



the out of bounds church? Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change
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Postcard 1: Beyond Romeo and Juliet

I sit on the fault lines of a cultural shift. In my right hand, I hold a video remote. In my left hand, I hold the gospel of Jesus. I am born for such a time as this. So are you. Ours is the task of communicating this gospel in an age of change. Ours is the task of following Jesus into the future of this cultural shift.

Last century, Karl Barth wrote that the task of Christian communication was to sit with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. Last century. That was when “gay” meant happy and the Berlin Wall marked East from West. Last century. That was before multi-media, the Internet, and virtual reality. Jesus and the Bible have not changed—both have captured my heart. But the world I sit in looks totally different than it did even ten years ago. The future of faith looks increasingly fragile.

Press PLAY

In 1968, the year I was born, Franco Zeffarelli produced a film version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Zeffarelli realized that while Shakespeare’s ancient text had not changed, the people reading the text were totally different. It was time to focus on historical literature through the lens of a contemporary context.

The 60-second cinematic introduction to Zeffarelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* is one long, slow, camera pan. From a distance, the lens casts its gaze languorously over a city. The viewer is allowed a detached distance from the affairs and passions of that city. A lone male voice speaks over a soft, orchestral lilt. Slowly a horse and cart emerge from an ancient city gate and clip their way across the screen.

fault lines of a cultural shift:

I like the image of cultural eras as tectonic plates—they’re usually quiet below the surface. We don’t necessarily notice that they’re holding up our society every day. Then they start moving, and the effects are dramatic. The culture has moved under society’s feet, under the church’s foundations. We’re in a whole new place, from the ground up and even deeper.
—Kelli Robson

on the big screen:

Romeo and Juliet, directed by Franco Zeffarelli, Paramount Studio, 1968.

on the big screen:

William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, directed by Baz Luhrmann, Fox Home Entertainment, 1996.

setting Shakespeare

free: Luhrmann's film deeply affected me. I've watched it, on separate occasions, with each of my three teenagers. It fills me with hope because Luhrmann understands what so many Christians don't—that you don't have to change the story, only its setting. When you have a story about riches and rivalry; love and lust; friendship, fights, and faith; about young people making their way in a confusing world—what do you need to change to make it relevant? Luhrmann doesn't add to Shakespeare, he sets him free. It's the same for our story—all the power is there in the ancient texts; we just have to learn to set it free.

—Gerard Kelly

Rush ahead to 1996, less than 30 years later, to Baz Luhrmann's cinematic version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Luhrmann, too, realized that while the ancient text had not changed, the audience had. Once again it was time to mix the old with the new.

Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* is set in Verona Beach, a modern city of guns, money, and greed. The 125-second cinematic introduction starts with static and channel surfing—welcome to the world of multi-media. A TV appears center screen and the news announcer, a black female, speaks—welcome to the celebration of the ethnic and the edge. The camera zooms the detached viewer into the TV and plunges down two lines of apartment blocks—welcome to a shift from objectivity to immersion. Text and image are mixed with an explosive soundtrack. Images flash by: a statue of Jesus, city scenes, helicopters, advertising, police around a body, newspaper headlines. Flames engulf a newspaper—both image and text—telling of the Capulets and Montagues—welcome to ancient text amid a cultural shift.

Two directors, two movies, two cultures, one text. Both movies tell a story that has been told (and contextualized) for centuries. Yet in these two versions of the same story, there exist cues about the times in which—for which—they were made. Not just the trappings of the culture, mind you, but its very essence.

Culture is like the air we breathe. Without it we would die. It lies all around us, unrecognized and unmentioned. And then, every now and again, air becomes a talking point—when my city has a pollution warning, when I am forced to study air at the university level, when my breath clouds in deep white billows in front of my face on an icy morning. Then I think about air. In the same way, the culture shifts between Zeffarelli's era and Luhrmann's have come so subtly that we may not necessarily notice them until some director pops them up on a movie screen in such an extraordinary way that we can no longer ignore them.

When I think about the cultural “air” in which Luhrmann contemporizes *Romeo and Juliet*, I find four

clear marks of the postmodern culture: fragmentation of fast/cutting, individual pick-and-mix lifestyles, tribalism, and the ethnic edge.

Fast/cutting and fragmentation

Fast/cutting is a filmmaking term for the rapid cutting between one image and the next. Fast/cutting is the mainstay of much contemporary video communication. It is a feature of Luhrmann's introduction of *Romeo and Juliet*—a montage of city scenes, people rioting, and images of Jesus. Graphics and text flash by, juxtaposed and fleeting.

Fast/cutting also shows up in the use of sound bites in the news. Studies show that the average length of a sound bite has decreased from 40 seconds in 1968, to 8 seconds in 1996.² The way in which we are given information has changed, and therefore the process of thinking about that information has changed. In every way, we have moved from Zeffarelli's slow single-shot pan to Luhrmann's rapidly moving juxtaposition of text, sound, and image.

I often show the introductions to these two versions of *Romeo and Juliet* to groups wanting to explore cultural change. After we watch the introductions, I have the groups list the changes, not just in the filming techniques but in the aspects of the culture that these techniques represent.

After doing this with a range of mainstream churches, I did it with an emerging church group. Half-way through the exercise, a voice spoke up. "It's real. Luhrmann's one. It's got more content." This comment reminded me that technology influences, even changes, the way we think. When you spend your life immersed in the fast/cutting of text and image, fast/cutting becomes the way you process and learn. Suddenly, the slow camera pan and the monologue become artificial, false, hard to follow. When you're used to surfing from image to image, three point sermons start to sound like archaic King James English.

time bites:

Fast/cutting is a fundamental part of my framework. I live in shorter bites than my mother. I work in shorter bites, rest in shorter bites, speak in shorter bites, think in shorter bites, so sometimes I find myself offering God short bites. I set aside an hour to think quietly, pray, meditate and my brain jumps. Is it better to fight for focus, or let the flux of bites flow up to God? I think it's important to offer God stillness in my mind, to be still and know that he is God. For me, nature has proven to be the best way to slow my thoughts and reflect on who God is, eternally, apart from the flux of human fragments around me.

—Kelli Robson

on the big screen:

The Matrix, directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski, Warner Studios, 1999; *Wag the Dog*, directed by Barry Levinson, New Line Studios, 1997; *Forrest Gump*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, Paramount Studios, 1994.

in the CD player:

U2, "Even Better than the Real Thing," *Achtung Baby*, Uni/Island, 1992.

Fast/cutting is a surface technology. It demonstrates a change in the way culture communicates. But fast/cutting is also like the leaves of a tree—just as leaves are nourished by underground roots, so fast/cutting is nourished by underground ideas. It isn't just our understanding of our culture that has become fragmented, but the culture itself.

In his book, *The Postmodern Condition*, French thinker Jean François Lyotard investigates the ways in which computer technologies influence people's thinking. His findings lead him to argue for "incredulity toward metanarratives."³ In other words, over time and with the help of our tech-centered world, we have grown to distrust the idea of one overarching story that can be used to make sense of everything. Our thinking has fragmented into many privatized stories.

And that brings with it a whole new set of questions. As Morpheus uses the remote to change landscapes around Neo in *The Matrix*, the question is, "Which reality is the real one?" As war is constructed in *Wag the Dog*, the question is, "Who controls reality?" As Forrest Gump is digitally inserted into the black-and-white archives of U.S. history, the question is, "What is true history?" As Bono from U2 sings, "Even better than the real thing," the question is, "Where are you standing to view reality?"

These movies, these cultural leaves, emerge from underground thinking. Back in 1972, French thinker Michel Foucault argued, "Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by multiple forms of constraint."⁴

Consider the work of Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstructionism. I used to think of his work as part of the remote world of academia—until he packed out one of the largest auditoriums in my city. I might have considered him elitist, but my city obviously considered him inspirational. In an article titled, "Des Tours de Babel," Derrida explodes previously universal and objective ways of viewing faith and language.

He argues that at the tower of Babel we see the emergence of the "city where understanding is no longer

possible.⁵ Rather than unify, language confuses, separates, and fragments. Subversively, Derrida pushes us further. He uses ancient languages to argue that God's name is Babel. Rather than unify, God divides, fragments, or, to use Derrida's favorite term, God deconstructs.⁶ It is not the task of this book to respond to Derrida.⁷ Rather, I want to point out that a packed town hall listened to Derrida deconstruct Western ways of looking at reality. The universality of language, philosophy, rationality, even religion, has become unstable and subjective. This fragmenting approach has been cleverly called, not deduction or induction, but *unduction*, the reversal of all attempts to achieve knowledge and truth.⁸ Such fragmentation, whether at the surface or on underground levels, can result in contemporary cultures being both pessimistic and playfully pluralistic.

Modernity's dream of a better, brighter future is replaced by kind of hopelessness. "It's dark in there—in the Future I mean. It's not a good place . . . I feel like sleeping for a thousand years—that way I'll never have to be around for this weird new future," writes a disillusioned young adult in a Douglas Coupland novel.⁹ In Coupland's *Polaroids from the Dead*, a hippie mother puts her children to bed while telling them the story of the skeleton that enters the gleaming modern city.¹⁰ The city is in a drought. Its creative visionaries die. The skeleton speaks, urging the dying city to pray for a vision of the afterlife. It's a poignant moment of pessimism that serves to contrast the idealism of hippie dreams with a dying, prayerless city.

The notion of postmodern pluralism, the fast/cutting approach to life, needs to be applied with care. Pluralism is not new; modern liberalism prized plurality. However, that brand of pluralism remained private. Plural beliefs were welcomed, as long as they lay within the overarching, universal metanarrative of the Western dream.

In contrast, a postmodern pluralism celebrates the breaking apart of the metanarrative. Instead of one public, tolerant answer to the big questions, we now have

on the bookshelf: John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion Without Religion.* Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.

on the bedside table: Douglas Coupland, "How Clear is Your Vision of Heaven?" *Polaroids from the Dead*, Regan: New York, 1996, 55-63.

eight kinds of coffee:

- Espresso
- Cappuccino
- Turkish Coffee
- Cafetière/French Press
- Vacuum Post
- Drip Filter
- Cold Press
- Percolator

competing answers—a mosaic of perspectives and ideas and beliefs. We stand at the postmodern coffee counter, individually choosing our own mix of worldviews—one shot or two, small or grande, milk or soy. The public worldview selection list goes on. We have little choice but to move from image to image, idea to idea, with the speed and vigor of Luhrmann’s opening montage.

Pick-and-mix lifestyles

Fragmentation represents both crisis and opportunity. In Luhrmann’s world, the camera zooms into a city where multiple communities are visible. Such communities are evident in the gender and ethnicity of the black, female newsreader and the black, male chief of police breaking up scenes of rioting between various groups, as well as in the juxtaposition of the Montague and Capulet families. As our culture liquifies into a montage of choices, the range of lifestyle options becomes evident. Identity is constructed from the pick-and-mix options available within the multifaceted culture.

The term *liquid modernity* has been used to describe the cultural shift from the solid, production-oriented, structured confines of modernity to an insecure, individual-driven, flexible way of living in contemporary society. The shift in the culture and the ways in which those shifts change the people living in the culture becomes an ongoing dance where each partner leads for a time.

As those of us living in a postmodern world negotiate our way through a piecemeal society, our assumptions about our place in that society are subtly altered. Angela McRobbie notes, “The reason why postmodernism appeals to a wide number of young people is that they themselves are experiencing the enforced fragmentation of impermanent work and low career opportunities.”¹¹ There is little that is permanent here—not your job, not your home, not your family or your friends. It is the age of the cell phone, the laptop, and the PDA, where the hot desk has replaced the office desk and

the satellite has replaced the landline. While the factory prized production, routine, and teamwork, postmodern industry values speed, innovation, and independence.

The Internet may be the ultimate in pick-and-mix living. Individuals are freed from external institutions, whether they are religious, familial, or business. The individual Web surfer clicks and browses. A virtual screen offers a global world of possibilities to each individual mouse. The surfer can construct his or her identity in a world of chat and e-groups. The Internet never sleeps as all these equal websites, bound together by the egalitarian hyperlink, offer their graphics and text. This is a world of individualized meaning, in which the consumer clicks supreme.

At the heart of this individual pick-and-mix is a search for identity. Sociologists Madan Sarup and Tasneem Raja note, "Millions of people in the world today are searching for 'roots': they go back to the town, the country, or the continent they came from long ago . . . identity is a construction."¹² Nowhere is this more evident than at the mall.

Identity and lifestyle walk hand-in-hand through the malls that define contemporary culture. At the mall you can survey the wide range of identity garments—the hip, the classic, the bold, the subdued, the sweet, the sexy. It is at the mall that we see the extent to which "product image and style and design take over from modern metanarratives the task of conferring meaning."¹³ It is at the mall that you pick and mix your lifestyle. At the same time, the selection isn't as individualized as it sounds. The choices are still pre-selected by powers outside of our control.

Even in the seemingly endless sea of choices, the pessimism of postmodernity bobs to the surface: "I am a 16-year-old girl and I attend a public high school in downtown Colorado Springs. Since childhood my body has been a billboard. Before I could read there were labels on my shoes, on my jeans, and across my bosom."¹⁴

Identity is not just about clothes. It's also about the consumption of experiences in an experience-driven

in the CD player:

"My Culture," *1 Giant Leap*, Palm Pictures, 2001. This is a song about the bittersweet experience of the richness of ancestral identity tempered by the lack of father love. How do we reweave identity in a culture of broken relationships?

on the big screen:

I love the scene in *Whale Rider* when the granddaughter questions her grandfather about their family origins. The grandfather uses the rope to explain how their identity is a weaving together of many strands. The rope is then broken. How do we reweave identity in our contemporary world? *Whale Rider*, directed by Niki Caro, Columbia Tristar, 2003.

the body billboard:

As a visiting storyteller and theologian at the Reel Spirituality Conference in Hollywood in November 1999, I witnessed a young woman—I will always remember the bright green hair—having a moment of self-discovery during a discussion with movie directors. “Look at me,” she said. “I’m a walking advert for the Gap. I wouldn’t know who I was if I didn’t have these logos.” Incidentally, she went on to complain about the way she, and others, were being exploited not only by the McDonaldized culture, but by movie directors who failed to offer young people appropriate alternative role models.

—Olive Drane

economy.¹⁵ The humble coffee bean can be grown as a commodity. It can be converted into a product. It can be sold as a service. Or it can be the center of an experience in a place that defines your identity. Experiences become another accessory the individual consumer can use to compliment a lifestyle.

Identity is also about making our life stories public; I define myself as I tell you who I am. That telling is not always a verbal exchange. Notice how widespread tattoos and body piercing are among the emerging culture. These are visual symbols of experiences, public mementos of a life lived. Ask my friends why they got a tattoo and you will hear part of their story. Ask me why I have three earrings and you’ll discover that each piercing was carefully chosen to assert my identity first as a Christian and then as a minister. In many ways, body modification is the natural offspring of a culture in which identity is found in how we look and the experiences we live out.

Spirituality is another area in which contemporary culture is busy picking and mixing in a consumptive search for individual meaning. In Luhrmann’s introduction, the statues of Jesus are a repeated image. The camera circles us around the outstretched hands of Jesus. Romeo, played by movie star Leonardo DiCaprio, peeks through an open door into a church. Throughout the film, candles glow and white crosses gleam. In Luhrmann’s world, spirituality is a very visible lifestyle option.

Douglas Coupland has written a stream of books from within the emerging culture. Intriguingly, Coupland’s characters often become spiritual, even though Coupland himself has no religious background. They go out into the wilderness and jump naked into freezing cold pools to confess, “My secret is that I need God.”¹⁶ They celebrate Christmas by creating their own experiential spirituality, lighting candles, and covering the whole house with “small moments of intense, flaring beauty”¹⁷ that open up new ways of being family.

The very presence of contemporary spirituality is in rich contrast to the stark secularism of Zeffarelli’s

era. The “God is dead” movement of the 1960s toasted “what-you-see-is-what-you-get” and the triumph of rational objectivity. Yet beneath the peat of disinterest, spirituality smoldered. In the undergrowth, the creators of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files* dreamed. The spark flickers and DiCaprio opens the door to candlelit mystery.

This is both good news and bad news for the church. The good news is that spirituality has not died. The bad news is that the traditional modes of thinking about and talking about Christianity no longer appeal to those living in a changing culture. In today’s pick-and-mix supermarket of spiritual options, people are not often looking for the one big story. People in the post-modern era are not interested in New Age 101 or Introduction to Buddhism any more than they are looking to grab onto the whole biblical metanarrative. Instead, they are simply sampling a meditative technique from here and a healing crystal from there.

Yet in this crisis there is opportunity. We can offer the culture the richness of our Christian heritage—the beauty of new expressions of faith and community that have the power to sustain us in a time of fragmentation.

Tribalism

As our contemporary world breaks apart, new tribes emerge. In Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet*, new tribes are signalled by the newsreader, the chief of police, the modern-day Montague and Capulet families, and the tribal gangs inhabiting the street scene. All of this is in stark contrast to Zeffarelli’s lone tribal representative, the British-sounding male narrator. Postmodern society has been likened to an airport departure lounge. Membership is fluid, as passengers wait for the announcement of a new piece of action.¹⁸

But this metaphor suggests a disconnection, a sense of isolation within postmodern culture, which isn’t completely accurate. In the face of this potential crisis

at home in the city:

One of the most interesting new buildings in England is in the city of Manchester. “Urbis” is home to a significant exhibition of the built environment. (The United Nations predicts that 60 percent of the world population will be urban by 2030.) People like cities, and they like them for different reasons. Cities provide spaces and networks for individuals to connect. According to cliché, you can be lonely in a city. At the same time, it is often easier to create community in a city. Experiences of loneliness and fragmentation encourage people to be intentional about looking for “community.” How can the emerging church look ahead instead of running to catch up? —John and Olive Drane

surfing in cyberland:

Please join the conversation at www.emergentkiwi.org.nz.

the cyberpub:

I had the same experience a few years back when a group of friends created our own "cyberpub." This was an e-mail group that became a regular meeting place for a dozen or so friends whose actual lives, spread across three continents, made physical meetings infrequent. We found ourselves talking with an honesty and directness previously avoided—even though several of us had been friends for many years. During a significant and transitional phase of my life, the "cyberpub" was a genuine discipleship group for me and, at times, the most useful "church" I attended.

—Gerard Kelly

of fragmentation, new forms of community have begun to spring forth. As an experiment in emerging ways of community, I started my own weblog, curious to discover if I would experience more or less community in the virtual world.

The answer has undoubtedly been more. I have seen relationships flourish. I have seen resources shared. I have seen horizons expand. I have even seen people who were once strangers step into each other's lives to offer financial and emotional help in times of difficulty. True, contemporary society does split the metanarrative that we once assumed offered us connection, yet new tribes are finding new ways to attach to each other.

In our contemporary world, individuals are now choosing to come together for the purpose of finding meaning in their lives; the community has become a tool for the individual. Coupland tells of Andy, Clair, and Dag, who travel into the desert "to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process."¹⁹ Together, in a tribal community, they find purpose.

Each of Coupland's ten novels focuses on a tribe, a smaller societal group of individuals who choose to find meaning together. These tribal communities are not necessarily exclusive or anti-generational. In the conclusion of his book, *Generation X*, the main character, Andy, is injured by a bird. A mentally retarded girl notices Andy's injury and proceeds to stroke him "gently with an optimistic and healing staccato caress—it was the faith-healing gesture." Andy is then embraced by all the members of the girl's mentally retarded group of friends, "an instant family, in their adoring, healing, uncritical embrace." As a result, Andy experiences what Coupland calls a "crush of love."²⁰ It is a striking vision of the power of human relationships—even those between seemingly disparate people—to bring redemption.

The ethnic edge

Technology has given us unprecedented access to other tribes—voices and experiences quite removed from our

own. Nelson Mandela writes of meeting a teenage Inuit in Alaska who had seen Mandela's release from imprisonment on Robben Island. "What struck me so forcefully was how small the planet had become . . . Television had shrunk the world."²¹ The universality of electronic media promotes local diversity. Hence, Peter Corney comments that the "contemporary city is a culturally rich and fascinating place, but it also produces a new tribalism of subcultures. Such vast cities are tied together by one factor: the electronic media—which paradoxically both homogenizes and fragments culture."²²

Music is another carrier of the ethnic edge. Cultural historian Steve Redhead describes how over the last 20 years the rock and pop industries have been disturbed by world music.²³ Hip-hop and similar music styles have become mainstream. Because of world music, teenagers are apt to be more connected culturally to teenagers on the other side of the world than to their parents in the next room.

On the other side of this localized diversity is global uniformity. George Ritzer observes how global corporations have used efficiency and the rationalization of "branding" to offer a homogenous and standardized product all around the world.²⁴ This is the global exporting of American culture, a phenomenon Ritzer calls "McDonaldization," that offers everyone everywhere the shared experience of American T-shirts, jeans, sneakers, and fast foods. Whether in China or New York, McDonalds offers a clean toilet and a Big Mac with fries. McDonalds creates an eating experience and trades on the spectacle of an image-based culture. At the same time, McDonalds responds to the edge, adding Spanish style roofs in Little Havana, Miami, and introducing the "Lomu Burger" in New Zealand, named after a local sporting star.

Ironically, the more the world is McDonaldized, the more vociferous the edge becomes and the more the edge and the center meld into one another. The media carry images of protestors who, using the globalizing tools of the Internet and airline travel, accuse global companies

the search for truth:

I don't think Gen-X spirituality is about an individualized search, but a search that's honest and genuine regarding the seeker's individual identity. Gen-Xers are seeking truth—they have just opened up the podium so that everyone has the right to share their truths and be part of defining what the truth is. We have swapped truth as defined by one individual or group for a harmonic truth defined by many voices.

—Kelli Robson

on the bedside table:

John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000, chapter 8.

and organizations of cultural imperialism and economic exploitation. Naomi Klein's protest against globalization, *No Logo*, is now a marketing success story, carried by the technological tide of Web reference.²⁵ The term *glocal* has been used to describe this interplay between global and local.²⁶

On the surface, the influence of the edge sounds like a very good thing. And yet there are cautions. First, beware the global underdog. While contemporary culture stretches around our globe, not all participants feel equally embraced. One dark cloud of uncertainty in this new tribalism is the shadow of fundamentalism. In a fragmented context, the simplicity of black-and-white beliefs is a powerful cocktail, one that can be intoxicating to those who find themselves disenfranchised by the powers that be. Whether Islamic, Hindu, or Christian, conservative religious communities have seen an increase in both the passion and numbers of adherents. In Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, the statues of Jesus are often placed directly between the Capulet and Montague families. The question is tantalizing: Does religion divide or unify?

Second, beware commercializing the edge. Postmodernism has been accused of celebrating the edges and margins in a manner that makes them meaningless. Postmodernism "kills everything that gives meaning and depth to the life of non-Western individuals and societies . . . When non-Western cultural artifacts appear in the West, they do so strictly as ethnic chic or empty symbols."²⁷ Is Western culture visiting the edge and commercializing the margins in a way that hollows out the riches of ancient and diverse cultures?

This is our world. It is the world of the emerging church. It is in this world that we sit, video remote in one hand and gospel in the other. It is in this world that Jesus walks. And in the explosive mix of sound and text and image, new expressions of church and worship are emerging. Christianity in the West is in decline. Yet in the shadows of the ancient statues of Jesus, new and

distinctly Christian approaches to creativity, community, and ritual are being practiced. Christian groups are creatively and imaginatively surfing the postmodern mission edges.

More books

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How do I feel after reading Steve's first "postcard"? I feel informed—Steve is a reliable guide who "feels" things as often as he "understands" them, and I tend to think his feelings can be trusted.

I feel relaxed. This new landscape is what it is. We don't need to fear it, nor demonize it, nor panic that we must instantly respond. We can take our time; listen awhile; wait to hear the whispers of the breeze of God blowing across these new fields.

I feel hopeful. Steve is one of many "playing" at the fringes of this new world, trying hard to pick up its tunes and sing them back; believing all the time that the translatability of God has not out-reached itself, that these tribes can also be a womb for the seed of the gospel. I'm looking forward to the journey—and the postcards that will follow.

—Gerard Kelly