



What's the most out-of-place you've ever felt? I've had several of those moments in my life, but one of the strangest was in Guatemala. While I was a youth pastor, I had traveled down to Quetzaltenango (the second biggest city in Guatemala) to speak at a pastors' conference with five other American pastors and a translator. But when the conference organizers learned I was a youth pastor, they decided to hold a separate youth pastors' convention across town. So when we got to the conference space, we ate dinner and then I was put in a little shuttle bus with

about 15 Guatemalan guys - only one of whom knew any English at all - and off we went.

This was a year or so before I started dating Amanda, and I knew basically no Spanish. So here I was, in a foreign country where I didn't speak the language, crammed into a bus with a whole host of guys chattering happily away. I remember thinking that if something were to go wrong, I was in a lot of trouble. I was excited to be on such a crazy adventure, but I was also very nervous.

I felt at a deep level that I didn't belong. Not that I wasn't welcomed - the guys who hosted me were exceptionally kind and hospitable. But this wasn't my culture. This wasn't my people. I was different. I was an outsider, a stranger in a strange land.

I didn't belong.

You've had a similar experience, haven't you? Maybe it wasn't in a foreign country. Maybe it was in middle school or high school. Or starting at a new job. Maybe meeting your spouse's family for the first time.

There are even moments when we feel that in our daily lives. When we're in the middle of a long work week or an intense fight with someone we used to love. Heading to one more practice or game, one more meeting, one more school event. We pause, just for a moment and we feel that there has to be more than this. That something's not quite right, that we don't quite belong in the daily grind.

The thing about that feeling is that we don't like it. We don't like to feel like strangers. We don't want to feel like we don't belong, like we're outsiders, especially to our own lives. So we tend to ignore it. To smother it with business or television or Kanye.

And to look around here, you'd think we've done a pretty good job of stifling that feeling, that sense of alienation. We don't like to admit it, but there's no real, discernible difference between Christians and non-Christians. Between people who follow Jesus and people who don't. Between people who have been raised from the dead, rescued from sin, and those who haven't.

We look a lot like the culture around us. A lot. And while we get angry at the larger institution of the Church, our true frustration, our actual despair really comes from our own sense of helplessness. We want our *own* lives to look different. We want our *own* lives to be transformed. We want to experience resurrection today, right now. Throughout our weeks.

And we don't. We fit in. We conform to the rest of the world. We're a group of people raised to new life who still live like we're dead.

That's the kind of Church Peter was writing to. They were struggling to live out their faith as well. They were caught up in the day-to-day grind just like we are.

Listen to how Peter begins his letter:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance. -- 1 Peter 1:1-2 (NRS)

Typical ancient greeting in a letter - author first, then recipient, then a greeting like "Grace and peace". But notice what Peter calls the Christians he's addressing:

To the Exiles of the Dispersion... chosen and destined by God the Father...

Peter calls us Exiles of the Dispersion. There's so much packed into that little statement, so much that sets up everything else Peter wants to say in the letter, that I want to camp out there today.

We're exiles. We're strangers in this land. According to Peter, this culture we're living in isn't our home. According to Peter, we have been chosen by God, set apart from everyone around us. He said,

Who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.

Note the trinitarian language there: God the Father chose us. We have been saved by Jesus (sprinkled with his blood is a reference to his sacrifice for us on the Cross) and we are sanctified by the Spirit. The Spirit makes us Holy. We are God's special, chosen people.

To be holy means that we live differently than the culture around us. That the values that shape the world we live in don't shape us. That we are immigrants, exiles. We're strangers... we ought to have that sense of displacement I felt in Guatemala. That sense we get sometimes that we were made for more than this? We *should* feel it. We *should* feel like we don't quite belong here. We belong to a culture, a nation, that has different values than suburban American culture. And we *should* live lives that reflect that.

That's the real problem: We're Exiles, but we don't live like we are. We treat the Kingdom of God like a Mexican restaurant. We here in Suburban America like Mexican food – at least I know I do. Think about the last time you had Mexican. You decided you wanted to go get some tacos or enchiladas so you went to the Mexican Restaurant. The inside of the place was decorated with trappings of Mexican culture. If it was your birthday, you might have had to wear a sombrero. You may even have offered up a "Gracias!" when the amigok or amiga serving you refilled your chips and salsa.

But at no point in this experience of Mexicana did you forget that you're a Suburban American. You didn't suddenly adopt Hispanic culture and values, start spontaneously speaking fluent Spanish. Even if the last time you ate Mexican was at home, you always know that you're a

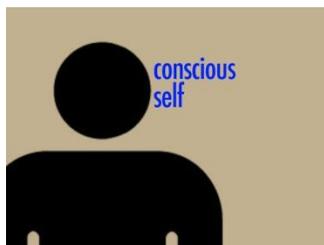
Suburban American. That's your culture. If you were to go to Mexico (where they just call Mexican food 'food'), you would feel out of place – just like I did in Guatemala.

When we live as citizens of American culture instead of as Exiles, we treat the Kingdom of God as a foreign country. Church becomes a lot like a trip to the Mexican place down the street. We come together for some Jesus tacos, we participate in the Kingdom of God. We worship, we serve, we do what Christians do. But we can do those things without *becoming* a citizen of the Kingdom of God... just like we can eat Mexican food without being Mexican. Our core identity can still be Suburban American even though we participate from time to time in the Kingdom of God – both here at 1850 N Fairfield and at home. We can continue to be shaped by American Suburban values rather than by the Kingdom of God.

Think about it - when we all gather together, we talk about how our value as people doesn't come from what we produce. We say that having a nice car and a big house don't make you a better person. That our kids need quality time with us way more than they need to be in another sport. That love is about service and self-sacrifice not feelings and fleeting pleasures.

But then we leave here and we fall back into the patterns of American Suburban culture. That culture tells us that we have to work harder so we can have more so our life can matter. That tells us that the Jersey Shore is the epitome of life, as good as it gets. American Suburban culture teaches us to instill that insane, never-good-enough work ethic in our kids. That tells us our beloved exists to make *me* happy.

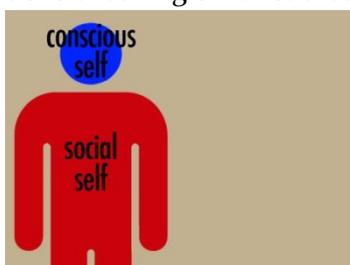
Isn't that the conflict you feel? That we know when we gather here that Jesus' way is the way to true life. But it's so hard to follow that Way once we leave here, once we enter back into the daily grind. Why is it so hard to be holy? Why is it so hard to live as God's chosen Exiles, instead of as Suburban Americans?



Peter Rollins says that's because we actually have two selves at work in us. The self we bring to worship together is our Conscious Self. It's the Thinking Self, the Self that's easily convinced of the Truth of the Gospel. The Self that knows we're made for more than conforming to the culture around us. The Self that knows we're called to be Exiles.

This Self is the mind, it's that conscious part of us, and this is the Self that Churches tend to focus on. We think of Salvation as being convinced of the right truths, of believing the right stuff.

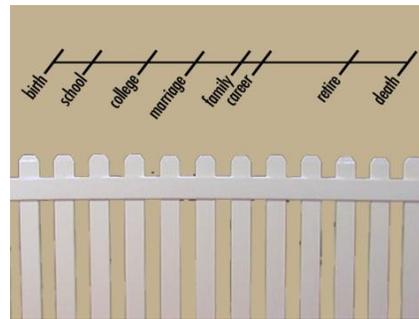
But we're more than just brains. There's more to us than just a mind. A lot more! In fact, surprisingly, the Conscious Self isn't the Self that controls our actions. Think about how much of what you do in a day isn't really a conscious decision. Choosing what to wear? Maybe. Driving to work or school? We're on autopilot. How much of our daily routine is just that - a routine? How much of what we do follows a script given to us by our employer or family? How much of what we do is checking off a list that's more-or-less predetermined?



Most of what we do isn't actually a choice. It's not that we don't have free will, it's that we choose not to exercise it. We just follow along with... something. A cultural current. A plot that was set for us. And this routine we're all in, that pattern we follow, exists at a much deeper, more basic level than our Conscious mind. We might call that lower, more basic Self that just *does* the Social Self.

So the really important question is, How do we form our Social Self? Because *that's* where we really need to dig in. *That's* the Self we need to transform if we're going to live as Exiles. And that deeper Social Self is formed not by our conscious choices, but by the story we live in. By the culture we live in. We think of ourselves as Suburban Americans because we live in Suburban America. Your Conscious Self might love the idea of Christianity, might be convinced of the Gospel. You might decide you feel like some Mexican food today, but your core is Suburban American.

Everyone knows our Suburban American cultural story, right? We call it the American Dream. You're born into a family, you go to school, you go to college, you get married, "start a family" (which means have kids) and start a career all more-or-less simultaneously, you work hard till you're 60 or so. You buy nicer cars and bigger houses as you go along. You raise your family to be similarly hard workers, then you retire and "enjoy life" with the wealth you've accumulated. Then you die. That's our Suburban American Script. That's the story that's formed our Social Selves. And it's a story that's different from the Gospel story.

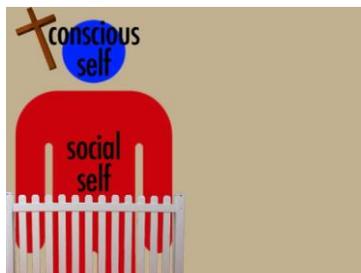


Consider, for instance, what's more important - character, or results? The kind of person you are, or what you accomplish. That's a values question. And Suburban American culture clearly says Results matter most. The Ends justify the Means. Anyone who watches sports knows all that really matters is excellence. Who cares what Michael Vick did? He's putting some great numbers up! What Jim Tressel did wasn't so bad - every coach in the NCAA does it (an argument that doesn't work on the Elementary School playground but seems perfectly acceptable when we need to beat Michigan). It doesn't matter *how* totally self-absorbed and outrageous LeBron James is. When he left Cleveland, you'd have thought the world was ending.

These are our heroes and we wonder why everyone thinks it's okay to lie and cheat to get ahead. We're shocked that our kids take speed pills to study longer, that soccer moms are one of the largest demographics of meth users. We wonder how families that live in communities where the average annual income is \$80,000 are living paycheck-to-paycheck with more credit card debt than they can count. We shouldn't be. That's the ugly other face of the American Dream. The big story we've all been taught to live is all about excelling. The Excellent Person is the one who has the best education and the best job and the best family. No wonder the less charitable call it a rat race.

This Cultural Story - the American Dream - shapes our Social Selves. At a deep, fundamental level, below the level of consciousness, the American Dream tells us how to live. It shapes how we think, what we even think our options are. Think about what you're wearing right now. You decided what to wear this morning out of a wardrobe that you bought because you thought it looked good.

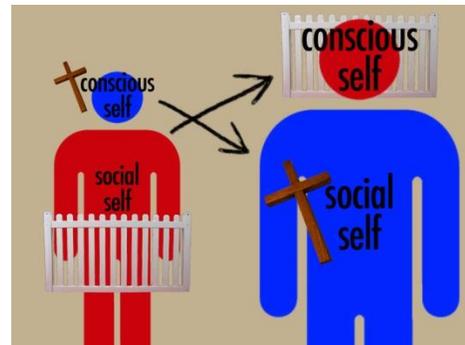
But who taught you what counts as good fashion? Our culture did. What you see on TV, in movies, in magazines. On other people (who are exposed to the same media as you). The media is a huge component of our culture, and a big force in shaping our Social Selves.



We spend so much time in our culture that we don't even realize how thoroughly it shapes our Social Selves, that base level where our pre-rational decision-making happens. The Social Self is where we make our home, where we belong. It's where we feel comfortable, safe. It's like the field where all our thoughts play. It determines the boundaries of our thought lives. It determines the shape our lives will take. And as long as that Social Self is shaped by Suburban America (or any other culture, for that matter), the

Kingdom of God will always feel like the Mexican Restaurant. It won't be home. It won't be what shapes us.

We don't have to have it backwards. We can flip it. We can be transformed, our Social Selves can be renewed. We can be shaped mainly by God's values, God's story. The story of the Gospel, the story of God working to rescue, resurrect and restore a broken world. In that story, the people of God - you and me - are Exiles in the midst of our culture. We've been selected, chosen by God to be agents of restoration in the midst of brokenness.



When we're shaped by God's story, we know that wherever we live, it's not our home. Our home is with God, in the restored, renewed creation. So we live as exiles, strangers in a foreign land. Mostly legal aliens. We know that this culture is not ours. Its values are not our values. That we are to be shaped by a different culture - Jesus' good news, the transforming, life-giving Gospel. So which values will shape us? Which story - the American Dream or the Gospel of Jesus?

Imagine your life characterized by generosity, by simplicity. Imagine a life where you didn't get your value from how much you got done in a day, or the clothes you wear or the car you drive or the size of your house or bank account.

That life is possible. We can live as Exiles. God wants to transform more than just our minds. God wants to give us new Social Selves, the deepest core of who we are. God takes what's been shaped by the American Dream and begins to reform it. To make it holy. To make it Jesus-shaped. That's what we mean when we talk about conversion. We're changed from one culture to another. We're transplanted from one home to another without ever even going anywhere.

We. Are. Exiles. This is not our home. And it's time to start acting like it. That's what Peter tells us. He spends several verses talking about the power of God's transformation, the salvation that God is working in us. And then he says,

So think clearly and exercise self-control. Look forward to the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy." -- 1 Peter 1:13-15 (NLT)

Holiness isn't just about what we believe. It's about how we *live*. Because we've been rescued, because we've been transformed, we *ought* to look different. And Peter tells us to take some steps to order our lives. **Spiritual Practices are the path to further transformation.** We can actually

create environments in which the culture's influence over our Social Self is less than the Gospel's. Because that's what we want. We want the Gospel to be what shapes our Social Self.

Once we know that the American Dream and the Gospel of Jesus are two different stories that want to shape us, we can choose to order our lives so that the Gospel is more able to shape us. That's the purpose of what we call Spiritual Disciplines or Spiritual Practices.

My mom always used to say, "Garbage in, garbage out." That means that whatever you put into your life is what you'll get out of it. What you spend most of your time on is what will shape your Social Self. If you consume Sports and magazines and Twilight and Reality Television more than you practice the way of Jesus, guess what?

I know some of you are on the edge of your seat, ready to run for the door. You're thinking, Wow, JR. is telling us to hate pop culture, become monks and never do anything but read the Bible and pray!

I want to be clear about something here. That's not what I'm saying *at all*. I am not saying you can't ever go out to eat at the American restaurant. I'm not saying that everything about American culture is bad. That we should burn all our secular books and toss all our secular music and deactivate our Facebook accounts and only shop at Christian stores. If you know me at all, you know I consume a huge amount of pop culture. I *love* pop culture. Just like I love Chinese food and Mexican food and all sorts of other stuff.

It's okay to engage in American Suburban culture. *We should*. Our life as Exiles is not supposed to be belligerent. To live as an Exile is a lot more complicated than just tossing everything out. We are called to walk a fine middle ground between conformity and belligerence. I want to offer you a couple of images that stand at opposite poles of this dilemma: a tea kettle and little old ladies from Michigan.

The tea kettle is those Christians who are so conformed to the culture around them that there's no discernible difference between them and everyone else. There's a tension we feel when we've been changed but don't live like it. That sense of alienation we talked about before - that deep knowledge that we don't belong here, that this is not our home. That feeling we want to ignore. It's a pressure that builds up inside us.

Much like a tea kettle [\[graphic\]](#) - as the water heats, it begins to steam, and pressure builds inside the kettle. You know the water's ready when the kettle whistles, but what's actually happening is that the pressure's gotten so strong inside the kettle that it forces its way through the hole in the spout, causing a whistling sound. If the hole wasn't there, the kettle would explode.

For those of us who want to conform to the culture, Church can be our release valve. So can the Spiritual practices like reading the Bible or prayer or giving. We can do those things to relieve the pressure we feel from the conflict our way of living is producing. As long as I go to Church on Sunday, or read my Bible in the morning, or pray or give some money, I can go on doing whatever I want the rest of the time. I can live like an American instead of like a Christian.

Are you a Tea-Kettle Christian? Maybe not. Maybe you're on the other extreme. Maybe you're a little old lady from Michigan.

The summer after I graduated from High School, I got to go to Germany for about a month. And during the last week of our trip, our little group hooked up with a larger Student Tour that went around Switzerland, Austria, Italy and German. But the other people on the tour were three siblings who counted as the students and about 8 little old ladies from Michigan who were their chaperones. These little old ladies were the quintessential rude, loud American tourists. At every stop they wondered loudly why no one spoke English and tried the saying-it-louder-and-slower-automatically-translates-what-I'm-saying approach to communicating. There was never a moment's doubt for anyone, anywhere we went, that these women were American. [graphic]

Some of us are like that. We realize that we're Exiles, and we rub it in the culture's face. We flaunt our holiness like it's a badge that makes us better than them. We use our spiritual practices as weapons, bludgeoning people with how much Scripture we've memorized or how often we pray. Our Church attendance or the size of our tithe.

And that's really no better than being a Tea-Kettle Christian.

To live as an Exile is not to live either as a Tea-Kettle Christian or as a Little Old Michigan Lady. To live as an Exile is to love the culture you're in, but to remember that it's not your home. To appreciate the good that this culture has to offer, but to remember that it does not have the final claim on us.

This is not our home. And we need to act like it.

What does that look like for you? What does a holy life, shaped by the Gospel look like in your neighborhood? At your school? At your job? I wish I could tell you. I wish I could hand you a rulebook that spelled it all out. But I can't. There is no magic pill that will make you live like an Exile. I cannot do anything to convince you that this is not your home. What an Exile's life looks like for you and your family is something you need to take up with God.

But let me offer you a couple of closing thoughts about what Peter calls us: we are **the Exiles of the Dispersion... chosen and destined by God the Father...**

It's God who makes you holy. All those Spiritual practices don't make you holy (that's what the Michigan Ladies think - that automatically they are holy because of what they do. That's legalism). Following the way of Jesus, ordering your life after his Gospel pattern only leads you to a place where you encounter God. It's ultimately God who changes you, the Spirit who sanctifies you. The Son who saves you.

And God calls us chosen Exiles to be the Dispersion right where we are. The Dispersion is a name the Jewish people gave themselves when Babylon conquered them and dispersed them among the nations of the world. The name literally means 'to scatter seed'. And just like the parable of the sower we heard a few weeks ago, the image is that God has scattered his people among the nations and communities of the world. He chose us, and we are exiles, strangers, aliens living in foreign cultures. But we are to be the Dispersion, the Scattered Seed. We are in Exile, longing for Home, and in that longing we are to invite our communities with us. We are to be a Gospel plant growing up among the weeds of our culture, serving as God's agents of transformation wherever we've been planted.

We are the Beaver Creek Church of the Nazarene. We have been rescued from death, transformed and reborn. And now we are strangers in Beaver Creek, OH. This is not our home. Dayton is not

our home. Ohio is not our home. America is not our home. This world is not our home. Our home is the new creation that God is even now working to restore.

I don't want to be a Church that's just some Jesus Taco Stand where people get their fill of God whenever they're feeling a little religious.

I want to be a place that radically transforms people from the core out.

I don't want to be a set of tea-kettle Christians who get together to blow off a little steam so we can keep living boring, uninspiring lives that look just like the toxic American Dream culture around us.

I want to be radically different, so much so that when I encounter death-bringing patterns and habits in Suburban American culture, I know deep in my core I don't belong.

I don't want to be a bunch of little old Michigan ladies who wear our holiness like a badge and wield our works like weapons.

I want to be a Gospel seed scattered among the citizens of Beaver creek. I want to be a part of a Church that is a powerful oak growing among suburban weeds.

Brothers and sisters, we have been scattered here to change Beaver creek. To show Dayton what God's Gospel Way looks like.

This is not our home. And it's time we started acting like it.

<prayer>

Examine

Close with a time of Examine for you to explore your life.

In the last week, where have you most embodied Suburban American values?

In the last week, where have you most embodied Gospel values?

In the next week, where will you be most tempted to embody Suburban American values?

In the next week, how can you choose to embody Gospel values?

What practices can you begin today, and continue through this week, that will orient your life towards transformation?