

French, Catholic, Jewish.

Outsider Within

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As a Jew, one is automatically an outsider in many cultural contexts. However, my focus in this paper will be on how my Jewish identity has both reflected and constructed an ambiguous insider/outsider status within my own family. I will then turn to how this outsider status influences my professional work.

My mother was raised in an immigrant Jewish family. Her parents were born in Russia and Lithuania, and were culturally Jewish. They immigrated to the U. S. in the early years of the 20th Century and settled in Cleveland, Ohio. My father's parents were French. They immigrated to New Orleans in 1874. My father was 30 years older than my mother. They met at the racetrack in Cleveland where my father was head of security, and also owned and raced horses. They began living together after knowing each other for three months. Although my father had been separated from his first wife for 15 years, it took him another 12 years to obtain a divorce. Getting the divorce was a long and stressful process that broke his first wife's heart because of her religious beliefs, and resulted in his excommunication from the Catholic church.

The first 5 years of my life, I lived in New Orleans, in the city, and later running wild on a farm. My second language was French. I went to a French-speaking nursery school, and to a very high French Catholic church. We said "Hail Mary's" everyday in front of a portrait of the Madonna and child in a room redolent with incense. I was very close to my father, and felt loved and adored by him.

When I was 5, my father died, and my mother returned to her parents' home. In Cleveland, I was suddenly thrust into an urban, Eastern European Jewish lifestyle. My grandmother spoke Yiddish, kept kosher, lit candles every Friday evening, and observed

the sabbath. In so far as it was possible, she recreated the life of the *shtetl* where she had been born outside of Wilnius, Lithuania. Without a husband to support her, my mother was forced to seek paid employment, so my grandmother became my primary caretaker.

I cannot remember how difficult the transition to life in Cleveland must have been. However, I do remember getting off the train – the City of New Orleans - and greeting my grandmother - telling her that she was going to burn in hell because she didn't believe in Jesus Christ. “*Oy, Oy! Oy, gavo!*!” she cried, giving a *geshrei* (a scream). Somehow, we recovered from that shaky beginning, and developed a very caring and loving relationship. Because my mother never again mentioned my father and our life in New Orleans, and because I spent the next twelve years living in the midst of my mother's Jewish family, I became identified as a Jew. I didn't repress my life as a French Catholic little girl, I just felt totally emotionally cut off from it.

Although I felt loved by my grandmother, I never felt like I belonged in my mother's family. My mother had a very competitive relationship with her two younger sisters, Emma and Pauline. They were blonde and light-skinned, like my grandmother, and had been her favorites. My mother had a darker complexion and dark hair, and was allied with her father in the marital wars that my grandparents waged. My aunts had financially successful husbands, and lived conventional, upper middle class lifestyles. My mother had a dead husband, who had left her financially bereft. My name was Bordeaux, in a family of Goldsteins and Goodmans.

Despite my “otherness,” my mother's family followed my grandmother's lead and was welcoming to me. Every Sunday one of the aunts would invite us to dinner. I felt embraced by the extended family as long as I was with my grandmother. However, I

knew that I could never pass as one of them. I was too dark, too fat, too poorly dressed. I was my mother's daughter, and they were not fond of their older, disreputable sister.

I also had trouble fitting into the larger culture of Shaker Heights, Ohio. My last name, Bordeaux, was unpronounceable, and there was always a lot of snickering at school whenever the roll was called in class. I also did not have a father, which in the 1950's was like not having an arm. I always felt disabled, different.

There was also the question of money. In high school, friendships were defined, first by religion, then by class. I couldn't fit into the Jewish mainstream because my family didn't belong to either of the Jewish country clubs; my mother couldn't afford to send me to "Mrs; Shapiro's" for ballroom dancing lessons; and my clothing certainly did not attain the fashion standards required of the "popular" girls. Similarly, I couldn't fit into the non-Jewish mainstream because I was Jewish.

Ultimately, I developed three close Jewish girlfriends: two came from divorced families where their fathers had no relationship with them. The third had a father who was chronically ill. The absence of male incomes in all of our families left us in more or less the lower middle class. The absence of a dominant male presence, and the fact that all of our mothers worked, allowed us more freedom than most middle-class Jewish girls. Most of the time, our mothers had no idea what we were up to. We spent most of our time chasing boys, since this was the currency of self-worth in that era. Because none of us could fit into the upper middle class Jewish lifestyle of Shaker, we dated mostly non-Jewish boys, and generally developed a "cross-over" lifestyle.

My cross-over lifestyle also led me to begin a flirtation with an African American boy in high school. We were young kids, 16 years old, studying American history

together. We lived near each other and spent a few weeks walking home from school together. After a couple of weeks, one of the “older” White Jewish boys, an 11th grader, began to call me “a nigger lover.” Because of my vulnerability to my own outsider status in the Jewish community, I became very frightened by this epithet and began avoiding my Black friend. It took us 30 years to talk about this experience. At a high school reunion, I learned that the consequences of this cross-over were much greater for him. He told me about how the football coach trumped up a reason to suspend him from the football team for a period of time. This suspension was very serious for him because he was going to college on a football scholarship. He got the message – “Don’t mess with a White girl.” The differences in the consequences of our behavior was shocking to me, as was my complete lack of awareness of the implications of our friendship for him. This experience has generated a strong interest in confronting my own racism and insensitivity. Teaching multicultural humility to my graduate students at Yeshiva has become a passion.

When it was time to apply to college, everyone smart at Shaker High was expected to apply to the Ivy Leagues. Instead, I applied to Sophie Newcomb, the women’s college of Tulane University in New Orleans. I had no conscious awareness of wanting to return to my roots, wanting to return to a place where everyone knew how to pronounce Bordeaux. Yet, I stood up to the pressure from my friends and the guidance counselor, and insisted on going to Newcomb.

When I got to New Orleans, I called my half-sister, Grace, my father’s daughter from his first marriage. She refused to meet me. This experience was apparently so

painful, that I repressed it. I have no memory of that phone call. I didn't learn of it until Grace apologized for it many years later.

At Newcomb, I defined myself as part of the Jewish minority. This was somewhat problematic because I could not afford to go through sorority Rush, which was the conventional pathway toward acceptance. Luckily, my roommate was a very cosmopolitan, Canadian Jewish woman who refused to go through Rush because sororities were "too, too *passee*." Her disdain provided a cover story that helped me avoid acknowledging my family's financial straits. We became notorious as the first two Jewish girls in the history of Newcomb who refused to "rush." Thus she and I became part of the left-wing Jewish intellectual set, outsiders within the outsiders. Being a Jew at Newcomb in the 1960's was interesting. One schoolmate from Dallas had never met a Jewish person before, and asked to see my horns!

After graduation from college, I married a conventional, upper-middle class Jewish man. Again, I had no conscious understanding that I hoped to become a Jewish insider. To my surprise, my husband turned out to be the "outlaw" in his family - of course who else could marry someone like me? [To his surprise, Louise Bordeaux turned out to be Jewish!] So the hope that I would be welcomed into the bosom of a nice Jewish family didn't exactly work out. Still, as a "Silverstein," I came closer to joining the "Goldstein/Goodman" club.

This outsider/insider status has influenced my choice of profession, and my choice of a specialty within that profession. Becoming a family therapist has been part of my search for a family to belong to. Choosing to specialize in Bowen family systems therapy, which emphasizes reconnecting with one's extended family across many

generations, has helped me find my own family. In retrospect, I think that I was hoping that doing family of origin work would give me the key to finding a way for my famil(ies) to accept me. Although I have not been accepted in the way that I had hoped (who ever is?), this work has helped me understand the emotional forces operating across the generations to over-determine my outsider status.

Understanding these multigenerational roots, I have come to take my outsider position much less personally. I now realize that, because of the cultural/emotional clash between the two families, if I remain connected to both sides, I will always be considered an outsider by each side. The only way that I could become an insider would be to deny or dissociate from one side of my family. This, of course, would be more damaging than absorbing the stress of being an outsider within.

Thus I remain very identified with both my Jewish and my French roots, and have accepted that I will never feel fully at home in either community. I am close to both my Cleveland Jewish and Catholic New Orleans families. About 15 years ago, I hosted a large family dinner in which my mother and Grace (who is almost exactly my mother's age) met each other for the first time. Although this event was quite stressful, it also generated a new level of identity integration for me.

My insider/outsider status has had an impact on my academic life as well. When I decided to pursue an academic career after 10 years in private practice, it was very difficult to find a job in New York City. After being rejected in several places, I landed a job at the graduate school of psychology at Yeshiva University. Yeshiva is an interesting environment in that the graduate schools are all secular, but the overall university and the undergraduate colleges (male and female) operate under the rubric of Modern Orthodox

Judaism. As a secular Jew, I again find myself a Jewish outsider within an Orthodox Jewish institution.

However, with a name like Silverstein, I can pass for a member of the tribe, if not the family. That is, until I open my radical feminist mouth. Because I teach a course on the social construction of gender, I am “outed” early in each academic year. Although many of my views generate tension between me and some of my Orthodox Jewish students, I have learned a great deal from them. I have been privileged to have a window into a way of life that is much more complex and layered than a feminist outsider might imagine it to be. I have also been challenged to walk the walk of multiculturalism in a way that is very personal. As a feminist, it has been difficult for me to embrace diversity to an extent that includes religious fundamentalism, especially because this particular brand of fundamentalism represents my own cultural and religious origins.

My quest for insider status has helped me accept the ambiguity and complexity of life, and in this way has made me a better therapist. I now realize that the forces generating the distance between me and both my father’s and mother’s families started many years prior to their marriage. For example, I now realize, that no matter how good I am to my Aunt Emma, my mother’s sister, she will never love me as much as she loves Carol, her other sister’s [my Aunt Pauline’s] daughter. This is a continuing sadness for me. However, I now know that it has nothing to do with me, and everything to do with the emotional triangle between my grandmother, my mother, and her two sisters. My mother was the outsider in that triangle, and as her daughter, I inherited that outsider status. It might as well be encoded within my genes.

Similarly, Grace will never forgive our father for the shame and humiliation that his divorce caused her mother. Because she can never completely separate her feelings for our father from her feelings for me, she will always maintain a wary emotional distance between us. In the early years after our reconciliation, Grace saw me as her ticket to heaven. She explained that she was worried about meeting St. Peter in heaven, because she had not been able to stop hating our father. She was hoping that making peace with me would encourage St. Peter to overlook her hateful thoughts toward our father. Many years later, Grace ended her life in a nursing home, suffering from dementia. On my final visit, she was convinced that I was the devil standing next to her bed. And so I fell from the Gates of Heaven to the Gates of Hell – the ultimate insider/outsider experience!

Accepting the inevitability of these multigenerational emotional forces has helped me to stop blaming anyone in my family. Blocking blame may be one of the most important tasks of a therapist. As long as one is blaming others, one is not able completely to take responsibility for oneself. Focusing on the Other, i. e. what our mother [father, husband/wife, or any significant other] did or did not do, to or for us, is a way of giving up power – the power to change one's life for the better. Focusing on Self, in contrast, allows us to accept responsibility, and mobilize our power to change.

The issues of sibling rivalry, emotional triangles, and conflicting family loyalties exist in every family. In my family many of these conflicts have been exacerbated by cultural and religious differences. Unbraiding the ethnic, religious, and emotional strands of my otherness has helped me to accept being an outsider within both sides of my family. On a good day, this has made it easier for me to help clients accept their sense of

otherness. On a bad day, I tend to get too identified with that otherness, and even to project it onto a client who may not be struggling with that issue at all.

To a great extent, my life has been organized around trying to become a cozy insider somewhere. However, when insider status is within my grasp, I “find” myself having climbed out onto a limb and in the process of sawing it off behind me! When the in-group of the moment finishes off the amputation, I am (once again) surprised and hurt.

In the course of this life-long struggle, I have made some progress recently. I am no longer compelled to be the outsider in every aspect of my life. In the last 3 years, I have initiated a Holocaust research project at YU, studying the experiences of grandchildren of the Holocaust, and exploring the possibility of creating a model teaching curriculum for high school students that teaches about the Holocaust and stresses the importance of protecting the rights of all minorities and marginalized groups. Focusing on this painful moment in Jewish history has brought me closer to many faculty members at YU and at universities in Israel as well.

Moreover, on a recent trip to Cleveland, I spent a lot of time with my cousin Carol, Aunt Emma’s favorite. I am now beginning to have some appreciation for the burden of insider status. Still another surprise on the life-long journey that is family of origin work!