know the earth under your feet, and see the light that wakes up every cell. You will feel the living stream through the bark. You will grow up with the tree, and finally find a new way of life – to fly with the tree and to dance a new dance."

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Stories of Breaking Out!

Feminist theology, as other branches of feminist studies, was/is rooted in the experienced realities, heart-felt struggles, and innermost passions for wo/men's right to their own voice – their own voice to articulate how their lives and faiths related to each other. Over the years the professionalization of feminist theology, as of other branches of feminist studies, has created a gap between “theory” and “story”. There is a danger that real experiences of struggle, memories of pain, tears and scars in the journey of struggle tend to be looked on as ‘popular’ writing or as “not critical enough” writing, as against professionalized ‘theologizing’. IGI has tried to straddle this tension by embracing both ends of the spectrum as it were i.e. from descriptive stories of our situation, to radical critique of these towards transformation for change, treating both as parts of a continuum and not a polarized impasse. In keeping with this methodology, this issue of IGI is titled “Stories of Breaking Out” and combines the stories of individuals, communities and particular groups of people who are trying to “break out” in one way or another.

A community of people decides to speak about their story of breaking out from the history of subjugation and exclusion forced on them, as Ruby Hembrom does when she powerfully writes “silence is not my mother tongue” outlining the history of Adivasi struggle in India. Her reflection powerfully captures what “identity” means to her:

Identity is belonging; and I belonged there; we belonged to each other. We shared a language and a heritage. We shared memory. It didn't matter that I was a city bred Santal or that we didn't know each other personally.

Thehil Ruselliah Singh's reflection on a biblical story from the book of Numbers is another story of a group of people – women – with a history of being denied their rightful claim to land and a share in the promise of God, breaking out to voice and claim their identity for themselves. Thehil argues that

... the daughters of Zelophehad were not only asking for the land that belonged to their father and therefore to them but they were also seeking a claim to their rightful identity. They demanded that they be considered not as property but as human beings, daughters of Israel and therefore heirs of the promise of God.

By focussing on her queerness as a lesbian minister and reflecting on her journey as a “personal exodus story”, Reina Ueno's breaking out story is a poignant, succinct and beautifully crafted piece that speaks to our emotions, passions and pain. It is her exodus story from an environment that required her to “not be myself” to finding self and glorying/finding peace in what her Self means to her and to her ministry. She declares:

“Being weak doesn't mean being humble and being strong doesn't mean abusing power. Power of queer strength is gentle and peaceful. It is squeezed from an oppressive situation. It is like tears that can heal wounds made by the oppression”

Reimagining what the cross means to Christians with same-sex attractions is a provoking and “from-the-heart” story of breaking out to claim the agency to “out God” in the process of “outing Self”. While owning how painful the “outing” process is, Joseph Goh breaks fresh ground in affirming that it is also an ongoing identity construction process and clarifies how he uses the term “outing god” when he says:

“I use the term ‘outing God’ as an expression to denote public declarations by Christians with same-sex

attractions of God's presence and involvement in their lives, not in reference to coming out to God."

Christina Wong finds the courage and strength to share her story of breaking out of societally expected identities and finding the resources for analysis of herself. She realizes the hybrid identities she bears through a feminist theology/pedagogy class she went through and expresses what many of us wo/men in Asia feel when she says:

... Every community has its own obligations or restrictions, which may limit me in my continuing critical reflection and praxis in the interest of care of self.... Apart from social and cultural backgrounds, I am also wary of my other personal identities, which challenge the integrity of the dynamics between oppression and liberation when I engage in Asian feminist theology.

Narrating her story of discovering feminist re-interpretations of Genesis 1-3 by feminist scholars, Naw Htoo Htoo shares that she has found feminist biblical interpretation a helpful way to conscientize the congregations of Myanmar about mutual respect and understanding. This is therefore her story of breaking out of the traditional interpretations of this text by Churches in Myanmar and hopes:

... that this way of interpretation from feminist perspective will enlighten their knowledge toward mutual responsibility and equality between man and woman in leadership roles of the church.

Along with these stories of breaking out we also have a poem that simply speaks of literally breaking away and retreating to refresh our broken spirits.

Most of us live according to some dictates from society, culture, religion and family. Most of us try very hard to live in ways that satisfy all these dictates so that we can be considered "acceptable" by all. Seldom do we try to take the "roads not taken" in the ways we live our lives. Seldom do we find the courage to follow the dictates from within ourselves – dictates that arise out of our journeys as evolving persons – as thinking, feeling, analytical, struggling and resisting selves who want to claim agency in and of our own lives or the life of communities we belong to or identify with.

As groups of peoples and communities we all have different histories: of pride and joy at achievements, of unique cultural markers, of oppression, injustice and pain. Much of the stories of both our individual and community lives that belong to the history of oppression, injustice and pain are either blotted out willfully, forcefully or sometimes as our own means of survival to keep sane in the present. The telling/recording of these stories/memories are sometimes more painful than the actual lived experiences of subjugation, domination, struggle, resistance and survival. Therefore such unrecorded histories of pain and struggle are lost to our individual and collective memories and consciences. But when these stories are told, processed and re-told – there is possibility for new knowledge for life, new strategies for survival and fresh methods of resistance and agency to be learnt.

Whenever an individual or community decides to break out of the confines and boundaries dictated to her/him/them and stake/s a claim in the road of resistance, struggle and ultimately laying hold of agency for one's own life – that story of breaking out becomes a touchstone or model for another individual's/community's struggle.

IGI is thankful to all the authors and artists in this issue who have courageously shared their stories of breaking out with us so that we, as readers, can find inspiration, strength and courage from their narratives. Our feminist theologizing arises like a phoenix from the ashes of such narratives of pain, denial and exclusion to soar through paths of resistance, struggle and agency.

Jessica Richard

(For Editorial Advisory Committee (EAC))