

Growing in Grace: Formation Perspectives

Wem WAIOLAIHUI'IA CENTER for MINISTRY *For all God's people*

The Gift of the Sturdy Flexible Container

By The Rev. Cn. Andrew J. Arakawa, Canon for Ministry Formation

On my flight from Honolulu to Auckland, I saw a film I highly recommend – *Tinā*. The 2025 film, directed by Miki Magasiva, is the story of Mareta, a Samoan teacher devastated by the loss of her daughter in an earthquake, who takes on a substitute teaching role at an exclusive private school in Christchurch, New Zealand. The film was so moving that I was in tears for most of it.

Its storyline offered me another opportunity to reflect on the structures, systems, and spaces in our society, our institutions, and our worshipping communities. The students in the film are continually pushed toward destructive perfectionism. This drive takes a toll on their physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational health, all in the name of exceptional achievement. The rigidity of the school's systems, which prioritize rules and tradition over well-being, connection, and grace, leaves students feeling unsafe and vulnerable. In contrast, Mareta builds a sturdy yet flexible container in which they can live, move, and have their being, offering the safety of knowing where they are going alongside the freedom to be emergent. This reminded me of something that was mentioned in a recent discussion group I facilitated. One of the participants recalled a sign in a restaurant that boldly stated the sentiment, “The goal stays the same. The plan can always change.”

The film's critique naturally leads to the question of how we define success and achievement in our own institutions and worshipping communities. What truly is important to us? Where can we find grace in our systems and rules? I often turn to historian Jonathan Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio's standard for achievement and success: “Careful conservation, sharing resources, cooperation and consensus, honoring ancestors, protocols that demonstrate respect for one another, and a definition of wealth that is indicated by family relations, healthy lifestyles, and community connections along with monetary security.” Echoing this wisdom, conversations across our diocese consistently affirm that covenantal relationality is foundational to who we are as a community. This prompts us to ask: How do we truly come together as one diocese? How do we cultivate enough safety to take big risks with one another?

In this light, *Tinā* offers several powerful messages about covenantal relationships and communal well-being that resonate deeply with who we hope to be as a denomination:

1. Healing happens in relationship, not in isolation.
2. Community thrives when gifts are shared, not hoarded.
3. Challenging rigid systems is an act of love.

Ultimately, the journey toward becoming a community defined by covenantal relationality requires a conscious choice to embrace grace over rigidity. By considering the lessons of *Tinā* and the wisdom of Osorio's standard, which measures wealth by healthy relationships and community connection, we can move away from destructive perfectionism. The challenge for our institutions and communities is to build that sturdy yet flexible container, ensuring we have the safety to be vulnerable and the freedom to take the big risks that foster genuine healing and shared flourishing.

Growing in Grace – Formation Perspectives seeks to cultivate a community of lifelong learners as disciples of Christ within our diocese. The articles offer resources, share formation stories, and give updates on the Waiolaihui'ia Center for Ministry. Please reach out to the Rev. Canon Andrew Arakawa if you have story ideas or resources that can add to this ongoing conversation: arakawa@episcopalhawaii.org.