Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Small Harms and Their Repair

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Editorial

Rachel Miller Jacobs

I have been thinking about and researching small harms and their repair for about a decade and a half, and every time I talk about this project, at least one person asks, "But what about abuse?"

I mention this at the beginning of my editorial to remind you of the theme of this issue of *Vision*: small harms and their repair. This issue does not intend to address trauma, abuse, sexualized violence, war, murder, or systemic oppressions of various kinds. Of course, these realities matter and deserve attention; such harms are both all too frequent and never desirable, right, or just.

Yet what *all* of us routinely experience is everyday relational harm—the small, often-overlooked hurts that linger in homes, friendship groups, workplaces, churches, communities, and perhaps even in brief one-off interactions with strangers. Though not catastrophic, these moments disrupt our sense of well-being and our relationships with ourselves, others, and God. Thus, one reason to focus on small harms is their ubiquity.

Another is that centering small harms points us toward a both/and perspective, which we can easily overlook when we think only of big harms. Small harms make it impossible to sustain the illusion that we are only ever "victims" while others are only ever "perpetrators"—at the small scale, we are all both.

In addition, moments of crisis are the worst times to gain skill and practice something difficult, including the difficult work of repair. Teachers, parents, coaches, and pastors all know that we learn new skills best when we are not panicking. Catastrophe does not usually elicit wisdom, discernment, or self-management. Focusing on small harms and their repair allows us to practice recognizing and remediating harm in times of lower stress and greater bandwidth, which gives us some hope of doing better in times of higher stress and less bandwidth.

Finally, perhaps ironically, we are unlikely to do better at addressing large harms until we can recognize small harms as genuinely harmful, find ways to remediate them appropriately for their scale, and become better and wiser at differentiating among varieties and intensities of harm. If harm is viewed either as nothing at all or a complete catastrophe, the temptation to deny even the big harms can be overwhelming when, for whatever reason, those harms do not meet our personal or collective catastrophe thresholds. When we begin paying closer attention to the less-intense part of the harm

spectrum, however, it is harder to pass off a big thing as a small one or as nothing at all. We know better.

This issue of *Vision* opens with an article by theologian-pastor Tim Peebles that proposes a conceptual map for categorizing "negative happenings" along a spectrum of intensity, from simple hindrances to severe horrors. By distinguishing between subjective impacts, objective outcomes, and the degree of moral agency involved, Peebles illustrates how misclassifying events distorts both personal and pastoral responses. Conflict mediator and consultant Betty Pries argues that peace theology must address the close-to-home dynamics of small harms rather than focusing exclusively on large-scale war. Grounding conflict resolution in a divine identity, she outlines several actionable practices for living out Anabaptist peace theology on the small scale. Pastor and activist Jonny Rashid writes a vulnerable personal reflection on the ways even "those who are working toward noble causes they believe in" can and do cause harm. Conrad Grebel University College professor Carol Penner follows this up with an invitation to spiritual maturity in the form of humility, *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness), and a posture of looking for the growth in love made possible when we bump up against our own and others' less-than-ideal behaviors or attitudes.

Two Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary colleagues, Gilha Lee and Malinda E. Berry, tackle biblical and theological resources for thinking about harm and its repair, including the repair of small harms. Lee writes about Paul's theology of reconciliation, which addresses the most unequal power dynamic possible: the divine-human one. Yet this reconciliation was achieved through genuine reciprocity that neither reinforced hierarchy nor led to unilateral surrender, a reality that helps us imagine how reciprocity might also unfold in unequal human relationships. Drawing on Julian of Norwich's concept of "oneing," Berry advocates for a colorful spectrum of salvation that embraces both personal and collective healing, encouraging faith communities to address daily slights through compassionate, incremental grace.

MDiv student Catherine Bergs Mohr invites us to reflect on the unintended consequences of overly avoidant liturgical strategies such as eliminating "sin-talk," abstracting confession, and banning physical touch. Though it is not their goal, these strategies can disenfranchise trauma survivors, erase moral agency, and enforce white, middle-class norms of decency. Bergs Mohr points out that, in an effort to do good for those who have experienced great harm, we may inadvertently undermine our collective capacity to recognize the small harms every one of us perpetrates and lose the opportunity to build remediation muscles for both the everyday and the extraordinary. My own essay makes the case for what I call "small non-moral painful experiences": things that, while they hurt, are not wrong. Particularly if we are unable to

claim that such experiences exist, we may seek to remediate them with strategies that cannot succeed, looking for apologies when what we really need is reconnection. Pastor and writer Joanna Harader offers a contemplative, artistic prayer practice to help us discern and process small harms. A variety of church leaders write brief essays on the kaleidoscope of scriptures they return to again and again as they seek to repair harms both small and large. The issue closes with a prayer by Mary Schertz, seeking, by God's grace and in God's love, to practice forgiveness as a way of life.

To say that I am thrilled with this issue is a vast understatement. I hope you, too, will find it enlightening, challenging, thought-provoking, and encouraging as you seek to recognize and remediate the small harms you encounter in family, friendship, congregational, and work groups. And I pray that good work with small harms will help us all do better with big ones.

From hindrances to horrors

Mapping "negative happenings"

Tim Peebles

Introduction

Christians believe that human beings are creatures. To be a creature is, among other things, to be finite, limited—not occasionally, but all the time. And one of the ways we encounter our limits is by experiencing things happening to us, often without our choosing. Those "happenings" have to do with our relationships with other finite and limited creatures—animals, plants, forces, objects, and, of course, other human beings. Other human beings can be observers of what happens to us, participants in it, or perpetrators of it. To be created, then, is to be implicated—folded into and tangled up with a web of finite creatures—and complicated—impacted and intertwined with those finite creatures in ways that can be beautiful as well as befuddling. This essay aims to reduce our befuddlement regarding the complications of negative happenings by guiding us in noticing and naming several elements in those happenings:

- the different intensity in a recipient's experience (a subjective, first-person perspective);
- the range of interpretive responses by observers of those same experiences (an objective, third-person perspective);
- how some of those others might be implicated in those experiences as a participant or perpetrator (an interpersonal, second-person perspective);
- what proper expectations the original recipient might have for such observers, participants, and perpetrators; and
- what proper obligations observers, participants, and perpetrators might themselves have in relation to such a recipient.

I begin with a hiking scenario illustrating some complications present in negative human experiences, which then serves as a metaphorical launching point for considering other negative experiences. While hiking, one can wander without any reference points or sense of orientation. Or one can "wayfind," using actual terrain and plants "on the ground" as reference points.

Further, one can use maps that abstract and generalize from on-the-ground conditions. I prefer maps, and a good map serves a walk by clarifying key reference points, paths between them, and relations among them. The following offers some mapping regarding "negative happenings," inviting you, my reader, to join in that effort. Wanderers and wayfinders are also welcome!

A "map" of negative happenings

Let's start by returning to a key element of being a creature—things *happen* to us. We experience some of those "happenings" as good and positive for us; they contribute to our wants and choices, to our well-being and flourishing. They are *helps* in living and leading our lives. An unexpectedly clear sky is a "help" if it makes a walk up the hill easier and more pleasant. We experience other "happenings" as bad and negative for us; they take away from, or make more difficult, our wants and choices, our well-being and flourishing. They are *hindrances* to living and leading our lives. An unexpected thunderstorm is a "hindrance" if it makes the same hill walk more difficult.

Many happenings are a mix of help and hindrance and are not easily sorted into positive or negative categories. But a distinction between helps and hindrances allows us to notice and name some of those differences. In doing so, we find that for both sets of happenings (good and bad, positive and negative, helpful and hindering) there are degrees of intensity in how they impact us. To illustrate this, let's consider some hindrances that have happened (or could happen) to me when hiking.

In the lovely White Mountains of New Hampshire, it's common to find trees fallen on and over the trails. Sometimes a fallen tree yields a positive experience, a new element that enriches the sights I anticipated when I began the walk. Other times, I experience a fallen tree negatively: It causes a minor inconvenience to my progress toward the mountain's summit. The tree on the path is a *hindrance*—it's in the way such that I need to exert a little bit more energy and dexterity than if it weren't there.

If there's no way around the tree, I'll have to climb over it, an endeavor typically resulting in scrapes and bruises. In this case, the hindrance of the fallen tree gives *hurts*, a feeling connected to a *surface*-level and mild violation of my bodily integrity and well-being. To the inconvenience of needing more energy and dexterity is added some discomfort and pain, intensifying my sense of hindrance. Not only is there an obstacle to overcome (the inconvenience), but now that obstacle has impacted me in a way that will require further attention (a bandage or ice pack). And I learn something from this experience: While not all hindrances hurt, all hurts do hinder. Hurts intensify, or add to, the experience of hindrance.

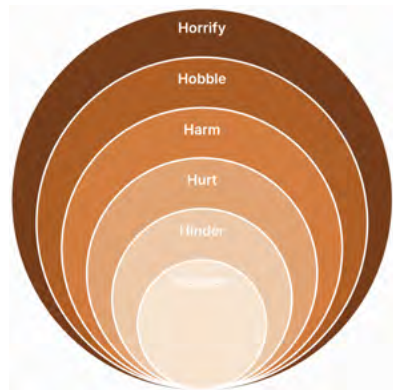
If I stumble when climbing over the tree and break my leg, the relatively minor hurt of a scrape or bruise becomes a more significant *harm*—the

impact has gone beyond a surface violation of my bodily integrity to a more *substantive* one, a deeper injury, introducing some impairment that will take time to repair. A cast might be required, and likely a temporary period of mild disability. Both the hindrance and the hurt from the fallen tree have been intensified. The experience of harm *includes* the experience of hurting, which means it's also hindering. But the converse is not the case: Not all hindrances hurt, and those that do don't always harm.

Imagine one step further: Suppose that, instead of breaking my leg as I climb over the tree, I wrench my knee, tearing ligaments and destroying cartilage, requiring surgery and leaving me with a permanent impairment, a *structural* violation of my bodily well-being. In this scenario, I have become *hobbled* (at least to some degree). I can't be hobbled without also being harmed, which also involves being hurt, which includes being hindered. But I *can* be harmed (as well as hindered and hurt) without being hobbled—a broken leg (a harm) will heal in a way that won't leave lasting impairment, unlike a permanently altered joint.

Finally, when climbing over the fallen tree, I could (God forbid) slip and fall into a ravine, which could lead to a slow and lonely death, a *systemic* violation of my bodily integrity and well-being. In this scenario, I will likely experience *horror*—an impairment that is systemic and final, ending my capacity to want and choose. While this horror involves hobbling (lasting injury), hurt (a painful experience), and hindrance (the unfulfilled hike), horror was not present in the mere hindrance (extra expended energy), or in the hindrance that hurt (the tree requiring a climb that produced scrapes and bruises), or in the hindrance that hurt as well as harmed (the climbing that produced a broken leg), or in the hurting and harmful hindrance that hobbled (the permanently damaged knee).

We can picture these negative happenings as "nested" circles, with each smaller circle *including* what's in the larger circle(s) but *adding* elements to what it shares with those circles. For example, happenings that horrify (the most intense form of hindrance) include elements of hobbling, harm, hurt, and hindrance, but each adds its own unique elements.[1]



1 This is an update and adaptation of a scale of force Steve Thomas and I employed to illustrate Mennonite martial arts. There, we developed a continuum of physical force in response to more simplified assumptions about "violence." For more on this, see Steve's article "Martial Arts as a Model

Expanding the map

For the most part, I have presented my scale of negative happenings in terms of their *subjective* impact on me, how they have been experienced and felt from my *first-person* point of view. And I have noted how those experiences include different degrees of violation of my bodily integrity and well-being, violations that could be seen and observed by others. So, correlated to this subjective impact, there are also *objective* outcomes, things that can be noticed and named by others from a *third-person* point of view. These can produce a similar, corresponding scale of objective outcomes, moving from difficult to deadly (systemic violation corresponding to horrors).[2]



for Nonviolence: Resisting Interpersonal Violence with Assertive Force," *Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 1 (Winter, 2015): 72–91.

2 When we assess our own negative experiences, we sometimes adopt a more "objective" third-person observer's perspective. It might be that as we move up the scale of intensity, "objective" considerations become more prominent than "subjective" ones, whereas as we move down the scale of intensity, "subjective" considerations become more prominent than "objective" ones. Still, both subjective and objective, recipient and observer considerations will always be present. Pain illustrates this mix of subjective and objective. Pain involves some degree of psychological interpretation of physiological sensations. And for the most part, when we talk about pain experiences, we give subjective interpretation priority—when someone claims to feel pain we presume accuracy as a starting point. But more objective discernments (whether in the first- or third-person) about objective physiology still play a part. We have conversations, with ourselves and others, in which we say things like: "I know this feels painful, but I think you are over-interpreting something that is really simply uncomfortable, or unpleasant, but not really painful." Our overall assessment of "pain" will

With these nested and correlated scales of negative happenings in place, we can then map different domains of our lives. There are negative outcomes on and impacts to a *body* by other bodies we encounter. But we are not only physically connected to other things—animals and objects (water and rocks), patterns (weather and disease), and plants. We are also spiritually connected to the divine, and soulfully connected to other human persons. The same scaling and nesting of impacts can be used for negative happenings to our soul and spirit.[3]

Second, since human beings have bodies, there are impacts that we have on one another that are simply a matter of our bodies interacting in the world, often without any deliberate choice or decision—they are inadvertent or accidental. You could, for example, replace the fallen tree in my examples above with another hiker who accidentally and unintentionally trips into my path. The point is that, as embodied human beings interacting with other embodied human beings, there will also be negative happenings of the same sort that arise from objects and patterns, plants and animals. These negative happenings are impersonal: They don't involve personal elements of desire, deliberation, and decision. They are not moral happenings, since moral happenings involve personal elements of desire, deliberation, and decision; motive, choice, and act.

Of course, human beings are not just bodies that bounce off one another in the world; we are also creatures who sense and intuit, feel and emote, think and reflect, discern and decide, act and do. We intend and decide, sometimes with deliberation, to do certain things with our bodies, which often have impacts and outcomes on other persons on purpose. Back to the hiking scenario: Someone could decide to cut down a tree and lay it on the trail, wanting or intending any of the outcomes mentioned earlier—to hinder me, to hurt me, to harm me, to hobble me, to horrify me. There is, for the impact and outcome on me, *in the first-person*, an intention, desire, or choice from another human, *in the second-person*.

Put another way, when we look at the impacts and outcomes on us resulting from human thought and choice, things become personal. And

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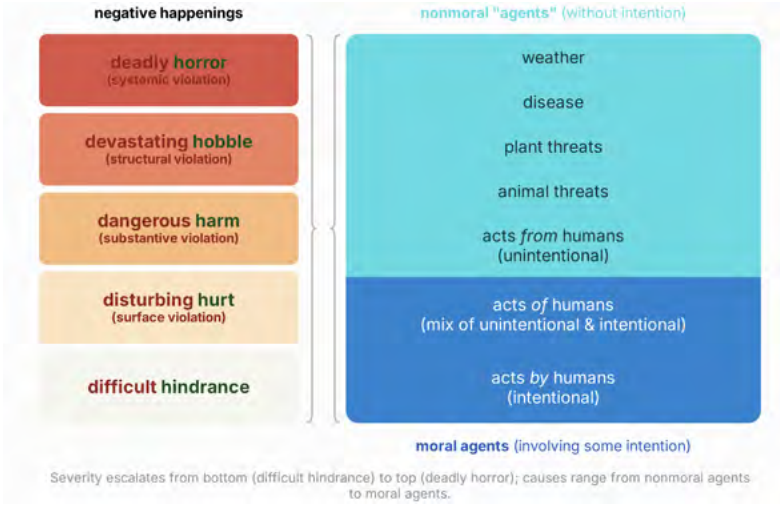
involve discerning subjective and objective facets, or features, or aspects of an experiential happening. The same is true of all negative happenings, and not only painful ones.

3 Although it can't be developed here, the relationship of body, soul, and spirit is also "nested." What happens to my soul, in interpersonal interactions, will always include something happening to my body *plus something more*, while not everything that happens to my body impacts my soul. The same with spirit: Everything that impacts my relationship with the divine will include what impacts my soul and my body *plus something more*. A quick example: To attend to soul trauma in therapy will (always?) include attention to bodily sensations (a need to calm the nervous system by creating a relaxed bodily state), as well as other modes of psychological and relational treatment.

that means we are now considering moral matters in a moral context because motive, intention, deliberation, decision, choice, and action are involved.[4]

But there is a complication: There are "mixed motives" and "unintended consequences," often in terms of degree ("that was more physically forceful than I expected"), but sometimes in kind ("I didn't know *that* would happen when I moved my body in this way"). And human beings are also often careless, inattentive, and impaired. Much of what we experience from others is a mix of intention and unintended consequences, chosen behavior and unanticipated results, one motive mixed with another, healthy thinking and impairment, personal engagement and impersonal impact.[5]

We can, then, supplement the previous chart with one further column.



The lighter part of the right column highlights those causes we take to be impersonal and nonmoral;[6] the darker part of the right column highlights those causes that we take to be personal and moral. The brackets

4 As with the previous footnote, there is more that could be said here about how *moral* matters might always involve *nonmoral* elements *plus something more*. If attending to matters of our interpersonal souls will always involve yet supplement attention to our physical bodies, then attending to morality will always involve yet supplement attention to nonmoral considerations.

5 Cognitive impairment is a good instance of this mix: I might have a diagnosed condition that hinders my judgment, which then inclines me to drink too much, further impairing my judgment.

6 Mapping structural violence (or violation) and institutional violence (or violation) would be a further complication, insofar as these producers of negative happenings do involve intention and choice, but these are more collective, composite, and diffuse, meaning they are a mix of impersonal and personal elements.

are meant to show that each of the causes of negative happenings in the right column can have the full range of subjective impacts and objective outcomes. Weather can produce deadly horror just as acts by humans can; conversely, moral acts by human agents can be mere hindrances to us, just as the weather sometimes is.

Why have a map?

By this point, you might be asking: Why is it necessary to display and map all these complications? One possible answer is that it's simply worthwhile to explore a fuller, richer account of human experiences, including the negative ones. If it's true that our negative experiences come in an array of intensities and relationships, then it's good, at least to some degree, to see and speak that truth, even if we don't immediately know what consequences might come of it. But perhaps a better answer is that once we see this larger, more complex display of negative happenings, we can step back from how we currently navigate them and consider alternatives. We might find, for example, that in our current thought and practice, there is a narrowness and imprecision in our noticing and naming of negative happenings, which contributes to narrowness and imprecision in developing spiritual and moral practices for engaging those negative happenings. As finite creatures, we also often map the "same" experiences in different categories of intensity of impact or outcome: The same negative happening to me, when seen by another, might be placed in different categories of outcome by them than by me.[7] We may encounter mismatches between negative happenings and the obligations we might have as observers, participants, or perpetrators with respect to those happenings. This is true for both interpersonal behavior and professional guidance (like pastoral care).

For example, we sometimes under-respond to possibly dangerous harms because they are felt or treated like difficult hurts, especially when perpetrated by respected figures or trusted institutions. Conversely, "harm" is commonly overused, referring to everything from a bad day to a devastating violation. Applying hurt-level responses to harms—treating genuine moral injury as "just a misunderstanding" or "something we all need to move past"—fails the person harmed, enables the one who caused harm to escape accountability, and leaves our relationships damaged. Conversely, mere hindrances and hurts caused by the motive, intention, and choice of others (however clear,

7 More holistic accounts of meaning and knowledge allow us to give an account of how experience and its interpretation come to be and be sustained, showing how experience and its interpretation can be both internally coherent/plausible in first-person discourse, while simultaneously being externally opaque to second- and third- person discourse, as well as the reverse. See Rachel Miller Jacob, *If You Think You've Been Wronged, You're Right: Why Small Hurts Matter* (Fortress Press, forthcoming 2027).

unambiguous, and decisive) are overburdened with the more demanding expectations and obligations that are properly applied to higher-level negative happenings (harms and horrors), thereby depriving us of more modest expectations and obligations for responding to those lower-intensity happenings. Applying harm-level responses to hurts—treating every painful slight as a moral injury—can produce guilt disproportionate to the act, burden relationships with relational processes ill-suited to their scale, and leave the person who was hurt without the more fitting resources they need.

In addition, when responding to higher-intensity negative happenings (harms, hobbles, and horrors), we are often so focused on what is appropriate for the added intensity of those happenings that we overlook what is appropriate for responding to the merely hurtful or hindering elements within them. However, a fuller response to higher-intensity negative happenings would do well to include the expectations and obligations appropriate to lower-intensity negative happenings as well.

Applying harm-level responses to hurts—treating every painful slight as a moral injury—can produce guilt disproportionate to the act, burden relationships with relational processes ill-suited to their scale, and leave the person who was hurt without the more fitting resources they need.

There seem to be rich resources in both personal practice and pastoral care for shaping our expectations and obligations regarding intensely negative events (harms and above). We have practices such as confession, forgiveness, repentance, accountability, justice, and restoration.

But there are few resources in personal practice and pastoral care for cultivating wise and life-giving responses to mere hurts and hindrances, even though they are the most common negative happenings within human relationships. So we need more and better resources for shaping our interpersonal expectations and obligations regarding what we might call moral-but-minimal negative happenings (hindrances and hurts caused by the clear, ambiguous, or ambivalent motives, intentions, and choices of another human).

And we also have very few, if any, resources for attending to our expectations and obligations regarding nonmoral impacts and outcomes from other human beings (accidental and inadvertent consequences of bodies interacting with other bodies). Much of what accumulates in ordinary relationships sits in the nonmoral range: illness, loss, disappointment, and the ordinary friction of life, along with the things we accidentally, inadvertently, and unintentionally do to one another. And we need more and better resources to

There are few resources in personal practice and pastoral care for cultivating wise and life-giving responses to mere hurts and hindrances, even though they are the most common negative happenings within human relationships.

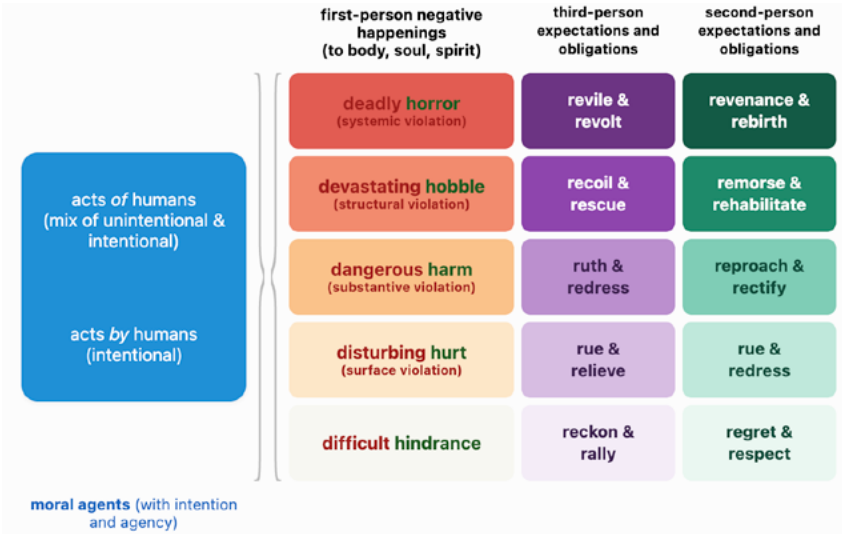
shape our interpersonal expectations and obligations regarding such *nonmoral* negative happenings of all intensities, including the impacts and outcomes produced by other human bodies without any motive, intent, or choice.

Using the map better

The kinds of responses to negative happenings that we develop must be, like the happenings themselves, "nested" or "layered," something like this:

- *Hindrances* call for: acceptance, adjustment, equanimity, the wisdom to distinguish what can be changed from what cannot; resignation in the best sense—not passive defeat but a kind of grounded trust.
- *Hurts* call for everything that hindrances call for, *plus*: acknowledgment of the pain (by self and others), the possibility of expressing regret (even without clear moral fault), and the gentle work of repair in relationship. A statement like "I'm sorry that happened to you, and that I was part of it"—even absent clear malice—can be genuinely healing.
- *Harms* call for everything that hindrances and hurts call for, *plus*: explicit accountability, genuine remorse (not just regret), active remediation, and the slower work of trust-rebuilding.
- *Hobbles* call for everything that hindrances, hurts, and harms call for, *plus*: justice, sustained accompaniment, careful attention to the disruption of the whole person (body, mind, spirit), and patience with the nonlinear, often long journey toward restoration.
- *Horrors* call for everything that hindrance, hurt, harm, and hobbling call for, *plus*: lament for what cannot be restored, bearing witness so the truth isn't lost, vigilance and solidarity so that the violation is not repeated.

It seems that we need two additional columns for our "map"—one for the expectations and obligations we have for observers of negative happenings, and one for participants in (though not perpetrators of) negative happenings. There is some "nesting" here as well: The relationship of participant expectations and obligations will always include the corresponding observer expectations and obligations, along with something more. Whether the cause of the negative happenings is moral (with intent) or nonmoral (unintentional or caused by non-agential "powers"), the larger map might look like this:



As I hope is evident from both additions, some of this terminology is archaic, made up, or unclear, along with relationships among elements that probably need revision. The extensions in the last two columns are intended as working models or starting points. The pairs of terms in each of the observer and participant columns are a gesture toward recognizing that our expectations and obligations in these places have both an interior element having to do with motive, intent, and feeling (the first term in the pair) and an exterior element having to do with action, behavior, and performance (the second term in each pair).

Before concluding, one final point should be noted by way of clarifying and developing the expectations and obligations we have for recipients of negative events in subsequent relationships, as well as for observers, participants, and perpetrators. A negative experience has happened. Observers, participants, and perpetrators have engaged in that negative happening with the recipient. How should the recipient then respond to those engagements? What should their inner motive or feeling be? What should their external action or behavior response be? We need the same kinds of paired terms for the engagement of the person who has experienced a negative happening in the past, seen the responses of observers, participants, and perpetrators, and now needs to engage those responses in the present.[8]

8 This would expand our chart with three more columns: one for the experiencer's subsequent engagement with observers of the initial negative experience, one for subsequent engagement with participants in the initial experience, and one for subsequent engagement with perpetrators of the initial experience.

An example of this: in an Anabaptist Christian perspective, first-person recipients of a negative experience, when engaging with the responses of participants and perpetrators to that experience, are often encouraged to "forgive" or "reconcile," English words that translate Biblical terms. But how are biblical "forgiveness" and "reconciliation" to be understood in light of these larger ranges of negative experiences and possible participant and perpetrator responses? Might responses other than forgiveness or reconciliation be needed? Or might forgiveness and reconciliation be more complex, involving different forms or dimensions? I tend to take "forgiveness" as the internal aspect of a peaceful response to the participants in and perpetrators of all moral (and even some nonmoral) negative happenings, and "reconciliation" to be the external aspect of a peaceful response to the participants in and perpetrators of those same moral negative happenings. And I then go on to speak of different forms of forgiveness and different forms of reconciliation that correspond to the full range of moral (and nonmoral) negative happenings. But I suspect we need a broader "naming" of subsequent recipient responses, including biblical backing and contemporary resonance.[9]

Conclusion

Christian practice, whether interpersonal or professional, involves both noticing and naming. It can include fundamental acts of personal ethics and pastoral care, both a starting point and an orientation for shaping our relational instincts, feelings, and thoughts, which in turn shape our actions, behaviors, and performance. Within our churches, among the wider church, and in the church's engagement with the wider world, much of our conflict and disagreement about both moral and nonmoral matters is rooted in how we notice and name things, since we notice and name differently as individuals, communities, and societies. In this light, having a rich and nuanced set of observations and conceptions regarding negative

9 I do the same for naming our expectations of perpetrators, taking all our expectations for second-person perpetrator feelings (regret, rue, reproach, remorse, revenance) as forms of "apology," and all our expectations for second-person perpetrator actions (respect, redress, rectification, rehabilitation, rebirth) as forms of "repentance." There are different kind of apology and repentance, each corresponding to different negative happenings of which one has been a perpetrator. But it might be that a range of terminology is needed, whether from scripture or our contemporary context. For a further exploration of the complexities of how we understand and talk about such things, including biblical considerations, see Maria Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness: Case Studies in the Distortion of a Biblical Ideal* (Fortress Press, 2015); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Journey Toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Baker Academic, 2013), especially chapter 28, "Justice, Forgiveness, and Punishment"; and James K. Voiss, SJ, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness: Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Explorations* (Liturgical Press, 2015).

happenings is not an act of taxonomy for its own sake, but rather an effort to widen the map of the field in which our lives take place, offering shared reference points and enriching our capacity to understand and care for our finite and fragile limits in our relationships with each other, the divine, and the more-than-human world.

About the author

Tim Peebles is a husband, father, theologian, Mennonite pastor, and martial artist, with a love of heavy metal music, horror movies, and whiskey.

Peacemaking closer to home

Addressing the daily conflicts of life and faith

Betty Pries

I have long been curious about why Anabaptist peace theology is largely silent on what to do when small harms occur, even as Anabaptist theologians have written extensively on the theology of peace in the context of war. Understanding pacifism in the context of war is critically important. Still, there is something missing.

Several years ago, I was talking to the director of a peace studies program and remarked that, as far as I could tell, all of the program's professors focused on peace studies in the context of international conflicts and war. I asked the director why the program had no specialists on building peace closer to home—at work, with family, in the congregation, or among people in our local communities. The director replied: "No one is interested in that, Betty."

I think the director was wrong. But he was also right. It is easier to think theologically or strategically about conflicts that are far away or, if closer to home, far from our own experience. Stories about conflicts that lead to war and death are compelling, in part because they are dramatic and in part because of their significant consequences. But they are also compelling because they are far outside the experience of most people, making them the source of some curiosity. The problem with this focus, however, is that theologies of conflicts outside our experience do not ask anything of us. They do not demand of us a reckoning with our own conflict behaviors, nor do they give us resources for how to deal with the irksome relationships in our lives.

The absence of theological work on conflicts closer to home is surprising given that the biblical witness seems especially focused on these types of conflicts. While stories of war abound in the Bible, and while it is true that Jesus said "all who take the sword will die by the sword" (Matt 26:52, NRSVue), it is also true that Jesus said "take the log out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matt 7:5, NRSVue), and "let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone" (John 8:7, NRSVue). Throughout his ministry, Jesus settled disputes among disciples, among siblings, and among people in the crowd who followed him. Looking beyond the Gospels, the Bible

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contains many stories of conflicts among family members, friends, and community members. Indeed, most, if not all, of Paul's letters to the early church—Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians—speak directly to conflicts closer to home. Memorably, in 1 Cor 13—the famous love poem that was actually written for people in conflict in the church rather than people at the altar—Paul writes in verse 12: "For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12, NRSVue).

I have spent my entire career helping people sort out conflicts closer to home. While the title of this issue refers to "small harms," it is important to note that the word "small" should not be read to mean "easy." Small harms can be disorienting and deeply painful, leaving us, at best, at a loss for words, and, at worst, deeply wounded. Consider the following examples of "small" harms that have crossed my desk over the years: (a) a woman tells me that putdowns by her relative, while sometimes subtle, are nonetheless frequent enough that she has lost her ability to be kind to her relative, and this bothers her; (b) congregants are divided over how to heal following an uncomfortable parting with their former pastor; (c) the transition of a business from one generation to another is not happening easily—no one is overtly angry, but the dynamics are complex and the parties are becoming testy with one another; (d) a man tells me about the struggles he and his children have talking with one another—everyone seems to become defensive, and well-intentioned conversations quickly become conflictual; and (e) a woman leaves her job because of interpersonal conflicts at work but now feels unable to apply for work again. None of these conflicts makes the news, but every one of them is impacting the people involved in these stories, eroding the participants' ability to be well in the world.

I would like to offer several ideas for addressing the day-to-day harms that show up in our lives, matching each with a theological or spiritual proposition.

1. Put your differences in a mug

One of the big mistakes we make during conflict is that we identify with our thoughts and our feelings, believing we *are* our thoughts and our feelings—and that the other person *is* their thoughts and their feelings. As a result,

when people disagree with us, we feel compelled to take it personally, and we make it personal about them, too. But each of us is much more interesting than our thoughts and our feelings. We are meant to *have* thoughts and feelings; thoughts and feelings are not meant to *have* us. *Putting our differences in a mug* is a metaphor reminding us to hold our thoughts and feelings at arm's length, so that when we are discussing our differences with one another, we are always only discussing the mug and not identifying our differences with one another's personhoods.

Several years ago, I shared this metaphor during a workshop I was leading for leaders at a faith-based institution. In response, one of the participants said, "Betty, if I'm not my thoughts and my feelings, what am I?" I replied, "You are . . . a spark of the divine." There was a moment of silence, and then he quipped, "I think you need to tell my wife." We laughed, but I had not intended to be silly with my response. The deeper truth is that we are all made in the image of God, and the breath of God is alive in each person—even when that breath is hard to see.

In all the research I have done, and in all the conflicts I have mediated, I have observed that one of the primary drivers of conflict is that the conflict puts our sense of selfhood, our sense of who we think we are, at risk, whether individually or collectively. In large or small ways, we believe we are being threatened, that our belief system, our self-image, or our sense of security or belonging are on the table. The problem is that when we experience our selfhood as being at risk, we tend to take things personally. In contrast, when we place the center of our identity in the breath of God alive within us, we allow our thoughts and feelings to be something we have rather than something we are. Putting distance between our sense of self and our thoughts and feelings allows us to respond more thoughtfully and meaningfully to the challenges in front of us.

2. Go to the gym for your soul

Many people go to the gym to build muscle that will help carry them through the course of their day. It is harder to remember that we also need to go to the gym for our souls, taking time for quiet, rest, prayer, and renewal so our spiritual muscles can also carry us through the course of our day. It is hard to navigate the hurts in our lives if we are not taking regular time to become grounded in the deeper truth that we are beloved of God—and so are they, the people with whom we are in conflict.

But how do we hold onto the sense of our—and their—belovedness during difficult conversations? How do we find our center when our best skills escape us and we find ourselves falling off the cliff of our own good intentions? In addition to taking regular time for prayer and contemplation, I have come to believe strongly in the power of *breath prayers*, short mantras

Breath prayers . . . gently turn our bodies back to God's love for the other person and for us, helping us to stay grounded before, during, and after difficult conversations.

that help us to find our way back to God and back to center, even and especially when tough conversations are causing us to become unmoored and flooded with emotion. Consider the following examples of breath prayers: *"I can do this. My selfhood is not at risk." "I am beautiful. I am worthy. I am beloved." "I release to God and to the universe all the pain and sorrow from every cell in my body." "God, help me to love this person with unconditional positive regard." "God, please embrace this person with your arms of loving kindness."* Breath prayers can be simple, poetic, or profound. Most importantly, they gently turn our bodies back to God's love for the other person and for us, helping us to stay grounded before, during, and after difficult conversations.

3. Remember that the feelings we resist are the feelings we entrench

We often want to resist the feelings that emerge for us during the hurts we are experiencing—our turning stomach, our constricted breath, our wounded heart. Or we may go so deep into our wounded heart that we lose our way and do not know how to find our way to our center again. Healing includes remembering that before we have a thought, we have a feeling; before we have a feeling, we have a physical sensation; and before we have a physical sensation, we have an *association*. Practically, this means that the conflict in front of us has awakened an old wound or an old narrative; within moments, our body, heart, and brain respond, driving our conflict behaviors.

So often, people tell me that they want to let go of the large and small conflicts in their lives, but they do not know where to start. Or they tell me that they have tried letting go, but versions of the same conflict keep cropping up again and again. In my experience, it is hard to let go of conflict when we have not accepted the feelings underlying it.

One of the most important first steps out of our hurts is allowing ourselves, without judgement, to feel the sensation the conflict creates *in our bodies*. Most of us do not take time to be tender with the sensations of pain in our bodies during or following conflict—our turning stomach, our constricted breath, our wounded heart. This step of healing takes time and is so important that we dare not rush past the invitation to be tender with our wounded self. When we allow ourselves to sense the pain in our bodies, we come closer to the deeper feelings that emerge from it. And

when this occurs, we can accept rather than resist the complex feelings the conflict has generated within us, the stories we have told ourselves, the half-truths we have clung to, and the ways we, too, have contributed to the conflict.

Once we can own the sensations and feelings we hold in our bodies and hearts, we can shift to the second step of healing—releasing all we are holding into God's care and resting in God's love for us. Releasing our hurts into God's care is so much more powerful than simply "letting go," because when we do so, something very powerful happens: Rather than being erased, our wounds are held tenderly, giving us time and space to learn how to be tender with ourselves, to heal, and to turn our emerging self-compassion into a more expansive compassion that, over time, can come to include the person with whom we have struggled.

While some hurts require an immediate response, often there is time before we must respond. After we have allowed ourselves to sense how our body is reacting to the situation, accepted our feelings, released our wounds into God's care, and rested in God's love, we are now ready to consider our next steps. We may need to take action in response to the hurt we have experienced. We may need to have a difficult conversation with ourselves or with the person who has caused us harm. When we take time to allow, accept, release, and rest, we come to the question of what our next step should be, less "hooked" by what occurred, and more capable of making wise and thoughtful decisions about how to engage what we have experienced. Now we can respond rather than react to what occurred, raising the possibility that our response will heal rather than deepen the challenges between us and the other person.

4. Remember that you are beloved as you are—and there is room for improvement

Both principles—your belovedness and your brokenness—are true at the same time. We all fall down. None of us gets it right all the time. While we may know this truth deep in our bones, both during and following difficult conversations we can be tempted to solve our pain by blaming the other person for what has happened between us. In these moments, we are vulnerable to focusing on what the other has done wrong while minimizing our own contribution to the tension between us. As noted by the apostle Paul, however, we all see in a mirror dimly. Remembering our—and their—belovedness and brokenness allows us to come to our conversations with one another with more humility, more honesty about our own contributions, more grace for the ways we have each fallen down. With this stance, we increase our capacity to effectively say the hard things we need to say, to hold boundaries appropriately, and, ultimately, to find our way forward.

The repair of small harms is not a lesser expression of peacemaking—it is one of its most demanding forms.

In Luke 10, we read: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27, NRSVue). The secular version of this same commandment is to regard our neighbor with *unconditional positive regard.* The American psychologist Carl Rogers, who popularized this phrase in 1956, famously stated that when he regarded his clients with judgement, they responded with resistance. But if he regarded his clients with unconditional positive regard, change was possible. The same holds true for the conflicts and small harms in our own lives. When we start with unconditional positive regard—even as we hold boundaries and speak about our differences—change is possible.

More than one person has told me that the idea of unconditional positive regard is harder to practice than loving their neighbors as themselves, for the simple reason that because the word "love" is used so frequently, it no longer demands hard things of them. Unconditional positive regard and truly loving our neighbors as ourselves are not easy commandments, but they are transformative.

Conclusion

Small harms are real harms. It is important for us to learn the skills to engage the day-to-day harms that, at some point, come for all of us. Just as importantly, we must nurture an understanding of what it means to be a child of God—not only as a theological proposition, but also as a self-understanding, a stance, a way of being that influences how we lean into the world, how we regard the other people in our lives, and how we transform small harms.

If Anabaptist peace theology has taught us to imagine a world beyond violence, it must also teach us how to repair the small harms that shape our daily lives. The work of peace is not only found in opposing war or naming injustice at a distance; it is also found in the ordinary courage of pausing before we react, tending honestly to our wounds, remembering our own belovedness and brokenness, and extending that same grace to others. These practices will not make conflict easy, nor will they remove the need for boundaries, accountability, or hard conversations. But they can help us become people who meet harm with greater wisdom, humility, and compassion. The repair of small harms is not a lesser expression of peacemaking—it is one of its most demanding forms.

About the author

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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.

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.

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.

The righteousness of our cause will not preclude us from causing harm. Put another way, working toward ending big harms will not make us immune to causing small ones.

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.

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What's in the toolbox?

A Christian response to slights

Carol Penner

Ouch! I didn't say it out loud, but the church chairperson's words smarted. I concentrated on keeping my face neutral as the congregational meeting continued. I could feel my heart racing. I knew I would be unpacking his words later.

I don't even remember the exact question I was asked or my answer. It was something about how I saw my unique role in the congregation as a pastor. I had gone to the microphone to give my answer; the church chairperson stood up in response and, in a few short words, flatly contradicted me.

It was a brief interaction lasting less than thirty seconds, but what was said reverberated in my mind for a long time. *Why did he say that? Why am I so upset now? What is at stake for me? Is follow-up needed or not?*

Suffering a slight, publicly or privately, is a commonplace occurrence in the hurly-burly of life in the church, in our families, at work, or in the community. Words are said that take us aback and sting. Or sometimes it's words not said, credit not given, thanks not expressed. Or it's a dismissive gesture, a rolling of the eyes, a turning of the back, a shrug of the shoulders. We end up with our feelings crumpled and our spirit out of joint.

How do we deal with these small crises? There are so many tools in our theological toolbox to help us. I will share three stories and highlight some of the different tools I've used.

Pride and humility

How did I resolve what happened with the church chairperson? The framework that helped me at the time was pride and humility. That evening, as I was thinking about what happened, a comment I'd heard in a sermon came back to me. The preacher had said, "When our feelings are hurt, it is usually because of a blow to our pride. How might embracing humility help us release the hurt?"

The preacher's comment helped me in this situation, because my pride was feeling dented. I had a certain standing in the community as the pastor, and one of the things I felt I should know something about was my role in the congregation. When the church chair took the mic, he strongly disagreed with what I'd said: "That's not the pastor's role; that's what we're all supposed to do!" I felt taken down, and a shiver of incompetence went

down my spine. In my mind, I wondered, *Do I really know what I'm doing? Will my church members think less of me now?*

That the church chair had a valid point didn't salve my feelings. I wished he could have expressed himself in a more sensitive way. How much easier it would have been for me if he'd said, "I see where you are coming from, Carol, but I wonder whether . . ." Instead, his opinion came out blunt and unadorned. It was a small contradiction, but a public one. The comment was not a pattern; this church chair wasn't trying to undermine me or put me down. He was a plain-spoken person and wanted to set the record straight. Apart from a few comments like this, he was mostly supportive.

Wounded pride was at the centre of my pain. I had been served a helping of humble pie at the church meeting. It wasn't pleasant! But on reflection, it wasn't that bad; it wasn't going to kill me. I make mistakes, and everyone saw I'd made one. It was not that big a deal; my bruised pride would survive. As followers of Jesus, we are called to take a humble path, just as he did. He gave up so much and was treated so badly both by those he knew and those he didn't know well. Surely I could accept this small humbling moment with grace.

And what was the alternative for me? I could have doubled down on my pride and demanded an apology from the church chair, insisting that he not contradict me in public like that. Yet it was a small slight involving a choice of words. I felt that making a big deal of it would raise suspicions that I had a fragile ego. Confrontation would probably have bewildered a person who hadn't meant anything by his comment other than correcting a theological point. A better path was to humbly accept my pride being taken down a peg.

Yieldedness: Letting it go

Many years ago, my husband's widowed grandfather decided to remarry. The fact that he remarried a few short months after his wife's passing was difficult for his eight adult children. It wasn't made easier by the fact that he married someone the same age as his oldest children.

A few years passed, and the grandfather died without a will. His estate passed entirely to his new wife. This was disappointing for the eight children, who had hoped to inherit some money from their father's modest estate. But I never heard people bemoaning the fact that they didn't inherit any money; what I did hear was the story of the sugar bowl.

Once the grandfather was buried and the will was read and settled, one of my husband's aunts went to her father's widow with a request. "Our mother always had a pink sugar bowl on the kitchen table. I wonder whether you might be willing to part with that, as a memento for me of my mother." The widow was quick with her answer: "I know that sugar bowl, but I can't part with it. I really like it myself."

This interaction made a huge impression on my mother-in-law and everyone in that family. I heard the story at least half a dozen times from different people, but the gist was always the same: The person who had inherited everything was unwilling to share a crumb with her late husband's family.

Ten years later, twenty years later, I was still hearing the story of the sugar bowl! The bitterness was not fading away. The pain was present decades after the fact, and the family had broken off contact with the father's widow.

In early Anabaptism, the German word *gelassenheit* was used to describe the process of yielding to God's will. It's a word that is hard to translate, but it involves self-surrender and openness to suffering for God's sake. Its fruit is peace and calmness of mind. How might *gelassenheit* have helped in this situation? While sin is real (some people simply will not share), we do not have to let sin and hatred grow in us. Instead of allowing the pain of being denied a beloved object to fester, following Jesus would mean giving up the resentment and focusing on maintaining the relationship. We can forgive someone even if they don't offer an apology.

The catch here is that *gelassenheit* is so much easier from the outside. I wasn't attached to that sugar bowl, so it was easy for me to see where they'd gone wrong. When I've tried to practice *gelassenheit* about problems in my own life, it has been much more agonizing. I've found it remarkably difficult to let go of something that hurts me. A pebble in a shoe might only be the size of a lentil, but it can be excruciating. Can we aim for the spiritual lightness of *gelassenheit?* It can be practiced on hurts of every size.

Divine testing

I have been helping a particular individual in a long and sustained practical way over a period of years. In recent months, the person I have been helping said negative things about me to someone else, blaming me for something that had happened.

The framework of pride and humility can certainly help here. My pride was hurt because this person was saying negative things about me. I was worried that people would think less of me. Instead of getting praise and accolades for being a helpful friend, I was being cast as the villain. My pride was being taken down a peg. It was a humbling experience.

And the practice of yieldedness, of *gelassenheit*, was also a helpful tool. I needed to let go of the hurtful words. Holding on to them would build resentment. I needed help from God to surrender them and focus on working on the relationship.

Another tool turned out to be even more effective in this situation: the framework of seeing things as a test from God. Lately, I've been reading the spiritual classic *Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales (first published in 1609). Francis de Sales, in fact, promotes the first two tools

"Great occasions for serving God come seldom, but little ones surround us daily." . . . If we are unable to be true to love under the pressure of small slights, we are bound to fail when facing greater temptations.

I've mentioned: humility and a yieldedness to God's will. He also teaches that God sends us challenges to help us practice obedience. The majority of trials are small things: "Great occasions for serving God come seldom, but little ones surround us daily."[1] He lists the little tests that are required of us: "the tiresome peculiarities of husband or wife, the broken glass, the loss of a ring, a handkerchief, a glove; the sneer of a neighbour."[2] All of these help build a Christian's strength to offer love.

When we want to build muscle, we need resistance. We'd like to pick up a twenty-five-pound weight with ease. Picking up a five-pound weight many times will condition our muscles for the larger challenge. If we are unable to be true to love under the pressure of small slights, we are bound to fail when facing greater temptations. God sends us trials to strengthen us.

I found it easy to love the person I was caring for when they were thankful for the help I was giving them and everything was going smoothly. But now it was time to see whether I could love them under duress. This purer, stronger love required more self-discipline. After a stripping away of the positive parts of the relationship, could I continue to be loving?

Wisdom and love

Some people reading this last story might think: Why can't you confront that person? Shouldn't they apologize for what they said? Why do you just have to absorb everything?

In this situation, I am helping a person of advanced years who has no family. I am walking with them as they require more care and, most recently, as they moved into a long-term care home. It's understandable that they wanted to try to find someone to blame for what was happening; it's stressful to get old and need help. They have enough on their plate right now. They never intended for me to hear those words, which were spoken to someone else; they just needed a place to vent. They have probably forgotten all about them. Unfortunately, in the small town where I live, things have a way of getting back to you.

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1 Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609), chap. 35, "We Must be Faithful in Things Great and Small," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://ccel.org/ccel/desales/devout_life/devout_life.v.xxxv.html.

2 de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, chap. 35.

I find that in the ups and downs of life, we can absorb bad behaviour. Not everything has to be confronted. A good friend or a family member can be having a bad day, a bad week, or a bad year, and because their circumstances are stressful, we decide this isn't the time to confront. Taking a humble path, letting things go, and trying to let the trial help us become a better person are tools that can aid us in dealing with small slights.

A good friend or a family member can be having a bad day, a bad week, or a bad year, and because their circumstances are stressful, we decide this isn't the time to confront. Taking a humble path, letting things go, and trying to let the trial help us become a better person are tools that can aid us in dealing with small slights.

There are other situations where it can be important to stand up for yourself and to ask for an apology. Patterns of behaviour that demean or put down consistently shouldn't be ignored. Microaggressions can be part of a pattern that one faces because of race, gender, disability, or sexual orientation. There are other tools you need for those types of hurts. We pray for wisdom to know which tools to use and when.

God provides many tools for us. We learn from scripture, from wise guides, and from our reading. Each of the tools I've mentioned today fit within the larger context of love. When we love God, small slights can be put in perspective. Knowing we are loved and valued by God allows us to take a humble path, like Jesus. Letting go of resentment is made possible when our eyes are fixed on God's great love for us. We can rejoice when opportunities come to test our love, because the Holy Spirit is working within us to make us stronger.

Finally, the reality is that we are just as likely to be the one causing the offense. We hope that when we have a bad day and are not our best selves, those around us continue to love us and give us grace: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31, NRSVue).

God of grace,
it's not always smooth sailing
on our journeys of love.
You know the bumps that jolt us
and despite our best intentions,
we find resentment blowing us off course.
As we lie down to sleep,

we toss and turn with questions:
"Why did they say that to us?
What are people thinking about me?
This isn't fair!"
Place your hand on our foreheads
and whisper sweet words of love.
Let these words sink into us like ballast,
giving us the grace we need
for the passage home. Amen.

About the author

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After the slammed door

Small harms, unequal power, and the way God reconciled us

Gilha Lee

A father, worn down by weeks of slammed doors, knocks and says, "Let's make peace." A pastor, after a tense congregational meeting, invites a frustrated member to her office "so that we can be reconciled." A manager schedules a "repair conversation" with the employee he embarrassed in front of the whole team. On the surface, each is a gesture toward healing. Each can also be something else: a summons.

When the more powerful party initiates reconciliation, the invitation arrives freighted with the asymmetry of the relationship. The daughter cannot decline her father's peace without becoming, once again, the problem. The congregant knows who will be standing in the pulpit next Sunday. The employee knows who writes his review. In such moments, the language of reconciliation—warm, healing, even Christian language—can quietly do the work of restoring not the relationship but the hierarchy. The harm is declared resolved, and the imbalance that produced it emerges not only intact but freshly legitimized, because now it wears the garments of peace.

There is an opposite failure, and it is common among people of good heart. The less powerful party absorbs the harm unilaterally—*it's all right, don't worry about it*—asking nothing, exchanging nothing. I have watched this happen repeatedly, nowhere more than in churches, and I have done it myself. It does not produce peace. It produces resentment, and it quietly strengthens the unequal dynamic: one party perpetually benefited, the other perpetually depleted.

Both failures are failures of reciprocity. In the first, the powerful counterfeit mutuality; in the second, the powerless surrender it. And both flourish most not in catastrophic violence but in the small, everyday harms that accumulate in homes, congregations, and workplaces—precisely the places where power differentials are unavoidable and largely invisible. So the question: Between parents and children, pastors and congregants, bosses and employees, even the extroverted and the introverted, how can the repair of harm be genuinely reciprocal without becoming one more tool for maintaining privilege?

The harm is declared resolved, and the imbalance that produced it emerges not only intact but freshly legitimated, because now it wears the garments of peace.

My answer comes from the steepest power difference of all: the most asymmetrical reconciliation ever narrated, the reconciliation of God and humanity. Paul, I will argue, presents reconciliation not as a unilateral act of grace received by passive beneficiaries but as a reciprocal exchange, one in which the immeasurably weaker party has something to give that the stronger cannot supply for itself. How reciprocity was possible across that difference—not because God is God, but through the very logic of exchange—can teach us how to make it possible across ours.

Reconciliation is exchange

The Greek verb Paul uses for reconcile, *katallassō*, holds a surprise for readers who encounter it first as doctrine. Open a lexicon, and its primary meaning is not "reconcile" but "exchange." It was marketplace language, used for changing money and trading goods, before it named the mending of relationships (*redemption*, another word we have thoroughly theologized, comes from the same commercial world; we still redeem coupons). When ancient cities ended hostilities, the same vocabulary applied, and the process it named was recognizably an exchange: a gift given, a tribute paid, an offending practice ceased. Something changed hands, or there was no reconciliation.

Nor is reconciliation alone in this. The study of grace has arrived at a strikingly similar conclusion: John Barclay has shown that *gift* in antiquity was never the no-strings-attached, one-way transfer we moderns imagine; gifts in Paul's world came wrapped in the social expectation of return.[1] My own study of reconciliation reached the exchange dimension by a different route: through the vocabulary, institutions, and ideals of exchange and reconciliation in Paul's world. The two findings reinforce each other: grace and reconciliation, each carrying reciprocal exchange in its very grammar. So when Paul chooses *katallassō* for what God has done in Christ, his first hearers would not have heard "unilateral." Reciprocity was built into the word. The question is what Paul does with it.

God's unequal exchange

I did not come to this question as an exegete first. I came to it as a Korean. I grew up hoping to see the reunification of my divided peninsula, and I have

1 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015).

watched that hope grow more distant—not only because the older generation carries the traumatic wounds of war, but because younger South Koreans, weighing the enormous economic gap with the North, increasingly do not want reunification at all. Watching this, I kept asking: How can reconciliation happen between parties so unequal in power, status, and wealth? Then I noticed that the reconciliation Paul places at the heart of his gospel is exactly that kind. And according to him, it worked.

The traditional account says it worked because God is God: reconciliation as a unilateral, one-time divine act accomplished in Christ's death, with humanity contributing nothing, or at most passively receiving. I want to suggest a different reading. In 2 Cor 5:18, Paul writes that God, who "reconciled us to himself through Christ," also entrusted to us the *diakonia*—the service, the ministry—of reconciliation. The gift comes with a task, and the task is the return gift. Notice its shape: The gift descends vertically, but the reciprocation moves horizontally. We respond to God by practicing reconciliation with the people around us—family, friends, strangers, enemies—and that horizontal *diakonia* counts as our return to God. Divine-human reconciliation begins in the unrepeatable event of the cross and resurrection, but it continues as an ongoing process in which humanity plays a crucial role.

The gift comes with a task, and the task is the return gift. Notice its shape: The gift descends vertically, but the reciprocation moves horizontally.

An objection arises immediately, and it is an ancient one. Greek and Roman economic thought held that a just exchange required equal value, or at least proportion; to trade unequal things was not merely bad business but moral injustice. And this exchange is scandalously unequal: God gives Christ; humanity gives mere participation in the *diakonia*. How can that be a just exchange? Three features of Paul's world suggest how.

First, emergencies change values. Aristotle observed that exchange takes place only where there is need.[2] Philo went further: In a famine, he wrote, anyone would gladly exchange "all the treasures in the world for a little food."[3] And here is the theological turn: The rupture of God's relationship with humanity was, from the side of divine love, an emergency. A God indifferent to us could have shrugged or started over with another humanity. But the God who loves refuses to lose the beloved, and in an emergency,

2 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 5.5, 1133b.

3 Philo, *On Providence*, 2.10–11.

the beloved's recovery is worth anything, even Christ. Divine love is what makes the unequal exchange intelligible.

Second, the weaker party's offering is unique. Roman patronage shows this well: It bound together parties of wildly unequal capacity. An emperor could shower a provincial city with benefactions no city could ever match. Yet the city could give the emperor something he could not procure for himself: it could raise a monument to him in its square (erected by others, a monument conferred honor; erected by oneself, it conferred nothing). Likewise the wealthy landowner in Rome and the poor tenant farmer on his distant estate: Only the farmer's hands could work that particular land. The client's return could not match the patron's gift in value; it matched it in uniqueness. So it is between God and humanity. The *diakonia* of reconciliation happens human-to-human; it must be enacted by fellow humans, in bodies and neighborhoods, or not at all. God cannot do it for us. There is a startling irony here: God needs humans. That need is not weakness, still less a surrender of omnipotence; it is the space God has chosen to make for our reciprocity.

Third, reconciliation re-founds the relationship. The Greek ideal of *homonoia* (concord) meant more than the settling of a conflict. It meant a fundamental change in the relationship: two parties now sharing one will, one direction, one purpose, each recognizing the other as, in some sense, part of itself. When rival cities achieved concord, they sometimes minted coins bearing both cities' deities side by side—equal footing, stamped in bronze. This is what Paul means by making us "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor 5:20): The reconciled take on the very purpose of God. God does the same: not merely ceasing to be angry but placing humanity on a footing where our agency matters—not equal status, but equal regard. And with that, the objection dissolves. Between parties who share one purpose, who count each other as part of themselves, gifts are no longer audited for equivalence. The exchange that began as scandalously unequal ends by retiring the arithmetic altogether.

Repairing small harms across unavoidable differences in power

What does any of this have to do with a slammed door, a tense congregational meeting, or an employee humiliated in front of the team? Four things, I think.

Name the power difference first

Small harms are precisely where power hides best. A parent's sarcasm or a pastor's dismissive email rarely looks like an exercise of power, which is why the power in them goes unexamined. Churches that prize flat structures are not exempt; where power is denied, it does not disappear—it goes

underground, and underground power is the kind most easily mistaken for peace. Repair that begins from the privileged script—*I know what happened, I know what is needed, I have already prepared the terms*—will fail, however sincere. From my observations, I have come to understand that reconciliation is never achieved from a position of assumed superiority. The first move that made divine reconciliation possible was God's refusal to stand on status. Ours is to say, out loud if necessary: I have more power here than you do, and I know it.

Practice equal regard, not equal status

Where power is hoarded or abused, it should be contested; that is simple justice. But not every difference in power is an injustice. A parent must remain a parent; a pastor does not stop being the pastor when the hard conversation begins. What can change is regard: treating the other as a whole human being whose account of the harm carries full weight—as God treated humanity not as possession or project but as partner, entrusting to us, of all creatures, the *diakonia* of reconciliation.

Hold the paradox of true reciprocity

There are two ways to break reciprocity. One is to calculate your own benefit first, to enter "repair" already computing what the outcome should do for you. When I am in conflict with my teenager, this is my confession: I begin from my own agenda—*how do I change their behavior?*–and call it reconciliation. It does not work; teenagers can smell an agenda, and what I offer as peace, they receive as management. The other way is to want nothing at all, the good-hearted self-erasure that says my needs do not matter here. That is not generosity; over time, it breeds resentment and further entrenches the unequal dynamic. The paradox is that true reciprocity asks for both at once: Think first of what the other will receive, yet do not pretend you need nothing. Both agendas belong on the table, and it is only from there that letting go of my own demands becomes free rather than forced. Concord, after all, means the other has become in some sense part of me—their gain now counting, in part, as mine—the neighbor loved as the self, with both neighbor and self still present.

Receive the gift on the giver's terms

Ancient exchange teaches that value is contextual, and the weaker party's offering, of little worth by market measures, may be the one thing the stronger cannot get anywhere else. Every teacher knows this. The brilliant student's tenth flawless paper brings satisfaction, but the failing student's sudden breakthrough brings joy of another order entirely. The same act from someone of greater capacity would not be the same gift; it costs them

God did not complete reconciliation alone. That is the strangest implication of Paul's theology of reconciliation, and the most practical. The Creator of all things arranged the healing of the world so that the weaker party's participation would be indispensable, so that reciprocity would not be a threat to reconciliation across a vast power differential but its very form.

far less. The father of the prodigal was not measuring his returning son's speech against some standard of adequate apology; the return was itself the gift. In the repair of small harms, the child's clumsy half-apology, the introvert's few words offered in a room built for the talkative, the congregant's risky honesty with their pastor—these may be the whole treasure. When we are the party with more power, our temptation is to refuse such gifts, to insist that the repair take the shape we prescribe. That refusal is domination by other means. Accepting the other party as they are—receiving what they can actually give rather than demanding what they cannot—is not a lowering of the bar. It is what God does with us.

One caution belongs alongside these practices: Power is contextual, and it shifts. In Korea, I held privileges I could not see; in the United States, I am a professor in one room and, in the next, an immigrant whose life could be unsettled by policies beyond my control. Awareness of power differences is therefore not a box we check once but a discipline we carry from room to room, asking each time: Where am I standing now, and who can afford this repair less than I can?

The classroom of small harms

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If that is true, then reciprocity is not what endangers repair between unequal parties; counterfeit reciprocity is. And the small harms of ordinary life ask for repair in their own right. They are also where true reciprocity is learned, for such skill rarely comes in the moments that demand it most. The slammed door, the tense congregational meeting, the humiliation in front of the team: These are small enough to learn from—and, left unrepaired, they do not stay small. The practice is less a formula than a posture.

Ask where you stand, and name whatever power you hold. Regard the other as God regarded us. Put both agendas on the table, prepared to release much of your own. And when you are the stronger party—as each of us sometimes is—receive, as the father received his returning son, the gift that only the weaker can give.

About the author

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Elbows on the table

What I learned about small harms and salvation at summer camp

Malinda E. Berry

Introduction

The big idea at the heart of this issue of *Vision* is that small things matter because, among other things, they are the foundation for doing more complex things. This makes both intuitive and logical sense. I am able to write this journal article because I learned how to read, write, and understand small words when I was a child.

But we are applying this basic principle not to learning how to cook or mow the lawn; we are applying it to the morality, values, and beliefs central to Christian faith and religious practice—namely, the forgiveness of harm (trespasses against us). Barbara Nascimbeni writes, "God is smallness. We know God is huge. And yet God also became small, deciding to live in our world, to be a baby . . . who has to learn to walk and talk."[1] How did we forget that God's forgiveness isn't always huge?

Lesson 1: Green means I am kind and caring

This past summer, I served as pastor for a group of rising fifth- and sixth-graders attending a week at a Mennonite camp. If you have spent any time at a church camp, you know that the experience is often laden with traditions, from singing to pranking. Some of these traditions are beautiful, and some are simply habits we have stopped questioning. One tradition I encountered happened at mealtimes. It involved chants to get staff and campers to do various things. I don't remember this kind of thing from my days as a camper, but after doing a little research, I can appreciate how this tradition is an example of prosocial teasing. It's a lighthearted way to build camp camaraderie through "collective effervescence," though I found some of these rituals obnoxious and wished for subtler, kinder group bonding rituals. For example, if someone is caught with their elbows on the table, the rest of the dining hall points out this error in etiquette in a chant that includes this line: "Round the table you must go, you are lazy!"

1 Marie-Hélène Delval, *Images of God for Young Children*, illus. Barbara Nascimbeni (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 78.

On Tuesday, the campers tried to get me to join in. Since I was clearly older than their cool young-adult counselors, I was not expecting to be drawn into their game. But I was, and as they chanted, something deep inside me welled up to say, "No!" and I stayed seated. Wednesday morning, I decided to use our worship and teaching time to revisit what had happened at Tuesday lunch.

But before I continue, my story needs a bit more context. For reasons both geographical and racial, I have mixed thoughts and feelings about the theological symbolism of light and darkness, and one of the ways I work with my discomfort is to refract light, turning it into a spectrum of colors.[2] To this end, at camp we began each morning with a simple meditation and prayer practice, with each color of the rainbow giving us a message about how God's light shines in and through us. Using three sturdy twigs and strands of yarn in all the colors of the rainbow, campers also created a craft called a Wonder Eye to help them look at God's beloved world with wonder and awe as they trained to be "Detectives of Divinity."[3] I even wore a different color each day to help us focus on a particular message.

Wednesday was the day I wore green, and the campers actually remembered that green means "I am kind and caring."

The day's Bible story was Matt 14:22–33, which describes Jesus walking on stormy waters and Simon Peter sinking after his first step as fear overtook him. I decided to step out of our metaphorical boat and trust their capacity for care. I pulled out a childhood family photograph that I happened to have with me and showed it to them, asking them questions about what they saw. In the photo, I am a two-year-old sitting on my mother's lap, looking very uncertain about having my picture taken. The photo also gives them clues about where my ancestors come from: both Europe and Africa.

With my heart beating fast and about 140 people looking back at me, I explained why their chant left me sitting in my chair. I asked questions as campers called out the answers, and together we painted a picture of pain, sadness, and fear. I explained that my people had lived in bondage with masters who would beat them if they deemed them to be "lazy." Across

2 While light/dark imagery becomes complex in relation to racial categories, it is also bound to Northern Hemisphere geography. In temperate northern zones, daylight and warmth ebb and flow dramatically across the seasons, giving winter and spring immense liturgical weight (Christ is born in a season of darkness, and resurrected in a season of new life). This dynamic does not reflect the environmental rhythms of the Southern Hemisphere or life near the Equator.

3 Bryan Moyer Suderman, "Detectives of Divinity," track 2 on *Detectives of Divinity*, SmallTall Music, 2011, MP3 audio. Here is the refrain: "We are detectives of divinity, we're looking all around / for signs of God's activity, wherever they are found / God is up to something, of that you can be sure / so start the investigation! The clues are everywhere."

generations in my family, the word "lazy" is not a lighthearted joke; it is a word with weight.

When that word was chanted in the dining hall, even in jest, my body filled up with big feelings from the distant past and the past of my own lifetime. About seven or eight years ago, my father asked me a question borne of a Black man's anxiety and fear that his Black daughter would be denied promotion or further employment: "Are you pulling your weight over there at the seminary?"

I was taking a risk sharing my feelings with a clearing full of energetic tweens. I asked them honestly: "Are my big feelings a problem to solve or fix?" They looked at me, and with the beautiful, disarming clarity that children possess, a small chorus of voices clearly answered, "No."

I wanted to impress upon them the importance of listening to others with compassion and kindness during stormy times without needing to act, so I asked another question: "Does anything need to change?" expecting to hear another "No." To my surprise, there was a voice that said, "Maybe," along with a blend of yeses and nos. So I directed them to their cabin groups to talk about that question or to just share their own experiences of stormy times and big feelings.

Some of them decided to make a change, and "you are lazy" became "be more proper." They wanted to reshape the camp culture so that the dining hall could be more spacious and the tradition could truly serve its purpose. It was a deeply moving moment of community, and it happened on the very day they were tying green yarn onto their Wonder Eyes.

What happened that day was not a massive, cosmic shift in the universe. It was a small, beautiful burst of *ubuntu* and *shalom*. It was an ordinary moment of salvation.

Lesson 2: What to do when a small harm feels like a cosmic crime

Reclaiming Anselm's eleventh-century theory of atonement, the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, coupled with the Cartesian rationalism of the seventeenth century, put Western Christianity on a trajectory that led to a deeply individualistic place. "I think, therefore I am" is part and parcel of how salvation went from a spectrum of grace to a chargesheet of crimes as believers sought to avoid everlasting torment.

This has meant that for many Christians, everyday faith has become a highly personal quest to make it into heaven rather than a shared daily practice of *ubuntu* and *shalom/eirene*.[4] We see it all around us: "Faith" is expressed

4 Michael Battle, "How Should We Live? The Christian Life," in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 291. An important part of the worldview of Christians in Southern Africa, *ubuntu* names the interdependent nature of identity formation. Battle explains, "In contrast to the philosopher Descartes's characteristically Western assertion, 'I think, therefore I am,' Africans would say, 'I am,

through consumer culture, familiar slogans, and popular sacred music that describe how Jesus changes everything because *he* died for *our* sins, saving us from ourselves and leading to heavenly rewards in the life to come. This makes not just Jesus's power to forgive, but sin itself, a very BIG deal.

One result is that Westernized people tend to lump our experiences of harm and suffering into one big pile of pain, and it must be someone's fault. When we do that, every problem, no matter how (in)consequential, is given equal moral weight. After all, doesn't the Bible say something about "sin is sin is sin"? Even if we reject this interpretation of James 2:10, we can still get caught up in comparing the size of sins and transgressions because we can perceive both God and the devil in the details. If every choice I make can be scrutinized so that it either becomes evidence of my superb moral character or of my significant moral shortcomings, then where is the joy of Christian living? Questions like this keep us on a perpetual roller coaster of emotional pain as we carry a heavy, unarticulated burden of daily condemnation, unable to separate the genuine pain of a broken relationship from the background noise of systemic anxiety caused by the Domination System.[5]

When that sensitivity goes unnamed, our nervous systems start to register the smallest, messiest human moments as ruptures in our moral universe. But as those tweens showed us, big emotions aren't a cosmic crime—they're an invitation to reorient and reconnect.

The legacy of biblical nonresistance among Mennonite groups in the Americas has developed into different forms of active peacemaking and political advocacy. This has led to patterns of faith formation that have given many of us a deeply felt, highly acute sensitivity to inconsistencies, unfairness, and injustice.[6] When that sensitivity goes unnamed, our nervous

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because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' The person is part of the whole, and one's identity flows from the corporate experience and never in isolation from it." My reference to *shalom/eirene* is based on Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017).

5 Walter Wink writes, "I use the expression 'the Domination System' to indicate what happens when an entire network of Powers becomes integrated around idolatrous values." Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Powers Trilogy, vol. 3 (Fortress Press, 1992), 9.

6 Anna Baumert, Aya Adra, and Mengyao Li, "Justice Sensitivity in Intergroup Contexts: A Theoretical Framework," *Social Justice Research* 35 (2022): 7–32.

systems start to register the smallest, messiest human moments as ruptures in our moral universe. But as those tweens showed us, big emotions aren't a cosmic crime—they're an invitation to reorient and reconnect.

Lesson 3: All the colors of salvation

In her writings, Julian of Norwich (fourteenth century) describes how God's saving work creates a social fabric and a new way of seeing. "The reward of salvation is to grow into the fullness of our humanity. Julian calls this 'oneing,' and it is the process of growing into one-ness with God."[7] This is good news: We have an alternative to the dominant individualistic storyline of Western Christianity.

When we start telling this other story, the first one starts to unravel, and we see naturally occurring differences we can call "polarities." These are the opposites, to use an analogy from knitting, that give us working tension. When these *polarities* become *polarized*, the tension is so strong that we can't knit. Here is an example that may feel like a caricature.

Reconciliation. Repentance. Repair. For socially conscious Christians, these theological terms are connected to our search for ways to make wrongs right. Reconciliation is favored by those who lean to the right end of the spectrum, repair by those who lean to the left, and repentance claimed by both with different notions about the nature of the wrongs under consideration. Those focused on repair tend to conceive of the seven social sins as what people need to repent of. Those focused on reconciliation tend to believe that personal moral failings defined by the seven deadly sins are what call for repentance.[8]

What I love about Julian's description of "oneing" is that God is not absorbing us into their being but "knitting" us into a cosmic *ubuntu* of *shalom*. The reality of biblical faith is that God is interested in the whole spectrum. God is interested in us as the individual quirky people we are, and God makes agreements and promises with whole communities. God cares about what I do, God cares about what we do, and God cares about how our choices shape our attitudes, beliefs, and actions. But here's the thing: *God cares about all these choices because God wants Creation to flourish and thrive, not*

7 Jane McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life: Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement* (Pilgrim Press, 2000), 20.

8 The "Seven Social Sins" named by Frederic Donaldson and popularized by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi are wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce and industry without morality, science without humanity, worship and religion without sacrifice, and politics without principle. Early Christians developed a list of "deadly sins," and the list varies based on translation. Around 590, Pope Gregory I consolidated the list into what we know today as the "seven deadly sins" of pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.

God cares about all these choices because God wants Creation to flourish and thrive, not because God is waiting to punish us or collect a fine for each misstep we make.

because God is waiting to punish us or collect a fine for each misstep we make.[9] From a theological perspective, this means that God's justice, love, and healing (all theological synonyms for "salvation") are enough for all the ways we miss the mark (sin), individually or collectively, from the extraordinary (committing crimes against humanity) to the ordinary (using plastic shopping bags).

If we can let the bigness of God's "both/and" ease our tension in the form of theological polarization, I believe we can also see the interplay between the individual, the collective, the trespasses we commit, and the trespasses committed against us, which reveals something about the full spectrum of salvation. As Brethren biblical scholar Brenda Colijn explains in her book *Images of Salvation in the New Testament*, the Bible's wide range of soteriological images challenges the idea that God's plan of salvation is either strictly personal, spiritual, and heavenly *or* is only collective, social, and earthly. She writes, "God's purpose in salvation is to enable a broken creation to become a true reflection of its creator," adding, "We must focus more attention on the growth and completion of salvation" as *we live into Christ*, not Christ living in us.[10]

Daily life provides us with abundant opportunities to see how this understanding of salvation reveals itself in a rich, colorful spectrum of grace, as I discovered when I went to summer camp with a big bag of yarn.

Conclusion

As church leaders, in our faith-forming and peace-seeking work, we are often tempted to believe that our primary task is to manage the large-scale mechanics of faith—nurturing right relationships, preaching life-giving beliefs, tackling massive systemic evils, and carrying the weight of a broken universe on our fragile shoulders.

But the real work of the gospel, the work of God's *shalom-justice*, almost always happens on the scale of green yarn. For those of us who carry the beautiful, exhausting gift of a deep sensitivity to the wrongs we encounter

9 That there can be negative, undesirable consequences that result from our choices is a given; my point is that God doesn't exist to punish us.

10 Brenda B. Colijn, *Images of Salvation in the New Testament* (IVP Academic, 2010), 314–316. She writes, "It is only because of what God has done for us in Christ that we can clearly see the hopeless situation we are in because of sin. A fully biblical understanding of salvation is therefore Christocentric rather than anthropocentric. In the New Testament perspective, we do not invite Jesus in our lives; he invites us into his" (314).

across the street and around the world, this ordinary salvation is our lifeline. We do not have to resolve every systemic injustice before we can experience the vibrance of God's power.

Let us sit together at the ordinary tables of our daily lives, putting our elbows on the table as we lean into the messy, vulnerable, and joyful work of living. We may even spot some rainbows dancing around us, glancing off windowpanes and water glasses.

About the author

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Inclusion and avoidance

Who benefits from trauma-informed liturgy?

Catherine Bergs Mohr

The growing relevance of trauma theory in academia and the increased awareness of trauma in popular discourse have impacted theological scholarship and discourse. As practical theologians seek out ways to better serve traumatized people—victims of abuse, misogyny, racism, ableism, and other experiences of marginalization—there has been interest in the development of "trauma-informed" and "trauma-sensitive" liturgical resources within many denominational contexts.

It was in seeking resources from the Mennonite church that I became aware of and concerned about certain key limitations in the current landscape of trauma-informed liturgy—limitations I saw repeated across multiple resources and contexts. This article was largely inspired by concerns that arose for me in reading a worship resource titled "The Lord's Supper: A Ritual of Harm or Healing?" by Hilary Jerome Scarsella, with Rhoda Keener, Eleanor Krieder, David B. Miller, and John Rempel.[1] This resource presents a critique of the Lord's Supper liturgy in Menno Media's *Minister's Manual* through the lens of sexual abuse survivors. It also offers several alternative liturgies that depart from traditional wording in increasingly radical ways. This choice seeks to reflect the diverse needs present across and within the congregation. In this article, I will explore themes and recommendations that appear in this work and are reflected in other trauma-sensitive resources and seek to problematize some of the trends within this work, specifically grappling with some of the key concerns noted in "Ritual of Harm or Healing?" about how we engage with "self reflection and sin, forgiveness and reconciliation, physical touch, [and] narrating the life and death of Christ."[2]

Before making my critical comments, I wish to say that the methodology of this worship resource, which heavily incorporates testimonies of sexual abuse survivors, including some of the authors, is commendable, and the courage of its contributors in sharing their crucial, firsthand insights cannot

1 Hilary Jerome Scarsella, with Rhoda Keener, Eleanor Krieder, David B. Miller, and John Rempel, "The Lord's Supper: Ritual of Harm or Healing?," *Leader*, Summer (2016): 33–48, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Leader_Summer2016_WorshipResources.pdf.

2 Scarsella et al., "Lord's Supper," 35.

be overstated. The recommendations put forth by this and similar resources are worthy of critique on both academic and practical grounds, though they are informed by lived experience.

Efforts toward greater inclusivity in the church have led to growing unease about "sin-talk" and the practice of repentance in many churches. This trend seems intended to counter the enormous shame associated with misapplications of the doctrine of original sin and the use of sin-talk to vilify and control minoritized groups. The authors of "Ritual of Harm or Healing?" take issue with the pre-existing articulation of sin in the *Minister's Manual* and suggest instead that liturgists take what they refer to as a "broad" alternative approach. Their alternative liturgy avoids the word "sin." It suggests that self-neglect and inaction due to fear are the primary vices for which we must repent, while avoiding references to sins of commission. The problem with such an approach is multifaceted.

Such a framing implies that the confessor is a perfect victim—someone whose chief sin is in caring too much for other people to their own detriment, and who apparently has never raised a finger against anyone else, even their abuser. This sort of victim certainly does exist and deserves to be advocated for. Indeed, such behaviour can be the result of a traumatic experience triggering a freeze-or-fawn response. However, this imagined victim also has much in common with a regressive vision of feminine decency, particularly the decency of white femininity. That may be contextually reasonable given the longstanding cultural and theological valorization of martyrdom in the Mennonite church, and the majority-white demographics of many Mennonite churches. But not all Mennonite women are white, submissive, or feminine. Nor are all victims of abuse so uncomplaining, long-suffering, or female as such a description imagines. A victim of abuse who tends towards the "fight" response may not recognize themselves in liturgy that reinforces the image of a model victim. Additionally, the model of the perfect victim can benefit abusers, allowing them to seize on moments when their victims fight back to justify their own behaviour, reversing blame on the victim.

The sample liturgy may create a victim-blaming narrative in another way, too. It is not necessarily freeing when feelings of guilt, shame, and other forms of emotional distress are implied to be sinful because they prevent someone from experiencing God's love and grace. In her article about confession in the Uniting Church Australia, Annie Brophy points out that this approach, common in feminist liturgical offerings, still implies that the victim is the problem, trapped by the sin of not standing up for themselves.[3] Given this issue, Brophy argues that it may be best to eschew confession

3 Annie Brophy, "Hear My Cry, O God, Listen to My Prayer: Intersections Between Domestic Violence and Liturgy in the Prayer of Confession," *International Journal for the*

altogether, suggesting instead that a remembrance of baptism or a prayer of lament will better serve God's people, while communal confessions might be saved only for special occasions. This too is problematic.

To presume that a trauma survivor cannot enact harm in some other vector is to reduce them solely to victimhood, removing their moral agency. People experiencing abuse certainly may have acted in an unethical—sinful?—way outside the context of their abusive relationship. They may very well benefit spiritually and psychologically from a traditional confession and absolution formula to address the guilt they carry due to their own "small harms": the sins common to daily life. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of trauma and the way mental illness and trauma-influenced thought patterns can impact behaviour creates the possibility that victims may at some point victimize others—and that abusers may themselves have been victimized at some point. Awareness of this reality should trouble the comfortable and simplistic binary of "victim" and "abuser" as categories we place people into while we consider how best to offer both accountability and empathy in the liturgical context.

Excising the confession implies that no one in the room has sin to confess: We are all good people here in church.

This leads me to another concern about the avoidance of sin-talk. Excising the confession implies that no one in the room has sin to confess: We are all good people here in church. There is no one here who has acted abusively, violently, or maliciously. We are all good Christians here. The fact that this is not true should be obvious. Brophy herself acknowledges this reality, reminding readers that women experiencing intimate partner violence "might actually be seated next to their abuser in church every Sunday."[4] In one disconcerting example of how possible such an occurrence is, John Rempel, the last-named contributor to the "Ritual of Harm or Healing?" resource, was found guilty in 2020 of historic instances of sexual misconduct during his time as chaplain at Conrad Grebel University College.[5] Perpetrators of abuse are embedded in our communities, and we cannot always tell who they are. Also among us are racists and misogynists, overpaid CEOs, corrupt cops, and everyday people who choose to harm one another in smaller ways all the time. If that is so, why should the response of the church be an elimination of liturgy identifying and condemning sin,

Study of the Christian Church) 23, no. 4 (2023): 431–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742 25X.2023.2270306.

4 Brophy, "Hear My Cry," 439.

5 Mennonite Abuse Prevention, "John D Rempel," https://mennoniteabuseprevention.org/case/john-d-rempel/.

or abstracting sin away to a lack of love or a systemic issue? Brophy suggests that an effort of condemnation and an effort to convict sinners in our midst are beyond what the liturgy can or should do. But if it is not the work of the church to identify the distinctions between evil and good and call God's people into the latter, then what *is* the church's work?

Our response to issues of misappropriated guilt and shame should not be an abstraction of sin, nor the removal of confessions. I wonder if the church would benefit more from greater specificity, acknowledging sins of both commission and omission, and clarifying which activities we have in mind when we say we contribute to "systemic" sins. Perhaps the issue with sin-talk in the church is not that we have used the terms "sin" and "evil," but that we have erred in our naming: We have called that which is good *evil*, and that which is evil *good*, and it's about time we name things correctly. Additionally, congregations need to identify how sin is expressed in our everyday habits and actions—the small harms that seem to be an inevitability of the human condition. When only behaviours that result in extreme harm are described or acknowledged in how we talk about sin, it reduces opportunities for people to identify and correct habits of harm within ourselves and our close communities of accountability. This creates opportunities for escalating behaviours of harm, since it often means that concerns and correction will not be raised until they reach an extreme.

I plan to participate in faith communities that engage with the theological concepts of sin and evil as we acknowledge their presence in ourselves, our communities, and our world and seek to institute mechanisms of accountability and survivor-centred restorative justice. In this process, we must acknowledge that there will always be people in our midst who choose to harm others, and we must consider how we will respond when harm is revealed, whose side we will take, and what taking a side looks like when we live in a theological paradigm that claims no one is beyond redemption. But what does redemption look like?

"Ritual of Harm or Healing?" identifies some of the failures that persist in our current model of redemption and reconciliation within church communities. The idea that one must first forgive in order to be forgiven by God has some biblical basis, but the way this scriptural mandate has been interpreted and foisted upon those who have experienced intentional violence has done enormous harm. Forgiveness has also been tied to a vision of reconciliation that should not be expected between victims and those who perpetrate chronic and/or extreme harm. I agree wholeheartedly that this must be corrected, and great care is necessary in how we preach, teach, and talk about the call to interpersonal forgiveness and enemy-love in the life of Christian faith. This is in part why communities must provide a thoughtful articulation of sin, as I argued for above, and appropriately

identify evil and God's opposition to it. Having meaningful teachings around right and wrong can help us incorporate righteous anger and grief into our ministry offerings.

The imprecatory Psalms are difficult reading for nice twenty-first-century Christians—but their inclusion in the canon speaks to the fact that our expansive God cares for us, walks with us through difficulty, and makes holy even our most disquieting human emotions as we bring them before our Lord. God, too, is distressed, and even angered, by violence against human beings and our bodies. Watching people express rage—and experiencing it ourselves—is deeply uncomfortable. Still, we must learn to do so and create spaces where it is allowed, welcomed, and even encouraged, as we express rage at others, at God, perhaps even at ourselves, for the horrors of the human condition. We must also correctly place the onus of responsibility for sin's correction and for reconciliation. God is reconciling all things to Godself, and one day we will be reconnected by the slow but undefeatable gravitational pull of love. Along the way, God's commitment that "vengeance is mine" tells us that, even in a universalist framework, there *will* be some form of accountability, restitution, and resolution to the raw pathways of pain between us in the afterlife, the eschaton, or the cosmic flow of energy—whichever image you feel able to embrace. Accountability is part of reconciliation, even in God's paradigm, and it must be part of ours too.

The stories we tell about Jesus's life and death matter tremendously to our understanding of our own ethical callings. Articulating Jesus's suffering and death as both necessary and unambiguously good can teach a model of faithful life that leaves people feeling an ethical imperative to remain in situations that harm them. Penal substitutionary atonement theory is particularly implicated in both how it frames our relationship with God and how it suggests we are meant to interact with one another. When trying to avoid the issues with penal substitutionary atonement theory, many people reach instead for a moral influence theory of the cross, with Christ demonstrating the way of peace while humanity inflicts violence out of our baser nature. However, the self-sacrificing problem is, if anything, exacerbated by an un-deified Christ. If Jesus's death is just part of being a good person who lives an ethical life, that actually increases the rhetorical pressure to mimic this action. I say that neither option ultimately serves us.

Jesus's suffering and dying are fundamentally unlike our own because Jesus, as a member of the Godhead, was able to make a fully informed and consensual decision to fully experience the joys and miseries of life and death. In doing so, he transformed the cosmos in a way no other person could or can. Our own misery and suffering cannot intervene for people in the same way, and therefore, the ethical framework of our suffering is different. It is the work of twenty-first-century theologians to address the need for

When we over-rely on avoidant strategies in trauma-informed liturgy, we imply that it is inappropriate for worshippers to experience or witness strong emotion, distress, or stress reactions in a public worship setting.

fresh articulations of the scandal of the cross—articulations that acknowledge Jesus's interventionist action not as a model of how we should live (although we are called to embrace Jesus's example of ethical living) but as an action taken from a position of unimaginable power and knowledge that the rest of us do not have.

In a departure from the theological content of "Rituals of Harm or Healing?," I also wish to challenge the resource's recommendations regarding physical touch. Touch, especially when it is unexpected, can be a source of significant distress for people who have experienced physical or sexual abuse. I agree with the authors that churches have a duty to provide spaces where people do not have to experience unwanted touch or violations of consent. Some trauma-informed resources, therefore, recommend encouraging handshakes, fist bumps, or high-fives, and keeping hugs as an "ask only" option. "Ritual of Harm or Healing?" goes further, recommending that touching be disallowed during passing of the peace, and instead encouraging the use of a hand gesture as an offering of recognition and connection. To me, this is a profound example of how trauma-informed liturgy at times relies on avoidance rather than on approaching the liturgy in an additive and generative way.

"Rituals of Harm or Healing?" recommends offering the option of anointing if a community insists that physical touch is necessary—a recommendation I find concerning since it both institutionalizes the comfort of physical touch and limits its offering to a few formally selected people. Both options represent a profound missed opportunity for the practice of consent. I was shocked at the justification used to avoid simply asking people if they were open to being touched: "Because discerning whether touch is welcome during the peace greeting could be cumbersome or awkward."[6] Yes, it may be cumbersome or awkward to ask for consent, and it will likely be difficult for some people to say no at first—or respond well to a no. This is why it's something we should be practicing in the relative safety of communal liturgy.

When we over-rely on avoidant strategies in trauma-informed liturgy, we imply that it is inappropriate for worshippers to experience or witness strong emotion, distress, or stress reactions in a public worship setting. Although well-intentioned, avoidant strategies ultimately serve dominant cultural groups in public worship, maintaining norms of decency, appropriateness,

6 Scarsella et al., "Lord's Supper," 36.

politeness, and stoicism commonly valued in white, Western public worship. The reinforcement of these norms has the potential to further marginalize people with mental health conditions, neurodivergence, physical disability, non-Western cultural backgrounds, and other non-normative experiences.

While their stated goal is to avoid harm, avoidance strategies in trauma-informed liturgy flatten, overlook, or push out of communal life and into the privacy of therapy the diverse needs and expressions of emotion within our churches. Avoidance strategies also allow perpetrators to avoid potential shame and to maintain their appearance of decency even as harm begins to escalate. Given that the trauma-sensitive approach is intended to serve the most vulnerable and marginal in our midst, this lack of intersectional awareness should be of key concern.

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At-one-ment and attachment

Spiritual and psychological lessons on repair

Rachel Miller Jacobs

I'm convinced that small painful things can be both moral (wrong) and non-moral (painful without being wrong). And I'm also convinced that different kinds of repair are needed for these different kinds of experiences.

Small moral wrongs include what some would call white lies, failing to keep minor promises, insults, cheating at games, et cetera. We repair these kinds of small wrongs with an apology followed by better performance in the future. I'm partial to an apology rubric that I learned from an early childhood educator: "I'm sorry I . . . This was wrong because . . . In the future I will . . . Can you please forgive me?" If you think this is an easy rubric to inhabit, think again: Its specificity requires us to name accurately the way(s) we went wrong, be explicit about our plans to do better, and ask for forgiveness. While some people criticize this request for forgiveness as manipulative or premature, what I appreciate about it is that it reinforces that we have, in fact, done wrong: that we need to be forgiven.

But how do we repair painful things that aren't wrong? What do we do with the interpersonal pain that results from misunderstandings and miscommunications, cultural differences, personality traits, and getting our buttons pushed? In this case, the task isn't to make right what went wrong. An apology is not the right remedy. We need something else, something that helps us to *feel* and *experience* again the "rightness" between us.

Drawing on the various meanings of the New Testament words translated as "forgiveness" and "forgive," and on an atonement metaphor from the fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich, I suggest an enlarged understanding of forgiveness that allows us to make "right" what has gone "wrong."

New Testament contributions to thinking about "forgiveness"

The Greek word ἀφίημι (*aphiemi*) is used 187 times in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament combined. Most of these uses are in the synoptic gospels; the fact that various forms of the word *aphiemi* are used so much in these gospels suggests that there may be something characteristically Jesus-y about *aphiemi*-ing.

Aphiemi is always translated as "forgive" when something is named as a sin. On a few occasions, *aphiemi* is translated as "forgive" in the context of financial debts. Most of the time, however, *aphiemi* is translated in a variety of ways that are not specifically about forgiveness as we understand it, including "allow," "abandon," "cancel," "desert," "permit," "let," "leave," "send away," and "release." This range of meanings offers us more than one way to think about and remediate painful experiences.

Theological contributions to thinking about "forgiveness"

When she lay near death because of a severe illness, mystic and hermit Julian was given sixteen "showings" (visions). The thirteenth vision concerned a master and a servant.[1] In it, the master sends the servant off to do a job. The servant goes, but goes so eagerly, so quickly, that he falls into a ravine and gets hurt. Stuck in the gorge, he despairs because he can't get his job done. Julian looks closely: Can she blame the servant? Does his master? No. Not only does the master not condemn his servant, but he also takes pity on him, rewarding him even more than if he hadn't fallen into that ravine.

In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian records both her visions and twenty years' worth of her reflections on them. And what becomes clear for her is that God looks on sinners with love, not anger. While many atonement metaphors are built on the premise that humans ought to satisfy God, Julian's reflections make the exact opposite point. In her ninth revelation, Jesus looks at her and asks, "Are you pleased?" "Yes," she answers. Then he says, "If you are pleased, then I am pleased."[2] In Julian's view, Jesus became human not to die for our sins, but to ensure we were satisfied.[3] God doesn't need to be assuaged. We do.

Julian understands the gap between humans and God as the reality of human imperfection rather than defiance of God's will. For her, the fall is not primarily about willful disobedience. Instead, sin is something we suffer from regardless of the extent to which we're guilty.[4] Julian points out that part of what contributes to our suffering and separation from God is our focus: We are mesmerized by how imperfect we are rather than trusting God's love. We live in hells of our own making.

Julian's thinking rings true with what some contemporary psychologists have suggested: namely, that our problem is the perception of harm as

1 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. Grace Warrack (Methuen, 1901), 107–9 (the Thirteenth Revelation), Project Gutenberg, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm#THE_THIRTEENTH_REVELATION.

2 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 47 (the Twelfth Revelation).

3 Jane McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life: Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement* (Wipf & Stock, 2009), 21.

4 McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life*, 17.

harm. It's this perception rather than the need to make a moral judgment about the harm that "triggers the possibility that one might respond with forgiveness."[5] Julian's focus on the relationship between Lord and servant draws our attention to the deep human need for connection and to the ways the shaking of that attachment is an experience of what I'm calling non-moral harm.

Pain and disconnection

Disconnection is part of what makes relational pain painful: Humans are built for connection. This seems so obvious that it's barely worth mentioning; I'm emphasizing it, however, because in practice so little of our energy goes to noticing and tending to disconnection.

We have several tried-and-true strategies for dealing with the pain of disconnection. The first is to blame. We can blame others: "Whatever has happened is their fault, and they should fix it right now." Sometimes this is accurate—they did do something. But not always. We can blame ourselves: "Of course I messed up; I always mess up, and I just got what I deserved." Sometimes, and perhaps usually, we did something less than skillfully. Yet blame is a blunt instrument, and few people react positively to it. Blaming ourselves or others will likely deepen disconnection rather than build connection and establish a fruitful way forward.

A second tack to deal with the pain of disconnection is to minimize or deny the harm we've experienced. "That wasn't such a big deal," we say to ourselves. "Just suck it up and move on." Or we numb ourselves with Netflix binges, stress eating, or strenuous physical activity. Denial is an effective short-term way to get a little rest and marshal our resources for work that's beyond us right now; it's okay to take a break by watching a movie (or two), having a piece of chocolate, or going on a long walk. But if we only use this strategy, denial disconnects us from our actual lives.

We minimize someone else's painful experience by emphasizing that it's no big deal and telling them they should just get over it. Or we avoid the pain of acknowledging or witnessing the pain they're reporting by moving into defensiveness: "This has nothing to do with me" or "It's not my fault." We can also move into fix-it mode, offering advice or suggesting solutions without them being requested. While advice-giving or solution-seeking seem like helping behaviors, they're often ways of distancing ourselves rather than drawing closer.

The examples above help us marinate in the reality that part of what makes pain painful is that it's an experience of disconnection. In the case of small moral painful experiences, disconnection is one result of

5 James K. Voiss, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness: Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Explorations* (Liturgical Press, 2015), 99.

In the case of small non-moral painful experiences, disconnection isn't just a part of the harm; disconnection (or our fear of it) is the whole thing. Though nobody has done anything wrong . . . things still aren't "right."

the wrongdoing: The broken promise, the denigrating comment, or the lack of truthfulness shakes our confidence and trust in each other. Re-establishing connection closes the loop on making things right.

In the case of small non-moral painful experiences, however, disconnection isn't just a part of the harm; disconnection (or our fear of it) is the whole thing. Though nobody has done anything wrong, though nothing needs to be apologized for, things still aren't "right." So while re-establishing connection is useful in repairing small moral painful experiences, fixing small non-moral ones is all about finding ways to reconnect, reaffirm, or strengthen our shaken connection(s). And part of this reconnection involves being willing to see and appreciate as real the pain that we and others are experiencing.

Re-establishing connection as a key practice of repairing non-moral painful experiences

One of the principles that underlies this article is what developmental psychologist Per Granqvist calls "relationalism": the idea that the human mind is not only "fundamentally sculpted by relational experiences" but also that it "almost unceasingly . . . keeps searching for relational partners."[6] One of the significant ways in which relationalism has been theorized and researched is through attachment theory, which grew out of the work of the twentieth-century British psychologist, psychoanalyst, and psychiatrist John Bowlby.[7] Bowlby's early research concluded that human connection, particularly the attachment between infants and their primary caregiver(s), was as important as nutrition for children's growth and well-being. While Bowlby's research focused on the relationship between the children and caregivers, he believed that attachment characterized human experience throughout the life cycle.

If we accept that disconnection is the entirety of a non-moral painful experience, approaching attachment disruptions in search of confessions and apologies will both make things worse and fail to address our real needs. Psychologist Sue Johnson puts it even more strongly: Unless we address our

6 Per Granqvist, *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality: A Wider View* (Guilford Press, 2020), 7.

7 John Bowlby, *Attachment*, 2nd ed. (Basic Books, 1982).

"fundamental need" for connection, all other communication techniques are "misguided and ineffectual."[8]

Here's an example of a non-moral painful experience, one caused primarily and obviously by (fear of) disconnection. One time, my honey came home at midnight when I was expecting him at 9:30 p.m. I'd eaten supper, read a book, gone to bed, and fallen asleep; when I woke up near eleven to discover I was still the only one in bed, I was concerned: What had happened? I called and called and called, and each increasingly frantic call went straight to voicemail. By midnight, I was beside myself, sure he'd been in a terrible car accident or was maybe even dead. Why else wouldn't he be home when he said he'd be?

Approaching attachment disruptions in search of confessions and apologies will both make things worse and fail to address our real needs.

Greeting his post-midnight arrival with a demand for an apology wouldn't have made any sense to him. The professional association dinner had run longer than expected, and everyone had been told to turn off their phones so that the program wouldn't be interrupted. Turning off your phone when asked isn't wrong, and neither is attending a dinner and program that lasts longer than you expect. Offering me an "apology lite" ("Sorry I didn't text; I figured you'd be asleep") or telling me I was needlessly worried as he walked in the door ("See? I'm fine!") wouldn't have helped me. I was glad he was all right, and I wanted a text the next time an event ran substantially longer than expected, yet I didn't need moral repair since what had happened wasn't a moral wrong. But I needed something. I needed him to see my fear and address it. I needed him to acknowledge how much he meant to me and to assure me of how much I meant to him. I needed re-connection.

If, as I'm suggesting, the entirety of non-moral painful experiences consists of our experience of pain and our fear that our pain signals disconnection, the remedy is to acknowledge that pain and re-establish or re-affirm our connection.

The connection conversation

Biblically, reconnecting with important others "forgives" by *sending away* blame and guilt and *canceling* any demands for repentance. It also helps us *release* the stories we're telling, since they reveal more about our fears and our needs than about anyone's character or behavior.

8 Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Your Guide to the Most Successful Approach to Building Loving Relationships* (Piatkus, 2011), 34.

Theologically, reconnecting with important others affirms the reality revealed by Julian's atonement story: that at-one-ment is also, and always, about the deep bodily knowledge that all is indeed well, that our connection with God is trustworthy and dependable, and that our connection with many important others is too.

Yet making ourselves vulnerable by naming our need for connection and our fear of disconnection can be both difficult and frightening. What if our request for reconnection is refused? What if our vulnerability is used against us? Because both are possibilities, it's important to weigh the relationship context, the degree to which this person can offer us what we're asking for, and our current resilience and energy. I may be willing to invest time and energy in a conversation with someone I don't know very well as a way of practicing my skill—or I may decide it's not worth it. The same could happen in intimate relationships: This may not be the right time, the right issue, or the right moment for a connection conversation. Or perhaps, for whatever combination of reasons, it is.

Re-establishing connection with someone with whom we've experienced a painful experience is also tricky because these experiences are difficult to capture in words and mean something to us based on variables that may be hard for another person to grasp. While we may have some agreement about what counts as a small moral wrong, non-moral painful experiences are so person- and situation-specific that the other person may genuinely struggle to understand why whatever-it-is matters to us, and why it matters to us to that degree. So finding a way to communicate our experience without descending into blame is especially important.

To help us do this, I'm suggesting a simple reconnection rubric that's easy to remember when we're under stress. Though this rubric doesn't guarantee success, it gives us a place to start and some guideposts to help us along the way. We can keep returning to it until we're satisfied that it's done its job or at least done the job it can do right now. It has four steps: "The story I'm telling is . . . What's the story you're telling/the experience from your end of things? . . . Here's what I need . . . What do you need?"[9]

Because non-moral painful experiences are all about the story we're telling and why that story affects us the way it does, this re-connection "rubric" is more an open-ended conversation starter than an actual rubric. And because what bothers us may be opaque to the other person, or not land for them with the seriousness it does for us, our connecting conversation may involve significant storytelling, more detail, and more patience than a brief, pointed apology to get the job done.

9 "The story I'm telling" comes from Brené Brown, who suggests clarifying "The story I'm making up" in both *Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (Random House, 2017) and *Dare To Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (Random House, 2018).

"When I woke up, saw the time, and found your place in bed empty beside me, the story I was telling myself was that something terrible had happened to you. You like to go to bed just as early as I do, and you always let me know when something's come up. So all I could imagine was that you'd been killed in a terrible car accident. I felt paralyzed by grief, started worrying about telling the kids you'd died, and looked in horror at the huge gap your death would leave in every part of my life. You're so important to me; imagining that you were dead was devastating. I'm so glad you're here . . . and my body and emotions are still reeling from the fear of what might have happened. I need a long, long, long hug to reassure me that everything is okay."

This is what I wish I'd said when my darling came home late. What happened was that I was so frantic and shaken and in tears when he walked through the door that all I could manage were accusations disguised as questions: "Where were you?!" and "Why didn't you let me know?!" He offered his side of the story in a somewhat prickly way; he was blindsided by my reaction and wanted to distance himself from my accusations. His clarifications (an unexpectedly long event and a request to turn off phones) seem helpful in retrospect, though I didn't find them satisfying at the time. I think I requested a long hug, but we were both too ruffled to really relax into it. I never asked him what he needed from me, though if this circumstance were repeated, I hope I would.

It's relatively easy to come up with a good conversation script when you've had time to think about it or when the stakes are low(er), but a connecting conversation doesn't have to be perfect—it just has to get the ball rolling. A conversation that falls somewhere between the bad first draft I used with my honey (accusations framed as questions) and an articulate paragraph that helps the other person live inside your experience (my after-the-fact description of what it was like to be me that evening) is good enough. That good-enough midnight conversation could have gone something like this: "I freaked out when I woke up and you weren't here, because I couldn't think of any reason you'd be this late other than being dead. I know I'd make it on my own, but wow, did I panic thinking about *having to*. Don't say anything; just give me a super long hug."

Excerpt from *If You Think You've Been Wronged, You're Right* by Rachel Miller Jacobs © 2027 Fortress Press. Reprinted with permission.

About the author

Rachel Miller Jacobs is Associate Professor of Congregational Formation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. She is a daughter, sister, spouse, parent, in-law, and grandparent of five delightful grands. She teaches in the area of Christian formation and likes to garden, read cozy mysteries, and go tandem biking with her sweetie pie.

Traced hand prayer practice

Joanna Harader

Introduction

One of my struggles with small harms is that it is often not advisable—or even possible—to address them with the people involved. If I make a thoughtless, hurtful comment to an acquaintance, any repair work beyond a quick apology will most likely cause greater harm and discomfort. If a stranger drives their car through a puddle and splashes me with muddy water while I'm walking along the side of the road, I really don't want them to turn their car around and come back with a towel. That would be weird and potentially frightening.

Unaddressed small harms, whether we are perpetrators or victims, can fester and accumulate until they feel like a big spiritual burden.

Such unaddressed small harms, whether we are perpetrators or victims, can fester and accumulate until they feel like a big spiritual burden. So I invite you into this prayer practice not as a way of avoiding repair work that needs to happen with other people, but as a way of seeking discernment about any repair work that might be possible and finding peace with small harms that you cannot repair.

What you will need:

- Sheet of paper
- Pen or pencil
- Blue, red, and yellow colored pencils (Crayons or watercolors will also work.)

Opening prayer

God of elephants and ants,
God of oceans and creeks,
God of eternity and of this moment:
nothing is bigger than your power;
nothing is too small for your care.
I lay before you now these small harms,
when others have hurt me
and when I have hurt them.

Through your Holy Spirit
who covers the vastness of creation
and lives in each precious breath
guide the meditations of my heart
in this small moment and beyond
and beyond.
Amen.

Traced hand prayer practice

- Trace your hand on a piece of paper.
- Write a separate small harm in each finger (including your thumb).
    - These can be harms you have caused or harms against you. Simply write down the first ones the Spirit brings to your mind, no matter how long ago they took place or how you feel about them in the present moment.
- Next, take your colored pencils.
- For each finger, color it red if it was a harm against you. Color it yellow if it was a harm you caused. If it was a situation where you both caused and received harm, color it both red and yellow.
- Prayerfully consider each yellow finger—the harms you have caused.
    - If it is a harm you can take steps to repair, consider when and how you might take the first step. Pray for the Spirit's guidance and support.
    - If it is a harm you cannot repair, color over the yellow with blue as you pray for God to help you release that harm and find peace.
- Prayerfully consider each red finger—the harms against you.
    - If it is a harm you believe would be helpful to address with the perpetrator, consider when and how you might address it. Pray for the Spirit's guidance and support.
    - If it is a harm that, for whatever reason, you believe would not be helpful to address with the perpetrator, color over the red with the blue as you pray for God to help you release that harm and find peace.
- In the palm of the hand, write any reflections you have on the harms you have considered—perhaps how you hope to address them or what it feels like to release them to God.

I invite you into this prayer practice as a way of seeking discernment about any repair work that might be possible and finding peace with small harms that you cannot repair.

- Color the palm in with whatever colors you choose as you listen for the Spirit's response to your reflections.
- Around the outside of the hand, write a passage of scripture that encourages you in finding peace with these small harms. Some suggestions are below. You can simply write the passage out once, or you can repeat it several times, filling up the page around your hand.
  - I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother. (Ps 131:2, NRSVue)
  - For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. (Eccl 3:1)
  - From Christ's fullness we have all received grace upon grace. (John 1:16)
  - The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5:22–23)
  - God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1 John 4:16)
- Finally, place your hand inside its outline on the paper. Breathe deeply as you welcome God's comfort and healing.

Closing prayer

God of whales and minnows,
God of stars and fireflies,
God of eternity and of this moment:
I give thanks that nothing is bigger than your power,
and nothing is too small for your care.
Receive all that I have offered in this sacred time.
Through your Holy Spirit
who covers the vastness of creation
and lives in each precious breath
lead me forward in kindness
and give me peace.
Amen.

About the author

Rev. Joanna Harader serves as co-pastor of Bethel College Mennonite Church in North Newton, KS. She is the author of *Expecting Emmanuel* (2022) and *Prone to Wander* (2025), devotionals published by Herald Press.

A biblical text I draw on for repairing small harms

Brief essays by church leaders

The contributors for this collection of brief essays received this prompt:

> What is a biblical text that comes to mind when you think of repairing harm, especially small harm? After summarizing or quoting the text, offer a brief commentary on why it matters to you and perhaps how it's helped you deal with the small hurts you've experienced or caused in family, neighborhood, town, or congregational life.

Annika Krause
Pastor, Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal, Montreal, QC

Romans 12:1–18: Loving one another with mutual affection.

When I first started as a pastor, I felt a lot of anxiety about making mistakes. After all, what do you do when you accidentally trigger someone you are trying to comfort? At such times, it is essential to make space for everyone to express their feelings, to "renew our minds" (Rom 12:2) and not start from a place of arrogance or defensiveness. This passage reminds me of how much of a difference my mindset makes when I deal with conflict. We must speak with grace and understanding in order to live in harmony with one another, as God calls us to do. Casting a light on conflict and naming it encourages us to "live peaceably with all" (Rom 12:18).

Not too long ago, an older man in the congregation was traveling abroad alone. His credit card stopped working, so he emailed me and others a request to pay on his behalf. It looked like a scam! We asked him to call us. We didn't get responses, but new email requests kept coming in.

The next day, someone helped him make a call. He and I had a long conversation. I started by acknowledging how frustrating the experience must have been for him. He was understandably flustered. To him, it seemed we were not helping him when he needed it most. He had space to express his feelings, and then I had a chance to explain our perspective. In the end, we each felt heard and responded graciously to one another in genuine love. Thanks be to God!

Alaina Dobkowski
Pastor, Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship, Grand Rapids, MI

> *"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."*
>
> *Galatians 5:22–23, NRSVue*

As we walked around Reeds Lake one sunny afternoon six years ago, Susan and I were deep in discussion about the Holy Spirit's guidance of the house church we were co-leading. She pointed us to Galatians 5.

"How will we know if we are following the Spirit?" she asked aloud, before pausing. "We'll know by the fruit."

Since that day, this passage has not only guided our leadership but has also guided me through challenging moments, big and small.

As a parent of small children, my patience can wear thin. My children's disregard for my feelings can really agitate me. When frustrated (on my best days), I ask myself, before reacting, "What will the fruit of this moment be?" Responding in frustration typically yields fruit I'm not proud of, while a thoughtful conversation, once emotions have settled, guides us toward the fruit of the Spirit.

As a pastor and organizer, I've learned that even in the best congregation and community work, we are always disappointing one another: a missed email goes unanswered, a task is dropped, a misunderstanding occurs, or a project does not move forward quickly enough. When I'm called out on a harm I've committed or when I'm on the receiving end, I am reminded of the Spirit's guidance. I take a deep breath. I ask, what will the fruit of this moment be?

I give thanks to the Holy Spirit and her presence, guidance, and wisdom. How will we know if we are following her as we navigate relationships and the cycles of harm and repair?

We'll know by the fruit.

Al Rempel
Associate Executive Minister, Mennonite Church Canada, St. Catharines, ON

Luke 10:38–42

In this text, Martha is busy preparing for Jesus while Mary sits and listens. When Martha asks for help, Jesus gently reminds her that while many things matter, Mary has chosen what is most important.

I've often felt for Martha. The practical work she does is necessary, yet it seems to be overlooked. In many ways, her experience reflects the reality of congregational leadership. Leaders attend to many details and, along the way, make decisions for the good of the whole—sometimes setting boundaries or choosing paths that not everyone will agree with. Living in that tension is not easy.

The small harms leaders experience often arise from their own inner voice. Those asked to make decisions rarely do so lightly or without deep care. Each choice brings its own measure of self-questioning and doubt. Even when decisions prove imperfect—as all human decisions will—it is seldom out of indifference. More often, leaders are faithfully navigating the tension between care for individuals and responsibility for the whole. Many would much rather sit at Jesus's feet, letting someone else look after the details.

Perhaps this story invites us to see both sisters more fully. Mary's attentiveness matters—but so does Martha's faithful work. In that light, faithful leaders might also learn to meet themselves with a bit more gentleness.

To all congregational leaders: thank you. Your care, your courage, and your willingness to serve in complex spaces are deeply valued.

Brenda Sawatsky Paetkau
Pastor, Eighth Street Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN

Philippians 2:6–11

When I am troubled, I turn to the Christ hymn in Philippians 2. I read the entire hymn, but I especially meditate on this phrase from verse 7: Jesus "emptied himself."

I used to think Jesus accomplished some form of being actually "empty." Now I think that whatever arose in Jesus, as it constantly did, he kept handing it over to God. I'm trying to simply trust that whatever I am holding—emotions, thoughts, revenge, pity, et cetera—my task is to tell the truth about those things and hand them into God's enormous heart, hopefully *before* taking any action. If I only remember to meditate *after* I've taken action, this verse might prompt me to seek further repair, whether it's something I still need to ask for from another or something I still need to offer them.

This practice requires trusting God's *aliveness* to the extent that everything can be handed over. Those things are not gone from me, but they are no longer carried singularly by me. I have chosen to seek a greater wisdom in the handing over, in the constant "emptying" of all that appears.

Joel Beachy
Pastor, East Union Mennonite Church, Kalona, IA

> *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."*
>
> *James 1:19–20, NIV*

"Death by a thousand cuts" is a gruesome image of attrition. It has us imagine the slow deterioration of something that was once whole and strong. Relationships sometimes die a slow death when careless words, misguided assumptions, and impatience are introduced. Our words have power, and we sometimes use them mindlessly. The result can be harm that tears apart relationships that took years to form.

We are often challenged in our relationships to build and maintain trust. Doing this well requires not only transparency in our communication but also listening well, avoiding assumptions about others' motives, choosing words carefully, maintaining confidence, asking clarifying questions, and addressing conflict directly.

The author of the book of James recommends that we take care when we communicate with one another, doing so in ways that are life-giving and that reflect God's goodness. And the reality is that even thoughtful communication will fail us from time to time. Jesus suggests that we are to be ready for this eventuality. When we hurt one another, even unintentionally, we must reconcile with one another: make things right with each other. Jesus describes how a faithful person goes to the altar of God to offer a gift, but then remembers that they have a conflict with a sibling in Christ. Jesus says we must first go and be reconciled with the other. Then we will be ready to offer our gifts to God. Right relationships with others are integral to our right relationship with God.

Marilyn Rudy-Froese
Leadership Minister, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, Kitchener, ON

> *"Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'"*
>
> *Mark 12:29–31, NRSVue*

This text that I carry with me has its roots in the Old Testament and is quoted by Jesus when a scribe asks him about the greatest commandment. It helps me to see others as God's beloved and to remember that I am also God's beloved. As I breathe in God's love for me, I can breathe out God's love for the person who is annoying me, knowing that it sometimes takes everything I have—my whole being—to let go of anger, resentment, or hurt, and live into forgiveness and love. This text helps me choose grace when I don't feel gracious toward the person who has cut me off in traffic or who has sent me a harsh email. It also helps me choose grace for myself when I know my actions or words have inadvertently harmed someone else. Loving God and neighbor as I love myself reminds me that we are all loved by the one God, whose love helps me extend love to others and myself, however imperfectly.

Matthew Bailey-Dick
Pastor, Wellesley Mennonite Church, Wellesley, ON

> *"Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss each other."*
>
> *Psalm 85:10, NRSV*

I've always been a strong believer in "chemistry": the dynamic emerging from my interaction with Person #1 being different than the dynamic with Person #2. This is why I feel both encouraged and niggled by the words of Psalm 85:10.

Some years ago, John Paul Lederach caught my attention by showing how the Psalmist's "place of encounter" or "kiss" between love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace could generate new possibilities in the world of conflict transformation. The verse could almost serve as the preface to a peacebuilding manifesto!

More personally, when my spouse and I work through conflict, we often use relationship-building tools from counselors such as Julie Schwartz Gottman and John Gottman, who advise couples to "turn toward each other" and to follow specific steps for repair after experiences of hurt or disharmony. When I choose defensiveness as part of the chemistry between the two of us, I am not arriving at the "place of encounter" in a helpful way. When I choose a posture of listening or curiosity, I begin to contribute toward repair. Psalm 85:10 offers me spiritual encouragement as I use the tried-and-true Gottman resources.

The niggling comes when I reflect on how chemistry always changes, even with the same person! What will the place of encounter look like this time? What will I give to the chemistry today? "The Lord will give what is good" (Ps 85:12).

Melissa Atchison
Pastor, Manhattan Mennonite Church, Manhattan, KS

> *"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid."*
>
> *John 14:27, CEB*

How the world creates a facsimile of peace in my day-to-day context often sounds like, "You be you. I'll be me." This kind of peace implies that there's no point in working through the conflict.

In contrast, Jesus has given us his peace, a holistic *shalom* peace that challenges us to work through small harms in relationships instead of walking away. As someone who has learned about this better way toward peace in the second half of my life, I'm still a beginner and often feel afraid when I recognize the need to move toward reconciliation. That's when I remember that Jesus has given (and is actively giving, in real time!) his peace. This otherworldly true peace is a gift I can accept over and over. I use the courage that comes with it to go to the one with whom I have experienced harm. Fear not!

Micheline Ayitoma Ilonga
Congolese judge and peacebuilder, Indianapolis, IN, accompanying her husband who serves as pastor at First Mennonite Church, and assisting as their mother her two children who are in college

> *"Our Father who is in heaven, bring in your Kingdom, so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven. . . . don't lead me to temptation, but rescue me from the evil one."*
>
> *Matthew 6:9–10, 13, CEB*

Disagreement and conflict are normal and part of life. God is love, and he values relationships and is the perfecter of our faith and our healer. His reign over everything that concerns us always leads to a harmonious life and makes things right.

Recently, when faced with life's challenges or everyday negative impacts (the kind of hurt that may happen at home, at work, in church, or in the community), the prayer that the Lord Jesus Christ taught his disciples has been my reference point and foundation. It transforms and changes my thoughts as well as my walk with God and my interactions with the community, fostering a healthy relationship.

The Kingdom of God is peace, joy, patience, forgiveness: life as it is supposed to be. It is a reality in our lives when we believe and obey the words and deeds of Jesus Christ as his disciples. It is not just a future reality but also a present-day one. Jesus Christ announced and confirmed this when addressing the Pharisees on the subject, saying, "God's Kingdom is already among you" (Luke 17:20).

Thinking of God's cosmic plan for humanity and Jesus Christ's ultimate sacrifice on the cross, in any circumstance I may face, I pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit God reigns and takes the lead, taking control of the situation for peace to prevail. When he reigns, he delivers me and keeps me away from difficult situations that would undermine my faith. This attitude helps me grow in humility and forgiveness, and restrains me from seeking revenge.

Pratik Bagh
Pastor, Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, Elkhart, IN

> *"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."*
>
> *1 Peter 4:8, NIV*

First Peter instructs a diverse and nurturing community of witnesses of Christ to practice the art of covering sins as an aspect of love. These "sins" are the careless mistakes one makes in everyday life without realizing the harm they can cause others. Such harms might not require a formal apology, even though they are undoubtedly hurtful. Forgiving slight neglect, tiny lies, casually made promises, or even bad jokes can seem difficult, especially when the demand is to forgive all the time as Christians. To avoid overthinking, bitterness, or frustration, I find the idea of *covering over* very useful.

Sometimes good cooks confess to the guests that their food didn't turn out the way they wanted! Something unknowingly went wrong during the cooking process, so their food doesn't taste as good as they expected or wanted. For their part, guests can help out by adding a pinch of salt or using pickle or sauce to make the food taste better. Like good cooks, most loving people fail too! They, too, need others to show them grace and to Καλύπτει (cover over), which helps avoid responses like revenge or complaint and helps maintain healthy interpersonal relationships.

I understand Peter's phrase "multitude of sins" as multiple people experiencing a multitude of sins multiple times throughout their lives. So they must master the art of covering: recognizing the fault and covering over, knowing that the next day they might need their own sin covered. When our love for people includes occasionally covering their careless mistakes, we form a community that understands that we don't need to be perfect to be loved.

Richard Gehring
Pastor, Lombard Mennonite Church, Lombard, IL

> *"If anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise."*
>
> *Philippians 4:8, CEB*

Some years ago, I experienced a crisis of hope. In the face of personal disappointments and national trends, I found myself becoming increasingly cynical.

After prayerful discernment, I committed myself to a "Year of Hope." For a full year, I reflected daily on a Bible passage and an inspirational quotation from someone whose life bore witness to its truth. I sought to resist the tendency toward cynicism that threatened to lead me astray on my journey toward justice, love, and peace.

My theme verse for that year was Paul's encouragement to believers to set their minds on whatever is true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise. These words can sometimes be misused to encourage a Pollyanna-like denial of injustice, suffering, and violence. But as he writes from prison in Rome, I hear Paul calling us to see reality truthfully—not only the brokenness around us, but also the steadfast presence and faithfulness of God.

I continue to return to these words as I seek to remain focused on the hope and promise of God's Reign, not allowing the small harms I encounter along the way to distract me from the larger story of God's redeeming work in the world.

Ruth Boehm
Pastor, Faith Mennonite Church, Leamington, ON

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
For you shall go out in joy
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

Isaiah 55:8–13, NRSV

The day after our honeymoon, I realized I had a choice to make. The way my husband put the pots and pans away was not the way that I did. Our wedding scripture was fresh in my mind. *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord."* We chose this text because we don't look at things the same way. We usually start on opposite sides. We even put pots and pans away differently.

So I had to choose. Would I be irritated every time I put away a frying pan? Or would I remember that "your ways are not my ways" and let it go? I decided that a lifetime was a long time to be irritated about a small thing. So I took the non-essentials out of the cupboard and, for over thirty years, have not worried about where the cookware is placed.

This scripture verse has been so useful to us in our relationship, at work, and in parenting. When we step back and say, "Your ways are not my ways," it helps us gain perspective.

The best part about this text is verse 12. God promises that we shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. The joy we experience when we can let people be who they are and enjoy them for who they are is amazing. When we resolve conflict or put differences into perspective, we experience great peace and joy.

Forgiveness as life: A prayer

Mary Schertz

Holy and merciful God:

We know that you are both pure and compassionate and call us to be so, too.
We read this and we claim it and we confess our difficulty with it.
It sounds good on Sunday morning;
it sings, it preaches, we nod our heads, we say "amen."
But during the week, we muddle through our practice.
Sometimes we manage holy or loving;
sometimes, briefly, we manage a balance;
and often we just fall short on either count.

Grant us wisdom and patience and grace.
Wisdom to trust that the relationship in which this paradox lives is worth our lives.
Patience to keep coming back to try again.
Grace to return to forgiveness over and over
—throwing our unholy selves
into your warm and ever-open arms
that we might be released and also release.

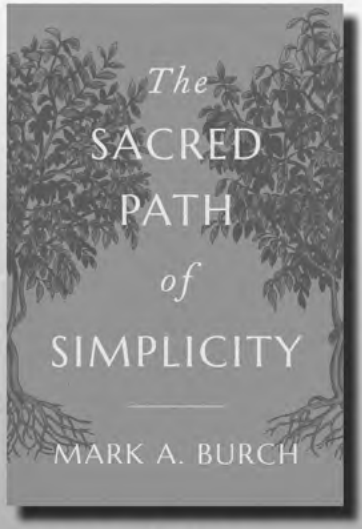
In Jesus' name,
Amen.

About the author

Mary Schertz is Professor Emerita of New Testament at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and the author of *Luke* in the Believers Church Bible Commentary series (Herald Press, 2023).

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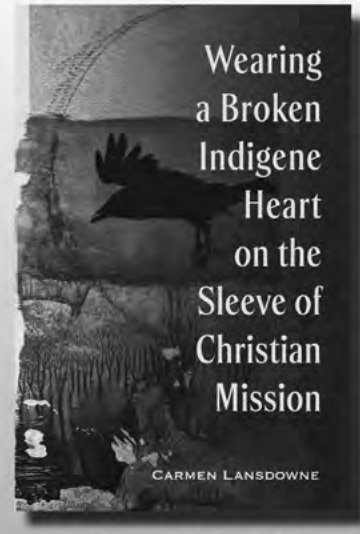
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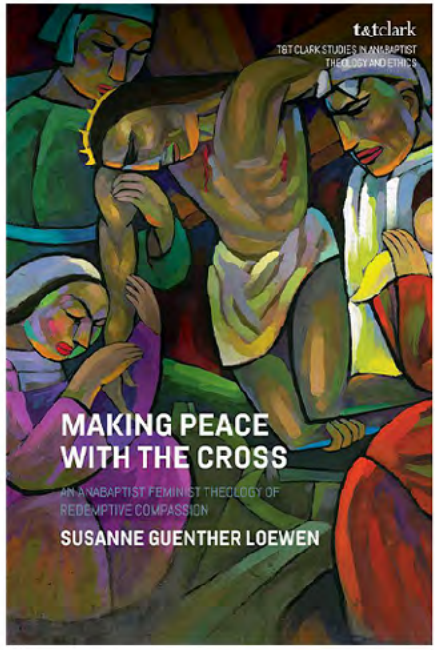
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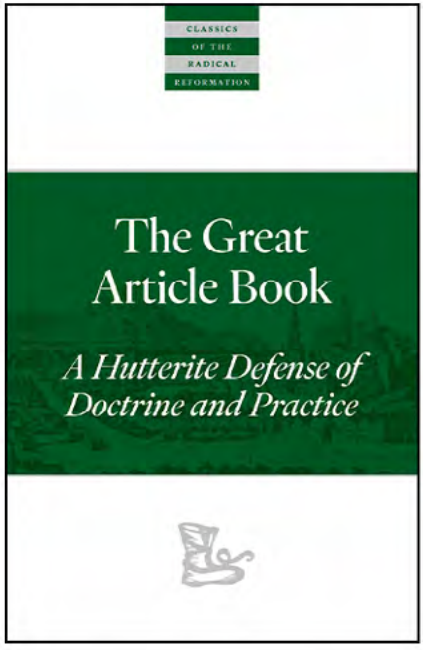


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