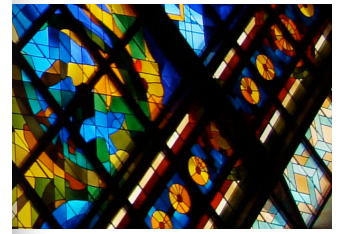




40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on *Anti-Racism*



DAY 2

Getting Over Either/Or

Julie Graham



Learning

As a child, I sometimes envied the people in the comic book Bible stories I encountered in the local Mennonite Brethren church. These books seemed infinitely superior to the older books the United Church had. Comics—in church! It was like superheroes, but better, because it was holy.

These people didn't worry about being wrong (or bad). They were certain about their choices, because God helped them be that way. They didn't debate right and wrong, because they didn't have to. They were just that good. And sometimes, I was just that bad. Everything was very clear-cut.

As a White kid, growing up in majority White churches, where White people occupied all the positions of authority, the binary good/bad of scripture was just another part of the stage set. Either/or was our reading of scripture, including what I have since come to see as profoundly disrespectful and poorly informed misreading of Jewish scriptures.

Within my European-roots, Protestant tradition, with its focus on the central place and inerrancy of God's word, I find that we don't question those binaries. And what we don't question and challenge will surely shape and form us at our roots, unnoticed and thus exceptionally powerful. From that reading of scripture, with its unhealthy dose of ancient Greek philosophical dualism thrown in, the dominant theology I learned arrived at a split between body and spirit, or mind and body, as though they cannot possibly be in symbiotic relationship. I was taught to rely on binary choices for understanding the world, for clarity and certainty, even (or especially)



Photo: J. Graham

Community artwork at the 2017 global LGBTQIA+ and Two Spirit Consultation with United Church partners.

when they are false; when the path forward is not an either/or choice, but instead something much more complex.

It has taken me years to begin to question false binaries in theology and scripture. Jesus, that Jewish rabbi we follow, regularly challenges our set ideas of who is right and wrong, who is in and out, who is holy and who is not, and who is in between, or in the process of transforming. My culture, which is also Canada's dominant culture, has done an excellent and thorough job of forcing Jesus into a binary box. But why?

- Right/wrong
- White/black
- White/everyone else
- Rich/poor
- Past/present
- One "right way" reading of history.
- A centering of White people to the exclusion of every other race and ethnicity.

Take a few minutes and write down the binaries you have been taught. Don't think too hard: just let them come naturally. Which, if any, have their roots in theology, scripture, or the church?

I got older, entered more racially diverse spaces in elementary school and beyond, and came out as lesbian/queer. Around me, my culture, the dominant culture in Canada and my church, ground on.

In my lifetime, more and more niizh manidouwag (Two-Spirit), trans, non-binary, and gender-queer people have claimed their place in the community, bringing an embodied way of challenging deeply held gender binaries. More Indigenous and Black and people of colour who are also non-binary claimed space long denied, pushing back on the central place held by Whiteness.

Where has dominant White Canadian culture shaped the way you feel, think, or embody? Where are there different, similar, or new alternatives from within your own ethno-cultural roots?

My comfortable binaries started crumbling, and with them a foundational way of encountering the world. Those binaries made less and less sense. They excluded so many. They erased or denied so many friends' stories, identities, histories, and complexities, all in the service of making things certain and easy to understand. They paved over diverse flowers and roots, flattened mountains, and made dead multilane freeways, going somewhere fast to some destination that was highly important for someone. Why did they exist, I wondered? Where is all the either/or taking me? What are its impacts on lives and bodies? Why was I taught to love them so? What are they serving?

In "Challenging White Supremacy Culture" authors Kenneth Jones and Tema Okum name

oppressions that uphold systemic racism, and also name possible antidotes. Okum credits Daniel Buford, a lead trainer with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, for deep thinking on the role that either/or thinking plays in enabling racism and White supremacy. Some characteristics of this thinking include:

- things are either/or—good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us
- linked to perfectionism, making it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict
- no sense that things can be both/and
- tries to simplify complex things
- creates conflict as people feel they have to make decisions to do either this or that, with no time or encouragement to consider alternatives
- often used by those with a goal to push those who are still thinking or reflecting to make a choice between "a" or "b" without acknowledging other options.

Where in the church have you experienced this?

It was a relief to read this. I began to recognize the machinery. I realized I wasn't alone in my discomfort. It also helped me better perceive where I was buying into the system.

I'm still learning to perceive it, and to understand what it enables, to more clearly see those moments when White people evade difficult truths and painful stories by

manufacturing a deadlock, or an all or nothing “choice.” Indigenous, Black, Asian, or brown reader: you will have your own perspectives on this, and your own experience; I am not speaking for you here. What I do wish is that we will create and use many more intercultural spaces in the church to absorb one another’s stories about this.

Every day, at least once, I catch myself falling into a binary, trapping myself in the false promise of easy decisions and simplistic framing. That machinery keeps grinding on in the background. Perhaps I fall into the temptation of seeing everything in linear time. Maybe a truth told challenges me, or how it is told challenges me, and I have to pay attention to my body’s sudden tension, my instinctive “but that can’t be true.”



Faith Reflection

Many Christians I encounter speak of the “Angry God of the Old Testament” versus “the forgiving God of the New Testament.” It’s a false binary that also serves to uphold Christian supremacy and replacement theology, and is weaponized against our older sibling faith.

In many Jewish approaches to the Torah, and even within scripture itself, God is argued with, bargained with, and contradicted. Dr Amy-Jill Levine describes in her numerous works the long and rich rabbinical tradition of questioning and re-interpreting seemingly absolute and often polarized commandments. Apparent binaries of good and evil, clean and unclean, God’s punishment

versus God’s mercy, the inner circle versus the outcast, are questioned and debated into richer, more nuanced questions.

As a child, I was in awe of Abraham arguing with God, bargaining down the number of righteous people needed to spare the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18: 20-33). What’s more, this awesome, fear-striking God listened to a mere human who changed God’s mind. This God refused a yes/no. This is a non-binary God, for whom “the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.” (Psalm 139).

I want to be reshaped by that. I need to dare to argue with the Almighty, or, perhaps, the words of the Almighty that I have been taught by humans.



Children’s Activity

Art: Get out your preferred art supplies and a piece of paper and pen. Thinking fast, go around the circle and call out either/or ideas (e.g., sunny/rainy; hot/cold). If people are having trouble, play a round of “would you rather...?” (Would you rather eat cake or ice cream? Would you rather watch a comedy or horror?). Write these down.

You can skip the verbal approach and draw the “either/or” without using words. Illustrate a binary on a big piece of paper, in teams in a whole group.

Or, you could do a silent circle. Pass your drawing to the left. The next person writes down what they think the binary is. Then they fold their words under, and pass again. Once you get your own art back, open it up and look at everyone’s guesses.

Where do you, with all of your many cultural, relational, and spiritual roots, find resources and spaces to expand your love of God’s fiercely complex world? In community? In readings, song, meditation, art?

Now think of at least two things you could add to the either/or that challenge the binary. For example: night/day is a common example. What else could we add? Sunset, sunrise, twilight, the full moon casting shadows in the middle of the night?

For older children, or teens and adults, try to make this a little more abstract (and try drawing or painting it). For example: good/bad, or something more complex, like included/excluded. How hard do you have to work to find those in-between ideas? How do things change when we make intentional space for more than two things?



Group Commitment

More than one thing can be true at the same time. It sounds so obvious. But my brain is no match for the deep, hidden roots of culture that have been laid down for me since my earliest memories and before. So this is a line I repeat to myself all the time in diverse groups, in anti-racism work, intergenerational work, language work, in Two

Spirit and LGBTQIA+ affirming work, and more. It is my shield, pressed back against cultural pressure and training to see things in black/white; heaven/hell; right/wrong. I search for the possible third, fourth, fifth truth, story, or path, and try to resist that prison of two boxes. In community, I keep trying.

Where, for you, are there non-binary ways of framing the world? (Your culture, your language, your body, your family or community history?) Where do you find spaces, metaphors, or spiritual reminders that can guide you out of, or continue to keep you out of, either/or thinking?



Advocacy

It's hard to challenge things in the moment. Interrupting a board meeting when perspectives or people are excluded or a false deadline created; offering concerns about the church school curriculum; or suggesting changes to the liturgy the day before the service is offered or filmed? Not easy. It takes time, energy, and accountability to help ourselves recognize and name either/or thinking.

Even then it's uncomfortable at best, and even unsafe for some, especially BIPOC people, because it's breaking the cultural rules of White supremacy. Maybe it's breaking rules in your own culture(s) of origin too. You may find people at the meeting or in the conversation will do their best to drag the conversation back to the old safe and familiar timelines and neat division between two things.

One step might be to identify the either/or false binaries that are most commonly used in your faith community, workplace, school, family, and more. Think through these binaries and the way they tend to appear, using a journal, conversations with those you trust, and more. Work at recognizing them in the moment and reflect on some strategies for challenging them.

Resources

Christi Belcourt is a Métis artist. [On this page of her site](#), scroll down to the last painting, "Our Lives Are in the Land." See if you feel it speaks to the binary of humans/Earth

[White Supremacy Culture: Either/Or](#)
[Challenging White Supremacy Culture](#)

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