

# Branch and Leaves from the Sequoia Tree: My Kerala Christian Diaspora Experience

Shaun Joykutty\*

## Introduction

My Christian diaspora experience is reminiscent of Herman Melville's 1851 classic *Moby-Dick*. In my version, however, I am the obsessed captain chasing an intangible, my identity. "Astringent nomenclature!" I imagine myself saying: "You can't get away from me, I'll straddle you from behind and drive my arrow deep into your abominable scabbard." Another version of imagining is that the monster shrank and vanished as I approached it, but it's never far enough away. My irritation and stress levels rise as I approach the point where I believe I have correctly discovered or approximated this sinister enigma, but then it vanishes. This is how I felt growing up in two cultures.

It is challenging to navigate between your parents' native country and their new culture (American) without the Christian foundation. No matter how you accommodate their heritage and traditional values, you cannot avoid the West's internal and external influence on how people perceive you. As a Western-born native child, the "diaspora experience" was bittersweet. Consequently, there were occasions when the ground beneath my feet felt foreign. The pull, in either direction, was applied so frequently that my genuine self became distorted.

The more I grappled with this conundrum, the happier I had become that I was thrown into the Christian faith at a young age. I found the countenance of Christ the Redeemer both redemptive and mighty, it cleared up the murky, aggravated the powerful, and plowed disdain on both sides of the Atlantic. I found out that the concepts given by Christ are flawless. Accordingly, my lens was revived and created afresh. The arbitrary became intentional in thought and action. The conflict between the two cultures became irrelevant because the struggle to find myself took a backseat since Christ was the driver, and I heard Him say, "Yes, there is a struggle, and it is crucial, but do it for Me."

Growing up in the American Midwest, I recall fighting with my parents over insignificant aspects of their native culture during my childhood. "Why should I rise when senior citizens or elders enter the room?" "What do you mean we have no dating tradition?" "Why do I need to learn Malayalam?" However, my campaign against them was unsuccessful because I sensed a voice saying, "Do it for Me." "Honor your parents, for you shall prosper."

The image of Christ upon me was unquestionably transformative, as Christ led me. My worldview shifted from conforming to society's mundane desires to becoming an agent of change. I began to inquire, "Heavenly Father, this is your world; you created it; please help me to comprehend it." I began to realize, in a practical sense, that

everything God created and manifested is based on a systemic approach involving interconnected systems. All I needed to do was go out and learn it, understand it, and practice it.

## Coming to America

My parents' immigration to the United States (US) in the 1970s was remarkable. My mother was the story's protagonist (Aleyamma Joykutty). She was the second of seven daughters raised in the wild tribal regions of Wynad (Kerala), India, by two school teachers. She was responsible for her homestead and her siblings despite her youth. However, she desired more for herself. And she took up the cause of nursing education and fled to North India (Delhi). There, she met my father, a Malayali from Kottarakara who was serving in the Indian military in Delhi.

My mother believed she was content with her new family (Dad, Mom, and a newborn daughter), but she wanted more and applied to hospitals abroad in search of better opportunities. She eventually qualified for a work visa to work in a US hospital and immigrated alone in the mid-1970s.

The 1970s were a time of social, political, and economic chaos in the US. Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations brought the US to a critical juncture. The federal minimum wage at the time was approximately \$2.00 per hour<sup>5</sup> and the country faced a nursing shortage<sup>6</sup>. Perhaps, a 2004 book on the 1970s, *America in the Seventies* says it best, "It was an age of limits and an age of excess...A time of high drama in which sexual liberationists and Gospel Hour devotees, Mohawked punks and disco dancers, furious displaced steel workers and new women professionals, Sunbelt and Rustbelt, white ethnics and people of color, all struggled to define America and to secure a future on a shifting cultural and economic ground."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> US Department of Labor. *DOL*.

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history#:~:text=The%20minimum%20wage%20went%20to,and%20%241.60%20in%20February%201971>. Accessed 3 November, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Medicine (US) Division of Health Care Services. *Nursing and Nursing Education: Public Policies and Private Actions*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 1983. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK218548/> doi: 10.17226/1120

<sup>3</sup> Beth Bailey and David Farber, *America in the Seventies* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004)

My Malayali immigrant mother became the archetypal "fish out of water." Everything was new to her: people of various cultures and skin tones; spoken English was so distinct that several things were lost in translation; and, among other things, American traditions were more nuanced. Her exceptional work ethic and faith in God, however, remained constant. She transitioned from a contract nurse to a full-time nurse at her workplace. And enough funds were saved to bring my father to the US while my sister remained with her family. I was born in the US, though I grew up in my mother's household in Kerala during my early years. My sister and I moved to the US permanently a couple of years later.

Our home away from home in the US was the newly established Mar Thoma community in Chicago. In the US, Malayali families were well-established, and they lived happily ever after. However, this was not our situation. We were surrounded by Christian Keralites who shared our struggles as new immigrants to the US, pursuing the "American Dream."

My sister and I attended private Christian schools in the US. Still, we were also raised on a steady diet of American television shows, including "I Love Lucy," "The A-Team," "MacGyver," "Magnum PI," "Little House on the Prairie," and many others. However, we also acquired a genuine taste for Indian films and songs from our father (late Ayroor G. Joykutty), specifically Malayalam films and old Hindi songs. My father sought to escape the US culture by immersing himself in Indian cinema and music.

My father was raised in India shortly after its independence. When reminiscing about India, he discussed the political, economic, and social upheavals and food shortages.<sup>8</sup> Even though India was taking baby steps after nationhood, he stated that the country was governed by ideology rather than practical considerations. He spent his adolescence and teenage years taking care of his extended family after his brother's death, much like my mother did for her family. At that time, my father had two options: to continue his education or to look for work to support his family. He enlisted in the army to provide for his loved ones.

My immigrant father compensated for his lack of formal education with a firm understanding of human nature and motivations. After working as a machine operator for several years in the US, he got tired of authority and someone supervising his time. And in the early 1990s, he be-

---

<sup>4</sup> Vikram Doctor. "Recollecting India's frantic efforts to end starvation after independence" *The Economic Times*, Jan 26, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/recollecting-indias-frantic-efforts-to-end-starvation-after-independence/articleshow/73618277.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed 26 October, 2022.

came an entrepreneur and opened a small Indian spice and convenience store<sup>9</sup>.

### Our Store

Owning a business is like getting married for the sake of your career. However, I have learned priceless lessons from this experience. In the first five years, it is estimated that roughly half of all new businesses fail.<sup>10</sup> Our fifteen years of business ownership ended when we sold the store. However, those fifteen years were not quiet. We tirelessly toiled to make the business successful. Working the typical 9am–5pm doesn't work here, as business owners know well. Extended hours are standard and occasionally required for good results. This mindset has proved to be beneficial for my own professional career.

My father was a natural saver who only spent money on things and people that helped him achieve his goals, either out of need or habit. Even though I cannot fully agree with his goals, I agree with his approach to keep the store's economics simple. Our key goals were to keep income above costs, avoid debt, and save consistently. We lacked advanced cost accounting methodologies and fancy accounting instruments.

### Growing Pains

We started to figure out how to balance our new lives in the US, and were slowly learning the rhythms of American life and living in the middle of two cultures. But do you remember how my parents loved and supported their extended families when they were younger? Well, their philosophical, romantic nostalgia for their remaining siblings and families never wavered. During the course of our family's history, my sister and I understood the competition between our parents for supporting relatives.

My mother's four sisters and their families arrived in the US in the late 1990s and early 2000s, following my mother's filing under the family visa category. By this time, my sister was away in college, and guess who remained to cater to all my parent's wishes? The voice I heard before came back and said, "Yes, there is a struggle, and it is crucial, but do it for Me." Before this "*new relatives in America*" episode, my life was already a whirlwind of organized chaos. In addition to my studies and helping out at my father's store, I was actively involved in the Chicago Mar Thoma Church, where I taught Sunday School and VBS, directed plays, sang in the choir, coordinated outreach programs for youth, and organized our regional youth conference, picked and dropped off Achens and

---

<sup>5</sup> "Joy Food and Gifts", 9186 W. Golf Road, Niles, Illinois 60714

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Carter. "The True Failure Rate of Small Businesses" *Entrepreneur*, January 3, 2021, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/starting-a-business/the-true-failure-rate-of-small-businesses/361350>. Accessed 3 November, 2022.

Thirumenis, all while, assisting our Vicar as a primary English lay leader.

Nevertheless, I had to help my parents in settling the new family immigrants to the US. So, in addition to the responsibilities listed above, I was tasked with assisting our new relatives and their children with their job searches and adjustment to life in the US. Our house was sometimes crammed with 15-22 cousins and other relatives. Everyone needed to get a green card, a driver's license, and a Social Security number right away. I was transporting people, which included dropping off and picking up passengers en route to and from various locations (such as job interviews, schools, and errands), as well as tutoring and mentoring. I was the facilitator for my extended family's transition to life in the US.

During this time, the challenges posed by this environment were significant. Due to various familial issues, I had to stay behind and take care of our store and household while my parents traveled to India for my sister's marriage. The cycle of caring for relatives, attending to my studies, and taking care of our household and the store resumed. Was all of this normal for an average US teenager? I don't know. I can assume, while others enjoyed their leisurely hours frolicking with friends and pursuing hobbies and girlfriends, I had to manage our family environment.

### **Marriage**

Between the ages of 14 and 22, my life was devoted to helping my parents/relatives, our family store, and the Chicago Mar Thoma Church in many ways. But the voice that said, "But, do it for Me" now said, "Now work on yourself." I spent the next few years focusing on my studies and career. I figured God probably wanted me out of this cycle.

Neither time nor energy allowed me to seek out female companionship. Those that cared came to me, saw that I was juggling too many tasks at once, and went elsewhere. To some extent, I attribute their departure to the advice given to me by a Mar Thoma Achen, whose teachings have served as the bedrock around which I have built my worldview. Of course, I'm paraphrasing here, but he said something like, "Shaun, you were born here; you have the education; you have the freedom and talents. Even though you can express your emotions to any girl in the US, hold off for a little. If you believe that God has a purpose for your life, perhaps you could return to India and consider getting married to someone who is not as affluent but comes from a good family. All you have to do is give them a chance." And that is what I did! I tied the knot in the Indian state of Kerala in January 2003.

### **What I have Learned**

Do I advocate that US residents ready to marry do so in India? I have absolutely no idea. It depends on the person's upbringing and viewpoints. Perhaps women find the hardships and compromises more complicated than men and thus skip this path entirely. Another thing I learned was the importance of never giving up my agency for parents,

friends, relatives, workplace, or mentorship. Your agency is solely yours. The battles you wage against the world exist for a purpose; never allow someone to take away your right to fight.

Carl Jung and other psychiatrists refer to this phenomenon as the *Regressive Restoration of the Persona*. We must distinguish God's image from that of our parents. Their nature and culture cannot significantly impact our lives. We must be sufficiently self-reliant, robust, and unattached so that when the time comes for battle, we will be the ones to lead the charge. Don't worry excessively about the outcome; let the Holy Spirit guide you, and have faith in God's plan.

Doing what is challenging is another principle that I suggest. Do not limit yourself by accepting the status quo. It's essential to recognize that there will be challenges and pains in life, but we're responsible for growing beyond them. And finally, I urge you to make a habit of planting productive seeds. I mean, we need to put effort into the present to reap benefits in the future. Methods of self-discipline may include but are not limited to, regular reading and exercise. Create a foundation of good practices today that will serve you and others well in the future.

### **Fruits of Labor**

Everything that led me to this point, from long work hours to constantly delayed gratifications, was for a purpose. Children of my first-generation relatives who arrived recently and took advantage of the American Dream are a source of pride for me. There are Doctors, Pharmacists, Respiratory Therapists, highly skilled Nurses, Transportation Services managers, IT specialists, and Entrepreneurs in my extended family. And they are also learning to navigate between two cultures.

The Lord has also granted me two exceptional brothers-in-law. They assumed burdens and responsibilities that I believed were mine alone to bear. Their caring attitudes and consistent vigor have given me a tranquil disposition.

### **Conclusion**

So, is this the identity that I struggled to comprehend? It is irrelevant; my identity is in Christ. His inner voice, which stated, "Do it for Me," has provided me with a solid foundation. He alone is sufficient and I will follow where He leads.

*\*Shaun Joykuttu works as a program expert for the US Department of Labor in Washington DC. Shaun and family are members of the Immanuel Mar Thoma Church, Virginia.*

---

<sup>7</sup> Regressive restoration of the persona. In: Jung, C., *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 7. 2nd ed., Princeton University Press, 1966. 349 p. (p. 163-168)