On straining out gnats and swallowing camels

Jonny Rashid

Sometimes I joke with my friends that you have not really lived until you've had an immersion journalist follow you around for four of the hardest years of your life. My dark humor is rooted in the difficulty of having someone else document and tell your story. Of course, I'm referring to Eliza Griswold's book *Circle of Hope*,[1] written about a church of the same name that I helped pastor for twelve years.

Since this chronicle was so widely read and reviewed, many people consider it the definitive account of the end of Circle of Hope. I do not think Griswold's interpretation and storytelling cement the events that took place during those difficult years from 2020 to 2023. Yet I do not feel defensive about her story, because even though I would tell a different one, it is profitable and useful for my own spiritual and psychological development to listen to her.

While it can feel shameful and embarrassing to have your worst moments and mistakes made public, I am grateful for the grace and love that many people have afforded me in the years that followed the publication of Griswold's book. One thing was clear to me as I read over both her narrative and its reviews: 2020 to 2023 was a very difficult time to be a pastor. I was not unique in experiencing that difficulty. Many felt the same strife during the pandemic and the racial reckoning that followed the murder of George Floyd; the gridlock that my colleagues and I found ourselves in as we tried to steer our church through both the pandemic and the work of anti-racism was a common experience of many pastors during that time. We had to navigate constantly changing public health advice while attempting to reckon with the white supremacy and racism that were endemic to our predominantly white church. Add to this the fact that the world was becoming increasingly polarized because of how the first Trump administration regularly sowed seeds of discord. The burnout and resignations we experienced at Circle of Hope were mirrored across the country in many churches, and in other professions as well.

My goal in writing this reflection, though, is not to relitigate the events of the past or offer a new understanding of the story of Circle of Hope. I

1 Eliza Griswold, *Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church* (Macmillan, 2024).

do not think those activities would be helpful for my healing and process. Though I feel largely healed from the wounds of that era, I do not want to pick at my scabs and scars. Rather, my goal here is to showcase that even advocates of peace and justice, those who are working toward noble causes they believe in, can cause harm.

Those of us in activist and organizing circles are certainly familiar with this reality, though we don't always realize, or admit, the extent to which we are implicated in it ourselves. Sometimes those of us who pursue peace and justice as a vocation are unaware of our own ambition and hubris. Or, because we believe our cause is so noble, we can quickly adopt a mindset of the ends justifying the means. Too often we overlook our tendency to treat the people who disagree with us as our enemies, and, contrary to what the Lord taught us, we do not love them or pray for them. We simply want to defeat them.

Jesus was familiar with this gap, confronting his friends and teachers by pointing out when they ignored the greater matters of the law in order to focus on the small ones. They tithed their mint, dill, and mustard, but ignored justice, mercy, and faith. They were careful to strain out a gnat while swallowing a camel. I am afraid that in my own pursuit of justice, I ignored the great commandment: the love of my enemy and the love of my neighbor.

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I have no doubt that my ambition often directed my decision-making and that my arrogance got in the way of my wisdom. What felt to me like my intellect and intuition guiding me were too often my impulse and my ego. But I was guided not only by ambition but also by pain. And while we can lead from our scars, we should not lead from our unhealed wounds.

I grew up the child of fundamentalist Christian Egyptians. We worshipped at a theologically and politically conservative Evangelical Free Church. I couldn't find Christians who shared my convictions against the Global War on Terrorism, even in the Anabaptist enclave of Central Pennsylvania, so I was stifled as I silently protested the looming war.

In 2004, I arrived in Philadelphia as a first-year college student at Temple University. I was looking for a new start to my life, a life where I could hold my anti-war convictions publicly and express myself fully, something I had not found in my home community. I was differentiating myself from my family of origin and trying to hold on to my faith. Circle of Hope became in many ways a new family to belong to, one I thought would heal

the wounds that my biological family had inflicted on me. I was very open with my pastor, and with our pastoral team, about my own father wound. Being mentored by other father figures felt like an opportunity to heal the "dad-shaped" hole in my heart. As a nineteen-year-old, I felt like I had experienced a miracle in finding this like-minded church.

While relationships can be a part of our healing process, I wish I had known that I could not truly be healed just by finding surrogate fathers or even a church. And seeking that fatherly affirmation made me vulnerable to doing things that I now regret.

While I started attending Circle of Hope as a parishioner, I quickly became a volunteer leader. I was eager to advance the church's mission, grow the church, and multiply our small groups (which we called "cells"). Eventually I was asked to plant a church in Philadelphia. I proudly agreed and began to serve as a pastor for Circle of Hope.

My ambition and my longing for affirmation made me an ideal candidate for becoming a pastor who did not often question the strategy or theology of the church. Upon reflection, I believe my own father wound was exploited by my mentors to get me to faithfully serve the church without reservations. It turns out that strategy worked!

In many instances, well before the period Griswold's book documents, I advanced racist and homophobic agendas. I prioritized church growth over pastoral care. I ignored people's feelings and well-being for the sake of the church's mission. And when I did those things successfully, it did not matter who I hurt; what mattered was getting the pat on the back from my new father figures, who would offer me something that my biological dad rarely did.

As time passed, and using what I learned in seminary, I also wanted to forge a new path for the church I believed in and loved. So I was not only motivated by ambition but also by deep regret and remorse: I did not want to repeat the mistakes I had made in the past, and I wanted to do something to right those wrongs. Our church had been homophobic for a long time; for years, we refused to "take a side" when it came to queer affirmation and would bait-and-switch the queer people who joined us. Initially, we would welcome them, but when it came time for them to become members or ask to be married, I would have to take them out to coffee and offer them a long-winded, indirect conversation. I went along with this strategy even as it felt instinctively wrong to me when I was a person in my twenties, so deeply did I value the affirmation I was receiving. Yet while I was perpetrating harm against queer people, as a closeted queer person I was also being harmed by the cowardly theology and doctrine that was victimizing them.

The pain I held for that decade and a half as a member and pastor in Circle of Hope gave me a distorted view of my own power. Because I felt

oppressed by my superiors, I lost track of my own power and used it in ways that I regret. I now see that the call-out culture I was engaged in, even though it felt justifiable at the time—speaking truth to power—was wrong. I was not "punching up"; the people around me were wounded too, sometimes by the same things that were harming me. What this often meant was that in the face of racism and homophobia, I could not see my opponents as human beings—they were just racists and homophobes. Worse still, I did not sufficiently interrogate my own internalized racism, my anti-Black racism, and my misogyny.

My ambition, pain, and shame all shaped my actions during the period of Griswold's book. To be sure, the effort we made to try to make our church reflect the character of the Kingdom of God felt noble and right to me and to many others. In fact, despite all of the pain and heartache around me, it took me years of reflection to imagine what I might have done differently. While I did not refuse to look back at events and review them, the pain I endured hardened my heart; I could not see the pain of those around me because my own pain clouded my judgment. And some of the pain around me was pain I was responsible for.

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Without intending to equate everyone's experience, it is clear to me that we were all reeling from and panicking about the new world that was being thrown at us. These are the kinds of circumstances in which we simply do not act like our best selves, even if we have the best intentions. Yet the righteousness of our cause will not preclude us from causing harm. Put another way, working toward ending big harms does not make us immune to causing small ones.

This is especially true when our trauma causes us to see the world in binary terms. Rather than seeing the humanity of those around me, I only saw people in terms of their political persuasions and how they personally harmed me. This is not to say that politics and pain aren't factors in how we relate to others, but they do not exonerate us from our conduct and behavior. I wish I could have seen that more clearly at the time, and I am sorry that I did not and for the harm I caused.

I wish I had picked up the phone more. I wish I had spoken face-to-face more. I wish I had not sent emails when I was sad or angry. I wish I had not been so reactive. I wish I could have had a soft heart then, and not let my pain, shame, and ambition harden me.

As I reflect with my now-softened heart, I am curious about what caused it to soften. Though there were myriad factors, I can reasonably conclude that safety, storytelling, patience, mentorship, and boundaries helped me to see myself fully: my growth areas, my strengths, my wounds, and even my gifts.

I needed safety to be able to process my grief and trauma. I needed to be able to know that I was not going to be harmed because of who I was and how I identified. I needed spaces that affirmed my desire for anti-racist justice and queer liberation.

I also needed people to listen to my story without judgment. Some of that came with the help of a professional counselor or spiritual director, but more often it came from my friends. There were many people who saw me in my pain, but not only through my pain.

I could not have softened without patience with myself and moving at my own pace. I could not, and cannot, be healed overnight. I am grateful for the years afforded to me to process my grief. I could not have done it on someone else's timeline.

I am also indebted to new mentors who saw me and journeyed with me, mentors who gently prodded me, and, while affirming my experience, showed me some of the things that I was hiding from myself.

Finally, I needed strong boundaries—both with my peers and with the people I pastored—and the ability to say no. I did not want to repeat my mistakes, and I did not want to bleed on the page, using my social media and publishing platform to try to find healing. Attention is a poor substitute for health. So I set my boundaries, and I am thankful they were respected.

Over the course of my career, I have spent a lot of time and energy encouraging Christians to meet the political demands of the Gospel. I still believe that our Gospel is one that advances peace and justice. But it is essential that we do not lose ourselves, our moral clarity, and our conscience in the pursuit of these greater objectives, essential that we do not swallow a camel in order to strain out a gnat, essential that we do not disregard basic decency and humanity in the pursuit of a more just world. Even the greatest activists and advocates can falter and cause harm. May God have mercy on us.

About the author

Jonny Rashid lives in Philadelphia on occupied Lenape land. He serves as pastor for West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship. He is also on the Mennonite Action national team, the steering committee for the Philadelphia Coalition for Affordable Communities, and the Philadelphia Alliance for Peace and Justice for Palestinians. He writes for *Anabaptist World*, wrote *Jesus Takes A Side* (Herald Press, 2022), blogs at jonnyrashid.substack.com, and is a DMin student at Eastern Mennonite University.