

Culture Care: ***Reconnecting with Beauty for Our Common Life***

by Makato Fujimara

Reading Notes and Discussion Questions

Matt Henegar, October 2024

I. Part 1 (Chapters 1-5)

1. **Understanding Culture Care - An Introduction to Nurturing Society.** In this first Chapter, Fujimara introduces us to the idea of “generative” solutions to the issues we face as a society. He talks about how we have made strides in fostering changes in how we treat the environment and how we think about mental health, but that we need to begin thinking about being stewards of culture. He writes from a Christian perspective, but believes that the principles apply universally. Ironically, it should have been Christians who led the charge on the environment, but alas, it was not.
 - What did you think of Judy (Fujimara’s wife) bringing home flowers when they were struggling to make ends meet? Do you agree with Judy, that we need not only to feed our bodies and our minds, but to “feed our souls”? How does that look?
 - How do you apply generative principles to the cultivation of art? What are some “genesis moments” you have had regarding future? How does failure help to create “generative” thinking and “genesis moments”?
 - Do you agree that generosity can set the context for the renewal of our hearts? How does an encounter with art help us in that regard?
 - How do we cultivate generative values in ourselves, in our children and the next generation? How was it cultivated in your family and broader community?
2. **The Necessity of Beauty in a Broken World.** Fujimara argues that beauty is necessary in a fragmented, competitive and disjointed world. Not only do we require food, shelter, mental health and mental stimulation... beauty and art are vital to engender
 - Fujimara describes “culture care”, as the process providing for our culture’s soul. How has that looked in your experience? Who are some of the people who have provided a framework for that for you?
 - He says that something is generative if it is fruitful if it generates new life or offspring (e.g., animals and plants) or producing new parts (e.g., stem cells). Had you thought about culture and art through this lens?

- In what ways has our fixation on entertainment through news and talk shows shifted the formerly “generative” aspects of our culture into a more destructive force?
- What about Fujimara’s reference to Isaiah 61:2-3 (...to comfort all who mourn, with a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit)? In what ways has our religious practice within the context of culture shifted away from the beauty of art? Why do you think that is? In what ways has art persevered in religious practice?

3. **Stewardship of Culture - Responsibilities of the Creative Community.** In the third chapter, Fujimara delves into our responsibility as citizens to be stewards of culture ... in nurturing and sustaining cultural health. He places artists and creatives at the heart of societal well-being.

- Have you considered the economics of this? How do pricing mechanisms at the macro-economic level impact our ability to foster this? In what ways was that true up until now about the preservation of the environment?
- In what ways have churches been to blame for the lack of framework to foster culture through economic incentives? How has the lack of economic markers in this arena led to people being treated as goods or cogs (as Fujimara describes them), as opposed to individual works of art themselves?
- What about the notion that our scientific community lacked the ability to see human beings and the scientific process as a mechanical process, as opposed to the deeper reality of what it means to be human (e.g., dissecting a frog, stitching it back together and expecting it to hop the way it did previously)? “Human beings are not human doings.” How do we cultivate the development of whole humans?

II. Part 2 (Chapters 4-6)

1. Art as a Generous and Essential Gift to Society. Fujimara believes that art is an essential aspect of society and that the core essence of art is generosity. He talks about how living isolated in our own cultural islands is contributing to polarized ideological positions and that through this we become “enemies locked in utter competition for commodities or power that should be ours”. Our inability to understand and get to know others makes it easier to dispise them.

- a. Do you agree that art and cultural understanding can bridge the gap? What did you think about his example of the NEA and how it is used as a means to political power as opposed to cultural connection and understanding? How does generosity come into play here... to cultivate empathy, connection, reflection and growth?
- b. How do we move from a “utilitarian or commercial posture” and toward a more generative or “culture care” one? Is it possible for that to grow in the context of the arts as Fujimura suggests? How will that look?
- c. What about T.S. Elliot’s thoughts in “Notes Towards the Definition of Culture” that people don’t just need enough to eat, but need a “proper and particular cuisine”? Do you agree that a dearth of cultural connection is contributing to things like school shootings, teen drug use and early deaths of celebrities? In what ways are Fujimara and Elliot talking about a different kind of “currency”?

2. Cultivating Cultural Ecosystems - Building Supportive Environments for Arts. In Chapter 5, Fujimara talks about cultivating institutions where art can flourish in the same way we cultivate gardens or crops in order to ensure we have enough to eat. He talks about how artists need to see themselves as part of an interconnected ecosystem and that those of us who are not artists need to support and uplift this community.

- a. Do you agree? Is it helpful to see all human as “artists” in a sense? Some as professional artists and others recreational artists? What examples can we draw from athletics? Is it true that professional artists have been pushed to the fringes of our society?
- b. In what ways are professional artists to blame for the fact that this ecosystem is struggling to thrive? In what ways are the rest of us to blame? Do you even agree that the artistic and cultural ecosystem is not in fact thriving? What are some examples of where it is thriving? How can we better engage in those areas?
- c. Do you agree that funding for the arts should not be seen merely as a charitable contribution but as an investment in culture and thus an investment in the very thing we need most ... similar to housing, food, clothing, healthcare, etc.?

- d. What about “soul care”? The work of patient/client and care provider/therapist? Who are the “soul care” providers in your life? Have they integrated art and culture into their sessions with you so that your experience of trauma and other negative events becomes more associated with positive experiences?
- e. How does beauty work? And what is your experience of it? Do you experience it as “ephemeral, saccharine or naive” as most New Yorkers apparently do? In what ways does our maturity level impact our ability to experience and express beauty? What about Child’s response that his student, in order to get a better grade, needed to “become a deeper person”?

3. Integrating Faith and Creativity - The Sacred in Artistic Expression. Fujimara delves into spirituality and a spiritual regimen as a means to develop culture and beauty ... beauty is “food for the soul”. “Beauty is the quality connected with those things that are in themselves appealing and desirable ... a delight to the senses, a pleasure to the mind and a refreshment for the spirit.”

- a. How do you define beauty? What did you think of Fujimara’s definition? Does your theology and religious upbringing inform your understanding of beauty? In what ways is a dearth of spiritual training and enrichment impacting our ability to contextualize and understand culture and beauty? What are some root causes of that in your view?
- b. Fujimara points to four markers of beauty ... gratuity, stewardship, justice and our response. God does not need us or the creation ... beauty is thus the gratuitous gift of the creator... not needed for survival, but very much so for our flourishing. What are your thoughts on this? In what ways can we implement this in our own lives? In what ways can we do so in our communities?
- c. In what ways does our view of God help us understand beauty? In what ways has our culture separated us from this reality ... both the sacred and the profane influences in and around us? And in what ways is this a core issue in the daily strife that we see on social media, in politics, in our daily commute, etc?
- d. What did you think of Fujimara’s connecting his own falling into faith in Jesus with his experience of the beauty of sacrifice? Do you agree that Jesus is the source of beauty? In what ways? How can churches help us to better define and understand this? How does truth-telling about alienation, suffering and oppression, justice, hope and restoration help us to connect to beauty, faith and culture? Is it connected with dying and sacrifice and Fujimara talks about in the context of Japanese culture?

III. Part 3 (Chapters 7-9)

1. Leadership from the Margins - Border Walkers. In Chapter 7, Fujimara talks about deputizing artists on the margins of groups to lower barriers to understanding and communication in order to defuse culture wars. Soul care, according to Fujimara, involves the reconciliation of cultures in relationships (including in marriage for example).
 - Fujimara talks about border walkers or “mearcstapas” (using examples from Beowulf and J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings) can represent tribal identities while still being messengers of reconciliation. Do you know the character Strider the Ranger? In what ways was he a border walker?
 - What did you think about mearcstapas in marital relationships? Did that resonate with you?
 - How do border walkers help to enlist feelings of empathy and understanding? What kinds of deliberate cultivation of cultural understanding have you seen in our current political leaders? Do you agree that, like the story of the Good Samaritan, artists are better able to see “others” as neighbors?
2. Tell Them about the Dream - Stories from TKAM and Other Aspects of US History. Scout, one of the lead characters from “To Kill a Mockingbird”, is described by Fujimara as a mearcstapa. In the story, Tom Robinson is falsely accused of rape, and is defended by Atticus Finch. And Scout becomes the leader who brings empathy between Cunningham and Robinson.
 - Fujimara says that racial lynch mobs are now unthinkable. Do you agree? In what ways can we become modern day “Scouts”? What do you think about the idea of “virtual mobs”? Do you think the current strains are the result of a lack of cultural cultivation?
 - How did the notion of us becoming “neighbor” first in order to remind us of our shared flourishing resonate with you? Is the language of empathy generative as Fujimara contemplates? Is this wishful thinking?
 - What did you think about the story of Mahalia Jackson who pushed Martin Luther King Jr. to “tell them about the dream” ... which ultimately to the “I Have a Dream” speech? Did you know that she had such a significant influence on such a monumental moment in U.S. history?
 - How does art help to break down hatred and fear?
3. Two Lives at the Margins - Responsibilities of the Creative Community. Here we begin to learn about Emily Dickinson and Vincent Van Gogh, from the mid 19th Century. Fujimara talks about how each saw the coming of utilitarian pragmatism and the impacts it would have on culture and religion.
 - One needs nothing more than a small and dedicated space to produce generative art. Do you have a 17.5” inch single-drawer desk?
 - What about Dickinson’s struggles with faith make her valuable to the church? What about struggles with oppression? Struggles in relationships? Struggles with addiction?

- What about Mt. Holyoke Seminary's school master, who divided her students into three categories... "Christians", "Hopers" and "No Hopers", when Dickinson attended?
- Fujimara talks about how artists like Dickinson and Van Gogh thrive in "liminal" spaces. In what ways are "liminal" spaces similar to cultural "borders"? What are ways to describe liminal spaces ... at the societal level and the individual level?
- Did you know that Van Gogh had trained to become a pastor and evangelist? Did you know that he had been pronounced "unfit" for the ministry? Or that he had "rejected the God of the clergymen" and yet not the same God that he had come to know through his love of people and his art? What can that teach us about art? About people? About ministry?
- Have you seen *Starry Night* in person? Had you thought about the message, at least as interpreted by Fujimara, "the Spirit has left the church (at least the building), but is still active in nature"? What do you think he means by "nature"? Had you thought of *Starry Night* as a spiritual work? Any other thoughts?

IV. Part 4 (Chapters 10-12)

10. Our Calling in the Starry Night - Lives as Living Parable. In Chapter 10, Fujimura poses the question “what do we do if Vincent is right” ... if the light of the spirit has really left our churches and gone swirling into God’s margins. He says that the Church has largely kept the truth but lost touch with the spirit in creating beauty.

- Do you agree with Fujimura that we’ve lost touch with spirit in creating beauty ... that we have invited Jesus in as our savior but not as our creator (as Keller put it)? If so, in what ways is this reflective in the recent election?
- What did you think of the notion of “disposability” ... or that anything that doesn’t meet society’s fancy at any particular point in time can be discarded? Is utilitarian thinking the culprit? How do we respond to our “calling” and still put bread on the table? Do you agree that if we aren’t sure whether “art” is our calling that it most definitely is not? Are we all “called” to lives of art as Fujimura posits? “... we are [all] called into the starry night of our complex existence as we too swirl in the darker mystery of our 21st century vista.”
- How can we be called beyond utility? Is the concept limited to our choices around college and career? How do we get beyond that? Do book groups like this serve that purpose? Do we need to bring art back into our church buildings? Alternatively, do we need to “follow the spirit into the margins and outside the doors of our churches”?
- Do we even need to go to college? Do you agree that art is not “useful” in a literal sense? Does Fujimura’s premise call us to a liberal arts education, as opposed to research- or trade-based degrees?

11. Opening the Gates - How do We Guide Mearcstapas. For Fujimura, Jesus is the the “gate” to open the sheep to a world of the beauty of the spirit ... to the good grass, the good water, the good pasture. But he believes that churches have largely closed those gates ... at least culturally ... and that this forces our young people into the unhealthy choice of complying with the church community’s norms and starving culturally or leaving their churches in order to experience the “good grass”.

- Do you agree? Is it true for churches in a broader sense even if not at Manhattan Church of Christ? What about having more open minds to allow mearcstapas to explore beyond the gates and come back to share with those who stay inside the gates?
- What did you think of Fujimura’s example of CJ’s interest in hip-hop music (and CJ’s struggles with his faith, his “church commitments” and other “boundaries”)? Did that example make you wonder how exposed Fujimura has been to “culture”? What did you think of the fact that they “gave CJ permission” to listen to hip hop as long as he allowed his parents to listen to it first? Or that he didn’t allow his other children to

listen to hip hop music?

- What did you think about Fujimura's notion that hip-hop music lacked its power and spirit if the explicit lyrics were excluded? In what ways is CJ a nearcstapa for Fujimura? Do you think Fujimura is aware of that fact?
- How do we learn to "love our enemies" or those who are different than us, as Fujimura suggests? How do we learn to "love" those who voted differently than us in the recent election ... noting the memes floating around with the "we are not the same" mantra? Is that even possible? Assuming it's something we want to do, do the notions of "beauty", "culture care", and "nearcstapas" help us in this regard?

12. Cultivating Cultural Soil - Using Objects from the Past to Cultivate our Understanding of the Present. In Chapter 12, Fujimura talks about how holding soil in our hands (which largely consists of decomposed dead animals, plants and insects) can help us understand the need to cultivate culture. He talks about how "culture" is comprised of dead objects from the past (similar to soil) that can help bring new cultural objects to life. He also talks about Jesus teaches that good soil is essential for a good garden and how God is inviting us to participate in a creative process.

- Do you agree with Fujimura that God is the ultimate artist and gardener? Is gardening a form of art? Had you thought about the notion that we sometimes instead treat the Bible and God as manual and CEO for the Universe?
- How did all of these metaphors sit with you? Do you agree with Fujimura that in many ways the Bible is the ultimate guide book for culture care? Had you thought about the larger arc of the story in the Bible as one of creation, destruction and recreation ... in the same way soil represents the decomposed organic material that yields new life?
- In what ways does all of this tie back to art and culture? Are those aspects of life truly "generative" as Fujimura sees them? What do you think about the fact that he is practicing being an artist in the midst of the largest Protestant seminary in the world? What did you think about the fact that he believes the soil he was planted in was not soil he could thrive in?
- What about the soil you were planted in? Does it allow you to thrive? Fujimura talks about salmon and the need to protect them, but doesn't talk about the generative power of salmon to the forests in the Pacific Northwest? Had you heard about that? Fujimura talks about how plants can't thrive in a greenhouse as well as they can out in the world? In what ways does that mirror the life of a salmon?