

# Lay Down Your Swords and Shields: The Call to Sabbath from the Culture Wars

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Malinda Elizabeth Berry, PhD • Autumn 2024

I tried to open this letter with cheerful words, but my attempts at Pauline mimicry rang hollow, not because there was no love in them, but because they felt dishonest. I can't write this letter without attempting to convey to you how sad I feel. It's not the sadness of depression or disappointment. It's the sadness of exhaustion and lament.

When asked if I think the proverbial glass of water is half-empty or half-full, I'm the kind of person who responds, "All I can say is there's a glass, and there's water in it" — I believe in the practice of withholding judgment, especially when my opinion is being sought to affirm someone else's actions and choices. Battling against the many ways we are asked, and even expected, to choose sides is **hard** work, and today, I am *tired*.

As soon as I acknowledge these feelings, I immediately think of the "Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids" (Matthew 25:1–13). The deeply embedded interpretation to "keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" prompts me to caffeinate my spiritual senses. I know that Sabbath is God's prescription for weary bodies, minds, and souls. But spiritually speaking, I don't know how to stay awake *and* get the rest I need. Even Tricia Hersey's call to resist grid culture through resting and napping is filled with the work of dreaming, visioning, inventing, creating, healing, imagining, resisting, and protesting.<sup>1</sup>

Why didn't Jesus tell us any stories about keeping the Sabbath? Who am I kidding? If he had, we'd probably just argue about what he meant, like we argue about everything else!

I want a Sabbath from arguments! I want a Sabbath from debates! I want a Sabbath from polarization! I want a Sabbath from domination culture! I want a Sabbath from the culture wars!

You may or may not know that I am a Mennonite. We Mennonites are a funky little ecclesial family within the Anabaptist movement (sometimes referred to as the Radical Reformation), and depending on which "cousin" you're talking to, we are considered one of the Historic Peace Churches because of our commitment to biblically based nonviolence. In some places, this manifests as a Progressive social justice consciousness; in other places, it looks like quiet communitarianism focused on flying beneath the radar of the world's Ceasers. The branch of the family tree where I nest is in a denomination that I think of as a mashup of Quakerisms and Mainline Protestantism. In my particular "nest" or "immediate family" (i.e., denomination), Mennonite Church USA, our numbers are dwindling after epic process spirals about sexuality. Those realities have led to theological and cultural realignments creating two new quasi-denominations (Evana Network and LMC), with a third one (Mosaic) expected to form in November. At that point, we will be down to about 40,000 people.<sup>2</sup> One of the things I hate about being part of the Radical Reformation tradition is that "Schism" seems to be our middle name. To say another way, we seem to be very adept at moving away from each other.

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1. Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2022), 57–58, Indiana Digital Library eBook Collection.

2. For context, our denomination headquarters and the campus of our denominational seminary are located in Elkhart, Indiana. The 2022 census puts Elkhart's population at 53,801.

Perhaps this is why my extended ecclesial family has produced a whole passel of conflict mediation specialists, peacebuilders, and thought leaders in the restorative justice movement. We've seen the debilitating illness of horrible conflict in the church up close, and thanks to our tradition of what we call "peace theology," we believe another way is possible. As an academic theologian and ethicist, I work in the spaces between the professional peacemakers (practitioners) and the ordinary folks in congregations.

In its development, the Anabaptist movement did not care much about formal theologizing. Some in our tradition speculate that when you're being hunted down and executed for heresy, you neither have the time for apologetics, dogmatics, and polemics nor are you likely to trust those who use their theological treaties to persecute you. This is one of the reasons we Mennonites are known for our ethics and our particular expression of biblicism: we don't worry so much about preaching the Gospel because we're hyper-focused on living it out, especially the parts where Jesus draws a clear distinction between the way of the sword and the way of the Lamb. This kind of theological innocence is what has animated our commitment to nonviolence for generations.

One idea I often return to is that because the 16th-century Anabaptists rejected infant baptism, the question of Original Sin was different. In their interpretation of Genesis' opening chapters, they found both sin and blessing. Humans fall down, and we get back up — this is how God created us. Learning, growing, choosing, and changing are central theological themes in this story of humanity. And this is what makes me a conscientious objector in the culture wars. Returning to my quip about the glass that's either half-empty or half-full, I don't hold to the theological analog: humans are basically bad or basically good. Humans just are. And there is a lot about who we are and how we are that points us to patterns of domination and the myth of redemptive violence. But this is not the only story.

If we can lay down our weapons long enough, maybe we can experience Sabbath space, where we can tell other stories. Here is one attempt to tell another story.

The Mennonite peacebuilders I know have been studying polarization long before it became the buzzword it is today. They have had plenty of material to work with as the various sites of the various culture wars rage around the world, illuminating important patterns in human nature in the twenty-first century. When it comes to understanding polarization, my primary teacher has been Dr. Betty Pries, a Mennonite scholar-practitioner who runs a consulting firm that helps congregations navigate conflicts, among other things. From the many insights I have gained from Betty's work and wisdom, there are three things I want you to reflect on. First, polarizations arise from naturally occurring polarities. Second, what turns polarities into polarizations is something Betty and others call "diagonal arguments." Third, navigating conflict well requires being able to genuinely see "the problem as the problem," not "people as the problem," by practicing unconditional positive regard.

**Polarization** — Like many of you, I live at the intersection of multiple polarities. A polarity exists when viewpoints that move away from each other rather than toward each other. Betty explains, "While many of our hard conversations involve an either-or problem, a both-and

polarity undergirds most either-or dilemmas.”<sup>3</sup> For example, parenting school-age children is a process marked by many recognizable polarities: public school/private school/homeschool, vaccinate/don’t vaccinate, retributive discipline/restorative discipline, kids will be kids/kids deserve thoughtful formation, sports are awesome/sports are the worst, pro-SEL/anti-SEL — you get the picture. While I aspire to think of all these polarities simply as sites of “creative tension,” the fact is that after acknowledging the other side, there is a lot of pressure (internal and external) to quickly pick a side and then pledge loyalty to it. This leads to diagonal arguments.

**Diagonal Arguments** — Here is what happens when we make diagonal arguments. Imagine you and I are trying to decide what curriculum to use for the youth group’s Bible study series. We begin by each presenting our very different ideas. I identify all the things that make my idea awesome, and your idea painfully limited. Of course, you make your rebuttal by lauding your idea and panning mine. Then we go around again and again and again until one of us gives up and gives in. We were caught in an either-or conversation about a both-and polarity, and the longer we stay in this loop, the more likely we are to shift from genuine disagreement to polarization. To begin to break out of this loop, we have to be willing to both acknowledge the limitations of our own ideas *and* recognize that the other person’s ideas reflect things we *truly* value. When I catch myself making a diagonal argument and open my thinking, I notice a shift in my heart: chagrin gives way to humility, which becomes gratitude. Once again, I have the opportunity to lay down my sword and shield, and affirm myself for sharing who I am and what I have with others. The truth is my idea was good, and yours was too, because we’re both creative thinkers who are passionate about sharing with teenagers the best of what Christianity has to offer. The other truth is that we’re both attached to our ideas because they reflect the kinds of connections we value most: I’m a contemplative nature nut, and you’re an energetic gamer (this is the polarity underlying our either-or conversation).

**Unconditional Positive Regard** — Another way the often subtle shift from disagreement to polarization happens is when our differing opinions about what makes for good Bible study become opinions about whether you’re capable of coming up with ideas that don’t involve devices and screens or queries about when I’m going to join the Amish because I hate digital technology so much. And just like that, the problem we were trying to solve (which Bible study curriculum will we use) isn’t the problem, the other person is the problem. To avoid taking more steps along the pathway to polarization, we can invoke the principle of unconditional positive regard, which Betty borrows from humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers. She writes, “We are more than our differences, and we are more than our arguments. We are, each of us, people worthy of dignity, honor, and respect. If we start there, who knows where our conversations...can take us.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Betty Pries, “April 2022: Transforming Polarized Conversations,” *Credence Newsletter Articles*, April 14, 2022, <https://credenceandco.com/congregations/april-2022-transforming-polarized-conversations-2/>.

4. Pries.