

## **Radical Faith in a Politically Correct, Religiously Correct World**

*As I sit down to write this morning, I am reveling in a typical spring day in Seattle, which means I am reveling in shades of gray. The cloudy sky reflects a bright gray, which is not an oxymoron if you live here. There is softness to everything and I don't have to squint. Even the trees conduct a warm grayness--just this week presenting bouquets of cream-colored buds. The water of Puget Sound is more of a steely gray, and so are the salmon and oysters and mussels that live in it. The wind blows and its coolness makes even my face a little paler, but I like the feel of the fresh air on my skin. Of course, it is also spring as I write and a few miles to the north dazzling fields of tulips and daffodils are having the last word about red and purple and yellow.*

*Personally, my values, like yours, are vivid colors. I believe that God presented himself as a person, and not as an earthquake or a moonbeam. I believe that broken human lives change more because of relationship than because of mandate. I am certain of the impossibility and of the unsavoriness of trying to control another human being's soul. And I believe that most people I meet are bearers of gifts for me.*

*Maybe it's a paradox that these vivid values give me a taste for grayness, for things I'm uncertain about and cannot control. Like those who revel in Seattle's spring, those who long to connect with the hearts and minds of other people, and the ways and means of other cultures must stand, with their vivid colors, in a shower of soft gray shades. Encountering people, in the way of Jesus Christ, starts with noticing and respecting what is real, right here and right now, in immediate emotions and circumstances. The problem for us is that human reality, the right-here-and-right-now, can also be messy and unsettling. "Real" is an untidy mix of black, white and lots of gray, of conflicting values, of traditional and new, of plenty and want, of good and bad, of dilemmas sprouting from countless personal issues, preferences, orientations and root systems. And sometimes I think human tolerance for real human complexity--make that real human messiness--calls for more grace than is humanly possible.*

*For me, staying engaged as a person of faith with my increasingly diverse American culture is an invitation to trust the example of Jesus. Problem is, social debate around here is getting more and more combative--and we Christians aren't helping matters much.*

*Advocates of political correctness barricade themselves with weapons of legislation and litigation, media moves and money. ACLU lawyers, social and environmental activists stare sullenly at an opposing fortress where the equally belligerent forces of religious correctness have co-opted the word "Christian" as the banner for their own package deal of causes and threats. The religiously correct angrily fire back with their own legislation and litigation, media moves and money raised to "win back" their culture.*

*Like a spectator at a tennis match, I stand in the middle, noticing when a good point flies over but frustrated about the lost opportunities for more life-giving engagement. Resistance is always full of information. Instead, I hear both camps demanding their own version of what should be, while "horribilizing" the other. I've noticed that most in the politically correct fort blame their extreme*

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*measures on religiously correct Christians, who in turn blame them. Whatever. Like gangs in business suits, each group insists on owning turf, alleging discrimination, defining rigid terms, determining their own ideal image of how others should act, and shouting an overblown sense of how much public control they deserve to assume. The angry debate seems to inspire each group to increasing self-righteousness. Rather than feeling drawn to listen to either army, I get a little bored. You too?*

*I smiled this week over the gentle words from Barbara Kingsolver's [The Bean Trees](#). "There may have been a world of things I didn't understand, but I knew when rudeness passed between one human being and another." Both the politically correct and the religiously correct of North America seem more concerned with entrenchment than with engagement, more called to power than to respect, busier with ultimatums than with dialogue, and more afraid than available.*

*Personally, a growing number of conversations like the following leads me to explore what I now see as an ethic, that is according to Webster, "a discipline dealing with...moral duty and obligation." As a follower of Jesus I am exploring this "ethic of engagement."*

### **On the Dock**

*It was one of those moon-bright autumn nights my parents' generation used to sing about, and seven of us were relaxing together on a dock on the waters of Puget Sound. Together we were embarking on two years of graduate study as aspiring marriage and family therapists, and I think each of us knew that this was the first of many conversations. As we talked, I imagined each of us measuring the mix of our backgrounds and faiths. Already we knew that learning to stay engaged with each other would be an important piece of our education and of our lives through the coming months. As our sense of safety grew, so did our candor.*

*"Patty. When I first met you, you really intimidated me."*

*The young woman's expression and tone of voice told me that I hadn't delivered the chilling effect she'd braced herself for. Now she invited my explanation.*

*On second thought, maybe she was only inviting conversation, but in that moment, as I looked at her and at the five other women and men sitting with us, I felt my heart bump and catch in a tangle of confusion and misunderstanding and disappointment.*

*I took a deep breath. Then, with a display of mock injury, I groaned, "Oomph. I'm sorry you felt that, Annie. Was it something I did--or something I said?"*

*"Oh neither!" Annie shrugged, letting me off the hook, "It was just that I'd heard you were a Christian."*

*Five other faces slowly swung in my direction. Their smiles were fading and they looked a little worried. I wondered what these bright, curious people had experienced in life that produced this*

reaction. Then I wondered if I was about to be sent to my room. This was like a big truck backing in between them and me and dumping a pile of unexplored assumptions, experiences, and prejudices.

More and more lately I experience conversations like that one in the moonlight last fall. To many of my friends, the title of "Christian" has become an inclusive adjective draping a vast but monolithic array of conservative political and social issues. Almost unbelievably, I find myself looking for new words to more clearly describe and define my faith, and myself. (Hmmm. Maybe "Jesus-esque?")

I asked my friends from the dock to read this article before it was first published several years ago. After all, they have helped me to explore the essence of my faith, with the style and the ethic of Jesus who stayed engaged with real questions and real issues and real brokenness.

### **The Ethic of Engagement**

William Shakespeare's Cassius observed, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves." And, few in any culture can disagree with him. Though the causes and effects and further causes of sin and brokenness are endlessly debated, it is significant to me that when he needed to describe the human condition, Jesus rejected the label favored by the religiously correct of his day. Their word, "sinful," focused mostly on behavior, but the concern of Jesus ran deeper than that. When he did use that word, it was usually when he deliberately mirrored back to religious leaders the shallowness of their understanding.

His own preferred term for broken human experience was simply, "lost." Whether theologically you regard "lost" as a cause or an effect, it was the word Jesus used most often, and it is the "fault" word he defined and described most completely.

In his teaching, the opposite of sin is not simply better behavior, or more compliance, or less discussion. "The opposite of sin is faith, and never virtue," writes Madeleine L'Engle, "We live in a world which believes that self-control can make us virtuous. But that's not how it works." She captures Christ's point. When Jesus placed a premium on people becoming "found," he reflected the simple but profound truth that as people chose connection, experiencing relationship and acceptance, their lives get better, and they get "found." This is as true theologically as it is psychologically.

In three parables from the fifteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus taught about being lost and found: The first story tells about a lost sheep which ignorantly wandered off; the second tells of a misplaced coin; while the third describes two lost sons, one, whose defiance leads to self-inflicted disaster and the other whose grumpy self-righteousness ends in his personal isolation. Each parable features not only something treasured and how it became lost, but also those who go looking: a seasoned shepherd who refuses to just cut his losses, a tenacious woman who relentlessly scours every corner of her house and then, in her success and happiness, throws a party, and finally a faithful father who waits and then chooses not to blame or shame, but to embrace and celebrate new connections with his children. Jesus seemed to be saying that people get lost and found in a variety of ways.

*My niece Sophie illustrated the point a few years ago. As a busy five-year-old, she was spending the day with her adoring grandparents, but all day long she'd been, as my mother would say, "a pill." Finally, as Sophie sat down for dinner, she looked at her plate, and evidently disappointed with what she saw there, began to sing, to the tune of Jesus Loves Me, "Damn-Damn-Damn-Damn, Damn-Damn-Damn..." Her grandmother, my mother, is an exceedingly gentle and patient woman. She looked Sophie in the eye and Sophie looked back. "Damn-Damn-Damn-Damn, Damn-Damn-Damn..." she sang on. My mother, wondering by now what a burst of laughter would do to her command of the situation bent down to face her granddaughter, "Sophie. What am I going to do with you?"*

*Sophie stopped singing, looked up, stuck her chin out and suggested, "You could hug me real tight."*

*Somehow, five-year-old Sophie already had figured one of the Big Rules of Life. Feeling a little lost, she needed engagement. She needed connection before, and maybe even instead, of correction. Change would follow.*

*None of my friends sitting on the dock last fall contests the existence of human brokenness. And all of us are learning, mostly from personal experience, that we who have been hurt or damaged in the context of relationship can move toward restoration by means of good and safe, and healing relationships. Jesus lived and taught that. The great psychologist, Carl Rogers, put it bluntly. He said that "significant positive personality change does not occur except in a relationship."*

*If, as Christians believe, Jesus really did present himself as the incarnate creator and designer and model of human personality, then his arrival as a person was the ultimate act of empathy, congruence and engagement: He brought love and connection first, then change and healing, even "rightness." God poses the first question recorded in the Bible to a troubled and defensive and lost human being. A question invited reflection as much as it invited reconnection. To alienated Adam, God said simply, "Where are you?"*

*Jesus preached that his purpose was to "seek and to save the lost." His mission was not a matter of ritual or performance or ultimatums, it was and is a matter of connection and restoration, of becoming "found." When he engaged in conversation and conflict, he began by noticing, respecting and talking about what is real, right here and right now. "Woman," he begins as a thirsty man with the outcast woman at the well of Samaria, "Would you give me a drink of water?"*

### **Eroding the Engagement**

*Sounds good, sounds clear, sounds engaging. But then I reflect back on all of those worried faces staring back at me that night on the dock. "Christian" to them does not feel good, or clear, or engaging. I was reminded of why, just yesterday when I heard a powerful Christian leader on the radio announced angrily that he is fighting a "civil war of values." He's mad and he wants his culture back. No wonder my friends are worried. No wonder they looked ready to duck. No wonder Jesus' ethic of engagement is a bit obscure to them.*

*No matter what my position on gun control or evolution or the death penalty or abortion or gay rights or affirmative action or national health care or immigration or sexism or outcome-based education or home schooling or nuclear energy or the right to die or..., as a follower of Jesus, my preeminent ethic, my expression of faith in this dramatically changing culture is to stay engaged and growing with the people in it. And in the rare moments when I must personally disengage with someone to protect my well-being, I want to do it in faith, without carrying evil and resentment in my heart.*

### **Engaged or Isolated?**

*I can think of three great reasons to not practice what I preach about staying engaged--each one learned from personal experience shortly after I became a Christian. Still in college at the time, my biggest problem, or so I thought, was all those people I had to keep living with.*

*In response to pain and confusion, they numbed themselves with drugs—chemical and otherwise. And when frustration about the future set in, they got cynical.*

*Some were obviously failing at life and relationships, some were not.*

*Some were just skeptics.*

*Sometimes I just didn't know what to do.*

*I quickly discovered some religiously "correct" reasons to become a religious hermit, removed from the real life. Being around all those skeptics and lost people was just too tempting, too scary and too irritating. Problem was, I knew the next step led naturally to isolation. To stay honestly engaged, I had to risk seeing my own lostness and accepting the process of growing more and more "found" myself. As a friend observed a couple of weeks ago, "No one walks her talk very perfectly; mostly we walk toward our talk."*

*My conclusion was that for the foreseeable future (like for several more decades), I would struggle with a degree of the same human screwed-up-ness that I spotted so clearly in my friends. We all possessed two very human tendencies: First, we assumed that we should make ourselves worthy of relationships, working on our problems via will-power, self-improvement, and rugged individualism. Or, we could simply elect to point out to people that "I don't have a problem. You do." Either choice came naturally to me, or either choice could look respectable, even religious. Neither leads to healing or growth. Neither choice reflected the advice of the aging Apostle John to "walk in the light."*

### **Meanwhile, Back on the Dock**

*I experienced a blank moment after hearing that I was intimidating. I scrambled to declare myself, and to stay engaged. I wanted four things:*

*\* I didn't want to disguise my faith; I didn't even think I could.*

*\* I wanted very much to bring this important part of me to these relationships, but maybe the resented word "Christian" needed some essential definition of my own.*

*\* I wanted to explore the reasons behind all those suspicious faces. There was a lot more I wanted to know about these people and the lenses through which they view the world. I wanted to know them.*

*\* And I wanted to stay engaged with them because I already liked them so much.*

*"It's true," I finally said out loud. "I am a follower of Jesus, and I have been for a long time."*

*And then I added, "And after all these years, I still love his words and his ways with people."*

*That's all I said. A moment later I heard a quiet voice and then another. Consensus grew around the second part of my affirmation. "So do I." "So do I." "Me too." Even though it appeared that each of these people had been roughed up in encounters with Christians, still, each one responded to what he or she knew about Jesus.*

*Those four "wants" are part of my integrity and my process as I journey with Christ these days. For me it is a walk of faith to be able to clearly and graciously declare myself without disengaging from other imperfect people.*

*Jesus arrived on earth as an infant, and could have thus fulfilled his atoning mission. But he stayed long enough connect to the vivid values and enigmatic gray shades of flawed and felonious human beings. As I consider his words, as I experience his presence in places like the dock, I am aware that while some people walked away from him--without his resistance--only the rigidly self-righteous and proudly correct ever had to run for cover.*