

Spring 2018

Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry

Let's Talk: Confronting Our Divisions



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From the Dean's Desk



Gregory E. Sterling
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I am deeply concerned that we are losing the capacity to have sustained conversations about our differences.

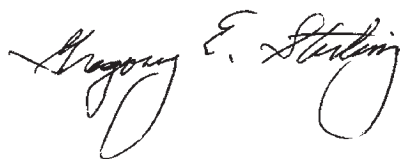
This is happening across society. Academic freedom on university campuses is being eroded in light of larger societal pressures and movements. You do not believe in academic freedom unless you are willing to defend the right of someone to speak with whom you disagree.

Churches face the same pressures as the academy – perhaps more so. There are centrifugal forces that are threatening to tear churches apart or to sequester us into monochrome and monolithic units. Will we have red churches and blue churches or will we have churches that are mixed? Will we have black churches and white churches or will we have integrated churches? I attended the most recent General Conference of the United Methodist Church in Portland OR, in the summer of 2016. There were two sides – quite literally – that lined up to speak about the ordination of same-sex clergy. Someone made the reasonable motion that each district should make the decision, a suggestion that was rejected. The centrifugal forces clearly outweighed the centripetal forces. The United Methodists are far from alone in this struggle.

I am not suggesting that we improve our talking skills only. We acutely need to learn how to work through differences rather than exacerbate or ignore them. One of the reactions to the phenomenon of global awareness is the creation of hermetically sealed existences in which we preprogram all that we hear to conform to our tastes and ideologies. We can preprogram our music, listen to select news outlets that brazenly promote a particular agenda, and exclude the voices of others, others who do not see the world in the same way that we do.

I think about the tensions that existed in the early church between a group of Pharisaic Christians who insisted that Gentile Christians keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:1-5) and Paul who insisted that they were under no obligation to do so (Gal 2:1-10). As described in the Acts of the Apostles, the early church found a way to mediate by stipulating that Gentile Christians observe four practices that would enable them to have table fellowship with Jewish Christians (Acts 15:20, 28; 21:25). Acts takes a centrist view that endeavors to emphasize the unity of the movement. This perspective is in minimal supply today.

This issue of *Reflections* explores how a group of talented scholars, clergy, and concerned others are wrestling with this urgent matter. Whether we think of the political world, the academic world, the world of churches, or even relationships within our own families, we must find ways to address our differences openly, candidly, and sensibly. What is at stake is the concept of community and what it means to be a community big enough and healthy enough to tolerate divergent perspectives and learn from them.



Gregory E. Sterling, Dean



At prayer, Lourdes, France, 1994
Photo by Ferdinando Scianna
© Ferdinando Scianna/Magnum Photos

Risky Dialogue



By Jennifer A. Herdt

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven ..." (Matthew 5:43-45).

"Attribution biases," social psychologists call them. These are, unhappily, rather common forms of the political distortions that plague us — common forms of systematic cognitive bias.

One is called "self-serving attribution bias," the tendency to attribute our successes to ourselves, and our failures to others and to situational factors.¹

Its collective form, "group-serving bias," is the inclination to credit internal factors for the successes of our in-group and external factors for the failures of our in-group, while reversing the pattern of attribution where out-groups are concerned.² When my team wins, it is because we deserve to win; when our rivals win, it is because the referee favored them or because we had so many injured players.

Then there is "group attribution error," whereby the in-group makes broad generalizations about out-groups based on very few observations, even as no such generalizations are made where the in-group is concerned.³ Group attribution error seems to play a large role in patterns of prejudice and discrimination, as for instance when recent immigrant groups are viewed as dirty or violent. This should be discomfiting. It should pull us up short, lead us to question the confidence with which we issue judgments of ourselves and others.

Puzzling Over Hard Sayings

It is not for nothing that "love your enemies" has been termed a "hard saying." I recall puzzling over it as a child: "An enemy is someone you hate," I reasoned. "So if we are supposed to love our enemies, then we aren't supposed to *have* any enemies." But surely this was wrong: Enemies exist no matter how deeply I might think we shouldn't have them. An enemy is someone who is actively opposed or hostile to what I hold dear, and sometimes we are called

to stand up for what we love. And yet we are also to love our enemy. So what does it mean to love our enemies, even as we name them as enemies and stand up for what our enemies despise and attack? And how might awareness of attribution biases transform this task?

Yankees vs. Red Sox

My in-groups are simply those social groups with which I identify. What counts as an in-group is as variable and malleable as personal identity. One person's in-groups might be Yankee fans, Irish Catholics, and environmentalists. Another's might be women, academics, and Starbucks aficionados. Chances are, the groups I identify as enemies I will

Naming and repenting our in-group biases must become, I venture, part of the discipline of loving our enemies.

also regard as out-groups. This means that my assessments of my enemies are likely to be systematically deformed by attribution errors.

Naming and repenting these biases must become, I venture, part of the discipline of loving our enemies. The challenge of loving those who are hostile to what we hold dear is the challenge of seeing them not simply as out-groups but always also as a part of a potentially larger in-group with which we identify.

This is what Martin Luther King Jr. meant, I think, in urging us always to keep in view the end of build-

ing the Beloved Community. “It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends,” said King, following the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. “It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”⁴

We are called into the fellowship of the divine life, called to be – *together with our enemies* – friends of God. And this means that our opponents should be addressed as potential allies and eventually even

We are called into the fellowship of the divine life, called to be – together with our enemies – friends of God.

friends: Our engagements with them should not simply be for the purposes of scoring points, of seeing to it that we win and they lose, but toward the end, however unfathomably distant, of friendship.⁵

What is This Prayer?

This goal, this hope, ought to discipline the means we employ in its pursuit. Above all, we are to pray for our enemies. What is this prayer? It is an opening up of ourselves to see our enemies as God sees them, to love them as God’s beloved children, rebellious and imperfect as we ourselves. It is to open ourselves up to grasping what our enemies most love and what they most fear, to grasping our common humanity, our shared finitude and fallibility and tainted goodness, our shared attribution biases.

There are times, to be sure, when dialogue is not an option, and we must fight, or run, or loudly lament. Even then, we must pray for our enemies, and we must act with a view to opening lines of dialogue, however remote this may seem in that moment. Our target is injustice and enmity, not our enemy.

Dialogue with enemies can of course be risky, which is one reason we shy away from it. It can seem pointless to listen to those who themselves are unwilling to listen, who only seek to control and overwhelm us – particularly when power lies in their hands. It can feel, indeed, like giving away the only remaining power I have – that of shutting my ears to their lies, of refusing to engage.

Making Allies

But displaying a commitment to dialogue is powerful, not weak. Even when it does not transform enemies into friends, it attracts allies, who perceive your commitment to treating others as worthy of respect, who see your willingness to take risks and make sacrifices for the sake of something higher than self-interest and lust for power, and who there-

fore trust you as a person of integrity, as someone who stands for her commitments.⁶

Precisely because any such effort oriented to building trust and community is powerful, it sometimes becomes a target of the powerful. They rightly see it as a threat to their continued amassing of power. So they deliberately sow lies, or denounce and belittle those who speak the truth.

How, in beleaguered conditions, do we continue loving our enemies? How do we go on working to expand the Beloved Community, to build networks of trust? We take the risk – the risk of exposing our own attribution errors, of being as ready to confess distortion in our own judgments as to diagnose theirs. And we continue to display ourselves as trustworthy friends, who by refusing to abandon the weak show themselves to be strong. For we remind ourselves that we follow Christ crucified, the foolishness and weakness revealed as God’s own wisdom and strength (1 Cor. 1:23-25).

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Notes

- 1 E. Pronin, D.Y. Lin, and L. Ross, “The Bias Blind Spot: Perceptions of Bias in Self Versus Others,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28.3 (2002), pp. 369-381.
- 2 D. M. Taylor and J.R. Doria, “Self-Serving and Group-Serving Bias in Attribution,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 113.2 (1981), pp. 201-211.
- 3 S. T. Allison and D. M. Messick, “The Group Attribution Error,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 21.6 (1985), pp. 563-579.
- 4 Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches* (HarperOne, 2003), p. 140.
- 5 Jeffrey Stout, “Dialogical Democracy: King, Michnik, and the American Culture Wars,” forthcoming in a volume edited by Piotr H. Kosicki and Kyrill Kunakhovich, and published by Central European University Press.
- 6 Danielle Allen has analyzed the ways in which risk and sacrifice can build trust in *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 154-155.



Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware is a member of the Senate Appropriations, Foreign Relations, Judiciary, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Ethics committees. He is known for his bipartisan efforts in the Senate to solve national problems.

When I appear on TV for an interview, a small banner typically appears across the screen, identifying me as US Sen. Chris Coons, a Democrat, from Delaware.

Sometimes, the banner will include that I'm a member of one committee or another, that I'm the sponsor of this bill or that one, or that I've just voted for or against a particular piece of legislation.

But that's it.

That's all the viewer, whether they're a Delawarean watching the news after dinner or a student in New Haven keeping up with current events, is told about the person who's speaking on the screen.

It doesn't say anything about my family or my values, my strengths or my weaknesses. As far as I'm concerned, describing me as just "a Democrat from Delaware" doesn't scratch the surface of who I am and what I believe in, but anyone, including my colleagues, could be forgiven for assuming I'm little more than what's listed on the screen: Senator, Democrat, Delawarean.

As Americans, we're viewing each other more and more through overly simplified, inadequate, and divisive indicators – as urban or rural, white collar or blue collar, religious or agnostic. The list goes on.

Because of that, we're missing the more difficult, more complicated, and more accurate pictures of people who aren't just our political allies or enemies, but our fellow citizens.

In the Senate, we've found one small way to try and counteract that.

It isn't the product of a bill, a commission, or a committee. It's actually pretty simple: Once a week, a bipartisan group of two dozen of us get together, pray together, sing together, and most importantly, listen to each other at something called the Senate Prayer Breakfast.

It takes place on Wednesday mornings in a small, tucked-away room on the first floor of the Capitol. We don't talk about policy, and we definitely don't talk about politics. Instead, we talk about who we are beyond the clipped, cable news biographies written about us. We talk about our fears, our hopes, our challenges, and our families, not as legislators or politicians, but as people. The Senate Prayer Breakfast is about seeing each other as more than a Democrat from Delaware or a Republican from

Oklahoma (as my breakfast co-chair, Sen. James Lankford, might be described on cable TV).

What we do every Wednesday morning is seek out the real people behind those simplistic labels, the man or woman with whom we'll have to have difficult conversations on the Senate floor or the committee room later that day. That can be hard for anyone, and it's only possible through a willingness to be truly honest and even vulnerable not only to friends, but also rivals and enemies. That's what makes the Senate Prayer Breakfast different from a congressional delegation trip or running into a colleague in the Senate gym: the attitude of humility and trust with which we open our hearts to the work of the spirit.

The point is that a difficult conversation with a stranger, or even worse, someone about whom you know nothing more than their political affiliation, isn't likely to go well. If instead, that difficult conversation is with someone you've prayed with, confided in, and trusted with your own challenges and worries, I'll submit that you're more likely to find a way forward, to compromise, or at the very least, to amicably agree to disagree.

So, as a member of Congress, a famously dysfunctional organization with approval ratings in the teens, allow me to suggest that much of the important work that goes into successful "difficult conversations" is actually done before the conversation itself. They often don't need to be as difficult as they are.

If we actively choose to seek out those that we're likely to disagree with, whose backgrounds and profiles are different than our own, we're more likely to see our assumptions about them proven wrong than confirmed. We're more likely to find a person not so dissimilar from ourselves, with their own perspective but a shared humanity.

If we, as Hebrews 10:24-25 suggests, "consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another," we might find that our difficult conversations are more about our ignorance of one another than the divisions between us.

Most weeknights, after busy days of meetings, hearings, and votes, I take the train home from Washington to Wilmington to be with my family, sleep in my own bed, and get ready to do it all over again in the morning.

On Tuesday nights, though, I usually stay overnight in Washington, so that I can be at the Capitol at 8 a.m. to see my colleagues, hold their hands in prayer, and try to see them for who they truly are.



Paris street, 2001 – discussion or dispute?

Photo by Richard Kalvar

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Can We All Get Along?



By Kaji Douša '06 M.Div.

One of the most powerful tasks we are charged with as a church is to inspire the imaginations of the people we reach. We get to play the profound role of telling the story of God and helping them to know that they are written into that story, too.

As we paint a picture of what God intends for their world to look like, I pray that we are guided by the Holy Spirit and not something else, that we are following Jesus and not someone else, and that we are rooted in the truth of the Scriptures and not some lesser force.

Until All are Free

How then can we faithfully rally our imaginations around unity and oneness as God would fashion them?

I speak from my own personal history as a Black woman in America. But the claims I make are not meant to be exclusive to my communities. Instead, I speak from the presupposition of intersectionality, the idea that all liberation is connected and that one cannot be free unless all are free.

I am reminded that I have given my life to an institutional faith that, for so much of its history, was designed to exclude me from this role ... and structured to indemnify my sense of self so that I would not question my lesser place or my restricted access to power ... claimed not long ago a good

The rush to the language of reconciliation can feel akin to a rush to a court settlement to avoid going to trial.

section of my ancestors to be less than human ... made ontological arguments to separate my personhood from my call from God ... and failed to acknowledge its own role in my community's daily struggles to live in a hostile environment "under the sentence of death," as James Cones puts it, even

though God has already made a choice in the matter to side with the oppressed.

What I adore about church, though, is this: We give people connections to the holy and oppressed people of Israel for whom God made a way out of no way. Church produces an imagination that remembers the goodness of God even in a dry and arid land, even in a dangerous swamp.

Derangements of Power

The power to shape imaginations is a profound and holy privilege that, unfortunately, has fallen subject to the power of sin throughout the history of the church.

Theologian Emilie Townes writes of the "fantastic hegemonic imagination," by which a power structure creates fantasies as a means of controlling the world in its own image and keeping structural evil in place.

"It is most important to note that the fantastic hegemonic imagination is in all of us," she writes in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). "It is found in the privileged and the oppressed. ... None of us naturally escape it, for it is found in the deep cultural codings we live with and through in US society."

If this imagination is in all of us, how can church counter it? As we imagine what unity means, have we done the work to undo the hegemonic imagination so that, when we become one, we are One with God, not one with something else, something less?

I join Jesus in praying "that they may all be one" (John 17). I also have to agree with liberation theologians who teach that reconciliation will not be possible until we free Christianity itself from satanic

forces of oppression. Until the harm against the oppressed has been redressed, until all are protected in Jesus' name, then, it seems, even Jesus knew that unity wouldn't happen yet.

This means that we Christians have much more work to do even to understand who the "they" Jesus referred to might be. To anyone who sees God as one who has taken sides in the struggle of the op-

Church produces an imagination that remembers the goodness of God even in an arid land, even in a dangerous swamp.

pressed, the rush to the language of reconciliation can feel akin to a rush to a court settlement to avoid going to trial.

What is Unity, Exactly?

Yes, we gather in the spirit of unity. But questions persist. Who is asking for this unity? Who is initiating the conversation of oneness? What agenda do they serve? What are the norms that define the oneness? Who is strongest in the crowd of many? Who's accepted and rejected? What is our collective history of "oneness" in the USA? In the "West"? In global Christianity? Do our conversations about "unity" and "reconciliation" reinforce a "generic" Christianity that manages to serve the dominant? Does reconciliation practically mean assimilation?

How can the church offer something different?

"In Christ there is no east or west" doesn't mean east and west don't exist. It means that where we can't seem to surmount oppression and power perversions, Christ can.

Remember that the church that most of us inherited was one that helped give theological justification for the enslavement of Africans. Changing this required revolution. And even then, through the white version of the abolition movement, there was still no lasting place for my people at their table.

Why should liberation be so dangerous? What would it take for liberation to happen in a beautiful, safe meadow? Let's reach for the power and freedom of reimagining liberation. This is how we subvert the fantastic hegemonic imagination. This is how a faith upturns the tables in the Temple.

But this will take some real work. Any church that takes the faith of Jesus Christ seriously will ask: How can we give things up so that this world – this nation, neighborhood, congregation – is safe for anyone who might need to wander inside it?

I title these remarks with the historic 1992 Rodney King case in mind. King was brutally beaten by Los Angeles police after a high-speed chase. Though the beating was caught on video, a white jury soon acquitted the officers. Riots erupted in the wake of the verdict. A shocked nation was forced to confront truths about how dangerous it is to be Black in America, and how our assumptions of justice, law, and order can be quite different depending on our interactions with oppression.

"I just want to say – you know – can we all get along?" King asked out of grief and frustration. Yet even he did not seem to understand the brewing anger, the community hopelessness triggered by yet another familiar example of how "justice" was never designed to include the people rioting. The naïveté of Rodney King's question holds special resonance in church spaces that push for a unity they have not yet earned.

Listening to Jesus

A famous theological mandate declares, "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity."

If this hopeful declaration is to do more than continue status quo sin and injustice, then we need to redefine how we imagine unity, liberty, and charity. God is counting on us to do better – and build an

Any church that takes the faith of Jesus Christ seriously will ask: How can we give things up so that this world – this nation, neighborhood, congregation – is safe for anyone who might need to wander inside it?

imagination that holds fast to the eschatological promise of the Oneness God intends for us.

What this means is that this Oneness is not going to involve making the dominant more comfortable, in society or in church. It will mean the same kind of radical transformation many of us invite into our lives during, say, Lent, involving prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Freedom from our sin will mean giving up quite a bit while we gain ... everything.

Kaji Douša 'o6 M.Div. is senior pastor of historic Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City, where she continues a public witness as preacher, writer, and immigration advocate. She serves on the Alumni Board of YDS and on the editorial board for the United Church of Christ's Stillspeaking Writers' Group.

WHEN GIVING IS ALL WE HAVE

By Alberto Ríos

*One river gives
Its journey to the next.*

We give because someone gave to us.
We give because nobody gave to us.

We give because giving has changed us.
We give because giving could have changed us.

We have been better for it,
We have been wounded by it –

Giving has many faces: It is loud and quiet,
Big, though small, diamond in wood-nails.

Its story is old, the plot worn and the pages too,
But we read this book, anyway, over and again:

Giving is, first and every time, hand to hand,
Mine to yours, yours to mine.

You gave me blue and I gave you yellow.
Together we are simple green. You gave me

What you did not have, and I gave you
What I had to give – together, we made

Something greater from the difference.

OUR COMMON HUMANITY

By Peter Salovey '82 M.S., '83 M.Phil., '86 Ph.D.



Peter Salovey '82 M.S., '83 M.Phil., '86 Ph.D. is the 23rd president of Yale University and the Chris Argyris Professor of Psychology. His research focuses on the connection between human emotion and health behavior. He was dean

of Yale College from 2004-08, then Yale provost before becoming president in 2013.

As Yale scholars, investigators, teachers, and students, we are dedicated to creating new knowledge and fresh insights about the world around us. This often means we try to distinguish our viewpoints from our predecessors or peers. We may say, "In contrast to the work of Professor X, I argue ...," or "Unlike Investigator Y, my findings show ..." Such disagreements among scholars can generate exciting ideas and spur innovation.

But what happens when differences of opinion turn toxic? What is the effect on the commonwealth when we only hear news and views that support beliefs we already hold? First, we miss out on the opportunity to learn from others. And furthermore, we begin to demonize those with different opinions, assuming the worst about them and their intentions.

Hearing different viewpoints – especially those with which we strongly disagree – is challenging, but it is as critical for a university as it is for our democracy. In the past, I have spoken about the need for careful listening and developing nuanced views of complex issues. Doing both requires us to connect with others, seeing even our opponents as fully human and deserving of our engagement. In short, it requires empathy and an affirmation of our common humanity.

A few years ago, Bill Clinton '73 J.D. was invited to speak at Yale College Class Day. He described a world desperately in need of compassion, wisdom, and leadership. And, as all good Class Day speakers do, he urged the audience to give their time and talents to something important.

I was particularly struck by one anecdote he shared. He recounted how, when scientists finished the sequencing of the human genome, they discovered that all living people are over 99 percent identical in our genetic makeup. Genetic variations between human beings account for less than 1 percent of our differences. President Clinton told the Class of 2010: "My basic belief is the only way that you can make the most of the world that lies before you is to believe that, as interesting and fascinating and profoundly important as all of our diversities are, our common humanity matters more."

Faith traditions, too, remind us of what we share with others. Last year in my baccalaureate address,

I described Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu scriptures that all contained passages telling us to welcome strangers. For example, the Torah states: "Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." The exhortation to empathy is clear: Because we share how it feels to be an outsider, we should show mercy and kindness to other, so-called outsiders.

Science tells us that we are far more alike than we are different, and religious texts urge us to recognize the experiences we share with others. And yet our political and civic world is marked by division, strife, and intolerance.

As I learn more about Pauli Murray '65 J.S.D., '79 Hon. D.Div., I am inspired by her endlessly constructive and creative approach to life. Last fall, I wrote about her efforts to convince Yale to allow George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama, to speak on campus. No one could have opposed Wallace's racist views more strongly than Murray, and yet she spoke up for his rights. Throughout her life, Murray insisted on the rights, dignity, and value of all people. That bedrock belief in our shared humanity motivated her to help marginalized and underprivileged people. She also took the time to engage with wealthy, powerful people who did not always share her beliefs. Her personal papers contain hundreds of letters with people high and low, with leaders and servants of all stripes and political persuasions.

"I want to spend my time finding the common denominator of mankind, and prejudice and hatred [are] an emotional waste," she explained.

Educators across disciplines have an obligation to seek out opposing viewpoints, thereby challenging ourselves and testing our ideas. We must remind ourselves continually of what we share with other people, despite differing opinions. And we must ensure that our classrooms and our campus are places where difficult, thought-provoking conversations can take place. We must engage as much as possible with our neighbors beyond Yale, searching for our common humanity everywhere.

Pauli Murray continued a lifetime of service by becoming an Episcopal priest. She said she hoped to contribute to "the possibility of reconciliation," in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr. "If this country is to survive, we must live together in harmony and we must live together in a spirit of harmony," Murray said. "We cannot survive as a divided country."

I agree. The work of reconciliation can begin with affirming the dignity of all people and seeing ourselves in them.



Women demonstrating for peace in Sarajevo, 1994

Photo by Josef Koudelka

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A Revolution in Reconciliation



By John Wood Jr.

The 1960s were years of acute moral struggle, challenging the conscience of a nation that professed to be founded on liberty and churches that claimed to be rooted in righteousness.

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. famously wrote from the city jail of Birmingham: “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn’t negotiation a better path?... Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. ... We must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.”¹

Fifty-four years later a subtler drama plays out in a century-old farmhouse in Brentwood, Ohio, in a civic center in Eagan, MN, and in an office building in San Diego where I happened to be in attendance.

Tension in the Room

There, seven reds (conservatives) and five blues (liberals) gather under the calm supervision of a foremost family therapist, Bill Doherty. A gadfly of nonviolence in his own right, the bespectacled and congenial professor walks the two sides through a gently controlled process of expression, observation, and conversation. Participants on both sides are invited to express the ways they feel misunderstood by their political opposites. Each side observes attentively as members of the other side are asked to converse among themselves about how they would criticize their own party. Only after completing these and other exercises are both red and blue brought together for an earnest and sincere dialogue.

There is tension in the room. Strong emotions simmer in the breast of each committed partisan. Yet the stage has already been set for reconciliation.

My own existence implies the success of the Rev. King’s conciliatory work. I was born in the mid-80s into a biracial household to parents of starkly different socio-economic backgrounds. And I suspect that without America’s change of heart owing to King’s legacy, the prospect of my parents’ union would not

“Today Americans increasingly view their political opponents not only as misguided, but also as bad people whose ways of thinking are both dangerous and incomprehensible.” – *Better Angels*

have been favorable. Now as an adult I have seen the divisiveness of politics once again threaten our society. That has led me to the work of Better Angels.

The Better Angels workshop described above goes to the heart of its mission. Founded in 2016 as a bipartisan organization, Better Angels is spearheading a new framework for political depolarization in a growing number of cities and states. Better Angels and other groups are pursuing their own brands of direct action in hopes of helping Republicans and Democrats reach for, as King tells us, “the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.”

The current moment is perilous. As Better Angels declares: “The United States is disuniting. ... This degree of civic rancor threatens our democracy.”

Better Angels’ goal, through its signature Red/Blue Workshops and other initiatives, is to bring liberals and conservatives together to understand each other beyond stereotypes, form red/blue community alliances, train participants to be workshop moderators themselves, teach practical skills for

communicating across political divides, pledge to use social media in positive political ways, and make a strong public argument for depolarization.

A Civil Rebellion

It is a different era from King's. The mission to improve Democrat-Republican relations in the second decade of the 21st century is different from the struggle against segregationist racism in the 20th. Yet both are comprehensible as civil rebellions against the decline of brotherhood/sisterhood. Both defy the pull of hatred in our society. King's was a revolution of reconciliation in American culture. This is what groups like Better Angels are striving for now.

Such projects are in truth Christian work. The gospel spirit creates space for mutual understanding by bringing us into intimate contact with our moral opponents and transforming the moment with acts of concern for the partisan opposition. It is easy to judge a political opponent from afar, or to maintain emotional distance from a neighbor or coworker or loved one by ignoring or discrediting their viewpoints, shouting them down in argument, or demonizing them on account of party affiliation. This has become a pattern, not just on cable news, but at offices and holiday tables, in congregations and classrooms, across America for far too long.

We habitually describe such fraught encounters as awkward and uneasy. Yet many of us have become accustomed to them, even comfortable with them. In our political culture we now treat such willful miscommunication as normal. This should be unacceptable to all of us. We should invite and not fear the constructive tension that comes with loving our enemy, praying for those who hate you and reserving judgment long enough to remove the plank from our own eyes in order to see clearly the speck in another's.

There are ways small and large to carry this effort forward. But the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., of Jesus of Nazareth, and makers of peace across the expanse of time shows us that this is possible now. In an age of radicals and reactionaries, true revolution lies in reconciliation. Let us take direct action to see it done.

John Wood Jr., of Los Angeles, is a media spokesman for Better Angels. He was a Republican candidate in California's 43rd congressional district election in 2014. He is completing a book called Transcending Politics: Perspectives for a Divided Nation.

Note

- 1 Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches* (HarperOne, 2003), p. 291.

Better Angels is a citizens' movement devoted to reducing political polarization. Its website offers advice for having a productive conversation across ideological lines. Here are excerpts:

Core Principles

- Respect, curiosity, and openness tend to elicit the same from the other person.
- Everyone needs to save face – no one should be portrayed as stupid, blind, narrowly self-serving, or bigoted.
- Most people have some common values that conversation can unearth.

Expectations to Abandon

- That you can persuade the other person to change core attitudes and beliefs.
- That facts will be agreed on and logic followed consistently.
- That your conversation partner will match your openness.

Tone-Setting Skills

- Letting the other person know that you want to understand other perspectives better.
- Asking permission to pose questions.
- Acknowledging your general political stance – liberal, conservative, etc.
- Offering something critical of your own side and crediting something positive about the other side. (Blue example: "I think that Democrats have been out of touch with a lot of people in rural communities and Rust Belt towns. Trump picked up on that." Red example: "I think that conservatives can sometimes come across like they don't care about minorities. Liberals have done a better job of connecting with minority groups.")

Listening Skills

- Paraphrasing what the other says – to make sure that you understand and the other person feels heard.
- Asking real questions of understanding (versus loaded questions).
- Listening for underlying values and aspirations, and acknowledging them.

Skills for Difficult Moments

- Staying focused on a topic when the other person jumps around from issue to issue.
- Not returning provocative statements in kind.
- Not answering baiting questions – instead, just restating your viewpoint on the topic.
- Instead of beating entrenched differences into the ground, agreeing to disagree.
- If the other person is upset and no longer listening, exiting the conversation in a low-key way.

Source: better-angels.org. See the feature called "Talking Across the Political Divide."

TWO MEN
By Alberto Ríos

Two men approach, who had been friends
Through the horse days of their childhood,

In the hay and the barns exuding summer-sigh,
Eating mulberries and seeds from the devil's claw

And the mountain onions, too, thriving in the rolling hills.
Years gone, they had long lost track of each other.

It happens to most. But now, these two men approach,
Having come to the same town, the same street,

The same door, the same handle,
Both at the same moment, by accident, by circumstance.

When they reach, and in doing so, when they touch,
However incidentally, each will look up.

There will be excuse-mes and I'm-sorrys at first,
But what happens next is the beginning of a different story.

What happens next has not yet happened.
We can guess, and hope to be right.



Carolyn B. Helsel is assistant professor of homiletics at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Austin, TX) and is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA). This excerpt is drawn from her new book, *Anxious to Talk About It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully about Race*, with permission from the publisher, Chalice Press.

Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully about Race, with permission from the publisher, Chalice Press.

When someone talks about their experience of being pulled over by the police in their own neighborhood for the ninth time that year, you can respond with compassion to that person's experiences and feelings of anger and sadness.

Alternatively, responding by trying to explain, rationalize, defend, or otherwise dismiss their experience limits your *response-ability*, and you are less likely to build a meaningful relationship with them. They are not asking you to take responsibility for the police; they've invited you into their experience. They know this is not your common experience, and they aren't asking you to do anything about it or to make sense of it. You are not responsible for the fear or anger they feel. But you can be *response-able* by listening, believing, and accepting their experience.

Racial justice educator Robin DiAngelo says white people suffer from "white fragility" when it comes to encountering conversations about race.¹ She argues that the emotions of white people often get in the way of learning about the realities of racism because white people often live segregated from "racial stress," noting that when whites first experience it, they often react defensively, expressing outward anger, arguing, or withdrawing completely. We need to consider the emotions we experience while talking about race, and become able to sit with them and honor them, rather than withdrawing.

As a white person, listening to a person of color share about discrimination by another white person or white society in general can be difficult to hear and not interpret it as being directed at you. For example, a Latino man says white people always assume he's a foreigner or from Mexico, when in reality he's from Puerto Rico, which makes him an American citizen. You hear this, and you sense he is angry. Where does your mind go? Is it to thinking whether or not you have ever done this? Or is it to defensiveness, thinking he's being too sensitive and it's an easy mistake?

Some white people when talking about race say they "feel stupid." Maybe you didn't realize Puerto Ricans were American citizens, and now you're wondering if you should just back away from the conversation and Google information about Puerto Rico. To feel stupid is to feel inadequate, insecure.

Given that you just saw his frustration that white people are not aware Puerto Ricans are citizens, you may be hesitant to say, "Wow, I didn't know that, either." You don't want his anger directed at you, and this white anxiety could prevent you from continuing the conversation. You may keep your mouth shut, feeling guilty for your own ignorance. But what if instead of letting this push you away, you focused instead on your response-ability? Might you be able to improve your relationship with this man?

Being response-able might mean you could listen to his frustration and not say anything. Perhaps being response-able would include saying "I'm so sorry – that must be really frustrating." It might include getting to know this person better and learning what his experiences have been like living between Puerto Rico and the US. Perhaps it could mean thinking about your own education as a white American, never learning in public school history lessons about the unincorporated territories of the US. Perhaps it means simply sitting with the anger that the other person feels, understanding that it's about something much bigger than you. Your response-ability is in your power – how you respond in the moment.

Also important is to understand the role of anger in the work of justice. Anger about injustice propels us to make a difference. At the same time, anger can feel all-consuming, and so we need to take breaks from time to time from our anger. The best way to diffuse anger is to help someone feel they have been heard. The issue may not be resolved, but the anger itself diffuses and the mind can begin to work again. Then you can feel free to address the action that caused the anger.

Building relationships with people who have been discriminated against means believing that their experiences of discrimination are real, and that their feelings are what we would feel if we were in the same situations on a daily basis. Authentic relationships require this kind of response-ability: being able to hear the frustration and the pain another person has experienced, without feeling as if we need to run in and "fix it" or save them. Instead, we are called to respond by being witnesses, accompanying our brothers and sisters and supporting them in whatever ways we can.

1 Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011), pp. 54–70.



Crimea, Ukraine, 1993
Photo by Josef Koudelka
© Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

Stop Resolving Conflict!



By Wes Avram

I loved “dialogue.” I was convinced it’s the answer to conflict – people of good faith coming together across their differences, as open to changing their minds as they are to speaking their minds. It assumes they are willing to do four things: 1) discover shared understandings they didn’t have previously; 2) change their minds in light of new ideas or data brought forward by others; 3) help others see things they haven’t seen; and 4) clarify irreconcilable perspectives in ways that help a group of people live without hurting each other.

For me, that kind of dialogue has been inspired by the vision of what Hans-Georg Gadamer called a “fusion of horizons” through open engagement.¹ It requires what another philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, called in his early writings an “ideal speech situation.”² That’s what occurs when conditions are met so that interaction is open and guided by good faith, and all parties strive for courtesy and respect in the pursuit of truths that everyone acknowledges when they’re discovered.

That vision shaped my view of the church. Despite our human imperfections, I assumed we’re basically a community that has made a covenant from those commitments. I trusted that we all, in our best moments, are open to such dialogue, which means conflict is merely a temporary breakdown. I believed we could always rely on finding the right words at the right time to change the viewpoint of the otherwise well-meaning but (for whatever reason) misinformed voices in the church, and turn conflict toward dialogue, reconciliation, and worship. With that in mind, conflict required the therapy of attentive listening and clarification – in short, conflict *resolution*.

Covenant or Contract?

Then I went into the ministry. And I’ve come to the embarrassing conclusion that I was, on the whole, wrong – or at least overconfident. I now think some of our attempts to resolve conflict through thera-

peutic intervention end up doing the opposite. They actually increase conflict, or produce scapegoating that serves anxiety more than it serves a shared vision. I’ve come to think that churches are often less covenantal in their life together than they are contractual. And much confusion comes when churchgoers who still hold the vision of a shared covenant come into conflict with sisters and brothers who do not – those who want what they want and will argue to get it, or who are on a crusade of some kind, or who are communicating out of their own emotional needs.

Conflict can be creative, destructive, or a mix of both – but it can’t be avoided. It is our condition, and we should redirect the dream of always resolving it into something possibly more helpful. For the sake of congregational leadership, health, and holi-

For the sake of congregational leadership, health, and holiness, I’ve come to think we should try to normalize conflict, not resolve it.

ness, I’ve come to think we should try to *normalize* conflict, not always resolve it. This becomes urgent in this time of surprisingly aggressive, sensational, and often irrational conflict in the culture at large. We should rethink, retrain, get smarter about how

human systems work, and reexamine how conflict drives the church in the New Testament. We should be clearer about the rules of healthy (even holy) disagreement, hold people to higher ethical standards in their communication, and get to work on building productive *conflicted* communities.

Spirit at Work

In admitting this, I guess I've gone down the path Habermas took when he later reconsidered his notion of ideal speech situation. He eventually concluded that systematic distortion of those imagined conditions renders an experience of the ideal far rarer than we want to admit. We don't *temporarily* intervene in order to repair and get back to dialogue. No – intervention against distortion never ends, and it even requires vigilant *self-critique* by those

In the church, centripetal and centrifugal forces are always in play. We might ponder how God's Spirit is at work in the tension.

intervening. Our effort to communicate is always on two levels simultaneously: a *meta*-level where we're continually communicating about communicating so we might discern and address distortion and identify bad faith, and a *micro*-level where we're nevertheless making calm, considered decisions (however imperfect or incomplete) and moving forward. The Spirit can work on both levels.

Conflict has always been there, but it feels unusually pervasive and sharp today. This raises the stakes on how we decide to tend to it. Revolutions in communication and media have transformed our culture, trust seems in short supply, the idea of "post-truth" enters the conversation, and the shouting and name-calling get louder – outside the church but inside too. Political scientists say we're more politically divided than we've been since right after the Civil War. It feels like our world of rhetorical conflict has moved past artillery volleys from a distance and gotten down to rhetorical knife fighting in open fields.

Dozens of theories are put forward to explain this. But fundamentally none of us really knows why this has happened. We just see it. The challenge is that the tools we're bringing to address this moment, including the therapeutic approach, feel old.

Triumph of the Therapeutic?

We've been influenced by marriage and family therapy. We create "reconciliation teams," establish "listening sessions" to allow different sides to express

their feelings and their concerns on an equal basis. We ask people to use "I statements" instead of "you statements." We practice "drive-through talking," repeating back to others what we've heard them say. And we believe these techniques will restore the thing they devoutly assume already exists – the *covenantal* relationship among people who already agree on the rules of dialogue but who have somehow lost their way for a moment.

Therapeutic interventions can have positive effects sometimes. I'm simply concerned about times when they don't, when the assumed covenantal relationship is itself conflicted. When this happens, communities may still splinter, leadership become compromised, and experience betray the reconciliation for which we hope.

It might be time to place alongside our well-meaning desire to cultivate dialogue an equally strong desire to encourage accuracy, patiently pursue truths, enable wise leadership, and accept some differences as predictable instead of threatening. This is the only way we can reduce harm and do the best we can to hold back an increase of distortion on the way to the "active listening" we imagine.

Everybody at Once

I'm taught here by philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, who in the 1920s developed a view of culture and discourse that's been translated as the idea of *dialogized heteroglossia*: Many voices speak at once, rarely taking turns, more often speaking on top of each other while still responding to each other. Such heteroglossia is conflict-laden, with moments of mutual understanding subsumed into a larger swirl of winner-take-all efforts at persuasion, with shifting and incomplete rules.

Within that frame, two competing forces are always present both in the whole of culture and in subsets of culture – that of spinning apart and pulling together. These centrifugal and centripetal forces aren't always equal. In some moments the impulse to find harmony looks more powerful. At other times the scattering of meaning and agreements seems to rule. But neither force ever pushes the other fully out. In any setting, both are at work – *always*.³

In the heteroglossic world of church, we might benefit by rethinking ecclesiology in light of this view, with centripetal and centrifugal forces always in play, and wonder how God's Spirit might be at work in the tension.

What happens to leadership when it is told to *resolve* conflict at any cost rather than *harness* conflict in resilient ways? It's set into chronic crisis. Leadership either retreats as it becomes a target for endless emotion-laden, even abusive attacks, or it

becomes a caricature: narcissistic, flattering, complacent. Leaders find themselves swinging between self-pity and self-righteousness instead of inhabiting the truer space in-between those poles. I think leaders do better to *expect* disagreement, conflict, and irreconcilable needs within the church and respond in ways designed to keep disagreement healthy – even as we still strive and pray for community.

New Normal

By normalization, therefore, I suggest two things. First, bring communities calmly and resolutely back into predictable, responsible communication around conflict, so that good decisions can be made even amid ongoing disagreement.

Second, we do this by *norming* conflict – by persistently and calmly inculcating a set of communication norms that, however imperfect, endeavor to restore healthy leadership, protect and give voice to those who might need help, and recognize that power is fluid. To norm a situation is continually to advocate ground rules for exploring differences in ways that are nonviolent in their intent, encourage due regard for roles and responsibilities, and value forgiveness as well as truth-telling – knowing that we will never do more than approximate those ideals. Fundamental to this effort is respecting differences and discouraging anonymity (except where significant risk to safety requires it). And maybe the highest calling of all is to do this in love.

Truth or Accuracy

In this it is important to acknowledge the difference between accuracy and truth. One way of describing it is to say that we live in an age of competing truths, where different ways of “narrating” reality can reveal divergent fundamental experiences of what is the case. A sentence can be true by how deeply an experience is somehow revealed by it. It is true “for” an individual, group, or situation.

Accuracy, on the other hand, can be verified by observable or measurable evidence, however imperfectly. It may be *true* that I heard anger in your voice. However, it might not be *accurate* that you are angry with me. When we too quickly equate truth and accuracy we lose the chance to hold each other to account, ask good questions, learn, clarify, and refine or revise truth statements by holding evidence (facts) to standards of scrutiny we can agree on. Part of the labor of normalizing conflict is discussing our standards for accuracy, correcting error, and agreeing on what we will count as a fact when we are seeking either to persuade each other or learn from each other.

No small task, all of this, for it will get confused and undermined along the way. But I believe that

this is the way stronger communities will be cultivated in our time.

A Learning Church

As we have worked to normalize conflict in the congregation I serve, most people have responded positively. Some have not. That will happen. We continue to try. As part of our attempt, we host a monthly “courageous conversation” after our main morning service. Attendance is optional. On a recent Sunday 120 attended. They talked for well over an hour in response to the question, “What role should politics play in the church?” It was civil and productive – though nothing was resolved. Near the conclusion, one of the participants told the group that she had come from a congregation where conflict over theology, politics, and mission had caused deep rifts. Before she joined our congregation, she said, she “interviewed” the pastor about politics and other positions. She remembered my response, that we endeavor to use conflict as a way of becoming a “learning church.” “That’s why I’m here,” she said. “I don’t think we all realize how unusual this is.” It is one thing to try to do this with political or theological differences. It’s another thing, and actually harder, to do it with conflict around mission, leadership, or personal feelings. But the effort is still worth it.

A reader might critique all this by pointing out that the vision of an “ideal speech situation” still lingers here. Perhaps I have not moved all that far from my idealistic youth. That’s probably accurate. But I’d still suggest that the truth of it, at least for me, is that the work of resolving church conflict on the way to being the beloved community is not as straightforward as the old therapeutic paradigm thought it would be. We’re conflicted, and we’ll remain conflicted. We’re emotional, and we’ll remain emotional. And God can use that, if we don’t try to hide it. Conflict is not our enemy, if ... if we normalize it.

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Notes

- 1 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Crossroad, 2nd edition, 1991).
- 2 See Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, two volumes (Beacon, reprint edition, 1992), among his other books.
- 3 Among other writings, see M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Texas, reprint edition, 1983).

Enmity and Accord: New Testament Perspectives



By Harold W. Attridge

How do communities of Christian conviction confront and creatively engage the bitterly divided discourse of our days? One option is to withdraw, seeking within our faith communities the unity and mutual respect so blatantly absent from the larger society.

We might be inspired to do so by Acts' picture of the early church, united in fellowship, caring for common needs in the midst of a hostile world (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-34). Trying to enact such an idealized vision may well be part of our response to our times, but the New Testament has more, and more complex things, to say about confronting enmity and polarization.

The early church, of course, was not always the realm of sweetness and light that Acts' sketch of the Jerusalem commune suggests. Divisions over doctrine and practice arose from the start, occa-

Divisions over early church doctrine and practice arose from the start, occasionally leading to rhetorical outbursts that rival Trump tweets.

sionally leading to rhetorical outbursts that rival Trump tweets or partisan commentaries. Think, for example, of Jude's tirade against "certain intruders" (Jude 4), "ungodly" people "who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness." Such folk are like "irrational animals" (Jude 10), "blemishes on your love feasts ... waterless clouds carried along by the winds, autumn trees without fruit" (Jude 12). Yes, early Christians knew how to denounce their opponents, and probably would defend their vituperation as appropriate for prophetic preachers. We have certainly been tempted to use similar tropes in our rhetoric of resistance.

Nonetheless, the New Testament offers other models for dealing with social conflict. The Sermon

on the Mount is foundational for a Christian ethic of reconciliation. That foundation provides a strategic goal for Christians today, but we might also usefully reflect on other tactics that some followers of Jesus employed in turbulent apostolic times.

Paul presents the most interesting and best documented case. His life and ministry were dedicated to the belief that God had done something new in Jesus Christ, fulfilling his promises to bring all nations to worship together (Isa 66:18). That conviction drove him to include Gentiles as Gentiles in the community of faith, a policy that caused the controversy recounted in Galatians 2. How Paul dealt with the aftermath of that disagreement merits more reflection, but that was not the only dispute he faced.

Hearing Both Sides

Paul's two letters to the Corinthian community are replete with efforts to confront socially divisive issues. Paul evokes them in 1 Cor 10:10-17, naming the various factions that had emerged at Corinth. Paul confronts the situation in two ways, beginning with an appeal to what the common bond of the community should be, the foolish wisdom of the cross (1 Cor 1:22-25). Contemporary political leaders often try to do something similar, making hopeful appeals to common values. The focus of their rhetoric, however, is usually not as strangely compelling as the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16), which dramatically runs counter to human standards (1:26-31).

Paul's appeal to the foolish wisdom of his gospel has practical implications for the ways in which he confronts the Corinthian factions. The bulk of the letter addresses very specific practical matters



Mother Teresa, India
Photo by Raghu Rai
© Raghu Rai/Magnum Photos

that are dividing believers. Paul responds to some with a firm command. Prostitution, for instance, is not allowed (1 Cor 6:15). Yet on other issues Paul's rhetoric is much more nuanced. In weighing his response to such questions, he recognizes what is valid on both sides of the debate before giving his own recommendation. Is sex entirely prohibited? No, says Paul, not as a general rule, but one might temporarily abstain (1 Cor 7:5). Can Corinthian believers eat meat sacrificed to idols? Those who say yes certainly have a good theoretical point (8:4), but by following that point they might scandalize their neighbor (9:6). According to those who argue no, there may in fact be an objective problem with the practice (10:20-21). Is the resurrection of the dead a realistic hope? It must be, says Paul, or our faith is utterly vain (15:12-15). Yet those who wonder about the physics of the event have a point. The resurrected body will be a "spiritual" one (15:44) and "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (15:50). In all of these cases Paul has listened to both sides, recognizes validity in each, and tries to draw both together toward common ground.

Tumult and Persistence

Paul's practical efforts may have succeeded, although his relationship with the Corinthians continued to experience bumps and fissures, as 2 Corinthians shows. Rivals came to town leading to a "painful visit" (2 Cor 2:1), a rupture in relations, and a bitterly ironic rant (2 Cor 10:1-12). Yet Paul did not give up and worked through an intermediary, Titus, to effect a rapprochement (2 Cor 2:13; 7:6). That will-

In all of these cases Paul listens to both sides of a passionate debate, recognizes validity in each, and tries to draw both together.

ingness to persevere in efforts at reconciliation paid off and Paul celebrated with his Corinthian believers the healing work of God that they experienced (2 Cor 5:16-21). Patient persistence in pursuit of that strategic goal can, and in this case did, bring results.

Yet not all such efforts have a happy ending. The major divide that Paul's gospel produced, between the Jewish people from whom he came and the Gentile believers who joined the movement, brought him pain eloquently expressed in Rom 9:1-5. To heal division between Jew and Gentile believers was a goal to which he devoted considerable effort throughout his ministry. His endeavor to organize a major collection to aid the poor in Jerusalem (1 Cor

16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9) was also an attempt to mend enmities. Such a collection would have demonstrated in a concrete way the unity between opposing factions of the early Christian movement.

Paul's letter to the Romans was written as he readied to deliver his relief collection from Gentile Christians to Jerusalem (Rom 16:25-27). It is not clear that the gift was accepted. Instead Paul's visit resulted in his arrest and transmittal to Rome, where tradition reports he met his end. The Paul who wrote the Corinthian correspondence was probably not surprised by the thwarted result of his efforts. The work of overcoming conflict and producing reconciliation is a formidable task. But it is not impossible, and it is one to which ministers of the gospel of Christ are called.

Harold W. Attridge, Sterling Professor of Divinity at YDS, was dean of the School from 2002-2012. He has written widely on New Testament exegesis, Hellenistic Judaism, and early church history. His books include Essays on John and Hebrews (Baker, 2012), and he also edited The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does It Continue? (Terry Lectures Series, Yale University Press, 2009).

THE PRESENT

By W.S. Merwin

As they were leaving the garden
one of the angels bent down to them and whispered

I am to give you this
as you are leaving the garden

I do not know what it is
or what it is for
what you will do with it

you will not be able to keep it
but you will not be able

to keep anything
yet they both reached at once

for the present
and when their hands met

they laughed

Walking a Path of Peace and Mercy while Staring into Chaos



By Janet K. Ruffing

Those of us who have read about violent and chaotic eras, here and elsewhere, have perhaps wondered what it would be like to have lived through them and how we would have responded. It seems to me we are finding out right now. And many of us are struggling.

We find ourselves staring into the enormous shadow, in Jungian terms, of our national, unrepentant, social sins. We naively believed ourselves immune to them, or felt innocent of the damage our national history has done to victims of prejudice and violence.

But the consequences live on. Economic and racial disparities intensify amid instant news cycles and social media. We suffer an excess of information – violent speech, lies, innuendos, hyped emotions about the scandal of the day – that creates a

It is urgent that we learn nonviolent practices that help us manage our anger and regain our equilibrium.

sense of social desolation, grief, and hopelessness. A dehumanizing effect descends daily, the feeling that progress toward social justice is largely an illusion. This is breaking our hearts, enraging us at the injustices inflicted, or in many cases numbing us into inaction.

Rejecting Degraded Discourse

We are challenged moment by moment to convert *constructively* our outrage and fear about the harm being done to world peace, to immigrants, to the environment, and to the millions of Americans who are poor while the 1 percent grow even wealthier. It is urgent that we relearn methods of nonviolence and nonviolent communication. It is vital that we adopt contemplative prayer and other practices that help us regain our equilibrium by managing our anger, refusing to imitate a degraded political discourse, and resisting its effect on us.

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) would say this overwrought condition requires that we recognize the desolation gripping us and make vigorous changes within ourselves.¹ Focus on prayer and serious self-examination. Notice how we unwittingly absorb and perpetuate the nastiness ourselves and respond in kind internally, if not with words or actions. I believe many of us need to spend less time on social media and choose more judiciously how we stay up to date. Limiting the inflow of upsetting information can unleash time and creativity to join others in constructive action. We can acknowledge our anger, which is an appropriate response to injustice, while choosing to release it physically through a martial art or other exercise that restores our equilibrium.

Active Hope

Through prayer, we lean more deeply on God. Through reflection, alone or with others, we learn again to nourish the virtue of hope. “Active hope,” eco-philosopher Joanna Macy calls it – a force that begins with gratitude, invites us to honor the pain we feel for the world, widen our vision, and take the next step.

Each of us will discover the right balance for ourselves as we choose specific practices. Matthew’s Gospel offers clues, pairing the beatitudes in the preaching of Jesus (in chapter 5) with the works of mercy in his Parable of the Last Judgment (in chapter 25). Blessed are the merciful and the peacemakers, he says, and those who do acts of mercy for the least of these. Mercy is a practical expression of care for a person or group who is suffering, combined

with an empathic word or gesture that honors their personhood. The Parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke's Gospel, shows what this looks like.

It remains a basic Christian principle that every person deserves respect and consideration, whether or not others honor that truth themselves. Those caught up in evil whether consciously or not remain deserving of basic human respect and even em-

Limiting the inflow of incendiary information can unleash time and creativity to join others in constructive action.

pathy. It is especially difficult to extend empathy to those who misuse power in order to fill some personal void. We live in times that blindly drive the most powerful to acquire even more wealth while depriving millions of the basics that sustain their lives, including potable water and breathable air. Despite the specific harm they do, they too deserve to be encompassed in God's compassion. This is what the gospel calls us to do, not condone the behavior but manage to keep our hearts open and peaceful even while we work toward remedy.

Mercy Prevails

These remorseless trends polarize and depress us. The veneer of polite, cultured, informed speech in public life and democratic conduct is supplanted by abusive language, raw feelings, and smoldering, bigoted opinions. I thought we had made more progress.

Resistance *is* mounting. Even so, many participants in protest seem unaware of the depth of training and community support needed – practices of peaceful dialogue and mutual support throughout the endeavor – if they are to remain nonviolent and reach their goals.²

Continuous war since 9/11 is exhausting our nation and creating wave after wave of refugees fleeing uninhabitable Middle Eastern cities. We suffer a

Those caught up in evil whether consciously or not remain deserving of basic human respect and empathy.

profound version of compassion fatigue, leaving us overwhelmed, incapable of taking responsibility. We now seem to be blaming the victims of our excessive and reckless violence. It is no coincidence that Pope Francis's last two World Day of Peace Messages are "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace" (2017)

and "Migrants and Refugees: Men and Women in Search of Peace" (2018).³ Of 250 million migrants worldwide, 22.5 million are refugees "searching for somewhere to live in peace," he declares.

My own order, the Sisters of Mercy, places works of mercy at the heart of vocation. We have long tended victims who suffer the most from poverty and injustice and today, with the help of social analysis, join with others to address the causes of suffering. We recognize we need to infuse all mercy-rooted ministries and social critiques with the practice of nonviolence and peacemaking even as we carry on the work of changing violent structures and conditions.⁴

Waiting for Daybreak

Contemplative theologian Constance FitzGerald describes our era of impasse as a "dark night" that, if we are intentional about it, can eventually serve to strengthen our trust in God.⁵ The broken experience

THE ENEMY

By Maryanne Hannan

for he it is that shall tread down our enemies
Psalm 108:13

On Your behalf, Lord,
we shall identify the enemy.
Sometimes we'll use external

signs, the color of skin,
annual income, place of residence.
Other times we'll probe

interior abominations – maybe
different beliefs, style of prayer
or a worrisome lack of church.

We can also come to understand
who is our enemy by the judgments
You send: famine, pestilence,

earthquake, drought,
plagues of locust,
the winning touchdown.

And when we have found our enemy,
help us in our treading. Don't tell us
again to love our neighbor as ourselves.



Palestinian man praying at wall that separates an Israeli settlement and a Palestinian refugee camp, Gaza, 2003

Photo by Larry Towell

© Larry Towell/Magnum Photos

of impasse invites us into deeper contemplative prayer, a prayer of surrender to the living God, a prayer that purifies memory (and liberates us from the destructive power that memories hold) and rekindles our hope while we do what we can in service to others.

There is no escape from the dissonance between our most deeply held beliefs about what it means to be a follower of Jesus and their contradiction in public life. But we can and must join with others and intensify our spiritual practices that keep us in equilibrium, deepen our relationship with Jesus in his compassion and nonviolence, and continue to walk a path of peace and mercy as nonviolent actors in our country today, despite the chaos.

Janet K. Ruffing, RSM, Professor of the Practice of Spirituality and Ministerial Leadership at YDS, has written widely on spiritual direction and supervision, mercy spirituality, female religious life, mysticism, and prayer. Her five books include Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings (Paulist Press, 2000).

Notes

- 1 Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Writings*, edited by George E. Ganss, S.J. (Paulist Press, 1991), no. 319, pp. 202-203.
- 2 Nancy Sylvester, "Engaging Impasse through Contemplation and Dialogue" in *A Matter of Spirit* (Spring 2006), publication of the Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center. See ipjc.org.
- 3 See the annual messages at w2.vatican.va.
- 4 Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Sixth Institute Chapter, "Chapter 2017 Recommitment: Called to New Consciousness." See sistersofmercy.org.
- 5 Constance FitzGerald, OCD, "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory," *CTSA Proceedings* 64 (2009), pp. 21-42.

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life by Marshall B. Rosenberg (PuddleDancer Press, 3rd edition, 2015). "Nonviolent Communication: a way of communicating that leads us to give from the heart," Rosenberg writes. "We perceive relationships in a new light when we use Nonviolent Communication to hear our own deeper needs and those of others. ... We are dangerous when we are not conscious of our responsibility for how we behave, think, and feel."

Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church by Barbara Holmes (Fortress, 2004). "The world is the cloister of the contemplative," Holmes declares. "There is no escape. Always the quest for justice draws one deeply into the heart of God. In this sacred interiority contemplation becomes the language of prayer and the impetus for prophetic proclamation and action."

Peace is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, edited by Walter Wink (Orbis, 2000). "Nonviolence is the human future," Wink says. "As Martin Luther King Jr. said on the night before he was killed, 'The choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It's nonviolence or nonexistence.'"

Shadows of the Heart: A Spirituality of the Negative Emotion by James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead (Crossroad, 1994). "Being angry carries the conviction that something can be done," they write. "This hope makes anger a friend of transformation, an honorable dynamic to change and growth. ... People who are angry with one another are still significant in each other's lives. Indifference is a greater enemy of reconciliation than is anger, because angry people are still linked."

Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers: Perspectives for the 21st Century, Vol. 2, edited by Robert Wicks (Paulist, 2000). "In the face of unbridled individualism, solidarity is a powerful antidote to moral isolation and preoccupation with oneself," writes William Reiser, one of the contributors. "The search for deep, lasting solidarity must be taken seriously as one of the major signs of our times."

Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (New World Library, 2012). "What helps us face the mess we're in is the knowledge that each of us has something significant to offer, a contribution to make," they write. "An oyster, in response to trauma, grows a pearl. We grow, and offer, our gift of Active Hope."

The Future Depends on Our Image of God



By Nancy Jo Kemper '67 B.D.

Two years ago, at age 73½, I made a decision that most people couldn't understand. I decided to run for Congress, as a Democrat, to represent the people of the 6th Congressional District in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Why would a grandmother, a nearly retired part-time minister, jump into such a thing in a state that turns more heavily red with each election?

On Jan. 10, 2016, standing in my church basement during my little congregation's annual meeting, I knew with sudden clarity that I had to run for the congressional seat. Having thought about it ambivalently for weeks, it now became an urgent calling.

I told the congregation what I was going to do. There was a stunned silence. I promised them I would not allow the campaign to intrude on church

Religion is more essential now in our public life than ever before – religion focused on building communities of care and compassion, wisdom and knowledge.

affairs and I'd continue ministry with them until the campaign's final weeks. I told them I believed this fit my life-long vocation, and theirs, of mending what is torn in people's lives, fixing what is broken in institutions, and creating communities of compassion.

No Illusions

One reason for running was that so few were willing to take on the Republican incumbent. I was under no illusion that I stood much chance of winning. One of my good friends, the former Lexington mayor, said bluntly, "Well, you'll lose." The soon-to-be-former lieutenant governor, a member of my congregation, worried that it would be too hard on me physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

In the end, I lost by 22 points. This wasn't so bad. In two other Kentucky districts, novice Democrats

were trounced by 60 points or more. When I returned to the church after 10 weeks out of the pulpit for the campaign's home stretch, the sanctuary was filled with members and non-members, Republicans and Democrats, who gave me a standing ovation. Their support signified something important: Christian faith obliges us to be involved in all aspects of human life: political, economic, social, as well as religious.

An Alternative Christianity

And we could claim some victories. My campaign endeavored to show a different kind of Christianity that many Kentuckians had never seen in political life. We articulated policies that were not couched in religious rhetoric but instead used aspirational social justice language that reflected compassion for the poor, the immigrant, and those who were denied their civil liberties. I had strong support from the sizable Muslim and LGBTQ communities in central Kentucky. At each campaign stop, I'd end my speech with a quote from Yale mentor Bill Coffin: "The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love."

I refused to be negative in my campaigning. I was determined to avoid name-calling. My staff and I had many discussions about moral boundaries, but they had joined my team because I had laid out those ethical limits.

Within 45 minutes after the polls closed, the entire year's effort was finished. I lost, and yet I didn't. Many young adults thanked me for running. They said I had made them feel, for once, that politics

could be decent. Their comments, as well as the witness I tried to provide for an alternative Christianity, made the 80-hour weeks worth the effort. The experience was not exhausting but enriching – a privilege and honor.

Harsh Lessons

Much of what I learned that year was not encouraging. The election revealed once again that money is rapidly destroying our system of government. I raised \$500,000, while my opponent amassed four times that amount, much of it from corporate donors who sought to eliminate financial regulations and consumer protections. The idea that money is speech badly distorts the notion of free speech, because those with the most money have the most

Many constituents are deeply frightened that the future holds only diminishing possibilities for them and their children. Their fears are well-grounded.

speech. Sadly, in my experience voters really don't care that money is controlling politics and government. Most do not see it as relevant to their lives. I would estimate that 90 percent of the voters in Kentucky's 6th have never made a campaign contribution. Many have no idea what a campaign really costs or how the big contributions can dictate the votes of elected officials.

The campaign demonstrated to me that among many, Christianity has become a cult selling false certitude as a balm for modern anxieties rather than a faith movement following the way of Jesus. Many constituents are deeply frightened that the future holds only diminishing possibilities for them and their children. Too many Americans, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, are being left behind as the nation turns into a plutocracy.

Finally, the campaign confirmed to me how deeply media are reinforcing our polarized condition. With high rates of adult illiteracy in some areas of our country, and with TVs or radios blaring all day, the repetitive propagandistic liturgy of ideology frames the mindsets of millions. Many citizens whose lives are in jeopardy hardly bother to evaluate issues or look much beyond making it through the next day.

Can progressive Christianity address this polarization? At least for now, that would be a difficult task in broad swaths of our nation, where many would be horrified by an emphasis on faith as trust and not certitude, by arguments that the Bible's truths are more than strictly literal, and by the no-

A vigorous Christianity that stands for gospel compassion, political reform, and meaningful communication is desperately needed in America's heartland.

In many town and country settings, citizens adhere to a form of fundamentalist religion that will fail them utterly as they face the complexities of 21st-century life. Many are fatalistically drawn to authoritarian rhetoric despite their deep commitment to freedom, to liberty. Yet liberty must be tamed by justice, or it turns anarchic and destroys all peace and harmony.

Mainline denominations are succumbing to this force: In church after church, pastors must not venture a political opinion. Outreach money is spent on youth mission trips overseas while poverty and racism in America, seething with political as well as spiritual roots, are overlooked. I hear too many sermons that ring sentimental and trite.

Many regional judicatories languish because local churches don't see them as worth paying for. Support evaporates for initiatives that would send strong, vibrant intellectually gifted ministers to serve in small-town congregations in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Nebraska.

Theological education must stay in touch with the neglected American heartland. A reinvigorated faith must teach communication skills that endeavor to sustain people with hope, courage, and real solutions.

A resilient Christianity remains within our memory and within our grasp. It understood why the civil rights movement required a Christian voice, why war and nuclear weapons are evil, why poverty must be overcome.

But along the way, we lost the ability to convey the gospel intellectually and soulfully.

We should rediscover (and update) the words attributed to Karl Barth: Preach and teach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper (or newsfeed!) in the other. Something crucial happens when people struggle together with the biblical text and the lessons it provides for our time – wrestle with what Isaiah has to say about economic justice, what Amos says about political corruption, what Jesus says about forgiveness.

If we fail to inspire followers of Jesus in the midst of our contemporary condition, then in my estimation the progressive faith of the old mainline will vanish by 2050.

– Nancy Jo Kemper



High school students during nationwide protest for gun control, 2018

Photo by Alessandra Sanguinetti

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tion that salvation might relate to how you treat your neighbors, not just having your sins washed away. Meanwhile, legions of educated young professionals are desperate for a more inclusive presentation of religion, an experience of mystery and awe, and for leaders who reflect ethics and compassion, not judgment.

A Moral Hinge

I believe history swings on a moral hinge, and right now enormous forces are pushing and pulling on that door to the future. Religion is one of the major forces doing the pushing and pulling. The sort of religion we espouse will determine whether human-

Until America itself is understood as a mission field for a new presentation of the gospel, our situation as church and nation will remain dire.

kind will be more divided, more alienated, and more violent as a species – or will find a way to work together knowing that neither the species, nor the planet, much less nations, will prosper unless all prosper. It is either the beloved community or the anarchy of oligarchs.

Much depends on our image of God. As Coffin often said, many seem to think God is in the protection business, offering a shield against illness or accident or evil until, inevitably, evil or illness falls upon them and they are left bereft of any solid ground on which to stand. No, as Coffin put it, the mysterious Holiness that we call God is in the relationship business, standing alongside us in good times and in terrible sorrow, and the love that emanates from that source of all being will enable us to stand on our feet again, to be resurrected, with hope and trust in tomorrow.

Repairing Distortion

Until American Christianity faces how egregiously its faith has been distorted, and learns how to communicate a new presentation of the gospel, our situation as church and nation will remain dire. We have turned churches into entertainment centers to help people feel good week to week. Churches should be places of alternative learning that stimulate intellectual curiosity and artistic creativity for adults and children, with a moral focus that goes beyond the personal to public well-being. Religion is more essential now in our public life than ever before – religion focused on building communities of care and compassion, wisdom and knowledge.

Can American politics be salvaged? Only if we elect individuals who will put country before party and put the good of the whole before the desires of the powerful. Only if we insist on truth in advertising in political races, overturn the US Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, and put financial limits on campaign expenditures. We need politicians who listen to people with their hearts.

I am encouraged by the persistence of resistance and by my Christian hope. Therefore I do not despair, even as we face the most critical challenge to our beloved nation since the Civil War. We must not give up the struggle.

The Rev. Nancy Jo Kemper '67 B.D. is a Kentucky native with 50 years of experience as a minister in the United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ. Known for her work in public policy and social justice issues, she was executive director of the Kentucky Council of Churches from 1991-2009. She received YDS's William Sloane Coffin Award for Peace and Justice in 2010.

SOMETHING I'VE NOT DONE

By W.S. Merwin

**Something I've not done
is following me**

**I haven't done it again and again
so it has many footsteps
like a drumstick that's grown old and never been used**

**In late afternoon I hear it come closer
at times it climbs out of a sea
onto my shoulders
and I shrug it off
losing one more chance**

**Every morning
it's drunk up part of my breath for the day
and knows which way
I'm going
and already it's not done there**

**But once more I say I'll lay hands on it
tomorrow
and add its footsteps to my heart
and its story to my regrets
and its silence to my compass**



Alex da Silva Souto '12 M.Div. is pastor of New Milford United Methodist Church in New Milford, CT. As co-convenor of the United Methodist Queer Clergy Caucus, he is a global advocate for the status and dignity of LGBTQIA persons (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual). For four decades, the denomination has been in turmoil over its rule against ordaining "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals." Next year, the church body will hold a special called global General Conference meeting to seek ways of preserving unity despite its deep differences over LGBTQIA inclusion.

On the struggle against racism and other prejudices ...

I think the problem is akin to alcoholism. An individual with a drinking problem has to get treatment at some point. But if the individual doesn't admit to the disease, he can't be helped, no matter how often we tell him his behavior is harmful to him and to others. The heavy lifting – the honesty, the self-searching, the steps toward recovery – finally has to be done by the alcohol abuser, or they can't get to a place of health.

Sexism, heterosexism, racism – these are diseases too, diseases of the soul. For the longest time, our church and nation have had the luxury of pretending we don't have brokenness. We could pretend that the body isn't sick until it's on the verge of collapse. So, we have to be honest. The phobias – the homophobia, the xenophobia – have a psychological dimension but they are also symptomatic of illnesses of the soul. What are religious institutions if not places for healing of the soul? Elected officials aren't doing so well right now, but even in good times their work is limited. Legislation alone doesn't do the trick. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 taught us that. It gave us some progress, yet we remain in great denial of the rights of so many. Legislative acts and presidential elections don't suffice if the soul is broken and corrupted.

On the responsibility of those who hold the power ...

The burden continues to be placed on the oppressed to be gracious and graceful and kind to those who think less of us, those who in some cases think we are evil. The burden remains on us, and yet by now we're very weary of it. Really, it is time for those in power to do their own work: the effort of learning empathy for those who are suffering. We face a paradox.

The oppressed are tired of bearing the burden, tired of hearing that we are responsible for the majority's misperceptions of who we are or aren't. Yet we are still needed if the dismantling of tyranny is going to happen, just as I need my African-American siblings to help me understand my own efforts to dismantle my prejudices.

On the witness of the wounded ...

Statistics report, and my own experience shows, that personal relationship and contact can – not always – allow hearts to grow softer to one another. We know that arguing with someone who has an entrenched opinion usually shows few results. Bringing intellectual prowess and reason doesn't really work, not compared to a heart-to-heart encounter. That can be very difficult, of course. Many of our hearts are torn up and mangled. What people might have to say from their hearts might sound

Many of our hearts are torn up and mangled. What people might have to say from their hearts might sound very harsh, because it comes from their wounds.

very harsh, because it comes from their wounds. Yet that can be an opportunity. A wounded person might be able to say to another who is listening: "Go ahead, stick a finger in my wound. See? I'm real. For a long time you have made me an abstraction, but now you can see: I am real flesh and blood."

I am blessed in my ministry to be able to speak to others, and in my vulnerability connect with others, if only fleetingly. Mutual vulnerability – that's all we are seeking. (Oppressed groups have no choice but to be vulnerable – that's their condition in the world.) We are not even asking others to stitch and suture the wound, just recognize the suffering.

On the gospel as social gospel ...

In Methodism, there is no gospel without social gospel. Where the good news is non-existent for people, Christians have to step in. It's a practice of vanity, a hypocrisy, if we *can* do something about injustices and yet don't care about them and instead are content to wait for the glory to bestow itself on us when we die. But what's the point of being a person of faith unless we are calling the world into a greater reality? What is our purpose if not the transformation of the world?

Ecology of Incarnation: A Love Song



By Kristin Foster '77 M.Div.

In 1988, my husband, Frank Davis '77 M.Div., and I moved with our three-year-old daughter to Mountain Iron, MN, a tiny town perched on the edge of an open-pit taconite mine. In this deeply pitted landscape called the Iron Range, surrounded by boreal forest and northern lakes, we would raise our two daughters. Until February of this year, I served as pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church, ELCA, the same congregation that called me in 1988.

After nearly three decades, the town is not the same town, and the congregation is not the same congregation. A whole generation is gone. Another has grown up. A devastating fire led us on a journey to a new location and a new role in our community. After years of discussion, we became the denomination's first Reconciling in Christ congregation

Churches might offer us the best chance to learn how to live with difference and find the courage to move through it.

in the rural Upper Midwest, welcoming people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. We launched a sustainability movement and now host the largest Earth Day event in northern Minnesota. Always we attempted to reach consensus. Sometimes we failed. Here and there, beloved members dropped away.

Can We Outlast This?

After nearly three decades, our country is not the same country either, and earth is not the same earth. Many changes are familiar: digital access, globalization, climate disruption, species extinction, rural decline, Rust Belt backlash, the war on the poor, the end of school desegregation, mainline church decline. We could celebrate marriage equality, as well as the massive demonstrations for the rights of

people of color, women, and immigrants. Yet how, we might wonder, will we ever be able to talk across differences about things that matter for our common good, maybe even for our survival?

Heavy Weather

Like an accelerating polar vortex on the weather map, political polarization creates a kind of inversion that disrupts the climate patterns necessary for the life of the polis to regenerate itself. The vibrant tension that holds together opposite poles is dissipating. Language degenerates into angry code words. Labels replace the lace of observation. To preserve relationships, people stop talking about issues that matter to them. Conversations become smaller. We tiptoe around each other. Or we just leave. A relational monoculture takes over, where we associate only with the like-minded. Can democracy survive this? Can churches?

In many church bodies, an enormous gap exists between its public prophetic voice and many people in the pews. Or ideology masquerades as theology, or self-improvement as salvation. Adding to this, our theological language does not readily speak to the culture of post-Christendom.

What can we do? Can churches speak prophetically without being caught in the vortex of polarization? Can we do the work of reconciliation when basic facts are in dispute and only one side is worth listening to – your own?

These large questions cannot be addressed apart from the particularities of actual Christian community. There we often avoid confrontation for fear of losing relationships. However, it is also there that we may have the best chance to learn how to live with difference and find the courage to move through it.

In my nearly 30 years as pastor in one place, I have asked these questions countless times: Can we talk about God's justice and mercy across apparently opposite poles? Can we stay in relationship while we move beyond our comfort zone for the sake of God's call?

These questions never met me in the abstract. They are shaped like a heart, where all the people of my parish also live. These heart-shaped questions live not in the head but between the ribs. Sometimes they burn in me like a live coal.

Glittering Paradoxes

Over the years, heartbeat by heartbeat, I have begun to discern not answers so much as heart-shaped movements. The movements are shaped by the paradoxes at the heart of faith. Christian theology

When the church fails to inhabit its paradoxes, theology collapses into ideology, and the church slides into polarization.

moves in dynamic tension between apparent opposites: humanity and divinity, power and weakness, mercy and justice, folly and wisdom, saint and sinner, politics and spirit, finite and infinite, least and greatest, heaven and earth, death and life. These theological polarities act like a heart, pumping blood in opposite directions. When the church fails to honor or inhabit its paradoxes, theology collapses into ideology. The church slides into polarization. Political powers and moneyed interests use the church as a pawn in their game of thrones.

Yet when pastors preach and lead from these indispensable tensions, we and our congregations might learn to attend to the paradoxes embedded in our personal and political sensibilities, not run from them by retreating to one pole or collapsing the poles in a flaccid neutrality. Amid the spiraling of anger and fear, shame and blame, dread and desperation, we might name deeper polarities we are likely avoiding — hope and grief, certitude and doubt, fear and confidence. We might even embrace these tensions as an energy field where the Holy Spirit moves. It is not easy, but I have experienced it.

Yet difficult conversations need something more than good theology. They need a rich soil ecology.

In the life of my church and its many passages through heartache and heart song, relational soil was forming. A soil of respect and affection built up among people of different ages, personalities, and wavelengths that could sustain relationship when disagreement emerged. It is much harder to reduce to a label the person with whom you share communion or serve at a funeral.

This biodiversity of relationships is not limited to the living. It is composted by the stories and spirit of our ancestors and aerated by hopes for the generation coming of age. The church's language fertilizes this soil. Ancient, poetic, sacramental, it can speak a word that frees people from bondage to flatness. It can draw each person's story into a much larger one.

Germinating Hope

These thoughts here are tendrils of hope. Just maybe, churches are uniquely suited to host community conversations where real speaking and listening are possible. Just maybe, churches that cultivate respectful relationships can overcome fearful paralysis and walk with those who are being marginalized.

My thoughts are also a love song.

At the celebration of my ministry in February, the pews were packed with people for whom the church has become a centering point, a horizon of purpose, or a place that held their families through life's milestones. Some came to honor my role in the community. Others who left in painful disagreement returned.

Amid unities and divergences, something had grown and lived, a benediction of deep love and gratitude. It is all grace. Maybe this is what the church can offer a society caught in a vortex of polarization — not a formula for civil discourse exactly but an ecology of incarnation, in which common ground is cultivated not from who we ought to be but who we are, in all our contradictions.

My hope is that such an ecology can sustain relationship as we act from the margins into the center of people's lives, even when some of our own dearest siblings in Christ take offense.

The question shaped like a heart is still a question, but it is beating, burning, catching in the throat. Alive.

The Rev. Kristin Foster '77 M.Div. is a member of the YDS Alumni Board, where she serves as immediate past president.

WHEN JESUS STIRS IT UP:
An Interview with M. Garlinda Burton



M. Garlinda Burton has served the United Methodist Church in different capacities for 35 years. She was top executive of the UMC's Commission on the Status and Role of Women from 2003-2012 and today provides educational materials for the denomination's Commission on Religion and Race. She is also a writer and editor, a United Methodist deaconess, and director of the Nashville Freedom School Partnership.

On the problem of playing nice ...

In so many churches, we think we are clear about where we stand on racial justice and racial inclusion. We talk about “welcoming the stranger” and “the least of these.” But for years we’ve been very cerebral about it. We assumed we all agree that these are good things, and didn’t push beneath the polite surface. Now, we look around and discover that we’ve not lived out these fine things we espouse.

And not everyone who goes to church with us even agrees we should include people who are not like us. We’re discovering there are people in our congregations who have been quietly resistant to racial inclusion all along – quiet until now. We’re at a point where we need to talk frankly about what we can agree on and still be a church. Remind ourselves what we believe biblically and doctrinally.

For a long time we’ve played nice with each other and felt good about sometimes electing people of color in positions of leadership. But how many mainline congregations are really integrated with regard to race or class? How many sermons do we actually hear each year about racism or white privilege? We’re getting further and further from living a faith that invades our real life. What’s missing are relationships that come out of real conversations. We depend on social media to do our grunt work when we weigh in against racial or class prejudice.

We need something deeper and more prophetic than that. A prophetic message from the pulpit doesn’t always have to be thunder from Isaiah. What might be needed now is the message that we – all sides – need to listen to the voices among us that are dissenting from us. Seek relationships that build trust enough to talk face to face.

On the value of struggling together ...

How can church deepen its relationships? I believe it means urging preachers to preach on hard subjects and holding Bible studies on hard passages. Have conversations and worship all through the week, not just Sundays. People with opposing views would

have supper together. We need to eat with folk down the street. Invite a mixed group of police officers to talk about street violence, race, and class. Worship with a church from another neighborhood where people have a vastly different socio-economic and cultural reality than the people in my church. People would start building personal relationships. Christians should worship, have conversations, pray, and struggle together.

There are some conservatives I trust more than some of my liberal friends because of a close personal bond I’ve formed with them. We don’t just pontificate or push our points of view; we also talk about our families and the struggle to be faithful. We will disagree about guns or marriage equality but we speak from the heart, with mutual respect. It’s not an ideological relationship. It’s a relationship. We don’t agree most of the time, but we are willing to walk together.

On writing a new history ...

There are two sides to a lot of issues, including the debate about who should own guns and why. Christians can reasonably argue about that. But there are some things that we Christians should not “agree to disagree” about. There are non-negotiables. Racism is a sin – non-negotiable. Sexism. You cannot claim to be a Christian and then vilify any child of God because you have a problem with their skin color, eth-

There are some things that we Christians should not “agree to disagree” about. There are non-negotiables. Racism is a sin – non-negotiable. So is sexism.

nicity, language, gender, or culture. You just can’t. We don’t make this clear enough in church. We’re all made in the image of God, and if we espouse any theology that *otherizes* another person, we’re flat out wrong. One problem is, we’ve created a version of Christianity that idolizes America, whiteness, and English. This idolatry is hard to face. There are times when we do need to choose between being a good American and being a good Christian.

Jesus is the son of God. He came to show us the love of God, save us, and sanctify us. He set a model for struggling with our humanity and striving for divinity – giving us the power to be reconciled and write a new story of faith that is not grounded in manifest destiny or “might makes right.” I think the Holy Spirit is with us and wants us to be better than we’ve been. We’re not perfect but we serve a perfect and ever-loving God. Whenever I see people coming together across lines, that’s Jesus stirring it up.



Street protest against police violence, New York City, 2000

Photo by Eli Reed

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A Family Affair: Class, Race, Theology



By Tex Sample

The white working class is a complicated people. The great majority of them bust their tails working at hard jobs that rack their bodies and don't pay enough. They support their families and draw dignity from protecting the people they love. When war comes, they are among the first to enlist and among the first to die.

These are hard times for many. Several dynamics account for a kind of free-floating rage among many working people – an anger based in declining wages, stereotyping and scapegoating, inequalities of wealth and income, the prostitution of politicians to economic power elites, with hypocritical tax giveaways to the rich and wage depression for workers.

These are also times for engaging working-class people, their convictions and ways of thinking, and responding to their pain through grassroots movements that offer a new direction. Those of us who talk for a living must especially learn to listen.

Meanings Behind Words

This is not to suggest an uncritical approach to working-class life. But listening does not begin with diagnoses of their false consciousness, their failures

It is hard to reduce other people to “them” when everyone is encompassed in the grace and love of the household of God.

to follow their self-interest, their bad faith, or their hegemonic commitments. It is listening to learn the tacit meanings behind their rhetorics and the ways they name and deal with social wrongs.

It is vital to note that white working-class people think in terms of family and other primary relationships. They seek cooperation among key groups like family, school, church, and other traditional institutions. They do not stress self-interest, especially of an individualistic kind, because it is corrosive of

family relationships. This is especially so in the case of the man, provided there is one, as the primary breadwinner. If he pursues his individual self-interest, he may walk out the door, leaving poor families devastated and near-poor families poverty-stricken. The greatest fear of these families is moral corruption, and this for a basic reason. James Ault makes the case that morality in this culture serves to support the structure of family relationships in order to cope and survive.¹

Thus political and economic positions on social issues are not at the base of the lives of these working families. More foundational are the commitments and practices that enable these families to deal with a world that does not come out right. This means that their political attitudes can vary significantly depending on how a given question relates to their lives. Most of these families do not listen to the National Organization of Women or to Focus on the Family or turn to Fox News or to the Ku Klux Klan, not even the American Legion and the National Rifle Association, though, of course, these influence some.² They are far more likely to tackle problems by thinking about how they affect their families, the cooperative institutions upon which they depend, and the morality that enables them to manage and to make it through the night.

Blame on Government

It is important to say the great majority of the white working class is made up of conservative traditionalists, not free-market conservatives. Studies show that in the abstract white working-class Americans support the free enterprise system, and they tend to

see that system from a small business perspective. They have strong anti-government opinions and blame government mainly for what has happened to the economy.³ (When asked about more concrete issues like support for Social Security and Medicaid, they are far more positive about government, though not in a systematic way.)

They deeply mistrust big business also, but they believe it is the role of government to prevent abuse by corporate America. They believe big business has too much power and that the current maldistribution of wealth and income is wrong. However, they believe there is nothing ordinary people can do about it. Hence there is great despair in their views.

Calling on Theology

Any theological understanding of working-class conditions should begin at this point of people's pain, alienation, and fierce anger. The task is to name the principalities and powers, as the New Testa-

Most do not stress individualistic self-interest because it is corrosive of family relationships.

ment calls them – the fallen forces that determine economic and social conditions – and trace their impact on real lives.

This demands from us the sharpest kind of theological critique. Today's enormous imbalances in wealth and income simply cannot be defended morally. Scripture speaks to this authoritatively. Isaiah 5:8 says: "Doom to those who acquire house after house, who annex field to field, until there is no more space left and only you live alone in the land." In Ezekiel 22:23-29, the word of the Lord denounces the conspiracy of princes, the unholiness of priests, the corruption of officials, the violations of important people who "have practiced extortion and have committed robbery. They've oppressed the poor and mistreated the immigrant."

Such biblical testimony is immense. Behind this is a view of human nature that regards the human being as created in the image of God and who is called to live out a life of love and justice for the other. Contrast that to the free-market notion of the rational economic individual who pursues self-interest in a competitive open market.

Family Stories

Any discussion of working-class life must grasp the power of family rhetorics. A way to address racism down on the ground with white working people, for

instance, involves encountering the stories of black families and how they struggle, the commonalities they share with white working people during hard times. These stories can build common ground. I have seen this work many times in community organizing – blacks and whites and browns standing up and telling stories of their families, of working more than one job because an employer won't pay fulltime, parents trying to manage work schedules, child care, family time, and just rest and sleep, doing their level best to be good providers.

These are hardcore narratives and they can have surgical impact in cutting away certain images of

CATHEDRAL KITSCH

By Tracy K. Smith

Does God love gold?
Does He shine back
At Himself from walls
Like these, leafed
In the earth's softest wealth?

Women light candles,
Pray into their fistful of beads.
Cameras spit human light
Into the vast holy dark,

And what glistens back
Is high up and cold. I feel
Man here. The same wish
That named the planets.

Man with his shoes and tools,
His insistence to prove we exist
Just like God, in the large
And the small, the great

And the frayed. In the chords
That rise from the tall brass pipes,
And the chorus of crushed cans
Someone drags over cobbles
In the secular street.

prejudice. I have seen this with my own eyes – people who were antagonists but who through the ongoing power of story came together to struggle for a justice that transcends individualist or racist ideology. When the conversation turns to the families of people who are politically or ethnically different – real mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, with struggles similar, at least in some ways, to their own – then the logics of their thought can shift, energizing coalitions across class, race, and gender. This is not a fail-safe practice, but it is far more effective than the rationales that come out of the management-speak of the upper-middle class.

Blessing and Beauty

Theologically speaking, it is a very short step from talking about the families of others to encompassing them in the family of God. It is hard to reduce other people to “them” when they are placed by a family idiom in the household of God, and all are caught up in the grace and love of God.

This is where a church model as extended family takes on major importance. Most white working-class people in the US are Christian, at least nominally, yet millions of these are alienated from church, in no small part because they feel like strangers without a home and people without an invitation. Transformation requires community. When a church uses familiar family language or adopts practices that people know “in their bones,” there is a sense of being home, of welcome, belonging, and affirmation. When these are lifted up in the presence of God’s blessing and beauty, they make a priceless gift. The experience of being swept up in the acceptance of God in a family-like church can provide redemptive strength to face one’s struggles in a postindustrial world.

Elitist Overtones

For a good many years I described myself as a liberal, but the more I realized how much that term was wrapped up with certain views of the nation-state and too accommodated to certain economic positions within capitalism, the less the term fit. When many of my friends became “progressives,” I never could quite accept the name. Quite frankly, it had an elitist ring about it that gave me discomfort. It carried the connotation of being literate, highly educated, and professional. I felt like it left out a whole bunch of people. Many of my friends who are people of color do not describe themselves that way, and even more of my white working-class friends would not be caught dead using the term. I have not used it to describe myself for some time.

Increasingly the term that speaks to me and describes the aim I seek in both my academic study and my community work is that of the common good. It is found in inchoate form in Scripture. I think of Jeremiah where God speaks to the people of Israel to “promote the good of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare” (29:7). I think of the apostle Paul, who in every one of his authentic letters urges the people of the ecclesia he organized to seek the good of all. We know Jesus crossed lines continually to heal, teach, and make alive. Notions of the common good abide in Augustine, Thomas, Luther, Calvin, as well as contemporary Catholic and Protestant thought.

The Great Discovery

One clarification seems to me desperately important: We do not know ahead of time what the common good is. I find it to be a decidedly grassroots, bottom-up process. Abstract notions like social justice, distributive justice, and democratic participation require a very concrete embodiment in the down-on-the-ground lives of people. I am suspicious of progressive agendas developed by elites who then go out and attempt to mobilize people

Most working-class whites believe big business has too much power, and the current maldistribution of wealth and income is wrong. But they believe there is nothing ordinary people can do about it.

on their behalf without much consultation. Also suspect is the use of fine-sounding language to promote the unjustified and viciously self-serving aims of libertarian billionaires and their congressional proxies in tax policy and legislation.

The common good is a discovery, a find. It emerges from listening, conversation, building relationships, and trust. It is local without being parochial. It transcends individual or group self-interest taken alone. It grows out of a search for what people truly need and profoundly love.

Visionary Scut Work

My friend the Rev. Sam Mann says that moving toward, moving onto, a common ground is an act of love. In community organizing it is the moment that makes a turn toward a relationship, generating a commitment, moving diverse people onto a singular journey. The character of that journey is not all “glory hallelujah mountain time,” an uninterrupted time

of high emotional expression and joy. Rather, it is about the discipline of showing up, of being there, of staying the course. It's doing the scut work of detail and follow-up, making phone calls, and touching base. It is a response to the pain of others but also to their hopes and dreams. It's sorting out the pieces of life and putting them together in new configurations. This may sound lofty, but it is hard work. It's digging on hardscrabble ground. It's staying with it long after you want to quit.⁴

In Christian understanding, it is born not of optimism but of hope – a confidence that God bats last.

Tex Sample is a lecturer, workshop leader, preacher, author, and emeritus professor of church and society at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. This essay is adapted from his forthcoming book, Working Class Rage, with permission of the publisher, Abingdon Press. His other books include A Christian Justice for the Common Good (Abingdon, 2016) and Earthy Mysticism: Spirituality for Unspiritual People (Abingdon, 2008).

Notes

- 1 James M. Ault Jr., *Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamental Baptist Church* (Knopf, 2004), pp. 189-200.
- 2 Ault, pp. 186-217.
- 3 Andrew Levison, *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support* (Democratic Strategist Press, 2013), pp. 171-203.
- 4 I am indebted to Stanley Hauerwas for understanding the common good as a discovery. See his *Vision And Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1986), pp. 235-240, and *War And The American Difference* (Baker, 2011), pp. 140-150. For the notion of the common good as local but not parochial, see Charles M. Payne, *I've Got The Light Of Freedom* (California, second edition 2007), p. 101.

With a historic commitment to peacemaking, the Mennonite Church USA has created a document called "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love" that outlines approaches to conflict. It includes:

In Thought:

- **Accept conflict** – Acknowledge together that conflict is a normal part of our life in the church. See *Romans 14:1-8, 10-12, 17-19; 15:1-7*
- **Affirm hope** – Affirm that as God walks with us in conflict, we can work through to growth. *Ephesians 4:15-16*
- **Commit to prayer** – Admit our needs and commit ourselves to pray for a mutually satisfactory solution (no prayers for my success or the other to change but to find a joint way). *James 5:16*

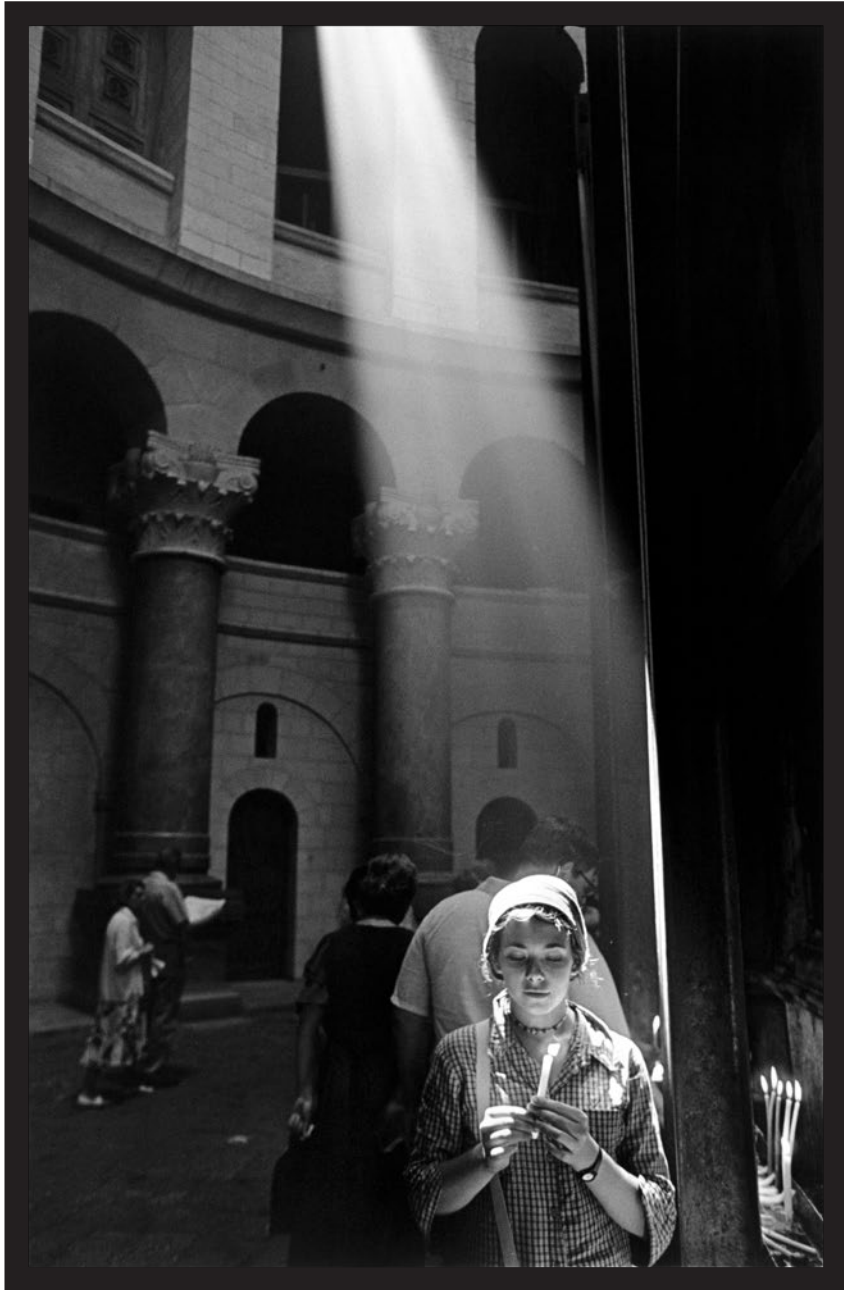
In Action:

- **Go to the other ...** Go directly to those with whom we disagree; avoid behind-the-back criticism. *Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-20*
- **... in the spirit of unity** – Go in gentleness, patience, and humility. Own our part in the conflict instead of pointing out the others'. *Galatians 6:1-5*
- **Be quick to listen** – Listen carefully and summarize what is heard before responding. Seek as much to understand as to be understood. *James 1:19; Proverbs 18:13*
- **Be slow to judge** – Suspend judgments, avoid labeling, end name calling, discard threats, and act in a nondefensive, nonreactive way. *Romans 2:1-4; Galatians 5:22-26*
- **Be willing to negotiate** – Work through the disagreements constructively. *Acts 15; Philippians 2:1-11*
 - generate options for meeting both parties' needs (rather than defending one's own way)
 - evaluate options by how they satisfy all sides
 - collaborate in working out a joint solution (so both sides grow and win)
 - cooperate with the emerging agreement (accept the possible, not demand your ideal)

In Life:

- **Be steadfast in love** – Be firm in our commitment to seek a mutual solution. Be stubborn in holding to our common foundation in Christ. *Colossians 3:12-15*
- **Be open to mediation** – Be open to accept skilled help. If we cannot reach agreement among ourselves, we will use those with gifts and training in mediation in the larger church. *Philippians 4:1-3*
- **Trust the community** – If we cannot reach agreement or experience reconciliation, we will turn the decision over to others in the congregation or from the broader church. *Acts 15*
- **Be the body of Christ** – Believe in and rely on the solidarity of the Body of Christ and its commitment to peace and justice. *1 Corinthians 6:1-6*

Source: Mennonite Church USA. For more information see mennoniteusa.org/peace or call 866-866-2872.



Pilgrim in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, 2000

Photo by Larry Towell

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“What’s a Human For?”



By Stephen H. Phelps '73 B.A., '86 M.Div.

Early this year, six adults were interviewed by PBS NewsHour, which had first gathered the group prior to the 2016 presidential election. One wore the hijab, one was African American, two expressed satisfaction with President Trump, four did not, three in the group were women, three were men.

Anchor Judy Woodruff asked what had changed for them in the interval. Every question generated feelings so sharply divergent it was a relief the responders did not stab each other with their eyes; they looked only at the anchor. At the end they agreed on one thing: We are more divided now than in 2016.

A Forked Road

Uncivil behavior, when it becomes common, imperils a society. This is a natural law. Our associations depend on basic ideas about their purposes.

Deep conversations are unusual. They never just happen. If no party to a conversation takes the risk to guide it down through unlit, unknown corridors, no door opens.

For members who refuse to work at reconciling, the road forks. In one direction, cynicism and withdrawal; in the other, deceit and violence to maximize power and control. Between these poles of despair and violence, only one practice can sustain a society while its members – enough of them, at least – rework and reform their ideas of what binds them: They must have difficult conversations. The same holds for a club or a church or a nation or a great civilization.

Only difficult conversations can open the door to a workable future for a society increasingly injured to lies and violence. But it is hard to find that door. Deep conversations are unusual. They never just happen. The self’s inertia keeps talk light or level or, if necessary, defensive. If no party to a conversa-

tion takes the risk to guide it down through unlit, unknown corridors, no door opens.

When someone intends to find the door, a few conditions are necessary to fruitful dialogue. First, a person must desire to learn from the other. A desire to opine or persuade cannot sustain the needed connection. Second, the desire to learn from another must itself be the fruit of the flower of humility, whose fragrance spreads from the awareness that one’s own view cannot comprise the whole view. In a difficult conversation, a person who intends to learn from another must hold steadfastly in mind why she’s there. Others may come with a mind to argue a position, but the learner commits himself to learn from the other regardless why others are there.

A Spiritual Quest

When one intends to learn from others but is uncertain of their aims, the obstacles to meaningful conversation loom like the forces that Frodo and friends face in Tolkien’s tales of spiritual conflict. Indeed, for the one who intends to persevere, it is helpful to see the difficult conversation as a spiritual undertaking.

The word *spiritual* is used in myriad ways, but all have in common an orientation to the whole. Martin Buber called this spiritual orientation the “I/Thou” relation. The coherence and co-existence of the other stand forward. Even if her views seem uninformed, harmful, or unjust, the desire to honor the relation, to learn, is undiminished.

In *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt explores a large body of psychological research that supports the conclusion that reasoning is not the tool that

cuts the path by which we arrive at our values.¹ The origins of these values lie deep in experience and even in inherited disposition. We use reason(s) only to make our values persuasive. This is why “the facts” do not change minds. Difficult conversations are difficult precisely because the values held are held out of reason’s reach. If the dialogue does not press beneath the surface of opinions, heat is generated, not light.

The Deepest Question

Commitment to a difficult conversation requires a format beyond a mere exchange of views. Filing opinions fails the test. It is not enough to give people a place to pound out their old thoughts and an excuse to hear nothing when opponents start in on the same.

To stay oriented to the sharp difference in the room, the format needs to turn participants toward the whole person – to the listener’s whole self, and to the speaker’s. Telling the story of how they came to be and to see can ground the conversation in its spiritual function.

Inviting a difficult conversation, we have to risk grasping how vastly our values can differ, and how strong are the feelings that attend them. A key question undergirds these efforts: What’s a human for?

Are we for ourselves and our kin alone? Are we for the Other? A society’s ethics are woven from our basic ideas about this question.

When we ask about a tool, “What’s it for?”, somebody knows the answer. When the same is asked about a human, the question hangs heavy. Some think some people are good for nothing, or merely objects to use. Some think they, with their profits, are for themselves alone.

Into the Light

Everything spoken and unspoken in a difficult conversation implies answers to what a human is for. Some answers are laments, some are pleas. Is anyone good for nothing? Are we for ourselves and our kin alone? Are we for the Other? A society’s ethics are woven from our basic ideas about this question. A person who is open to learn from the Other, how she came to be, orients to the widest perspective imaginable. The conversation partners move down a darkened passageway together to a door and into light.

Buber experienced just this in 1914 when he and various counterparts from several European

countries gathered in hopes of genuine dialogue in the face of an impending world war. As he described it:

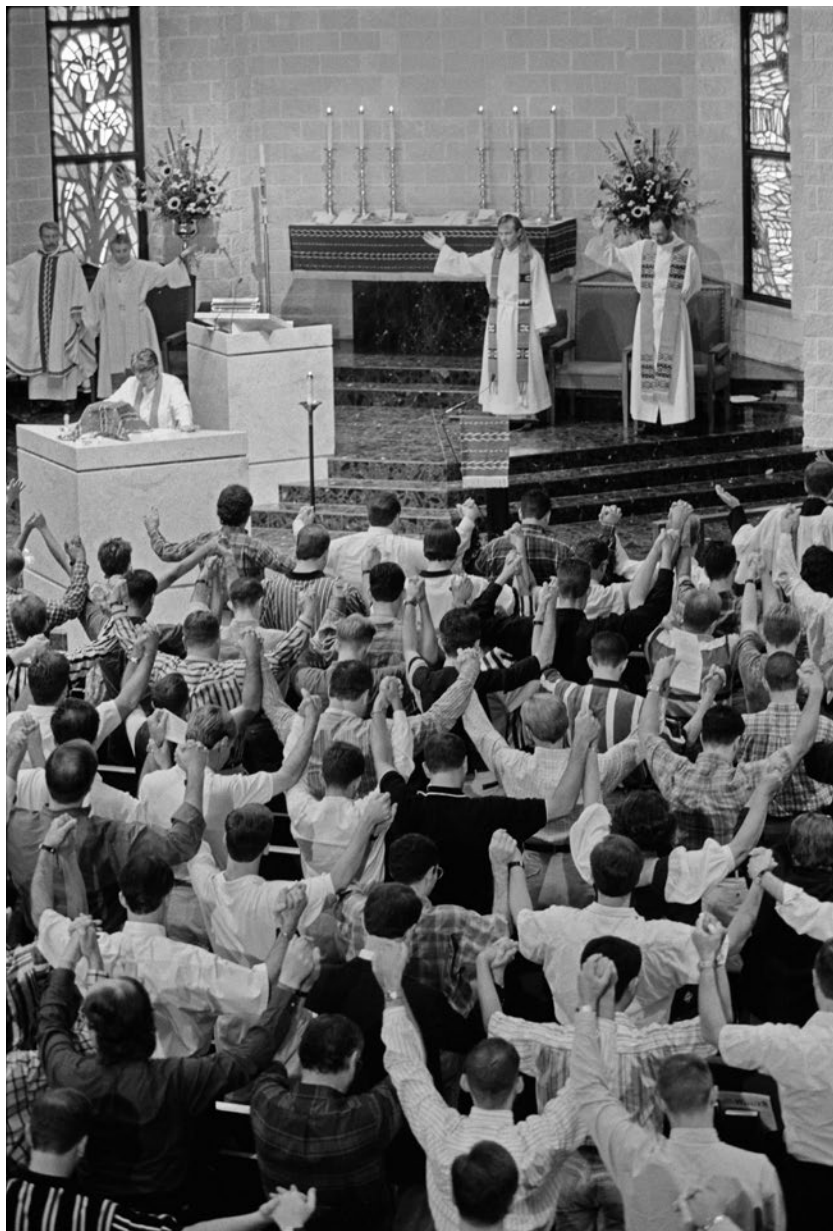
The conversations were marked by that unreserve, whose substance and fruitfulness I have scarcely ever experienced so strongly. It had such an effect on all who took part that the fictitious fell away and every word was an actuality. Then as we discussed the composition of the larger circle from which public initiative should proceed ... one of us, a man of passionate concentration and judicial power of love, raised the consideration that too many Jews had been nominated, so that several countries would be represented in unseemly proportion by their Jews. ... I protested against the protest. I no longer know how from that I came to speak of Jesus and to say that we Jews knew him from within, in the impulses and stirrings of his Jewish being, in a way that remains inaccessible to the peoples submissive to him. “In a way that remains inaccessible to you” – so I directly addressed the former clergyman. He stood up, I too stood, we looked into the heart of one another’s eyes. “It is gone,” he said, and before everyone we gave one another the kiss of brotherhood. The discussion of the situation between Jews and Christians had been transformed into a bond between the Christian and the Jew. In this transformation, dialogue was fulfilled. Opinions were gone, in a bodily way the factual took place.²

How odd to be called to the Other. How glad you are that scales fall from your eyes. What peculiar joy to feel drawn upward to the One while being taken down in humility to see the Other as you have not seen. Whoever would be great among you – you recall – must become a servant of all. What’s a human for?

In his writings and sermons, the Rev. Stephen H. Phelps ’73 B.A., ’86 M.Div. focuses on practices of inner development and social transformation toward a just economy. From 2011-14, he was interim senior minister at The Riverside Church in New York City. See his blog at stephenhphelps.com.

Notes

- 1 Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012).
- 2 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (Routledge Classics, 2002), pp. 6-7. The book was first published in 1947.



Service at Cathedral of Hope for LGBTQ community, Dallas, 1996

Photo by A. Abbas

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Fighting Like Christians



By Joyce Ann Mercer '84 M.Div.

In my extended family, we have a lot of experience with political differences. Across the years we've sat together at post-election holiday tables, offering analyses of the political landscape from decidedly opposing viewpoints.

A few of us make impassioned speeches about the theologies behind our views. Our conversations ordinarily are punctuated by good-natured teasing about each other's messed up political proclivities, and lots of tongue-in-cheek musings about how we siblings could possibly be children of the same mother.

In the past two years, however, something changed. We stopped joking about our divided politics or sharing divergent biblical interpretations that support those differences. There was no explicit rule disallowing all mention of immigration, gun control, the disposition of Confederate monuments,

In the past two years, something changed. Our family stopped joking about our divided politics or divergent biblical interpretations. An atypical silence has come over us.

election campaign discourse, police shootings, or assessments of the current White House occupant. But an atypical silence on these and other contested topics has come over us, signaling a shift in how we are together.

Enriching the Repertoire

Perhaps such dynamics are best understood as part of an overall diminishment of social bonds described by Robert Putnam.¹ Americans may no longer trust that the ties that bind us are strong enough to withstand partisan conflict. Perhaps, however, some of the disinclination to risk conflict is a tacit awareness that we lack a repertoire of practices for conflict engagement that can avoid wounding others (or ourselves) if we surface our

differences. Could it be that in these times we lack the practical knowledge to navigate the "culture of conflict" in which we find ourselves?

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu puts forward his concept of *habitus* as the place from which practices arise in various societies. *Habitus* refers to durable dispositions toward certain ways of going about everyday life that come to seem natural and normal. Within the *habitus* of a given culture, practices take shape, acquired by long-term exposure to a set of social conditions leading to an internalization of these norms. Participating in a *habitus*, people develop a shared sense of "just knowing what to do" in a given situation. Bourdieu repudiated the notion that cultural "rules" direct human action in a mechanistic way. He contended that beginning in childhood, through a long-term apprenticeship within a *habitus*, persons develop and internalize practical knowledge allowing them to construct appropriate strategies of action in varying circumstances.

It seems to me that in many parts of contemporary US society, we suffer from "habitus failure" when it comes to conflict- and peace-related practices. The cultural *habitus* through which many of us would acquire practical knowledge fails to apprentice us to work through conflicts and deal with tensions over differences. This lack is particularly true in Christian contexts that treat conflict as evidence of sin.

Conflicted about Conflict

Hugh Halverstadt, writing about conflict in congregations, contends that a dominant church narrative paints conflict as unfaithful, which sets up dissonance between one's identity as a person of faith and as a participant in a conflict.² Halverstadt

asserts that the question is not whether Christian people and churches will fight, but whether they are capable of a “fair fight,” an ethical engagement around ideological differences amid differences in power. Instead of seeing the absence of conflict as a marker of faithful practice, this alternative story regards inevitable conflict as an opportunity to deepen theological reflection, skillful action, and faithful practice.

The present national condition of pervasive conflict, while difficult, could be a chance for people of faith to shine. After all, Christian faith communities are no strangers to contention. The FACT2015 re-

The question is not whether Christian people and churches will fight, but whether they are capable of a “fair fight.”

search survey on trends in congregational life says 62 percent of churches report they have experienced conflict over the last five years.³ Given this frequent acquaintance with discord, Christians ought to be experts at dealing well with conflict.

Except that we’re not. Simply being in a conflict situation does not automatically equip a person to engage it well. We need early and long apprenticeships in doing so – a habitus rich in constructive experience with conflict from which to draw.

Biblical DNA

Part of the “DNA” of practical theological knowledge is a scripture-rich trove of stories in which disciples are those who love even their enemies (Matt. 5:43-48); actively work out their differences with one another (Matt. 5: 21-26); are called as peacemakers (Matt. 5: 9); and who act to forgive as they have been forgiven (Matt. 6:12). We need to free these stories to interrogate our conflict-saturated lives and call us to re-form our practices of dealing with conflict in constructive, perhaps even peaceable, ways as Christian people. This does not mean covering over differences or harms in the false idea that if we just embrace and accept each other we are reconciled. Instead, these scriptures point to seeking new ways of going about addressing our differences by refusing to give in to the desire for retribution, or to fight in ways that harm others or ourselves.⁴

Being Strategic

There is no single “right” way to deal with conflict, and much depends upon one’s historical and present social location in relation to the focus of the struggle. Strategic conflict engagement is a faith practice, not because conflict is inherently “bad” such that we must get rid of it to be faithful, but

because working through it can issue in transformations of injustice and the creation of more loving people and communities. Conflict can help to bring about important, necessary social change (e.g., the civil rights movement) and does not always “feel” peaceful – but we can learn ways to struggle that are not so destructive.

Faith practices involve theological ideas and skills for action that can be taught and learned. If reconciliation and peace are important for Christians, then congregations, through their religious education/formation, preaching, and pastoral care, must make these practices central theological tenets – and deal with conflict in productive, hope-filled ways. Churches teach people ways of interpreting scripture, of practicing compassion, and of worship and prayer. We imagine that these practices matter not only inside the church but also for people’s lives in the world. Today, honing capacities for addressing stress-filled conflict and supporting people through it becomes a necessity.⁵

The Rush to Reconcile

One task here involves re-working the way narratives of conflict and reconciliation fit in the discourse of faith communities. The idea that reconciliation is the necessary goal to all conflict situations, should happen as quickly as possible, and is best measured by the absence of overt conflict, tends to structure the goal as a rush to resolve discordance. The meaning of reconciliation gets reduced to our being in a state of zero-tension. Deeper notions of the restoration of right relations and the repair of wounds then take a back seat to the more simplistic idea that reconciliation exists when conflict is not present.

Jennifer Harvey’s challenge to this “reconciliation paradigm” in relation to racial conflict fueled by white privilege and racism is apropos here: The rush to racial reconciliation ahead of repentance and repair keeps present racist practices and structures in place. Harvey writes, “... at the end of the day reconciliation does more to cloak and make difficult attention to particularities and the deep, specific, and sustained work required of whites before we can have any business talking about reconciled relationships in a collective manner.”⁶ Harvey is not opposed to reconciliation as a vision of the desired goal; she simply recognizes that its use actually can inhibit its accomplishment when the term covers over histories and experiences of suffering that white people do nothing to address. Though Harvey deals specifically with the situation of racism, her refusal to cover hard conflict work with kumbaya togetherness speaks to the difficulty in engaging all kinds of conflict well.

In certain difficult circumstances, there is another option: strategic conflict avoidance. Avoiding conflict gets a bad rap these days, and I cannot recommend it as a good solution. But as a short-term option, strategic conflict avoidance – the decision to step back temporarily from a particular conflict whether as an individual or a church – may position a group to preserve bonds, like holiday dinners in my extended family right now where we tacitly agree

Take on controversial issues in conversational spaces like religious education and pastoral care, instead of always in sermons or congregational meetings.

to disagree. We do not discuss certain subjects, I believe, because we value the connections and history we share over any relative “good” achieved through the unlikely event of political agreement.

I’ve seen this in my ethnographic research on congregations in conflict. In one divided church that was part of a study on conflict over sexuality issues, many members spoke of making the strategic choice not to continue fighting. They opted not to exit from their beleaguered church community, in spite of their closer agreement with the views of departing members than with those who stayed.

Choices and Consequences

They made this choice because they deemed other elements (e.g., relational, theological, and historical ties) more important than the single issue of agreement over changing ordination rules in their denomination. As one long-time member put it, “I basically agree with the people who left us – I don’t particularly like the changes the denomination is making, but I wouldn’t leave my parish over that.”

This is, in the long run, a living out of the tragic dimension of human life and finitude, in which we must constantly choose between competing goods and figure out how to live with the consequences of those choices. Simply agreeing to disagree, though it has its limits, can be an appropriate, short-term way to deal with conflicts in some circumstances.

Elsewhere I have written in more detail about the “how to’s” of congregations engaging conflict constructively.⁷ Here are several bullet points named there. Many of these congregation-minded strategies could be adapted for individuals trying to navigate the intense ideological disagreements of our era. Congregations keep conflict constructive when they:

- Teach practices of open communication around differences, and around dispute resolution, *as practices of faith*.
- Pay attention to the practices that help maintain connections apart from the controversy.
- Take on controversial issues in conversational spaces like religious education and pastoral care, instead of always in sermons or congregational meetings.
- Be prepared to work with others to put boundaries around behavior that cannot and should not be tolerated in a fight, such as personal attacks or name calling.
- When possible, anticipate conflicts, not for the purpose of avoiding or shutting them down, but in order to plan ways of creating a framework so that people can face their differences in a healthy manner.
- Hold listening sessions in smaller groups that allow people in a controversy to experience themselves as being heard and acknowledged.

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Notes

- 1 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).
- 2 Hugh S. Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1991).
- 3 See Carl S. Dudley, Theresa Zingery, and David Breedon, *Insights into Congregational Conflict*, David Roozen, series editor (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2015). Accessed online <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/InsightsIntoCongregationalConflict.pdf>.
- 4 See Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Volume II: Diverse Christian Practices of Restorative Justice and Peacemaking* (Orbis, 2009).
- 5 Katie Day's *Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity* (Alban Institute, 2001) remains a useful guide for a group considering how to talk about contentious topics together.
- 6 Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* (Eerdmans, 2014), p. 98.
- 7 See Joyce Ann Mercer, “6 Ways to Keep Congregational Conflict Constructive,” August 2014, available online at <http://studyingcongregations.org/blog/ask-an-expert-6-ways-to-keep-congregational-conflicts-constructive-by-joyce-mercer>.



Street scene, Spain, 1972

Photo by Josef Koudelka

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Speaking and Listening to the Motley Pew



By Molly Phinney Baskette '96 M.Div.

In 2016, my church held an election night watch party. We made two playlists for the big finale just in case, little thinking we'd actually be making slow, sad circles to Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" at the end of the night instead of leaping for joy to Kool and the Gang's "Celebration."

My church lives in the heart of the liberal bubble of Berkeley, CA. Our congregation is home to UC-Berkeley faculty and students, young families and retirees, boomer hippies who migrated here during the Summer of Love and stayed, and a pew full of young trans spiritual seekers, one of whom coined the phrase "Motley Pew" for our church T-shirt.

Post-election, many of us felt an urgent need to learn how to talk to folks who had voted for Trump. We began exploring the power of Nonviolent Com-

We are showing up for difficult conversations, listening, stating our feelings clearly, and trusting the Holy Spirit will lead us to the wisest outcomes, not for you, or me, but for us.

munication (NVC), a tool for compassionate engagement with others and a conflict-resolution strategy. It is based on the work of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, which sponsors training events worldwide (cnvc.org).

Name It, Claim It

NVC invites us to identify and name our feelings: restless, apprehensive, despairing, serene, tender, optimistic. Understanding our feelings helps us identify the universal human needs beneath those feelings, needs that might not be getting met – physical sustenance and safety, meaning and purpose, autonomy and community, connection and affection.

Honoring our needs, we are able then to make specific requests of the person with whom we find ourselves in conflict. We are also better able to understand their needs and feelings, and honor requests they may make of us.

NVC began to permeate our life together. The preachers preached it. The children learned about it in Sunday school. It was the theme for our all-ages retreat, and again for our women's retreat. We also hosted a daylong training sponsored by Bay NVC last fall.

As we learned our new skills, I think we imagined someday chartering a bus from Berkeley to Birmingham, sitting down over jello salad and healing all of America's ills with some good compassionate communication. One of my members did, in fact, participate in a moderated Facebook group of Democratic women from California and Republican women from Alabama, and has spoken eloquently about how the friendships she formed with the Alabamans gave her new spiritual depth.

Sneaky Divine Motives

For most of the rest of us, those nation-healing conversations didn't materialize, at least not yet. But our learning was not for naught. God had sneaky ulterior motives for our steeping ourselves in NVC, as She often does. It turns out there were people quite different from us whom we needed to learn how to talk to. They were in our own pew.

In October 2016, a fire had damaged our sanctuary and destroyed the building next to it that housed every other function of the church. For eight months we held worship in a local synagogue, while we reno-

vated the sanctuary and repurposed every remaining closet, junk room, and hallway to carry on the work of the church once we moved back.

Grief Arrived

In diaspora, we enjoyed a kind of camping-out elan, a dreamy and creative can-do spirit. But once we moved back into the sanctuary, the grief really hit, some of us harder than others. The unified blob of the congregation began to spread out along a spectrum, with some people moving into a “preserve and protect” mode, others into a “possibilities” mode around a campus redesign, and a lot of people in the middle confused and concerned.

Some were imagining a state-of-the-art new ministry center, or putting affordable housing on campus to address the cruelty and immorality of the housing crisis in our region. Some wanted to get back to normal as soon as possible, and not further risk the stability of the church by committing to projects with unknown downstream effects or financial strains. Even now, our issues are not resolved, and we’ve been having some very painful conversations about our scope and direction. The “pew” was far more motley than we had imagined, and it threatened to tear the church apart.

Covenant of Respect

In the midst of this, we have been able to draw on our NVC skills to dial down anxiety and truly hear each other. A covenant of respect, which we say aloud in unison at every community meeting, reminds us to speak using “I” rather than an anonymous “a lot of people feel that ...” to bolster our position, because even if we are only one person, our feelings and needs still matter.

Recently at our deacons’ meeting, we were all asked to say how long we had been coming to our church, what drew us here, and what kept us here.

One of our veteran deacons, a tall trans woman in her late 20s wearing a studded belt and black rock ’n’ roll tank top, talked about how when she first arrived in the Bay Area, she joined a lot of radical groups, which offered her instant community and purpose.

“But one by one, I watched them fall apart – sometimes really fast,” she said. “It was rough how quickly they turned from camaraderie to vitriol. I wanted to check out a left-leaning church. I was curious how churches stay together for generations, when other communities and institutions fall apart.”

In an age when mainline churches are despairing the absence of millennials, who reportedly mistrust institutions, here was a twentysomething who had

actually been attracted to our ... institutionality. One of the good things about institutions is: They manage to organize people, a building, and a little savings that make it possible for them to do things like acculturate Nonviolent Communication.

Last month, I preached that no matter the outcome of our decision-making, the miracle is already happening. Not only are we charged with figuring out how to be church at the end of the empire, resisting oppression, facing down religious hypocrisy, becoming a super-diverse body with all kinds of opinionated people in it, but oh, by the way, we also have a 100-year decision to make involving \$15 million, give or take – and we are doing it.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, our motley pew makeup, we are still showing up. We are feeding our hungry, visiting our sick, singing side by side, and praying for each other. We are also showing up for difficult conversations, listening, stating our feelings and needs clearly, making requests, and trusting the Holy Spirit will lead us to the wisest outcomes, not for you, or me, but for us.

Molly Phinney Baskette ’96 M.Div. is minister of First Congregational Church of Berkeley. Her books include Standing Naked Before God: The Art of Public Confession (Pilgrim Press, 2015) and Real Good Church: How Our Church Came Back from the Dead and Yours Can Too (Pilgrim Press, 2014).

AFTER YEARS WITHOUT SPEAKING

By Alexandra Barylski

**We move not by faith
but by touch. Your soul rises
to skin, shines in its heated oil.
You press your mystery back
with palms over each brow –
fingernail moon, clover, iron
smell of forsaken earth soused
with water, almost baptismal.
Give your hands. I will tend gently
each whorl of your fingertips inked
with being and roll them one by one
to mark the pout of my lips.**

A Tribe as Big as the World



By Ray Waddle

It's a word that bares its teeth and refuses to negotiate. It is heard every day now to describe the smoldering social world: tribalism.

Tribalism is regarded as a window on the human heart and a danger to democracy. Seen this way, everyone hungrily adheres to a like-minded group. Our tribal instinct makes snap judgments about others' personal style, music, slang, and religion. It is willing to lash out and twist facts if we feel our team, and whatever is sacred to us, is threatened. It is addicted to conflict. It doubles down rather than listens up. It is aggrieved and unappeasable. It stirs grim predictions that society is splintering into subgroups fired up by online fabrications and hardened by hatred of compromise.

Global and Local

This description is the new orthodoxy. Can it be challenged? Could tribal identity be stretched into some larger group? What if tribal loyalty could be extended even to the whole planet, so that everyone is in the tribe? Psychologist Daniel Shapiro thinks it's not so far-fetched.

"In fact, there is no inherent tension in having every person on our planet identify as a citizen of the world, because the category of inclusion is so broad," he writes.¹ "The core principle of identity

The awe and rebuke of the Gospels point to an identity and horizon beyond the noise of the tribe.

formation remains the same: We imbue emotional significance to our membership in the group and commit loyalty to that entity."

Human survival likely depends on forging a larger tribe of citizens who care about creative problem-solving, mutual learning, and meeting grave global problems such as climate change and nuclear ter-

rorism. The aim, Shapiro argues, is to expand tribal identity beyond the local one – *without threatening the local*.

"We can emotionally attach to a global identity with as much fervor as to a national one," he writes. "Mitigating such tension requires that our systems of global cooperation build a strong institutional sense of camaraderie while simultaneously ensuring that members feel sufficiently free to determine fundamental aspects of their provincial identity."

This kind of hopeful analysis is still uncommon. New warnings keep surfacing – the worry that our institutions are fragile against modern misinformation, and we are descending deeper into political shrillness and spiritual corruption.

Ominous New Trend: Disgust

Writing on the eve of the 2016 election, Yale social psychologist Jonathan Haidt observed that angry disagreement had mutated into something more alarming: disgust.

"The disgust expressed by both sides in this election is particularly worrisome because disgust dehumanizes its targets," Haidt and co-writer Ravi Iyer argued.² "That is why it is usually fostered by the perpetrators of genocide – disgust makes it easier for ordinary citizens to kill their neighbors."

But Haidt and Iyer say civic norms are still within reach. "Is it possible for Americans to forgive, accept, and carry on working and living together? We think that it is. After all, civility doesn't require consensus or the suspension of criticism. It is simply the ability to disagree productively with others while respecting their sincerity and decency."

In her new book about political tribalism, Yale Law professor Amy Chua suggests the American model is resilient despite some dire ethnocentric

trends. Historically, tribalism doesn't get to have the last word in this immigrant land of dreams of dignity and opportunity.

"America was able to elect Barack Obama as president because this country is a super-group, a group in which membership is open to individuals of any background but that at the same time binds its members together with a strong, overarching group-transcending collective identity," she writes.³

"Historically, there have been super-group empires – Rome, for example, and, arguably, Great Britain. In theory, there have been super-group ideological movements (communism, for example), and super-group religions (Christianity, for example), although of course ideological movements and religions are not open to individuals with the wrong beliefs. But for a *country* to be a super-group is extremely rare."

Memory and Mandate

Behind appeals to transcend the fevers of tribalism is the conviction that transformation is possible because human-to-human encounters still count.

In Christian terms, the idea that the image of God dwells in all people retains its power. It stirs the imaginations of millions. It commits them to honor the souls and destinies of others. Its theological memory and mandate go deep. Still, it has not halted trends that are intensifying divisions, trends including winner-take-all economics and widespread gullibility around false rumors and misrepresentations. Christian ideas have lost their share of the discussion. One way the faith can be a real presence in society is to act as a counterbalance to in-group deliriums. The awe and rebuke of the Gospels, the counsel of restraint in Proverbs, the beauty of the Trinity all point to a horizon, an identity, beyond the self-canceling noise of the tribe.

The struggle of life in a 21st-century republic rages on, the ethical endeavor to find the right combination of pride, self-criticism, and compassion. In late November 2016, the nation's most prominent Christian (and its commander in chief) said this about citizenship and character:

"Societies and cultures are really complicated," said President Obama after leaving office. "... These are living organisms, and it's messy. And your job as a citizen and as a decent human being is to constantly affirm and lift up and fight for treating people with kindness and respect and understanding. And you should anticipate that at any given moment there's going to be flare-ups of bigotry that you may have to confront, or may be inside you and you have to vanquish."⁴

Notes

- 1 Daniel Shapiro, "Can We Overcome Our Tribalistic Nature?", *Psychology Today*, March 7, 2017. See psychologytoday.com.
- 2 Jonathan Haidt and Ravi Iyer, "How to Get Beyond Our Tribal Politics," *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 5, 2016.
- 3 Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (Penguin, 2018), p. 22.
- 4 David Remnick, "Obama Reckons with a Trump Presidency," *New Yorker*, Nov. 28, 2016. See newyorker.com.

TRA LA

By Stanley Moss

In the garden or on my fire escape,
I water Peace Lilies, flower pots.
I plant flowers in full sun, shade,
if they need it. I often fail,
flowers die.
I've heard flowers play a divertimento,
I've seen a rose bush die,
given last rites, Buddhist services,
another rose bush mourned by blooming.

I whistle a dirge without thinking,
word rhythms certainly, no ensemble
for clarinet, horn, drums and cello.
Yet I have overtures in me,
solos, sonatas, military bands.
I want to write a quintet for strings
that fits local architecture,
near a crucifix in a synagogue,
Hebrew Bibles in Christian churches,
Korans among racks for hymnals.
One sky above – why not one religion?
I sing my hims and hers
to pilgrims walking with bare feet,
preaching one religion. *Tra la, tra la.*



Ex-drug addicts embracing after 15-day pilgrimage walk to Santiago Cathedral, Galicia, Spain, 1998

Photo by Peter Marlow

© Peter Marlow/Magnum Photos



The Rev. Kevin Park is on the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA, where he is associate dean for advanced professional studies and assistant professor of theology. His interests focus on emerging Asian North American theologies, critiques of ornamental multiculturalism, and divine beauty as a resource for multicultural theology.

On ornamental multiculturalism ...

As mainline Christians we aspire to become more racially and ethnically inclusive. Yet it often turns out that our attempts at this are mere ornamental multiculturalism. This happens throughout society: America displays particular aspects of other cultures like Christmas ornaments. It's a way to enhance the perceived value of the dominant group. Minority cultures are accepted as long as they don't alter or challenge the real structures of power. What we ethically aspire to and what we are truly willing to commit to are two different things. Multiculturalism sounds good, but so often we're not willing to put ourselves into it and make it happen. That's because it's hard work. We need a new kind of conversation that takes up these issues without devolving into ornamentalism or white guilt.

On complicity, confession, and solidarity ...

As a Korean-North American, I can say that the second or 1.5 generation are no longer kids. We're moving into our work lives, and we're voicing social-political and life issues in more profound ways. I think there is now an onus on minority communities to speak up. The Korean-American community, for instance, has spent so many years just trying to survive that we got accustomed to staying in our corner. Korean Americans, like other visible minorities, have been pushed to the margins by the complex social machinery of the dominant group. We need to confront that – and find solidarity with others pushed to the margins. I think we all need to come to the table in mutual confession, mutual vulnerability, and radical humility and admit we are broken by our sins as well as by the sins of others.

On the power of the cross ...

Transformation will require mainline churches shaken up by the power of the cross of Christ. Despite the arguments of post-modernism, we all have our foundations. But the Spirit tears down in order to build up. That's a voice speaking from the wilderness, and we're not good at receiving that message in America. We're good at self-affirmation and build-

ing ourselves up. We don't do well with the message of the cross that drives us into the wilderness for deep self-reflection and repentance in the light of God's Word. The Trump election exposed a truth about our society. We had President Obama, and we thought we were making progress. Yet what a thin veneer that turned out to be.

I think we're now in a moment where we all need to exercise biblical self-criticism and rediscover what the Bible says about multicultural inclusiveness. Look at Rev. 21, which describes the coming of God's kingdom: "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations." As I've argued elsewhere, God's kingdom is not a melting pot where our distinctions are blended into a colorless unity. The world's ethnic peoples – the nations – are not abolished; they are preserved and redeemed in the kingdom of God, and they will bring their glory into it.¹ Each time we pray God's "will be done on earth as it is in heaven" we commit to improving life conditions where real biblical diversity, not ornamentalism, can take place on earth, here and now.

On the countercultural witness of churches ...

Churches are still the best venues for conversations about mutual respect and biblical multiculturalism. Churches aren't defunct. They are still gathering! If church leadership would speak the truth about the churches' cultural captivity to prejudice and conflict, I believe people would hear it and overcome the defensive impulse to retreat. But confession comes first. It's part and parcel of transformation. We need to admit how co-opted we are by the politics of our time. Let's remember what the church is – a counter-cultural community of God that represents the new life in Christ.

It's too easy to maintain a perpetual ritual that doesn't propel us to change. It might be time that white churches need to experience marginality: The dominant group steps out and goes to the margins. What would that mean? I don't think of it as another way to receive another PC badge. I realize many local mainline congregations are smaller now and no longer central. They find themselves marginalized. But maybe being small isn't such a bad thing. Maybe now they can see things and do and say things that they couldn't when they were the big church in town. Minorities know something about that.

¹ See Kevin Park, "Nations Will Bring Their Glory," Theological Conversation 2016 #4, presbyterianmission.org.

Hate the Hate, Love the Hater



By Tom Krattenmaker

In Romans 12, Paul expresses a nice sentiment. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil,” he writes. “Do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

Good thing he slipped in that practical proviso – “if it is possible” – to give us the free pass we seem to need for such a fractious time as ours. If ever there were a moment when peaceable living was not possible, wouldn’t it be now?

Getting Beyond Excuses

I mean, I can’t possibly live at peace with people who want to erase my neighbors’ identity or my own, can I? I can’t possibly extend courtesies to people who want to consign my allies or me to unequal treatment – even death – under the law, can I? I can’t possibly be civil to people who cheat and lie to win in political battle, can I?

Actually, I can. In the following ways:

Think first about what Paul’s teaching does *not* compel. Nothing in it suggests that people ought to withdraw from struggles for justice, to “just go

Space must always be left open for “offenders” to join the community of inclusion.

along” with corrupt authorities or agendas. Indeed, Christians and all people of good will are called to do the opposite, knowing there can be no real and enduring peace until there is justice for all.

Note that in his exhortations to the fledgling Roman church Paul is calling on the people to live at peace with *everyone*, not *everything*. There is no prohibition against Christ followers opposing harmful ideas and bad practices. In truth, we know they must fight against that which is evil and harmful – through their power as citizens and the example they set as individuals and church communities.

As citizens of 21st-century America, we can understand this concept better, and start to visualize its implementation, by unpacking an often-misunderstood and poorly practiced principle at the heart of our most rancorous political differences: the principle of tolerance and inclusion.

How Many Chairs?

One way of understanding our present political dynamic is to examine citizens’ divergent responses to the growing inclusion we see in American society. The table was once reserved for men, largely – men who were white, straight, and Christian. They ran the show and reaped the rewards. But in recent decades, different people have been showing up and rightfully expecting to be seated: people of color, people from other countries, female people, LGBTQ people, Muslim people, nonreligious people, and so on.

Do you embrace that social change? A person’s answer goes a long way toward revealing which side he or she is on in today’s culture battle.

But putting this in practice is no easy task. To hear it from many conservatives, liberals are nothing but hypocrites when it comes to tolerance and inclusion. This is made gallingly apparent, the critics charge, the moment that tolerance promoters encounter anyone who disagrees with them on gay rights or equal treatment of women, for instance.

It’s true that the champions of tolerance mangle their cherished principle when they condemn, as a person, the baker who won’t bake or the photographer who won’t photograph for a gay wedding. Or when progressives demand the shunning of anyone who, at some point in the recent or not so recent past, has done or said something offensive against a group that has been too long excluded.

But overreactions of this sort do not change the larger truth. Tolerance is a worthy principle that should remain at the heart of the progressive creed. To blithely ignore or accept acts of exclusion would make a mockery of this commitment. Those committed to tolerance cannot abide racist acts committed by their leaders and political foes. They cannot stay quiet about sexual abuse committed by men who misuse their positions of power and authority, or accept any other acts of exclusion and dehumanization. These are in the category of what should not be tolerated: that which constitutes *intolerance*.

Shunning Ideas, Not People

But how then are advocates of tolerance supposed to treat *the people* who commit acts of hate and exclusion?

I suggest we build on the kernel of wisdom found in a popular aphorism that evangelical Christians are known to use, one that finds its origins in Augustine: “Hate the sin, love the sinner,” as it’s popularly phrased. Though its credibility was damaged years ago by abuse by Christian Right political figures, the insight it carries remains potent: Instead of reflexively shunning people with whom we disagree on important and divisive issues, we can shun harmful *ideas*. Instead of automatically condemning those with different positions and philosophies, we can reserve scorn for bad actions, bad behavior.

We can hate the hate, but love the hater.

Space must always be left open for “offenders” to join the community of inclusion, the community of philanthropic love and acceptance. The redemptive potential of simple human encounter has to be respected, protected, risked. It’s not as impossible, not as naïve, as it sounds.

Crossing the Border

Consider the African-American blues musician who has made it his life’s work to engage with, and befriend, members of the Ku Klux Klan.

Dubbed the “KKK whisperer” by CNN, Daryl Davis has been talking with – mainly listening to – Klansmen for decades. He was at it again last August in Charlottesville, during the ugly, convulsive weekend of white supremacist rallies. The driving force behind Davis’ idealistic initiative is a question he’s been putting to racists for decades: “Why do you hate me? You don’t even know me.”¹

Daryl Davis has a closet full of Ku Klux Klan robes. They were given to him by Klansmen who quit the imperial order after their encounters with him.

In his interactions with those Klansmen, the “KKK whisperer” hated the hate, but not the hater.

Sometimes her voice gets low
like she’s telling me a secret.

I think people can’t listen
to certain kinds of stories,
she says. When they start

to hear it, they start
to change it, to listen instead
to their fear.

It changes memory.
That’s why when I told
what happened,

it was misunderstood.
People heard
their own fear: the stranger

at the door. His bouquet
of pallid flowers.

And in more than a few instances, the interaction changed those men, changed the equation.

Not all of us have the constitution for this kind of radical border crossing. Some will deem it unsafe. A straight white writer (like yours truly) should not deign to tell people from embattled groups how to engage their oppressors.

Yet we can all be moved by the insight and inspiration. We can all appreciate the exemplars in history who refused to hate their haters. Martin Luther King Jr. propagated this insight. So did Jesus. If we truly want to break our present impasse, we can each find our own border to cross.

Tom Krattenmaker, communications director at Yale Divinity School, is an author and columnist specializing in religion in public life. His latest book is Confessions of a Secular Jesus Follower (Convergent, 2016).

Note

- 1 Mallory Simon and Sara Sidner, “What happened when a Klansman met a black man in Charlottesville,” CNN.com, Dec. 16, 2017.

CREDITS

Reflections Spring 2018 Yale Divinity School

COVER ARTWORK

Ordered, 1998 (acrylic on board) by Ron Waddams (1920-2010)
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POETRY

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"After Years Without Speaking." Copyright © 2018 by Alexandra Barylski. By permission of the poet.

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"Something Happened" from *Best New Poets 2015: 50 Poems from Emerging Writers*. Copyright © 2016 by Cassie Donish. Reprinted by permission of the poet.

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"The Enemy." Copyright © 2018 by Maryanne Hannan. Reprinted by permission of the poet.

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"The Present" from *Garden Time*. Copyright © 2016 by W.S. Merwin. "Something I've Not Done" from *Migration: New and Selected Poems*. Copyright © 2016 by W.S. Merwin. Both poems reprinted by permission of Copper Canyon Press. See coppercanyonpress.org.

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"Tra La." Copyright © 2018 by Stanley Moss. By permission of the poet.

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"When Giving is All We Have" and "Two Men" from *A Small Story About the Sky*. Copyright © 2015 by Alberto Ríos. Reprinted by permission of Copper Canyon Press. See coppercanyonpress.org.

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Two concentrations have been added to the M.A.R. degree program in the last year:

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allowing students to focus on Latinx Christianity in the US or Christianity in Latin America or both, with an eye towards developing a more hemispheric perspective.

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See divinity.yale.edu for details.



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October 17-19, 2018



Highlights include:

Beecher Lectures – Oct. 17-19

Charles L. Campbell '82 S.T.M., Professor of Homiletics at Duke Divinity School, *"The Scandal of the Gospel: Preaching and the Grotesque"*

Lecture I – Wed, Oct. 17, 4 p.m.

Lecture II – Thurs., Oct. 18, 10:30 a.m.

Lecture III – Fri., Oct. 19, 10:30 a.m.

•

Faculty presentation – Oct. 17 – 9 a.m.

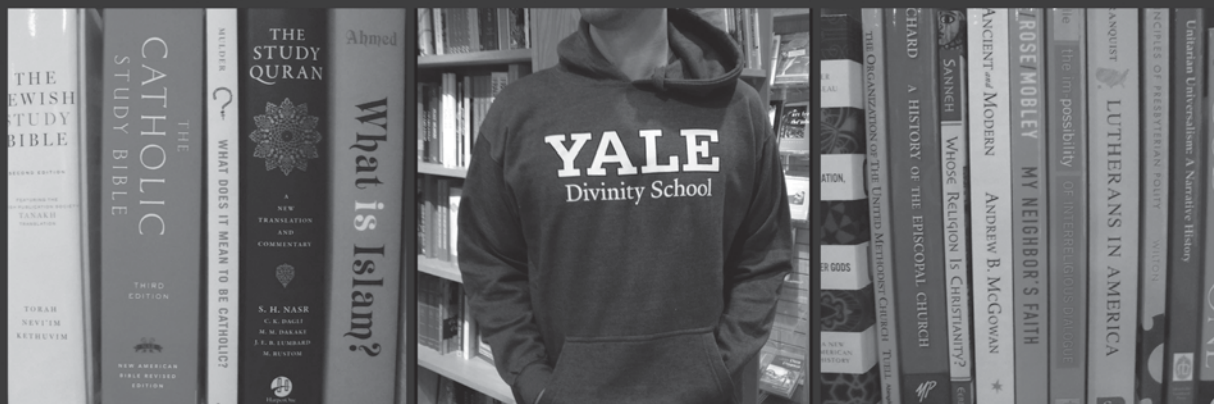
Joel S. Baden, Professor of Hebrew Bible at YDS and co-author of the recent book *Bible Nation: The United States of Hobby Lobby* (Princeton, 2017) – a discussion of themes from *Bible Nation*, an account of vast private fortune used to promote personal faith in the public sphere.

•

Evening concert – Oct. 17 – 7:30 p.m.

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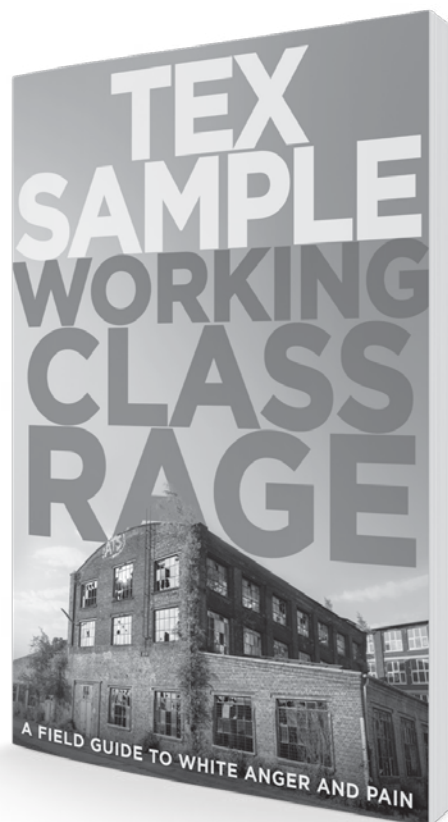
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From the Editor: Turning a Corner

By Ray Waddle



Op-eds every day lament the “two Americas” – pro-gun America and anti-gun America, PC and anti-PC, white and non-white, city and rural. Alas, this is nothing new.

There were two Americas in 1860 (slave and free), in the 1930s (people with money and people with none), the 50s (segregationist and non-segregationist), the 60s (war and anti-war). The “United States” was always an article of faith as much as a sociological fact.

That’s not terribly consoling right now. Our partisan era is severely testing spiritual resilience and the democratic future. We need a bigger frame for understanding the forces at work and getting things done. Eco-philosopher Joanna Macy says it’s time to get in touch with our inner strengths, our sense of adventure, and our power to choose – despite uncertainties everywhere. This isn’t optimism. It’s “active hope.”

Never mind the latest dispirited news about gangsterish leadership, data breaches, and gun slaughter. She argues we are entering a Great Turning, a period that is poised to repudiate unlimited-growth consumerism and embrace life-sustaining practices that lead to the recovery of the world. The Great Turning reconceives power as collaborative and open-ended. The old form of power – dependent on conflict, I-win-you-lose tactics, and, above all, a fear of looking weak – is handing us political paralysis and ecological crisis. It is slowly discrediting itself in an ethical collapse. Macy and co-author Chris Johnstone think we can do better than business as usual.

“Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life on whose behalf we can act,” Macy and Johnstone declare. “Active Hope is ... a readiness to discover the size and strength of our hearts, our quickness of mind, our steadiness of purpose, our own authority, our love of life, the liveliness of our curiosity, the unsuspected deep well of patience and diligence, the keenness of our senses, and our capacity to lead.”¹

None of these things, they say, “can be discovered in an armchair or without risk.”

Such high-spirited arguments are carefully shouted in the furious matrix of nonstop media. The sensationalized effect, from TV to Twitter, feels like the opposite of hope. News and comment arrive in a blaze of alarm, but also with a barely concealed

thrill – the anchorperson’s dopamine thrill, and ours – at the next squalid or horrifying revelation. Then cut to commercial. And so our wretched divisions are gleefully monetized. Nobody’s happy with this and everyone abides by it.

An outbreak of authentic hope might well soothe the national case of nerves, rebuild some trust, and blunt some of the perfectionism that drives debate – the jargon and self-righteousness, the contempt for consensus. Reform happens in the grit and tumult of each exhausting week, not in the pure air of some alternative universe.

As I hear it, urgent to all this is a sturdy creation theology, a conviction that a Creator underwrites all life and all matter. The world is worthy. We’ve been given reason and each other to explore it, praise it, understand it, reform it. It’s *discoverable*. Facts might not be 100 percent accessible, but evidence still matters. To paraphrase a commonsensical George Orwell theme, even if facts are just, say, 70 percent reliable, that’s still better than 69 percent, and the difference is worth struggling for.² It’s certainly better than the nihilist’s zero percent acknowledgment of the world’s conditions and pain.

Other tribunes of hope come to mind: the writers in this *Reflections* issue. They dare to take on hard sayings of scripture, the hard-shell disagreements coursing through 21st-century life, the hard task of facing conflict, defusing it, or even finding redemption in it.

“Walk with us in the way that we take,” the mystic-prophet Howard Thurman prayed, “lest our footsteps stumble in the darkness and we lose our way, Our Father.”³

Notes

- 1 Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy* (New World Library, 2012), pp. 35, 32.
- 2 See Julian Barnes’s discussion of Orwell’s stature in “Such, Such was Eric Blair,” *New York Review of Books*, March 12, 2009. See nybooks.com.
- 3 Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment* (Friends United Press, 1969), p. 123.



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