



## Update from Shelvis and Nancy Smith-Mather February 2022

### *Working towards a Dream: A Faith-Inspired Reflection on the Beloved Community*

I first heard the phrase “cultural appropriation” a few months ago on a podcast my son tunes into frequently. Though new words for me, the meaning behind them is familiar. We wrestle with the concept when living cross-culturally both in the U.S. and overseas.

The encyclopedia Britannica explains the phrase this way:

*“Cultural appropriation takes place when members of a majority group adopt cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way.”<sup>1</sup>*

A definition from the PBS teachers’ lounge states:

*“...the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of another culture. It may be perceived as controversial or even harmful, notably, when the cultural property of a minority group is used by members of the dominant culture without consent.”<sup>2</sup>*

While reviewing resources for our last newsletter, I learned that some Native Americans consider the making, purchasing, and hanging of dreamcatchers by non-Native people to be “cultural appropriation.” It seems that many dreamcatchers are made and sold by non-First Nations persons. Often, the profit does not benefit Native Americans in any way. Also, the original meaning behind the symbol is often misunderstood by those hanging it over their beds; like the one hung in our house.

Our dreamcatcher meant a lot to seven-year-old Addie. For Addie, nightmares are very real. She often wakes up at night scared by a bad dream. Her dreamcatcher made her feel safe.

When trying to prepare myself for a conversation with Addie about her dreamcatcher, I did an online search titled: “How to talk to children about cultural appropriation.” I found that the resources are plentiful! One article advised asking your child the reason the symbol or costume is important to him/her.

“The glitter sparkles,” she said, “and it keeps me from having bad dreams. The good dreams pass through the net. The bad ones get caught.”



*The dreamcatcher in our window  
made Addie feel safe.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-cultural-appropriation>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/education/blog/cultural-appropriation-whats-an-educators-role>

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“I did not know this before,” I shared, “but I recently learned that it is hurtful to some Native Americans when people buy and hang dreamcatchers.” Then, I attempted to explain that the feathers on it have a special, sacred meaning to some Native Americans.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

At that point, I tried to explain the concept of “sacred” by talking about what the cross means to our family. Retrospectively, it may have been better to give an example of something special in our cultural heritage instead of our Christian faith to avoid creating a dichotomy in her mind between First Nations people and Christianity. Currently, there are 97 Native American congregations just in the Presbyterian (USA) denomination, so the cross would also be a sacred symbol for many Native Americans.

In an effort to think on a seven-year-old level, I then added “If you were doing something on the playground, and you did not realize that it was hurting your friend’s feelings, but then the friend tells you that you are making her sad, what would you do?”

“Stop doing it,” she responded. She understood.

Then we brainstormed other things that might make her feel safe at night. With the ease of online shopping, she picked out something with glowing hummingbirds dangling from strings. The colorful light reminded her of God’s light and the birds, the Holy Spirit. They make her feel safe.

Instances of cultural appropriation are not always obvious to me. If I had not read about dreamcatchers, Addie’s would still hang above her bed. Yet, I am grateful for the opportunity to grow in my understanding. When I know better, then I can do better.<sup>3</sup>

Why does it matter to me?

Maybe because I have bought into the idea of the “beloved community,” Martin Luther King Jr. described. I see it in Jesus’ actions, bringing people from the margins of society back into the fold. Jesus asked people with privilege, like myself, to seek humility and to care about those with less power in a society. Towards that end, an uneasy feeling and an awkward conversation with my daughter is well worth the effort, if it takes a step towards “loving others well.”

May God give each of us the willingness to learn and the courage to advocate for respectful engagement with people of cultures different from our own. May we do the best we can to be loving neighbors to those both near and far. Amen

*Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives. ~ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

*“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first*



*The glowing birds replaced the dreamcatcher, they make Addie feel safe now.*

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<sup>3</sup> “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” – Maya Angelou  
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*commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Matthew 22:36-40*

*Thank you so much for your support of our family and the ministry to which we feel called. We are deeply grateful for you!*