

# Awareness of the Current Cultural Context

Session Eleven

Online 2020-21



 Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA

Courageous, resilient, and faithful leaders for the sake of the world

# Awareness of the Current Cultural Context

## Session Eleven Participant Outcomes:

1. Describe awareness of your perspective in terms of your generation, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, primary relationships identity, culture, etc.
2. Name a polarity in your community and create a process to manage it.
3. Practice dialogue with active listening, inquiry, and empathy.

## Preparation for this Session:

- Read this section of the manual.
- Reflect on the Embodiment/Social Location Elements Worksheet (pp. 5-9).
- Reflect on and be ready to share how your own embodiment influences your understanding of social issues (i.e., health care, climate change, etc.).

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## Session Overview

We are called, not just individually, but also as the Church to proclaim and embody God's love for the sake of the world. We embody God's love in a particular context, at a particular time in history, with particular challenges and opportunities. We currently are practicing ministry in a context of uncertainty, unrest, and division. In this session, we will explore some of our current issues, doing our best to move into Scharmer's "Field 3" – opening our hearts in listening and dialogue. This means that we first need to become aware of our own embodied perspective in how we have been shaped by various factors such as the generation in which we were born, our socio-economic status, our ethnicity, our education, our health, etc. Second, with this awareness of our own perspective, we practice opening our minds to other perspectives, creating space for opening our hearts in inquiry and empathy for dialogue to discern together God's proclamation of love on a particular issue.

## Perspective Awareness

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works; that I know so well.

*Psalm 139:13-14*

Each human being is fearfully and wonderfully made, uniquely gifted with purpose and meaning. People in the majority culture have a tendency of thinking that their perspective is normative. They easily assume that 'me and my' experience of the world mirrors and matches everyone's experience of the world. As we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves, we learn how to hear the stories of others, to find compassion, to build empathy, and form relationship.

In this session, we begin this work by reflecting on our own social location, determined by social constructs that influence how we show up in the world. The list of particular embodiments or social locations and the questions that follow are not exhaustive. Rather, they are a glimpse of some of the factors that make us, us. In order to do this work, find a quiet space. Take time to think through, journal, and identify your particular embodiment. Read the essays to help you get started.

The essays are meant to help you think through your social location. The first two essays reflect physical embodiments – racial awareness and sexual orientation/gender identity. These essays are people's personal stories. Read them with an open mind and an open heart to hear their personal experiences. The other three essays, which come later in the manual, use a person's embodiment to reflect on current social issues. We offer these essays to demonstrate how our social location influences our perspective on the issues swirling around us.

## Systemic Racism by Rev Julie Brooks

Racism is something that has hovered at the periphery of my awareness as a person with “white” skin: I knew it was there, but I didn’t really *know*. My suburban, middle class upbringing in Colorado in the 70s and 80s didn’t bring me into close contact with people of color and so it was easy to ignore an experience of *being* in this country that was different from my own and to tacitly accept stereotypes and assumptions that were implicitly passed along as normal, okay, and inevitable.

As a young person, I traveled to Mexico on mission trips and later, to the Middle East, where my own race and social location were thrown into relief through the eyes of others: Obviously a white American – and therefore an object of both admiration and antagonism; Wealthy – by world standards; Educated – and also naive; Female – and therefore, in places, at a literal disadvantage of having less freedom than a male, for instance, to take a walk by myself. I also learned something else that would stay with me: I am energized by differences and connections across culture and race and other divides, continually awed by the power of our shared humanity. These experiences were a start, at least, for opening my eyes to the problems so deeply embedded in our own society; as well as the vast opportunities.

I am glad to say that I spent a great deal of time in church while growing up, learning that loving neighbor went along with loving Jesus. In the years since – and as I’ve spent even more time with scripture and with God – the gap between the *idea* of love and the *actuality* of love has been dissolving. Through centering prayer and study, I’m adjusting to being on God’s boat instead of trying to fit God onto my own with all my human tendency to sort and judge. From here, I see better where love is lacking; showing up big-time in racially-based prejudice, exclusion, and injustice. I believe it is my call and my responsibility to lean into that which has too long been ignored and perpetuated; to courageously learn and hear and acknowledge my own complicity. Addressing racism and being anti-racist is not optional for people on the spiritual journey; as God seeks to heal the whole world, which includes the neighbor who is being harmed - and the ones who *do* harm.

My practice has included these past months: Reading books and articles; watching youtube and movies; listening to friends, teachers, and also black clergy at Zion Baptist Church in Five Points; teaching a class on race and incorporating it into sermons. The deeply embedded, pervasive, historical practice of degradation and violence toward people with darker skin is something that takes a while to absorb. Note the stories of meritocracy in which presumably it only takes effort to do well; and then acknowledge what it does to be shut out, shut down, put down, incarcerated, violated, and killed; all because of a genetically insignificant matter of skin color that has been called “race” and used to justify a history of slavery and oppression.

We are all in need of healing – which is another fair translation of the Greek word for “salvation.” As a pastor, I see it as my task to share the Good News which frees us and all of creation from the bondage to sin and death. The sin here is like most sin; collective and with a life of its own. It’s also particular. The



Law leads to repentance by revealing the truth of our thoughts and actions creating other's brokenness and our own as well. As Fr. Thomas Keating names it, our essential human struggle, weathered by Jesus in the Wilderness, are three relentless pursuits of "programs for happiness that can never work:" Affection and Esteem; Power and Control; Safety and Security. The overgrown impulse to satisfy these important dimensions of life has run rampant until they become captors of our souls and our communities. Operating out of fear, greed, and the immature need for greatness, we do what contradicts our values. Repenting and changing are necessary for any progress. Addressing racism is a moral imperative for the sake of black and brown bodies, but it is also an opportunity to unearth the neurotic ways of death that pervade human thought and action: That is, it's an opportunity to repent and experience salvation.

I understand the world I live in better now. More and more, I see our connectedness and how injustice doesn't cause suffering for just a few – but for all of us. I will keep seeing and questioning a social system that is set up by the economics of profit, and prone to using and dehumanizing people. Jesus' call to take up the cross and follow gets really real, really fast in the bare light of inequity and injustice as he himself enters into solidarity with all suffering.

### **Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity** by Hanley Ekeren-Moening

I had my first inkling that I was queer when I was fourteen. A common sentiment I've heard from queer folks close to my age is that they first came to accept that they weren't straight, and then subsequently began to question their gender. It was the opposite for me. At fourteen years old, I got smacked in the face with gender dysphoria. I thank the powers that be that I reached adolescence during the internet age. I don't know how I would've made sense of my intense desire to rip my uterus out of my body, or my feelings of being an imposter whenever I was called a girl, had it not been for online forums and Tumblr blogs.

The sheer number of options for naming one's gender was overwhelming, and that I'd never heard these words used in real life made me feel like it was all made up. Of course, gender as a whole is made up, and that doesn't make it less real or valid. But having no one in my life who could relate to the feelings I was having made them feel invalid and made me feel incredibly alone. Through my research on gender, I naturally stumbled into the sexual orientation side of the LGBTQ+ community. Having become completely overwhelmed by the expansive possibilities of gender, my curiosity naturally turned to the question of my sexual orientation. I didn't know what I was, but I knew I wasn't straight or cisgender.

The realization of my queerness came at a strange time, mere months before my family moved from San Diego to a midwestern town of 3000 people. Being a pastor's kid in Southern California hadn't affected me that much. None of my classmates went to my church, and few of them even knew of my dad's vocation. Even without the pressure of being labeled as the pastor's kid, I remember the panic in my chest the first time I told someone, my middle school best friend, that I thought I might be bisexual.



Now in this tiny town, everyone I interacted with knew me as the pastor's kid. I felt a constant sense of being watched and judged. This added a level of pressure to my coming out that I couldn't stand. Now I not only felt alone, I felt like I was harboring a secret. The longer it sat there, the more terrifying the idea of sharing it became. And as time passed, the more opportunities there were for me to encounter the vocal homophobes of the town. While I also know there were some great allies in town, my scared, adolescent ears were fixated on the expressions of hatred toward a group I now knew I belonged to.

I spent the next several years annoyed and frustrated that I couldn't settle on a firm label for either my sexual orientation or my gender identity, before finally accepting that both are fluid. In fact, one can use multiple words for each at the same time. That last part was a game changer for me. I continue to learn about new terms that have been coined and to play with them. It is truly fascinating how we can use language to express our internal universes, and how the creation of new words allows us to view the world from new perspectives.

Recently, I began to more externally present as queer. By that, I mean that I present myself in a way that leads many strangers to assume I'm queer, an assumption I'm happy to take on. Be it my shaved head or my rainbow mask, most people pick up on it. It's an immense privilege to be able to outwardly express my queerness. I am lucky enough to live in a city where I feel safe doing so, in a time where I feel safe doing so.

I am now 23, use they/them pronouns, and identify my sexuality and gender with a myriad of words, some more strongly than others. My *go-to* identifier these days is queer. I like it because it describes both my sexuality and my gender. It leaves room for me to be more specific, but also leaves room for the times when I don't want to be more specific. Above all, it holds space for fluidity, for the reality that sexuality and gender ebb and flow, shifting over time, sometimes subtly and sometimes drastically. Queer is also inherently political. It evokes the rich and often painful history of the LGBTQ+ community. It is defiant, an act of protest. It also speaks to the deep love and comradery queer folks have with each other, and pride we have in who we are.

## Embodiment/Social Location Elements Worksheet

### Age

They say that you are only as old as you feel. That might be true, but we also know that the world pushes back on age in unhelpful ways, telling us that we are either too old or too young to have the right perspective.

- What is your biological age?
- How does your biological age match up with society's expectations of your age?
- What are your primary experiences of being this age?
- How has your experience of becoming this age changed over the last decade?

- How does your age effect your perspective?
- What are your dreams, hopes, and goals for your next ten years?
- As you ponder your current age, how might you open your mind to the gifts and perspectives of other ages?

## Generation

Many social scientists have researched generational theory and helped us to categorize the varied perspectives that result from coming of age at a certain time in history. While generational theory overgeneralizes human experience, it helps us pay attention to world and local events that shape our perspective. For example, 9/11 shaped and continues to shape a generation in many different ways.

- In what year were you born and when did you reach adulthood?
- Geography effects generation. How did the place you grew up influence your experiences of the time you grew up?
- What events or nodal moments shaped your understanding of yourself and the wider world while you were growing up?
- Name three to five world events that have dramatically influenced your perspective of the current world.

## Ethnic Culture and Racial Identity

The concept of race is artificial, and yet our society continues to use this social construct to categorize and separate people. Ethnicity is the real influencer of culture. There is no brown, black, or white culture because there is no unified experience based on melanin. Every one of us holds a different and nuanced story based on our diverse ethnic backgrounds and a variety of generational immigrant progressions. Notice the emotions that emerge as you contemplate your ethnic culture/racial identity. Notice what emotions stir inside of you as you contemplate other ethnic and racial peoples.

- Describe your ethnic identity and how closely you identify with that identity.
- What ethnic heritage surrounds you?
- Where did you grow up? What country? What sub-culture in that country (rural, suburban, urban, other)?
- How old were you when you became aware of your racial identity? What is your story of awareness?
- Are you the same race as your parents and other family members?
- When have you experienced being a part of the racial majority or minority community?
- How does your racial identity influence your sense of power and security in the wider world?
- How did you think about your racial identity as you were growing up? How do you think about your racial identity today?
- Did you experience cultural affirmation or dissonance from the world around you?
- How did the cultural values you experienced in your family of origin form your personal values?

- In what ways does your current culture connect you to others and/or keep you isolated from others?
- Who and how are major decisions made for you?
- How is conflict managed in your family system?

## Socio-Economic Status

We are told culturally that "middle-class" is good; so, people want to be in it, even if they don't fit the classification. Sociologists delineate the socio-economic classes as 1) poor, 2) lower middle class, 3) middle class, 4) upper middle class, and 5) upper class/rich. Each stratum has its own culture, imposed values, and broadening/limiting of choices.

- What socio-economic bracket were you born into?
- What were the characteristics of your socio-economic status?
- How did this reality inform and/or define your current reality and your current worldview?
- How has your socio-economic situation changed over time?
- Did you make conscious efforts to change your economic reality or did you unconsciously arrive at your current reality?
- Do you experience yourself making choices and/or decisions that protect and/or jeopardize your current reality?
- How has your socio-economic culture limited your choices?
- How does your socio-economic status affect your spiritual life, your mental health, and your physical ability?

## Education

As we know from the history of the last 100 years in this country, education plays a key role in our identity and how we understand the world around us.

- What is the highest level of education you have completed? What about your parents? Your grandparents?
- What were the messages you received about education? What were your family's assumptions (ex: gender) about education?
- As you think through your family's history, what is a story that describes your relationship to education. What value did your parents/family ascribe to education?
- What emotions come when you ponder how education levels inform your view of other people?
- Name both a proud moment and a moment of struggle in your education.

## Career and Occupation

We tend to socialize, separate ourselves, and form opinions and biases based on our work and profession. Factory workers hang out with factory workers; doctors with doctors; teachers with teachers. Our worldview is significantly influenced by the people with whom we spend time.

- What career or occupation do you most identify with?
- Are you currently working in this field? Why or why not?
- What level of satisfaction do you experience in this career or occupation?
- How does this field of employment affect your worldview; positively, negatively, or neutrally?
- How does or doesn't your current occupation encourage emotional and spiritual growth?
- Does your current occupation allow you creative space to live into your core values?

## Primary Relationships Identity

Often, when we are asked who we are, we reference a primary relationship. I am Ben's mother, Charles' daughter; we know that these relationships change over time. Death, divorce, or other new chapters in our lives shift and change these primary relationships.

- Name the three to five primary relationships that most define who you are: Parent? Spouse? Sibling? Best-friend? Cousin?
- How have these relationships changed over time?
- How have these relationships defined you? How have these relationships nurtured and sustained you? How might these relationships have limited or suppressed who you really are?
- Have you recently lost a primary relationship through divorce or death? How has your grieving process influenced your perception of yourself and others?

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

We each have a particular sexual orientation and gender identity core to who we are as human beings. Yet, throughout much of human history, our cultures have normed gender on a binary system of male and female with a hierarchy that placed male above female. These assumptions no longer hold as true and valid in defining our experience. The same is true for sexual orientation; much of human history has normed heterosexual attraction and repressed other orientations. Take some time to ponder your sexual orientation, your gender identity, and your way of gender expression.<sup>1</sup> Notice the emotions that come for you as you engage in this pondering.

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions from the Human Rights Campaign:

**Sexual orientation:** An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. Note: an individual's sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity.

**Gender identity:** One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

**Gender expression:** External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, body characteristics or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.

- Name your current sexual orientation and gender identity.
- When did you become aware of your sexual orientation and gender identity?
- How was your sexual orientation celebrated? Affirmed? Diminished? Shamed?
- How was your gender identity and gender expression celebrated? Diminished?
- What messages did you receive about your sexual orientation?
- How does your sexual orientation impact your worldview?
- What messages did you receive from the world around you about your gender identity and expression?
- How does your gender identity and expression impact your worldview?

## Mental, Physical, and Emotional Health

Our bodies and minds are the vessels that carry us throughout life. Health and disease dramatically impact our understanding and experience of the world.

- Were you healthy as a child? Did you experience times of physical or mental struggle?
- In your family of origin, how did the health of others effect your own well-being?
- How was death discussed and dealt with in your family of origin?
- Is abuse or trauma (car accidents, major surgeries, rape) a part of your story?
- Disability can be physical, mental, or cognitive. How has disability been a part of your story?
- How have limitations or disability influenced your capacity for empathy and compassion?
- How has your lack of limitation or disability influenced your capacity for empathy and compassion?

## Religion

For many of us inside and outside the Church, religion has played a significant role in forming our identity both positively and negatively.

- How would you define the religious identity of your family of origin?
- How did the home in which you grew up inform your concept of God and creation? Were these positive, negative, or neutral images or concepts?
- Has your religious affiliation changed or grown over time?
- How do your current religious beliefs inform your perception of the world?
- Do your religious beliefs contribute to forming inside/outside groups? Do your religious beliefs encourage you to expand your sense of inclusion?



## Essays on Current Issues

### Climate Change by Hannah Harman

I'm one of those rare "Colorado Natives." I grew up playing outside ALL the time. And for as long as I can remember (as my mother would say), I have literally been 'addicted' to the outdoors. My life has been shaped by the four absolutely remarkable seasons that we get to enjoy here in Colorado, and these distinct seasons have served as time markers for some of the most pivotal experiences of my life. The thrill of skiing and the tranquility of snowshoeing in vast, open meadows or densely packed forests, the playfulness of building snowmen/women and the anticipation of catching snowflakes on my tongue during the crisp, cool, yet SUNNY winters of Colorado to the fresh excitement of green grasses and new flowers and a return to longer days and spring nights spent playing soccer in the backyard. From camping and hiking to playing in the sprinklers and crawling on my hands and knees looking for worms and snakes during the summers to the raking of leaves and the awareness of the hurried stillness of the forests as the animals begin to prepare for what inevitably comes after the colored leaves of fall have come to a rest on the ground below. My life has, for as long as I can remember, always moved in time and rhythm to the changing seasons of the Earth Herself. I knew myself best in relation to these predictable cycles.

And yet, this rhythm and this movement that I have always taken for granted, is on the verge of disappearing as the playful summer sun starts to become more oppressive and threatening and as the relatively few intolerably cold days of winter start to become more prolonged, more pronounced, and more demanding, and as the bridge seasons of spring and fall start to disappear completely. And, all of a sudden, I'm starting to feel lost, as if I don't know who I am anymore when not in relation to the rhythm and movement of those beloved seasons from which I have formed my most life changing memories. I'm starting to feel lost, and if I'm honest, I'm starting to feel scared and out of control for what seems to be happening all around me. And on my worst days, I feel helpless and hopeless for what seems like the inevitable progression of this downward spiral. And then, by the grace of God Herself, I am pulled out of my own self-pity by the words of Edward Hale a Unitarian clergyman and author in the 19th century:

**I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything; but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.**

*I am only one.* Yes that is true. But **STILL I AM ONE.** To believe that I am so small and insignificant that my own humanity no longer matters is a sin. I am one, and there is power in this reclaiming of oneself. *I cannot do everything.* Yes, this is also true, even though our culture tries to convince us of the contrary. But **STILL I CAN DO SOMETHING.** One of the lies that I tell myself frequently and that I struggle to dismantle the most is this: 'If I can't do everything, then it's not worth it to do something because what's the point?'. Where does this corrupt, false, and evil belief come from? And unfortunately, I know I'm not alone in this idea. But the way out of this searing thought for me is this reminder: Precisely **BECAUSE I cannot do everything,** I will hold myself even more accountable for not refusing *to do the something that I can do.* I AM ONE and I CAN and WILL do the *something(s)* that I can.

What does this look like in my own life? My *something* takes many forms: reusing all my plastic bags by washing them in between uses, not letting the water run while I brush my teeth or do the dishes, truly living by the motto ‘if it’s yellow, let it mellow. If it’s brown, flush it down’ when deciding whether or not to flush the toilet, trying to only shop at thrift stores for me and my family and re-use as many items as possible, graciously accepting hand me downs of all kinds and asking for these gifts from our community, only providing actual dishes at my wedding rehearsal instead of disposable plastic ware and paper plates even though I knew it would take more time and effort to do so, utilizing reusable diapers for my new baby to prevent a ‘million’ dirty diapers from being thrown into a landfill which will take another million years to breakdown, turning off ALL the lights in the house that I am not currently needing to use, leaving ‘no trace’ in the wilderness and encouraging and teaching others to do the same, being mindful of how much time I am spending in the car driving when possible, putting on water-saving faucet heads in the shower even when it doesn’t match (ha!), walking in climate marches, modeling by example and using my words to encourage others’ awareness when my example isn’t enough, reminding people that we are each ONE and have a duty and responsibility to each do our ‘something(s)’ that we can, and the list goes on.

I am far from perfect. I have much to learn when it comes to understanding my own individual footprint and impact on the Mother. I can be a better advocate and a more relentless protector. AND, I want to learn, and I’m willing to discover the hard things about myself in order to make a change.

I am scared, and at times, I feel hopeless. But I am also motivated and inspired and hopeful that while I am ONE, I am ultimately not alone in this desire, and as a WHOLE, we can make sure that the seasons, and our Mother Herself, remain intact and beautiful, healthy and alive for generations to come. Will you join me? Will you do the *some things* that you can and be willing to continually search for more? Our spaceship, our Mother’s Body, is too beautiful and important to wait any longer. The time is now. Our moment has come. And by the Grace of God, we will answer the call. Thanks be to God!

### Health Care by Peter Severson

As a kid, I understood that health care encompassed all the places and people that kept me healthy. If I was sick, I took medicine; when I had a check-up, I went to the doctor. I knew that sometimes people got especially sick and went to a hospital, which is where my mom worked. She was part of a laboratory that helped diagnose diseases so that doctors could figure out how to treat their patients. My parents were continuously employed when I was a child and always had health insurance coverage, and because all the services I received were covered by them, I never had to think about the cost. Even when I was in high school, getting a physical exam for a sports season or receiving vaccinations to travel abroad, I never thought about it beyond verifying the correct policy number to the provider. I was fortunate to grow up without chronic health conditions that required heavy use of the health care system, so my interactions were generally limited to wellness check-ups and routine exams.



I also grew up in a city with a well-developed health care industry. Even from a young age, I knew that the economy of Sioux Falls, a small city on the upper Great Plains, was driven by the two major hospital systems in town. Many of my friends' parents worked for one of the hospitals. Health care is such an integral human need that Sioux Falls has long been a very economically stable place to live due to the consistent demand for medical services.

Around the time I graduated from college, a major debate about health care was brewing in Congress. The resulting legislation – the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare – was the first time I had a reason to think critically about the health care system in America. I made several good friends in college who were from other countries, and their perspective also shaped my burgeoning understanding of what made sense – and didn't – in our system. After graduating, I went to southern Mexico to serve as a missionary with the ELCA for a year, and in that time, I marveled at some of the distinctions I saw in a foreign country. My parents' insurance didn't work at the local community clinic, obviously, but I could still see a doctor and get medication to treat a stomach virus for less than 200 pesos (around \$15 USD).

Once I passed the age of 26, the limit under which Obamacare would allow me to be covered by my parents' insurance, I came to understand the insurance system more directly. I am fortunate to be employed full-time in an industry that provides health care benefits, while at the same time seeing more fully the way in which the profit motive distorts the cost infrastructure of health care services. One winter, I came down with a particularly bad influenza virus, I found myself needing urgent care on a Friday night, but the only open facility nearby was a "free-standing emergency room." Even with my insurance, I ended up paying \$1,200 out of pocket for treatment.

I have become deeply critically aware of how the insurance industry is able to distort the pricing of health care services, as well as the ways in which this system leaves out people who happen to be unemployed or under-employed in a job without insurance coverage. It makes no sense to me that we wouldn't aggressively pursue a single-payer system to simultaneously cover every person, drive down costs through the negotiating power of the single payer, and enshrine health care access as a right, rather than a privilege, in the United States. The powerful moneyed interests that are arrayed against this will take significant political willpower to defeat. For now, I'm not holding my breath, but I remain committed to pursuing this vision through every collective action I support.

### **Congregational Response to the Current Pandemic** by Rev Kristin Schultz

I am a pastor at All Saints Lutheran Church in Albuquerque, NM. I grew up in Albuquerque, and credit the beautiful, wild landscape and multiculturalism for much of my spiritual formation. I am white; my dad is Danish-American, and my mom European/Lutheran midwestern. I never considered our family wealthy, but looking back I can see we were upper-middle class, and able to enjoy such luxuries as traveling regularly. My parents talked about how carefully they had lived when they were first married, saving all of my mom's salary, and they modeled generosity in financial giving. I had a privileged education – a private preparatory high school, private Lutheran college, and seminary, without incurring any debt.

All of these things have had a role in shaping the way I have responded, personally and professionally, to the crisis of COVID-19 and the related, rising awareness of racial injustice in this country. First, I will name my immediate response of over functioning and my own expectation that I pivot, learn, and immediately offer everything possible to my congregation in terms of excellence of digital worship and faith formation. This is an expression of my regular tendency towards perfectionism, which I think was formed in school when I got used to having external accolades for what I did. I constantly wrestle with a sense that if I just try hard enough and pour enough energy into it, I can keep All Saints going by my own effort of will alone. Reading Friedman’s recognition of the treadmill we can get stuck on, simply doing what we’ve always done harder and harder even when it’s not working, was significant for me. With COVID, the reframing of the situation was external and imposed, but the “trying harder and harder to make it work” continues.

Another response I’ve had to the pandemic is a deep sense of responsibility, both personally and as a congregational leader, to be aware of and reach out to people in need. Alongside my privileged upbringing was an awareness of the very different cultures and social situations other people experience. My parents came to NM to teach in Navajo schools, and my dad spent his whole career in Native American education. I have been blessed to be able to travel widely, in developing and developed countries; travel is a part of the fabric of my family. Recognition of the dignity of every person and respect for different cultures was a given in my house. My own response in the past six months has involved increasing my family’s financial giving to local organizations, showing up for protests and rallies for racial justice here in Albuquerque, and volunteering at a local food bank and as an election monitor.

All Saints is a congregation of older white members, mostly retired, some professional, and few have seen their income significantly affected by COVID. I have challenged us to find ways to recognize that many in our city are in much more devastating situations, and to respond financially. For instance, a request came in the summer to help fund a position at a local food pantry, where many of the volunteers were no longer serving due to the virus; All Saints made a generous donation. Alongside that direct response, I have been intentional in lifting up racial disparity and injustice in sermons and prayers.

Finally, I think my upbringing and social situation affect how I’ve responded to pandemic restrictions. My upbringing and my faith cause me to be attentive to the social support of vulnerable people. My education taught me to trust science, research, and medical expertise. For me, the response of attending to the well-being of the wider community by following public health recommendations seems obvious. I am fortunate that much of the leadership in my congregation has shared these views – not only that we need to protect our most vulnerable members, but that we need to model responsible leadership in the community.



## Moving from Debate to Dialogue

Realizing that we all come from different perspectives, once we are aware of and own our perspective (self-differentiation), we can then open our minds to differing perspectives, and move into a space of sharing, listening, and inquiring. We can pool our interconnected perspectives, values, and meaning to gain a new collective perspective which has potential to connect us to God’s perspective and to co-create something new. This space of pooling our interconnected perspectives is dialogue. Dialogue is defined as “the free flow of meaning between two or more people.”<sup>2</sup> Moving into that space requires that we open our minds in debate – stating our differences, without trying to “win.” We can then move into opening our hearts with inquiry and empathy to dialogue.

With the complex and emotional issues we face today, it is crucial that we follow the path of self-differentiation, debate (stating perspectives without emotional attachment), and create space for dialogue utilizing active listening, inquiry, story-telling, and empathy skills.

Since the context in which we look at these issues is fairly polarized, we will apply the “Polarity Management Tool” as a way to help us clarify the positive and shadow side of these differing perspectives.

### Polarity Management

Today we find ourselves living in a deeply polarized society over many, many issues. As people of God, called into community to embody God’s love, we need to model something more life-giving for the sake of the world. Polarized perspectives spill over into our faith communities and our ministries. Ideological and political polarities influence people and can drive wedges between siblings in Christ. Learning how to have tough conversations about issues affecting ministries (e.g., immigration, homelessness, gun violence, mental illness, and anti-racism) can help us to be more effective in our embodiment and proclamation of God’s love.

In Session 6, we introduced “Ladder of Inference” which described a fast-moving internal process of getting hooked which culminates in solidifying noble certitudes. We quickly make assumptions and assign motives to people who disagree with us. Faith communities are great places to begin practicing and learning how to manage polarizing views. Therefore, Polarity Management is a tool that can be used to begin to see the upside of someone else’s perspective and even the downside of our own perspective.

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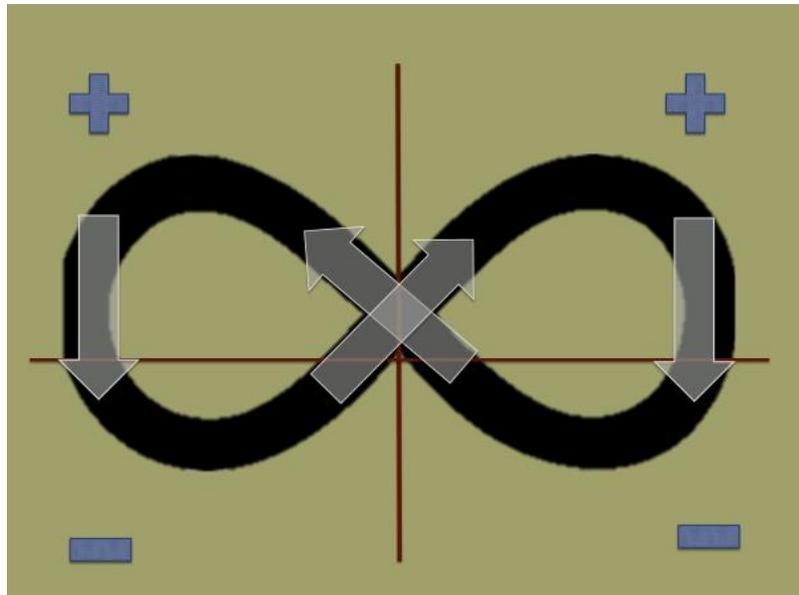
***One important note: a particular physical attribute such as gender, race, sexual orientation, disability is not debatable or up for discussion. There are no downsides to who a human being is and how a human being is embodied.***

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<sup>2</sup> Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler, *Crucial Conversations*, p. 23.

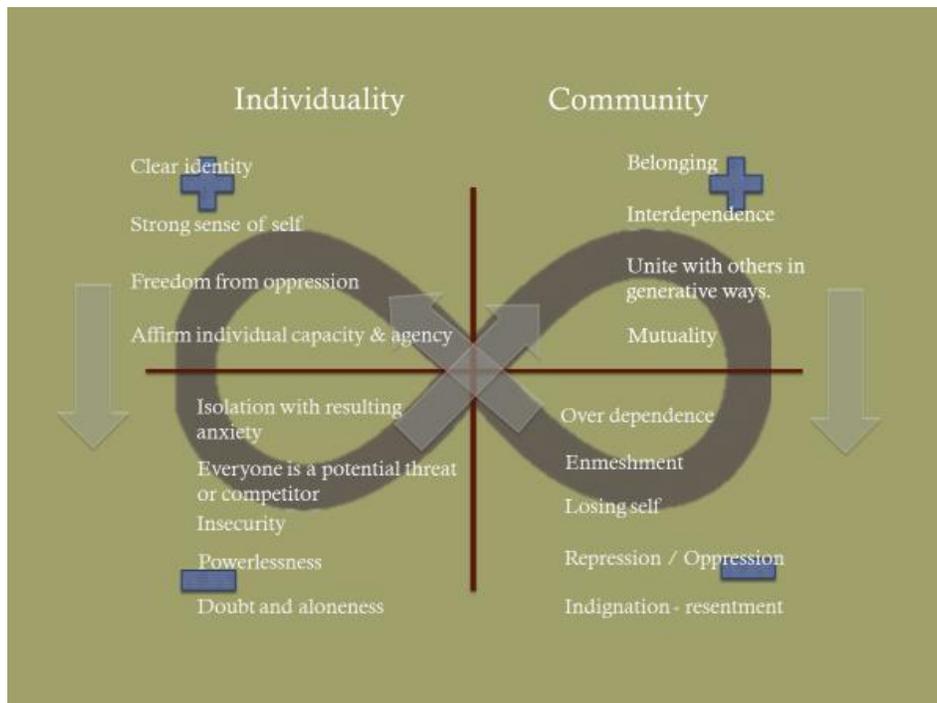
Polarity Management can be used to name a polarity in a group and find ways to manage it together. The process in a group, like a congregation council, begins with displaying a piece of newsprint. (See two diagrams)

Draw four quadrants with one side of the polarity listed on one column and the other polarity listed on the opposite column (i.e., conservative/liberal, individuality/community, faith budget/balanced budget, formal "high church"/informal "low church", etc.) The group then lists the positive aspects of each polarity in the top rows and the negative aspects of each polarity in the bottom rows. The group then discusses how they might stay in the positive sides of each



respecting the differences of one another. The reality is, however, that it is more of a dance as we move from a positive quadrant on one side to the negative on the same side. Then, hopefully catching ourselves, we move to the positive quadrant of the other side to the negative quadrant of the same, then back to the other side.

An example using Individuality and Community:



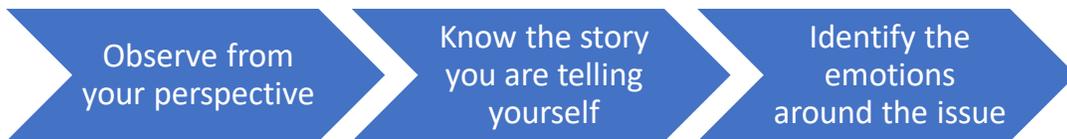
Another way this tool works with a deeply polarized issue is to visualize how the negative or shadow side of an issue is often projected onto the other side of the issue, thus demonizing them. For example, conservatives who value stability and tradition project their fear of losing identity onto progressives. Progressives who value innovation and change project their fear of getting stuck in unhelpful patterns of the past onto conservatives. By walking through a process of Polarity Management, both sides will begin to see the helpful and unhelpful aspects of both sides. When innovation becomes the norm, stability is lost. When stability becomes the norm, new ideas and changing for the sake of the future is lost. Polarity Management allows us to respect and honor the gifts of both sides.

## Opening Hearts in Dialogue

Creating the space for dialogue allows people to participate in an open flow of conversation involving differing perspectives, perhaps even conflicting perspectives, and know that each perspective has value as the group co-creates an emerging future. Creating that space means sharing and listening on several levels: sharing and listening from what we know, inquiring and being interested in other perspectives, engaging empathy and appreciation for other perspectives, and listening to God.

### 1. Sharing and Listening from What We Know

Get clear about what we know and the story that goes with it. Clarity around our own knowing gives us the foundation to listen and receive what someone else knows. This crucial step is especially important when issues are highly charged emotionally. The authors of the book *Crucial Conversations* break the process down this way:



Retrace your path ←

It is important in dialogue to retrace our path from the emotions back to the data we know informed our perspective. Sharing our perspective with the awareness of our story and emotions keeps us in the rational part of our brains where we can think, listen, and inquire about differing views. Some helpful steps are:

- Notice your behavior
- Get in touch with your feelings
- Analyze your stories, watching for where you default to
  - being victimized,
  - blaming a villain, or
  - being helpless
- Get back to the observable data



The best practitioners of dialogue “find a way to first slow down and then take charge of their path back to the facts.”<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Inquiring and Being Interested in Other Perspectives

Secondly, we need to invite others to share their perspectives and stories. Listening skills are important to build trust in the group. Be present to others as they are sharing. Notice body language and what is not being said. Ask questions to find out more about how they arrived at their perspective, their story, their emotions, their path. Paraphrase to indicate that you understand and that they are valued. Compare perspectives without judgment. Build on what others have said. “Ask questions that can turn an either/or choice into a search for the all-important and ever elusive AND”.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Engaging Empathy and Appreciation for Other Perspectives

When others begin to tell their stories, we need to employ the empathy skills we learned in Session 8:

- **Perspective Taking:** This skill is about seeing the world as others see it and not just as we see it. We need to take the stance of being a learner about another point of view rather than a “knower” of the truth as we see it. The skill is to learn to ask more about another person’s perspective.
- **Nonjudgmental:** Being nonjudgmental ultimately means we need to be aware of our own places where we get hooked in judging others. We need to catch ourselves in the tendency to judge.
- **Understand another person’s feelings:** To understand another’s feelings, we actually need to begin with understanding our own feelings and becoming emotionally literate. Helping someone name what they are feeling helps us understand what is going on and how we can connect.
- **Communicate your understanding of another person’s feelings:** Check in with the other person to make sure that you are understanding correctly what they are trying to say. Be open to not getting their emotions exactly right. By asking clarifying questions, you may even help them to better understand what is going on for them. Communicating our understanding by naming a feeling we think the other person is feeling may need some deeper understanding on our part of what that means for that particular person. Be a learner by asking more about what is happening for the other person involved.
- **Mindfulness:** Keep the emotions balanced by not minimizing them or exaggerating them.

## 4. Listening to God

While we will cover this fourth step in listening more extensively in Session 13, creating a holy space of listening is important in dialogue. Knowing that we are all beloved of God and have the indwelling Holy Spirit as a guide allows us to listen for God in one another’s perspectives.

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<sup>3</sup> *Crucial Conversations*, p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> *Crucial Conversations*, p. 46.

Beginning, stopping periodically for, and ending with prayer and/or silence to listen more deeply are appropriate ways to keep us grounded for holy dialogue.

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