Holy Disunity

How What Separates Us Can Save Us

Layton E. Williams

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Chapter Three

The Gift of Argument

Disney's 1950 animated version of *Cinderella* portrays the "evil stepmother" as a tall, stiff-backed, sneering woman in high collars, with graying hair pulled back in a regal bun, who stares down her nose at Cinderella and anyone else she deems beneath her. The stepmother, Lady Tremaine, makes demands of her stepdaughter in a haughty voice that carries a trace of sickening glee, and whenever Cinderella protests or attempts to argue, the stepmother throws out her hand, index finger pointed sharply toward Cinderella, and barks, "Silence!"

I grew up in a fairly strict and disciplined household. It was, of course, nothing at all like Cinderella's, but as a child I *felt* as though I was constantly getting reprimanded. I did not take well to discipline. As a very young child, I was constantly testing the limits and pushing back, and then when I inevitably got into trouble for my behavior, I would cry and scream at the injustice of it all. I hated getting punished, but apparently not enough to stay out of trouble.

Instead, around age four or five, I took a page from Lady Tremaine's book. Whenever I had done something wrong and gotten caught or pushed limits too far, and I could tell that an adult was about to scold me, I would throw out my hand, point a finger sharply toward the adult, and say in the firmest voice I could, "Silence!" I'll admit, it was not my most effective strategy. But

I was convinced that if I could just keep them from speaking, I could avoid any heartache or conflict or consequences. My mom will tell you that it was hard not to laugh whenever I did my "silence!" move, but she restrained herself.

Despite my sometimes insolent early childhood behavior, growing up in the South instilled in me a thorough education on the value of silence and the impropriety of disagreement. In the South, politeness is a way of life. We are taught to say "yes, ma'am" and "no, sir" and when not to speak at all. We're taught to swallow our anger and hold our tongues rather than speak out of turn or incite conflict. We learn early on that some topics are "not fit for polite company" and some family stories are best left untold. Argument is to be avoided at all costs, especially when there is a power differential or when the topic is heated and controversial. When disagreements occur, they must always be measured, restrained, and well mannered. Argument—which in my mind often carries with it a passionate tone and necessary but sometimes brutal honesty—defied social norms of "polite disagreement." Above all, we are made to understand that talking back is profoundly disobedient and disrespectful, and should not be tolerated.

Of course, this structure of conflict avoidance is not particular to the American South. Over the years, I've heard similar stories from friends who grew up in the Midwest and particularly from friends who come from immigrant families. In her book *Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng tells the story of a biracial Chinese American family who lose their middle daughter in a tragic drowning but are unable to fully understand what happened to her and why because they are each keeping secrets from the others out of love and obedience—secrets that obscure the truth of the girl's death and impede any peace that may come from a fuller understanding.

Describing how the youngest child learns the crucial role of her silence in her family's life, Ng writes, "Hannah, as if she understood her place in the cosmos, grew from quiet infant to watchful child: a child fond of nooks and corners, who curled up in closets, behind sofas, under dangling tablecloths, staying out

of sight as well as out of mind, to ensure the terrain of the family did not change."[1]

Though particularly potent in the family of Ng's novel, this fear of conflict, upheaval, and argument undergirds much of our culture and social history. The risk of speaking up, of arguing against, of taking a contrary position and being honest and passionate about it is that you bring shame to your family and your community, and in so doing destroy relationships. This fear is also at the heart of the modern Christian church. While some traditions, like my own Presbyterian denomination, encourage questions and understand that people of good faith can disagree, there are still deeply entrenched expectations of how we disagree and when and how intensely. We employ complex systems, rules, and procedures for how to engage civilly even in our disagreement rather than devolve into "needlessly hostile argument." Failure to comply with these expectations is perceived as a threat to the unity of the church and even, at times, disobedience to God.

Obedience versus Argument in the Bible

Obedience is a consistent theme throughout the biblical text. Those claiming its significance in the life of faith will find no shortage of support for their conviction. The very first human story in Genesis is arguably one of a failure to obey and the consequences that arise from that disobedience. God gives Adam and Eve the freedom to name and care for all creatures in existence, to enjoy the abundant fruits and pleasures of Eden, and to live a life unhampered by shame and fear. But God also gives them a single boundary. One rule: Do not eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warns Adam, "in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:17).

In Adam and Eve's defense, they seem pretty committed to following this rule, right up until the serpent comes along. Eve, having not yet eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, has no reason or even capacity to suspect the serpent of ill will. For the first time in her existence, someone has offered her an

alternative to God's command. He tells her that eating from the tree won't kill her after all. In essence, the serpent has presented a counterargument to God: the possibility that there is more to the truth than what Eve already knows. And she's intrigued. Honestly, I don't think it's entirely fair to expect her to know that something is wrong—even disobedience. She literally doesn't understand good and evil precisely *because* she hasn't eaten from the tree.

The serpent also isn't wrong. Eve and Adam eat the fruit, it's delicious, and afterward they do not—in fact—die. They just realize that they're naked and that some things are right and some are wrong and they have, apparently, just done the latter. Being perpetually disinclined toward obedience myself, I feel a fair amount of sympathy for these two bumbling humans. Still, there's no denying that given the choice between God's command and the serpent's intriguing alternative, Eve (and Adam) hardly hesitate before setting God's instructions aside in favor of another path. This disobedience supposedly enacts a chain of events that lead to the utter fall of humanity, at least according to modern Christian understanding.

From Abraham's covenant to Moses' ten commandments, David's kingship, and even Jesus' own teachings and life and death and resurrection—the Bible is almost entirely a book of God making promises to humanity on the singular condition that humanity obey God's commands, and humanity subsequently messing it up. Ours is mostly a story of epic disobedience. God only knows why God keeps at it.

There are, however, a few key examples of faithful obedience in our biblical story. The ultimate paragon is Jesus, who is repeatedly described as "obedient to the point of death" (Phil. 2:8). Though Jesus is plenty capable of getting himself into worldly trouble, he remains fully committed to God against the temptations of Satan, the disloyalty of his friends, the desperate reality of doubt, and even death itself. Trembling in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus begs that God might spare him. But immediately afterward, still slick with the sweat of genuine fear and doubt, he prays, "Yet, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). And

dying on the cross, having already cried out in despair (depending on which Gospel account you prefer), Jesus commends his spirit to God and breathes his last (Luke 23:46). In his obedient submission, Jesus enters into death and overcomes it for the sake of us all.

The faithful witness of Jesus Christ cannot be overshadowed or matched by another, but he's not the only major biblical figure noted for his obedience to God. Long before Jesus took on flesh and entered into this world, there was Abraham. After waiting a lifetime for a son, Abraham conceives two. First Ishmael, with his wife's slave, Hagar, and then—according to God's promise—Isaac, with his wife Sarah. Not too many years after the fulfillment of this promise, in a biblical passage known as the Akedah, God says to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you" (Gen. 22:2).

In response to God's horrific command that Abraham kill his young son as a sacrifice to God, Abraham does not argue. Instead, he gathers his son and packs up the things needed for an altar sacrifice and sets off to follow God's command. Isaac is just old enough to carry the wood for the fire to burn his body. At the appointed time and place, Abraham lays his beloved son on the altar and prepares to sacrifice him. Perfect, unquestioning obedience. And thankfully, God sends a messenger to intervene just in the nick of time. Isaac's life is spared, and Abraham's faith commended. Ever since, we have held up Abraham's obedient willingness to sacrifice his son. Confronted with this brutal story about a God who demands a father kill his own son as a sign of faith, we are challenged to either faithfully accept or disobediently question.

The Problem of Politeness
(How Argument Separates Us)

These popular biblical interpretations of Abraham and Jesus establish a Christian precedent for believing that faithful obedience

means silent—or at least unquestioning—acquiescence. In this theological framework, passionate refusal or argument is seen as faithless insubordination. However, in the early days of Christianity, the church itself was seen as radical, insubordinate, and conflict-inciting because it refused to submit to Roman religious understandings or place Caesar on the same footing as God.

After Constantine, Christianity became intertwined with the state, and sometime over the centuries a theology of faithful obedience became likewise intertwined with secular notions of proper etiquette. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount proclamation to "turn the other cheek" became conflated with silently bearing one's own mistreatment or oppression. The call to love one's enemies became a call to be nice and polite—no matter how someone else is treating you or others. The call to understand ourselves as a single body of Christ came to be understood as a call to hold together no matter what, and above all, not to rock the boat. Essentially, Christian obedience became a call to adhere to the ethics of civility.

Even in increasingly secular twenty-first-century America, these standards of behavior pervade our culture. Recently, the significance of civility has become a point of particular contention. Though civility originally centered on how to be a good and engaged citizen, sometime around the sixteenth century the word took on a definition more akin to general politeness, which is still its dictionary definition today.[2] The dictionary also notes an archaic definition of "culture; good breeding."[3] This is not an altogether surprising evolution. The word "civil" derives from the Latin *civilis* meaning "of or relating to citizens." Meanwhile, "politeness" derives from the Latin *politus* and evolved from a more literal meaning of "smooth and polished" in a physical sense to one of "elegant and cultured" in the sixteenth century, before finally landing on its current understanding of "courteous behavior."[4]

The not-so-subtle implication of this evolution is that those who were good citizens (i.e., those who were *allowed* to be citizens, especially the elite who had proximity to and influence over state power) established the expected codes of behavior (i.e., behaviors

that preserved the status quo), and those with less access to power were left to assimilate to the best of their ability, or else be effectively gated from "polite" or "civil" society.

Over the centuries, this divide along the fault lines of civility and politeness has frequently—if not always—mirrored fault lines of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and so on. Essentially, the crucial function of civility is that it maintain the existing system of power by keeping the privileged powerful and the oppressed "in their place."

This is as true today as it was five hundred years ago.

During the 2016 election cycle, Donald Trump gained the nomination of the Republican Party and ultimately won the presidency largely through the support of working-class white Americans who felt disenfranchised from power and the political system by Washington elites. They and others who supported Trump pointed to his refusal to play by the rules of the system and his willingness to speak in ways that were typically considered inappropriate or rude, as he referred to his opponents as losers and any number of other disparaging descriptors. Essentially, they saw him as helpfully uncivil in a way that reflected their own experience of failing to match the expectations of elite society.

Ironically, Trump defended himself against accusations of incivility by pointing to precisely the ways he differs from many of his most ardent supporters, harking back to a definition of civility that relied on class and status rather than behavior. In a conversation with reporters in October 2017, Trump said, "I think the press makes me more uncivil than I am. You know, people don't understand I went to an Ivy League college. I was a nice student. I did very well. I'm a very intelligent person. You know, the fact is I think—I really believe—I think the press creates a different image of Donald Trump than the real person."[5]

Months later, in the middle of 2018, civility again became fodder for American debate when citizens encountered members of President Trump's administration in public spaces and confronted them with anger and harsh words.

Owners of the Red Hen restaurant in Lexington, Virginia, asked White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders to

leave after Sanders and her friends had been seated and ordered food. The restaurant owner had not been at the restaurant when Sanders first arrived, but her employees reached out to her because they were uncomfortable.

According to the *Washington Post*, the owner said, "I'm not a huge fan of confrontation. I have a business, and I want the business to thrive. This feels like the moment in our democracy when people have to make uncomfortable actions and decisions to uphold their morals."[6]

This situation with Sanders was one of several like it over a period of a few weeks. Trump adviser Stephen Miller was called a "fascist" while dining at a restaurant.[7] Environmental Protection Agency administrator Scott Pruitt was confronted during lunch by a woman with her young son in tow.[8] The woman urged Pruitt to resign, saying, "We deserve to have somebody at the EPA who actually does protect our environment, somebody who believes in climate change and takes it seriously for the benefit of all of us, including our children."

Not long after this encounter, Pruitt did indeed resign, saying that "the unrelenting attacks on me personally [and] my family are unprecedented and have taken a sizable toll on all of us."[9]

These public confrontations sparked a fierce discourse on the definition and significance of civility. While some encouraged the confrontations, many of the most established leaders across the political divide decried the encounters as "unacceptable." Opinion pieces in major newspapers offered various perspectives on who was to blame for the breakdown in public decency. In a *New York Times* piece, Michelle Goldberg argued that people were resorting to uncivil tactics precisely because they were unable to voice their concerns in traditionally civil ways.[10] Though she was speaking in defense of those confronting Trump administration members, it's worth noting that Trump supporters offered similar reasoning for why they voted for him in the first place.

While some claim that civility merely calls us to be respectful in our disagreements—a noble pursuit in general—opinions vary widely on what constitutes respect and who is deserving of

it. As long as civility is defined by the existing system of power, arguing or dissenting in any way that destabilizes the system is deemed uncivil.

To the extent that faithful obedience has become conflated with civility and politeness, to be uncivil is to be unchristian. To be unapologetically disruptive is to be unfaithful or ungracious. To be argumentative is to create discord and tension at the expense of peace. Certainly, it's reasonable to claim that the call to Christian life comes with expectations of behavior. We are called to do justice, love kindness, show mercy. We are called to recognize the image of God in other people, even those who we believe are doing ungodly things that harm others. We are indeed called to love our enemies.

However, we must carefully disentangle our Christian understanding of faithfulness from a politics of politeness. It is not our Christian task to preserve the status quo of American ethics, or even earthly ethics. We are called to be anchored, above all, to the ethics of the kindom of God.[11] And when worldly understandings of respectful behavior preserve the power of some by silencing others, we must question whether those worldly understandings match the ethics to which God calls us and which Christ embodies.

Does God call us to hold our tongue, to temper the passion of our argument or the strength of our conviction in the name of civil discourse? To denounce our own anger over that which runs contrary to our deepest beliefs as hateful and thus inappropriate? Does God call us to inflict these expectations on others?

At some point, we must examine our dogged commitment to civility and subsequent fear of argument. What compels these convictions? Is it truly our Christian faith? Or is it merely our human fear of discomfort, conflict, and upheaval?

Do Talk Back to Me

(Argument and Obedience in the Bible, Revisited)

Jesus does a remarkably impressive job of engaging nonviolently even with those who seek to do violence to him. Hanging on the

cross, Jesus neither uses divine power to save himself nor even curses his executioners. Indeed, he pays them relatively little attention, choosing to focus instead on the two men hanging on either side of him, also facing death (Luke 23:32–43). To these, he offers opportunity for grace and hope.

It's true that Christ follows God's command even to death. But if we look to Christ as our paragon of obedience, we quickly find a framework of behavior that embraces argument and upheaval and, at times, rejects standard expectations of decorum. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his followers to resist anger and seek reconciliation (Matt. 5:21–26). Elsewhere, when those who are paralyzed or suffering physically approach him, he makes time for them (Mark 2:1–12; John 5:1–15). When the hemorrhaging woman interrupts him on the way to visit the dying daughter of an important official, he stops to praise her faith (Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48). He saves an adulterous woman on the verge of being stoned (John 8:1–11), sits with tax collectors and other sinners (Matt. 9:11), and makes time for meal and fellowship in the face of certain death (John 12:1–10). Remembering these stories, it is clear that Jesus embodies kindness, love, and radical grace which we can only hope to imperfectly emulate.

And yet, he unflinchingly refers to questioning believers and certain corrupt religious leaders as a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 12:34). He decries an entire generation when he is asked to show a sign of his power (Matt. 16:4). He curses a barren fig tree that is unable to sate his hunger with fruit, and when he encounters the money changers in the temple, he flips their tables with no restraint or concern for the rules of civility (Mark 11:12–25). He also makes a habit of rebuking his disciples when they repeatedly miss the point of his teaching. It's clear that Jesus isn't afraid to show anger, to shout when necessary. And though he refrains from physically harming other people and warns his followers against it, he is more than willing to cause a little destruction and disruption when the greedy powers of this world vandalize sacred space.

Jesus does indeed show mercy and grace and seems to recognize the God-belovedness of all those he encounters, including

his enemies. But he also sets himself against systems of power and expectations of behavior when they violate his own God-given ethics.

One could suggest that Jesus is allowed to get angry and argue and throw tables because he is the Son of God. Who other than Jesus can know when anger is righteous, and who among Christians would dare to claim that Jesus isn't allowed to argue exactly as he sees fit?

However, in the story of the Syrophoenician woman (or Canaanite, depending on the Gospel account), we see Jesus allow and even praise arguments *against him* in the name of true faith (Matt. 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–29). In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus encounters this woman who is not one of his people, and when she seeks his help he refuses her, saying, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She doesn't quietly desist. Instead the woman pushes further, pointing out that even dogs eat the scraps from the table.

By approaching Jesus at all she has violated social rules. And then she has the gall to argue with him about whether she deserves his help. Rather than scold or rebuke her for her insolence, as he has previously proven himself willing to do with others, Jesus praises the woman for her faith and heals her daughter. Biblical interpreters and theologians debate whether Jesus actually changed his mind or was merely setting an example. But either way, he makes clear that argument can be an act of faith.

Abraham's story too, upon closer inspection, might have a more nuanced theology to offer us than silent, unquestioning obedience—even, and especially, in the Akedah. At the beginning of that story, when God first demands that Abraham sacrifice his son, the text reveals that Abraham is being tested. From a perspective that exalts obedience as the ideal virtue of faithfulness, Abraham's silent acquiescence seems like the correct response to the test. But taken in the larger context of God's interaction with humanity and even with Abraham specifically, it seems that God might have been testing something else.

After all, Abraham has established his commitment to obeying God time and again prior to this test. At God's command,

Abraham gathers his wife and nephew and leaves his homeland for a destination unknown. He refuses to take the spoils of his conquests after battle, he plays the gracious host to God's angels, and he even circumcises himself and all of his men after his covenant with God is made. God has little cause to question Abraham's obedience, given this lengthy résumé. One is left to wonder either why God still needs reassurance or whether this test in the Akedah is about something else. It seems as if, rather than testing Abraham's obedience, God was testing Abraham's faith in their relationship.

Abraham's relationship with God is supremely special, especially in comparison to the other humans with whom God has previously interacted. The covenant that God makes with Abraham not very long before the Akedah story represents a profound shift in God's relationship with humanity. Prior to the covenant, God addresses humans as a master demanding information or action from a slave. God demands answers, asking Adam and Eve, "Where are you?," and Cain, "Where is your brother?" (Gen. 3:9; 4:9). God gives Noah exact specifications for building the ark. Even with Abraham, before their covenant ritual, God simply commands Abraham to go to Canaan, leaving space for nothing other than obedience.

However, through the covenant, God invites Abraham—and his descendants with him—into a new relationship. According to Genesis 17, God promises to establish an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his offspring, out of whom kings will arise, and to whom the land of Canaan is given. In return, Abraham promises to uphold the covenant. As a marker of this relational change, Abram and Sarai are given new names, Abraham and Sarah. When God calls to Abraham in the beginning of the Akedah, it is the first time in the Bible that God addresses a human by name. Through this covenant, God and Abraham enter into a relationship not of master and slave, but of partners engaged in mutual participation and conversation.

The astoundingly intimate and mutual nature of God's relationship with Abraham is even more explicitly revealed in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which falls between the covenant

ritual and the Akedah. In this story (Gen. 18:17–32), God decides to destroy the sinful cities for their unfaithfulness and reveals the plan to Abraham. He dares to push back on God, bargaining about the number of righteous inhabitants that would allow Sodom and Gomorrah to be spared. God allows Abraham's challenges and, even more strikingly, considers changing plans in response to Abraham's protests.

In the Akedah, God seems almost to be daring Abraham to protest again. Calling for the sacrifice of Isaac is an utterly cruel demand, made even more twisted because it directly contradicts the promise God made to Abraham as a term of their covenant—that his descendants would flourish through Isaac. Elie Wiesel points out, in his essay on the Akedah, that ancient Jewish law would have claimed that God was just as bound by the terms of the covenant as Abraham.[12] Given this, Abraham would have known that God had no right to make such a demand and that Abraham would be absolutely justified in questioning the order.

However, Abraham doesn't question. He doesn't speak at all. Instead, he simply rises early in the morning to set about the task that God has asked of him. This choice marks the beginning of a deep and striking silence that permeates the story and stands in stark contrast to the previously established dialogue. In refusing to speak, Abraham essentially denies his sacred relationship with God.

The journey to Moriah—the place that God indicates for the sacrifice ritual—takes place in unbroken silence for three days. When they arrive, Abraham commands his men to stay behind, and tells them that he and "the boy" will go worship (Gen. 22:5). Abraham's word choice here is significant—he refuses to identify Isaac as his son. Quite possibly, he simply must distance himself in order to carry out the act that lies before him, but in any case, he effectively denies another sacred relationship, that of a father to a son born as the miraculous fulfillment of divine promise.

When Isaac is bound upon the altar, and the knife is raised in Abraham's hand, heaven intercedes to spare Isaac's life. But while it had been the very voice of God who first called out to Abraham in the beginning of this story, it is now an angel who delivers

the command that stays Abraham's hand. Abraham chose silent obedience over conversation with God, and here, God refrains from direct conversation with Abraham.

Certainly Abraham's obedience is praised and the angel tells him that, as a result, his descendants will prosper, but underlying these reaffirmations of the covenantal promise is an unspoken and less favorable consequence to Abraham's choice. When the trial is over, the text states that Abraham returns to his men. As Elie Wiesel points out, the singular "he" is significant and intentional in contrast to the "we" stated by Abraham when he and Isaac first leave their servants behind.[13] What exactly has become of Isaac is unclear, but a definite separation has occurred and Abraham is never again described as speaking to either Isaac or God. When Abraham returns home from Moriah, he is a man alone. Where he has denied relationship to God, so relationship is denied to him.

The question lingers: Was Abraham faithful in his silent obedience to God's command, or was more required of him? Was his ultimate duty to the single sacred command or to trust in the relationship?

So eager is Abraham to obey, so afraid is he of defiance, that he upholds God's command even over all his other experiences of God's nature and will. But God is living and dynamic and relational, and to relegate God to one single command is to create a static image of God. In his silent obedience, Abraham has created an idol of his understanding of God's command. We must be wary, in setting our sights on obedience to God's *command*, that we don't lose sight of God's own *self*. We are required to do more. To obey God's will—certainly—but also to encounter and discern that divine will in participative relationship with God.

Perhaps the question is not whether we silently obey or not, or even whether we are quietly polite and thus faithful, or else rebelliously argumentative and thus disobedient. Perhaps the question for us is what to obey and how, and how to do it in ways that foster authentic relationship rather than rigid systems of decorum where people are bound by the strictures of civility or nicety and can therefore only offer some fractured and restrained insight into their convictions.

Trust Enough
(How Argument Can Save Us)

In reexamining the witness of Jesus, we see an example of daring and sometimes argumentative engagement both embodied by Christ and encouraged in others when born from a place of faith. In reexamining Abraham and the Akedah, we see a warning against silent obedience at the expense of honest and engaged relationship. The potential cost, then, of avoiding argument when it is needed is loss of relationship, distance, pain, and even death. By contrast, the gift that argument holds for us, if we dare to allow for it in ourselves and in others, is genuine, authentic, honest dialogue, born out of deep trust, from which previously unimagined futures can grow.

Not long after my spiritual encounter with a snake by the creek at my seminary compelled me to embrace my own queerness, I came out to several people I loved. I was still months away from being ready to tell my parents, but I was so alive with this new understanding of myself and the new relationship with a classmate that came alongside that discovery that I had to share.

I revealed my news to two trusted people from my home faith community, a pastor and a dear friend from childhood. To my dismay, neither of them offered the acceptance and embrace that I hoped for. One asked whether I'd considered how much this would devastate my parents. The other pointed to my previous romantic misadventures and questioned whether this new relationship was worth the cost, and went on to say that had I come out as gay they would have been supportive, but that bisexuality felt too much like trying to have one's cake and eat it too.

These trusted friends knew me deeply, and I believe their rejection came both from judgment and from genuine understanding of my history. It was also because of my close and long-term relationships with both of them that their responses devastated me so deeply. I trusted them and their assessment, and I was so new and fragile in my queer identity that I wondered whether they were right. Perhaps I didn't love this new person enough to let my truth hurt my family. Perhaps there *wasn't* any such

thing as bisexuality, and I was simply a still-halfway-repressed gay woman.

On the basis of those two painfully sad conversations, I might have walked away from myself and the future of love and authentic queerness that awaited me. Or I might have walked away from these two lifelong friends and the history and love we shared. They might well have decided they were done with me, too.

On the other hand, our years of trusted relationship were also how I found the strength and courage to push back, to trust both myself and them with the scarier possibility that I was right. I responded to each of them, both angry and defensive. My posture was emotional, no doubt, and neither as strategic nor as compassionate as I would have liked. But I left nothing back. In the fury of my pain I bared the truth of that hurt and my own ultimately undeniable convictions to them. It could have been the end of my relationship with either of them, but it wasn't. I stayed in the struggle with them, and they, no doubt out of their love for me and trust in our relationship, stayed in the struggle too. We argued, and we grew, by God's grace, to a place of reconciliation. These days those two old friends are also two of my fiercest allies.

Perhaps those experiences are why, several years later, I dared again to argue with someone I trusted and cared for. I had an uncommonly close friendship with my seminary's president. We connected when I was still a prospective student over our shared history in Atlanta and the South Carolina low country. He sounded like the men I'd grown up around, like home, and beyond that, my mother knew of him and respected him, so I trusted him implicitly. No doubt that is why he was one of the first people beyond my close circle of friends to whom I came out. I no longer remember exactly what either of us said in that conversation, but I know that I expressed fear that the place we both came from and the people in it would never understand and embrace me for who I was. And I know that he expressed, without hesitation, that if indeed it turned out that my people wouldn't have me, he would be my people and he would embrace me exactly as the queer and God-beloved person that I was.

It was a powerful and holy moment. And it contrasted sharply with the tense oppositional circumstances we often found ourselves in over the next several years. My coming out catapulted me into political awareness and activism. I joined a cadre of fellow queer students and our allies in fighting against ongoing inequalities on our campus and in our denomination. My seminary president, for his part, was a self-identified pro-LGBTQ liberal who found himself in the middle of central Texas, which counted a number of conservative Presbyterian churches, both big and small, among its number. Whatever his own ideological mooring, his deepest conviction was in a church that should stay united as one body even amid crucial value differences. The president and I were often at odds over how the seminary should respond to this tense reality. And yet, with a fair amount of frequency I found myself in his office talking about ministry and my future and even, sometimes, the very things that divided us.

Never was this divide between the two us more fraught than in my final semester of school. At the time, our denomination was poised to vote on two deeply controversial issues at its upcoming 221st General Assembly (2014)—divesting from three American companies doing business in Israel, and clarifying our definition of marriage to include same-sex couples. I admit I was so focused on the marriage equality vote that I knew next to nothing about the divestment issue or the politics surrounding it, but it was also a pivotal and controversial vote.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, in the face of these impending conflicts, Columbia Theological Seminary sent a letter to the commissioners of the General Assembly urging peace and togetherness above all, and they encouraged their sister seminaries to follow suit. Responding to this call, the faculty of my own school also addressed a letter to the commissioners, calling for "mutual forbearance" and the delay of any ruling that might contribute to further conflict and division within the church. Both letters were made public, and they stirred up quite a response.

The outcry against my seminary's letter was swift and potent. Many wrote responses and either sent them directly to the faculty or published them online. I did both, writing about my

disappointment that this same group of people who taught me a theology that allowed me to embrace my queer identity and compelled me to seek justice would sign their names to a document that stood against the full inclusion of myself and others like me. I allowed my letter to be published on the blog of a local pastor who was gathering oppositional responses to the seminary's call. Only afterward did I realize that I was the only current student who had published a public response.

My president called me in for a meeting. I was so afraid of the conflict I knew was coming that I had to force my body down the hallway and into his office. I had never seen him so angry, and he was angry *at me*. My southern upbringing and the ways I'd been taught to move through the world as a woman—not to mention my Christian background—told me to calm him down and defuse the situation by any means necessary. But I didn't. I was angry too.

I reminded him of our long relationship and what he knew of me and what I knew of him. And I reminded him that my disappointment in the faculty's letter was valid and that I didn't have a responsibility to silence that disappointment, even if it made him angry. And then I told him honestly that our opposition made me sad because my graduation was the following weekend, and I had been waiting three years for my mom who so respected him to meet him and see someone who knew all that I was and was proud of me not in spite of my queerness, but in light of it. There were tears, I think.

And though nothing was resolved and we were both still angry, he promised me that the following weekend he would do what I had hoped for. And he did. I listened as he sang praises about my preaching to my mother and I watched her light up and tell him confidentially that I might be one of the best preachers she'd ever heard (moms are allowed to say that sort of thing).

One month later, in the minutes after our General Assembly voted to approve an inclusive definition of marriage by overwhelming majority, I ran into my seminary president in the hallway of the convention center. Our recent and freshly relevant argument hung between us. But so did everything else. We

hugged. And he said, swallowing hard, "This is a good day. I am scared as hell. But this is a good day."

Our conflict and argument were one part of a much larger conflict in our church that is still not fully resolved, and I sometimes doubt it ever will be. But I am grateful for both the conflict and the honesty it allowed to grow between me and this mentor I cared for.

There is no obvious perfect answer for how we go about faithfully threading the needle between gracious engagement and genuine, trusting argument. I know that the answer is ugly and hard and preserves no one's comfort. But I love to imagine a world in which we might trust in God and ourselves and this world enough to lay it all on the table. To unflinchingly bear our arguments and our passions and our vehement disagreements and bear the fiery truth of others'. Not to value our perspectives or even deepest moral convictions more highly than others' humanity, but perhaps to value the possibility of honest engagement and mutual relationship they offer more highly than we value others' comfort, or our own.

There is immense risk in embracing true argument, in not allowing our fear of conflict or our desperate reliance on systems of civility to silence others or ourselves. We can only discover the extent of that risk in actually doing this scary thing. In shouting it out, in bearing it all. But there is risk in silence too. Silence costs us and that cost is, I believe, all the more fearsome because the thing about silence is that what it costs, we never get to know.

We are called to more. I believe we are called to ongoing sacred dialogue. And to be in sacred dialogue is to question, to challenge, to struggle—with God and one another, and even, at times, with ourselves. We are called, in blessed contradiction to what all the grown-ups taught us, to talk back.