



HO

Creating Connections  
in Divisive Times



LY CHAOS

Amanda Henderson

“Our best hope as we navigate the realities of a divided and highly polarized world is to find a love, listen, and collaborate across faith and politics not just despite our differences but because we know we need each other. Amanda Henderson is the perfect voice for these tumultuous times. With on the ground experience and the kind of leadership we desperately need for a better future, she offers us tangible ways to do our own inner work, bridge divides, and embody healthy change our world desperately needs. *Holy Chaos* is the perfect book for individuals and communities who want to not only learn but transform that learning into action.” —Kathy Escobar, co-pastor of The Refuge and author of *Practicing: Changing Yourself to Change the World*

“I wish I could go back twenty years in time and give myself a copy of Amanda Henderson’s beautiful new book, *Holy Chaos*. It would have saved me so many mistakes. It would have inspired me to take worthwhile risks. It would have comforted me when the work of peace-making and justice-seeking seemed terribly hard. I’m so glad this book is now available for you, because we need you, right now, to become an agent in the holy work of building connections in these divisive times.” —Brian D. McLaren, author/speaker/activist

“Amanda Henderson is a wise and generous teacher. She draws from her own experiences as pastor, activist, and (most importantly) family member to show us all that every moment is an opportunity for building relationships. In these fractured times, no one is more cherished than someone who can help us put the pieces back together. I am blessed to know her and learn from her.” —Jack Moline, president, Interfaith Alliance

“Gracefully written, this book is a documented guide that leads its readers through a mix of religion and politics, fear and love, diversity and unity, poetry and prose, diversity and cooperation, defeat and joy, surprisingly opening readers’ minds to the insightful interaction of what at first glance seem to be contradictions. With unique skill, the author draws from multiple religions not to highlight differences or peddle ideologies but to introduce life-enhancing wisdom helpful for everybody.” —C. Welton Gaddy, president emeritus, Interfaith Alliance; pastor emeritus, Northminster Church; host, *State of Belief* radio program

“There are many ways to live our lives; by far the most powerful and dangerous is to live vulnerably. And this is precisely why *Holy Chaos* is both powerful and dangerous. Amanda not only invites us toward vulnerability but makes herself vulnerable on every page of this book. In doing so, she invites us to live this kind of life, and reveals this is fertile soil for us to come together, across our pain and difference, to pursue peace and justice.” —Michael Hidalgo, lead pastor, Denver Community Church, author of *Changing Faith: Questions, Doubts and Choices about the Unchanging God*

“If you have ever experienced chaos in your world, community, family, or your own heart, Amanda Henderson’s wise book is for you. She offers no easy answers, rather telling stories about her own and others’ experiences and inviting reflection on the holiness of our messy lives. *Holy Chaos* is a necessary book for these divisive times.” —Jane E. Vennard, spiritual director and author of *Fully Awake and Truly Alive: Spiritual Practices to Nurture Your Soul*

“Amanda Henderson’s *Holy Chaos* is a powerful guide for people of faith who are perplexed by the challenges of our age and wondering how we might respond in impactful ways. Drawing on her stories and expertise as a pastor and community organizer, Henderson has written a book chock-full of practical insights and provocative invitations to create holy chaos in our communities to bring about the healing and redemption that our world so desperately longs for. This book is required reading for every community of faith seeking to make an impact in their world!” —Brandan Robertson, lead pastor of Mission Gathering Christian Church, San Diego, and author of *True Inclusion: Creating Communities of Radical Embrace*

“Never has the release of a book been so well timed. As people of faith navigate the turbulent waters of our nation’s politics, it is helpful to have a guide that can bring us safely into harbor without sacrificing our souls. Amanda Henderson has not only studied the waters, but has braved them herself, leaping head first into the deep end of faith and politics. Whether she is in the capitol in a clergy collar standing against unjust systems or in a T-shirt and jeans passing out PBJ’s to our homeless brothers and sisters, Rev. Henderson lives her faith. Read *Holy Chaos*, and you will be better at living yours as well.” —Jerry Hershops, founder of AfterHours Denver, author of *Last Call and Rogue Saints*

# HOLY CHAOS

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in Divisive Times

**Amanda Henderson**



**chalice  
press**

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For Kyle,  
Mia, Faith, & Ryan  
For our little space in the world  
where we learn how to grow,  
how to struggle,  
how to experience joy and laughter  
in the midst of it all  
—while loving each other *still*.



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# Prelude

## In the Midst

The morning after the 2016 presidential election, I sat, like so many others, feeling shock and deep concern for the future of our country and for my children. That same morning my father was scheduled for surgery. I was to meet my parents at the hospital two miles from my house at 8:00 a.m. I knew my parents were happy about the election results; they had the hats to prove it. I was heartbroken. I didn't understand how my mother, a strong independent woman who has always judged a man's character by his marital fidelity and treatment of women (to the point of refusing to watch movies with stars who have mistreated their wives), could vote for a person with such a horrific track record with women. I was baffled that my father, a life-long computer and science guy who values facts, could give a pass to the lies and science denial coming from the new President. Throughout the campaign season, we had spent many hours together in crowded hospital rooms, rotating between uncomfortable chairs and a pull-out bed. We had unfortunately gotten into heated debates about presidential politics, and I was not interested in reliving that tension on this day. On this painful morning I knew I needed to bracket my emotions about the election and focus on caring for my parents by being present and compassionate.

So when I awoke, I rolled over and sent my mother a text message letting her know I was upset about the election, was not ready to talk about it, and instead wanted to focus my energy on Dad's healing. My parents respected my wishes; they, too, felt

singularly focused on my Dad's surgery. So, we sat together in the waiting room ignoring the political headlines on the covers of magazines scattered on coffee tables and glancing past the four televisions showing multiple news stations replaying the election results from the previous night. We laughed about how the grandkids had hoped that Papa's surgery could have excused them from school that day, and we called my sister to let her know we would be heading in to see the doctor soon. We made a few jokes about the fact that my dad had had the good luck to be diagnosed with a disease with a name that sounded straight out of *Star Trek*—carcinoid cancer. Two hours later, they wheeled him back; my mom and I waved to him as he went into the surgery room, and we hugged to reassure ourselves that all would be well. It was. He came out of surgery an hour later. Doctors had removed the small tumor, and he would now rest for the evening, a rhythm to which we had unfortunately become accustomed.

Later that night I returned home, still reeling with the emotions of all that was stirring personally and politically. I wondered what the election would mean for the communities I care about personally and the people for whom I advocate daily in my work as Executive Director of the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado.

For the past five years I have been working to bring people together from multiple religious traditions to advocate on the basis of our shared values for human rights and equality. I am an ordained minister and a mom to three teenagers. I have been married for more than twenty years and love our neighborhood and community with all my heart. I experience joy through running, raising animals, growing plants and gardens, and spending time with friends. I love all of the people in my life fiercely. I also spend time each day standing with marginalized communities, bringing people together, and advocating for systemic transformation.

My days are typically filled with meetings: meeting with Muslim communities to counter Islamophobia, getting to know immigrant families who are working to establish community, and ensuring that women's reproductive rights and health are protected. On this particular day I just kept thinking about the many people I love and for whom I care who would be affected by the proposed policies and divisive rhetoric of the new President. I thought of my friend Jeanette, who was already living in a sanctuary to avoid

deportation after more than twenty years raising her children in this country. I thought of my friend Paula, who would be vulnerable to discrimination and have less legal protection as a transgender woman. And I thought of my children, who would inherit the long-term consequences of diminished environmental protections and courts stacked with justices who were against many of the concerns of everyday people and especially against women's reproductive freedom.

Yet as I wallowed in grief, I realized I was not alone. This is how most of the world has lived for most of history. Rarely are leaders on the side of the people. Quite often, there are radically different views and experiences within societies and even within individual families. In the United States, people of color, immigrants, Native people, and any other marginalized group have rarely felt safe, seen as valuable by those in power, or free to thrive. And yet, despite the uncertainty and chaos, people build resilience, speak the truth, work for healing, fight for change, and, most importantly, love one another and create space for joy and celebration.

Over the past four years since that 2016 election, the deep wounds in our country, our communities, and even our families have been on full display. Sometimes it seems we are living in different worlds depending on to what news we listen or with what circle of friends we surround ourselves. I feel real concern about the divisiveness in rhetoric, about the policies that marginalize people and tear families apart, and about the realization that the only way through all of this is to stand fiercely for human dignity and to build relationships with people whose views differ substantially from my own.

This is one of the more chaotic and unprecedented times in our US history. When I wrote this book, I imagined the chaotic and unprecedented time would be related to the impending 2020 presidential election. However, we have a turn of events that has created division in ways that are unique to this moment. As I send this book for publishing, we are under a "shelter in place order" to try to stop the *coronavirus pandemic*. As this virus sweeps across the world, we have seen over a million people infected and the global economy come to a halt. At this moment more than 20,000 people have died in the United States, a number that is expected to grow to 100,000 to 200,000 people. While so often our reaction

to times of crisis is to *gather*, to hold one another, to share meals and connection, this time the response requires *physical distance*. In order to love our neighbor, we must stay in our own house. In order to care for the most vulnerable among us, we must assure that medical providers have what they need, and the rest of us must simply stay in place to stop the spread. This goes against all of my instincts to run toward the pain, physically.

Unlike pivotal moments of shared pain, such as the attacks of September 11, 2001, or school shootings, or the many wars of our history, this is not a tragedy born out of hate and violence. Unlike natural disasters that primarily impact people in one physical location, this virus is taking lives on every corner of the earth. This is a biological tragedy that spares no one. While some are more vulnerable physically, and others are feeling the severe pain of this time financially in exponential ways, ultimately the virus knows no bounds of race, gender, nationality, or social location. A virus that most likely started in a market on the other side of the planet has reminded us that we are all impacted by one another. No one is separate. For better or worse, through sickness and health, richer or poorer, *we are in this together*.

While the stories in this book most often include physical presence, we are learning how to connect without being in proximity to one another. We are finding ways to support our neighbors that involve dropping bags of groceries on porches *after wiping down with Clorox wipes*. We are pushing our political leaders to prioritize those without homes who are crowded into shelters, and to refuse to fall to Darwinian notions of survival of the fittest when we are building public health directives. Parents are slowing down and learning how to support children's schooling from home. Teachers are staying up late, learning new technology, and ensuring that the kids whom they normally care for in the classroom are receiving much needed food and support at home. Faith communities are rallying to learn to conduct Easter services online and to hold Zoom Seder and Iftar meals. As we heed the call to stay home, we are not staying apart. We are finding ways to *connect* in the midst of this time of physical division. As my family stands in the kitchen cooking together, grieving losses one moment, and laughing at a funny movie line, Tiktok, or meme the next, I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the time we would

not have otherwise had. There are surely moments when we are finding the *Holy* in the midst of this *chaos*.

Throughout this book, I place this time of ours in context, religiously and politically, and dive deep into the very personal realities and struggles of finding a way forward in multiple contexts with integrity and *love*. I dig into the history of the interactions between religion and politics to help understand from where some of our fears and old patterns come. From the trenches, I share stories of getting it *wrong*, and getting it *right*. As I send this for print, in the midst of coronavirus, I am struggling to see how anything that was relevant before is relevant now. But the truth is, the need to create space for connection crosses time and context. We continue to be impacted by religion and politics and we continue to navigate finding connection in the midst of divisions. In everything I write here, my goal is to spark our imaginations as we move forward together and begin to wonder what might happen if we brought our full loving selves into the difficult, holy, and chaotic political spaces of life.

I realize we are also each in the midst of the chaos of daily life even when there is not a pandemic. Here was the scene when I initially wrote this Prelude: I am currently sitting in a chair, next to my bookshelves, with a big dog half by my side and half on my lap. Three teenagers crisscross through the room, interrupting my clear and (of course!) profound thoughts to complain about a teacher or cry about a friend. My husband stops as he walks through and asks who is picking up kids from school tomorrow and reminds me that our son has a basketball tournament this weekend. We need groceries and toilet paper, and it looks like chocolate milk was spilled on my son's nightstand—at least a week ago. I have twenty baby chicks I am raising in the garage, two jobs I am sure I am neglecting, and a world outside that frequently feels completely overwhelming. I often feel scattered and disoriented as I move from one world to another. This week, as I was about to walk into the State Capitol to testify on a bill to end the death penalty in Colorado, I was informed I was wearing mismatched shoes.

Each day monumental issues with life-and-death consequences progress through the Colorado legislature or pop up on the latest news alert. Each day I wrestle with the realities of white privilege and systemic racism, which I feel in my bones. I am deeply concerned

about our society's divisions around critical issues of sexuality, reproductive rights, racism, the environment, immigration, islamophobia and antisemitism, economic inequality, poverty, homelessness, gun violence, mass consumerism, and more. Each and every day I wonder how I can find my place in the daily work to dismantle these toxic realities, and each day I wrestle with how to love my own extended family, particularly those with radically different views—such as my parents—and how to find the time to connect with my neighbors in the midst of it all.

Life is chaotic.

Life is also holy.

I have come to believe that finding peace in the midst of the chaos is what our lives must be about. Finding connections in the midst of the division. Experiencing healing between the breaths of exhaustion and suffering. Working for ways of loving—personally and systemically—in the midst of the overwhelming fear, anger, and division that swirl around us.

There are no clear maps for this work, but there are practices. There are centuries of people who have come before us whose lives were just as chaotic, overwhelming, and painful, if not more so, and who yet managed to work for survival and thriving in their families and in their communities. They left legacies of resilience, spoke up for what is right, and put their bodies in the places that were needed to move our communities toward justice.

When it comes down to it, I believe we must seek to *love* in challenging spaces. I do not think there are easy answers to this monumental, lifelong task, only a standing invitation to muddle through the holy chaotic task of living together. These words are my way of sharing how I have navigated awkward personal and political spaces, conversations, and work grounded in an inner desire actually to live into the call to *love one another*. This is long-haul work that is personal and political. It is our job to develop the skills to navigate this chaotic, scary, confusing, and exhilarating territory. It is helpful to know that we are not alone, that we can hold grace with ourselves and others throughout the process. That's what this book is about: the daily work of creating connection in the midst of the real and difficult work that must be done to build the world and the communities for which we yearn.

I hope that these words inspire both reflection and action. Creating connection and boldly entering the worlds of faith and politics takes practice. I have found freedom and creativity through gaining understanding about our historical and current religious and political context. By becoming rooted in our own stories and perspectives on faith and politics, we can explore the fear we have about entering contentious spaces. We can build courage and resilience to step in and show up again and again, even when, inevitably, we mess up from time to time. Through finding joy in one another, we can experience the incredible gift of deep connection, especially across our differences.

Know that you are not alone in this daily work of loving one another. I hope you will come to see the worlds of *faith* and *politics* as less scary and more vital in our commitment to live into the clearest tenets of Christianity—to love God and to love one another—that echo in all major religious traditions. May we develop the skills, habits, practices, and ways of being to find the holy in the midst of the chaos as we enter the most challenging spaces of life together.

\* \* \* \*

I begin by laying the groundwork for our shared labor with definitions, as defined by *Merriam-Webster* and me.

### *holy*

- exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness
- having a divine quality, venerated as or as if sacred
- *My definition:* the connection to that which is *beyond*. The sense that something is more significant than a moment; the realization that “*surely, God is in this place.*”

### *chaos*

- a state of utter confusion, the unorganized state of primordial matter before the creation of distinct forms



- the inherent unpredictability in the behavior of a complex natural system (such as the atmosphere, boiling water, or the beating heart)
- *My definition:* an anxiety-producing feeling of instability, disorientation. When things are moving so fast, it is challenging to step back, think, breathe, and gain perspective.

### *faith*

- belief and trust (in something sacred, for example, God)
- belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion or a system of religious beliefs
- firm belief in something for which there is no proof
- *My definition:* a deep trust and practice that points us toward God. Faith is concerned with the systems, theories, and rituals that undergird and define a religious belief or practice. Ultimately, for me, faith looks like actions that are grounded in a deeply held belief and commitment to core values or religious teachings. I am less concerned with what your religion *is* and more concerned with what your religion *does*. How do your religious beliefs shape the way you move through the world?

### *politics*

- the art or science of government
- the competition between interest groups or individuals for power and leadership
- the total complex of relations between people living in a society
- *My definition:* the art of navigating life together. This art includes negotiation and decision making to determine the rules and boundaries that support shared experience in personal and public realms.

***daily***

- occurring, made or acting upon every day
- *My definition:* concerned with the everyday commitment to particular actions. Grounded in resilience and the pragmatic necessity of the long-haul, persistent, recurring needs of living.

***love***

- strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties
- affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests
- warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion
- unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another
- *My definition:* a relationship that is *mutual* and *generative*, and moves toward *justice* in the world. Through nurture, love happens between people; in families and chosen families; with neighbors and communities; between strangers; in cities, states, countries, and political systems.

Peace does not mean  
to be free of noise, trouble or hard work,  
but to be *in the midst* of those things  
and still be calm in your heart.

—*Unknown Author*



# 1

## I *Still* Love You: Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Standing on the rocky shore overlooking La Jolla Bay, I was observing pupping season in the bay, a time when dozens of seals come to the harbor to have their babies in a place free of predators. The day before, I had literally seen a seal birthing her pup on the beach. I had been watching the mama lying in the sand when suddenly there was a mess at her side including a brand new pup the size of a small dog, and a placenta, which quickly became fodder for the gulls battling overhead.

Today, it was time for swimming lessons. Mama seals and their pups dotted the bay, diving and bobbing. The mamas guided their pups up onto their backs and then let them slide back into the water. They alternately pushed the pups away and pulled them close with their flippers. I watched with delight, laughing aloud and full of awe. Then I noticed that unusually one of the mamas seemed to have two babies with her. Ah, there was another mama close by who must go with the additional pup. Suddenly the two-pup mama noticed the intruder and reared up, snarling and snapping and aggressively pushing herself away from the wandering pup. Startled, the wanderer returned to its own mama where it was quickly reprimanded and then cuddled.

For me, it was a startling moment. The placid and loving mama turned so quickly into an angry defender. Of course, most animals do not accept those who are not of their own womb or their own pack. When they do, it makes the news. Remember Koko and her kittens? Taking in young who are not “of our pack” is typically a uniquely human endeavor. Perhaps caring for someone who is “not us” as much as we care for ourselves—with deep, generous care, compassion, and love—is an aspect of our human evolution.

\* \* \* \*

The moment with the seals yanked me back to my first moments and days as an adoptive mother. My husband and I had made the decision to adopt out of love. We had experienced the pregnancy and childbirth of “biological children,” and we felt we had more to give. We had been in a social justice Bible study group discussing globalization and poverty around the world. We were immersed in books about broken lives and broken systems. We also had long connections to the Philippines, the country where my husband was born at Clark Air Force Base. Lying in bed one night, with three-year-old and one-year-old daughters tucked safely in their respective beds, Kyle and I looked at each other and said nearly simultaneously, “We should adopt.” A piece of me knew this would be a more challenging route, but I thought I was up for it.

It was a sunny Monday morning, two years after that bedtime moment, when we got the call. I literally fell to my knees, feeling the gravity of the moment. We had been matched with a healthy little boy who had just turned one year old. He had been brought to a hospital in Bacolod City in the Philippines at about five days old. The hospital staff had searched without success for his birth mother or family. They had spent six months looking for a home for the boy in the Philippines, where one in four people live in desperate poverty, and where there are far more people than available resources. My most sincere prayer was that he had been held and loved through this time, and indeed he had been. At the same time, our broken and imbalanced world left no other options at that moment, and so he was added to the orphanage’s list of children looking for homes overseas. We were the lucky family chosen to love and care for him.

We arrived in Bacolod City on August 13, 2007, the morning after a quick flight from Manila. It was warm and muggy as we drove to the orphanage. The sights and smells were familiar from our travels to other countries where poverty and life intermingle: the crowing of roosters and humming of motorcycle engines, the intermingling acrid and delicious smells of fires and street food, the colorful, clamorous vendors and markets lining the roads.

When we finally pulled up to the “Holy Infant Nursery Foundation,” my stomach fluttered with anticipation and nerves. Nursery staff invited us into the large room lined with cribs and cots. I looked into the wooden crib with peeling blue paint and no mattress and saw our baby wearing mint green shorts with a white tank top. He held a small pillow by his side. I knew those little feet from the picture we had been sent. I leaned into the crib and lifted his body to mine and held him for the first time, with tears running down my cheeks.

I held him for the next three hours as we waited for paperwork to be completed, and we dropped off suitcases full of clothes and toys and baby formula sent with us by our loving community back home. When all was complete, we said goodbye to Holy Infant Nursery, climbed in a jeepney, and began the next leg of our journey as a family.

The days and months that followed were filled with wonder, joy, confusion, and exhaustion. Our sweet boy seemed to bond quickly, but my heart was more challenging to crack. I was tired and sick (I had contracted giardia and hepatitis A after our trip), and that added to the challenge of raising three young children. In the months that followed, I learned things about myself I had never known and didn’t really want to know. I learned that I become angry and impatient and even have aggressive thoughts. The “self” I had imagined did not show up. Instead, a stranger took my place, a stranger who was depressed, disconnected, and overwhelmed. In that first year, I was forced to face my own demons, to accept that I was not the person or mother I had hoped I would be, and that my expectations were unrealistic and unattainable. These feelings mixed with immense guilt and profound responsibility for the amazing ones in my care. My heart broke.

My heart was broken by the realization of both my own inability to live into my expectations, and the painful realities in the

world of poverty, imbalance, injustice, and exploitation, realities that daily affect the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

It took me a good while to come to terms with my broken heart.

Yet it was also during this time of brokenness that I came to live what one of my favorite thinkers, Parker Palmer, speaks about in his theories around the broken heart. Parker Palmer says:

There are at least two ways to picture a broken heart, using heart in its original meaning not merely as the seat of the emotions but as the core of our sense of self. The conventional image, of course, is that of a heart broken by unbearable tension into a thousand shards—shards that sometimes become shrapnel aimed at the source of our pain. Every day, untold numbers of people try to “pick up the pieces,” some of them taking grim satisfaction in the way the heart’s explosion has injured their enemies. Here the broken heart is an unresolved wound that we too often inflict on others.

But there is another way to visualize what a broken heart might mean. Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart “broken open” into the largeness of life, into a higher capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s pain and joy. This, too, happens every day. Who among us has not seen evidence, in our own or other people’s lives, that compassion and grace can be the fruits of great suffering? Here heartbreak becomes a source of healing, enlarging our empathy and extending our ability to reach out.<sup>1</sup>

When my heart broke open, I became raw, vulnerable, free, and newly able to see the broader brokenness in the world. I asked fresh questions. I sought understanding in books and ideas and stories and in understanding the pain in the world with eyes wide open. During this time, I wound up feeling the call to seminary and to a new vocation—out of deep curiosity about life, meaning, and why the world is the way it is. Ultimately, my broken heart allowed me to see with new eyes and left me with a powerful, persistent longing to be in solidarity with the brokenhearted of the world.

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<sup>1</sup>Parker Palmer, *The Politics of the Brokenhearted: On Holding the Tensions of Democracy (Essays on Deepening the American Dream)*, (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Fetzer Institute, 2008): 232, available online at [https://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer\\_politicsbrokenhearted.pdf](https://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer_politicsbrokenhearted.pdf).

\* \* \* \*

Back to the seals teaching the pups to swim in La Jolla Bay. As I watched the mama seal attack the other baby seal, I was both shocked and relieved. Relieved that I was not alone. For loving is hard work. At times we are not our best selves. We hurt and are angry and protective in ways that are not life-supporting. And it is ok. What I felt at that moment with the seals was grace. Loving outside of ourselves goes against thousands of years of training to guard ourselves and others. This loving outside of ourselves is the work of evolving to our deeper humanity. As I experienced through bringing a child into full inclusion and love from outside myself to inside myself, this is difficult and long-haul work. In the process, we learn things about ourselves that we really don't want to know. Our hearts become broken. At our best, in that brokenness we become vulnerable to the pain, life, love, and joy that comes when we open our hearts and eyes to *love beyond*.

\* \* \* \*

Ultimately, loving beyond ourselves is the life task to which we are called, isn't it? This is the central teaching in so many of our major religions. The Christian call to love our neighbor as ourselves is similarly stated in each gospel. We can find versions of the great commandment in Matthew 22:35–40, Luke 10:25–28, John 13:31–35 and in Mark 12:28–31. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is asked, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" and Jesus answers, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mk. 12:29–31, ESV).

This wasn't something Jesus invented. The commandment quotes from and builds upon the Jewish text, *The Shema*, from Deuteronomy 6:4, the most important Jewish teaching of all. It's so important, one is supposed to recite it in the morning when one wakes and right before closing one's eyes at night. These are the words to be remembered when one passes through a doorway, and each time one prays:



The Lord God is one. Love the Lord with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul.

This is the key to liberation and the key to moving into our shared humanity—to look beyond oneself, to connect to God, and to the liberation of one another.

In a clear parallel, in Surah 4:36 of the Qur'an we find the same simple but profound sentiment: "Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him; and do good—to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer" (Yusuf Ali). The Hadith (or sayings of the Prophet) likewise reminds us, "None of you will have faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbor what he loves for himself" (Sahih Bukhari, Book 2, Hadith 13, <https://abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2011/03/18/love-brother-neighbor-self/>).

In Hinduism, though the word *namaste* has become common and perhaps overused (turned into bumper stickers and t-shirts), it nonetheless speaks the most profound truth: Recognize the divine light in oneself as equal to the divine light in another. The sacred Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, instructs followers to greet one another upon meeting and parting with the simple and powerful word and motion of *namaste*. This greeting is a visceral reminder that we are connected. Saying the word *namaste* recognizes that the life force, the divinity, the Self, or the God in me is the same in *all*. In acknowledging this oneness and equality by putting our palms together in greeting, we honor God in the person we meet.

Similarly, the African traditional spiritual teaching of *ubuntu* reminds us that "I am because we are," expressing the most profound truth toward others and the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. The teaching of *ubuntu* states that to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, to establish respectful human relations with them. A person is a person only through other people. We create each other and need each other. In belonging to each other, we participate in our mutual creation: we are because you are, and since you are, I am. Across traditions, across time, we are called to love...beyond.

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We know this, the call to love our neighbor as ourselves. We have heard it many times. But do we *live it*? Do we live it in our personal lives with those with whom we walk through life? Do we live it in our communities and our cities? Do we live this call to love in our political lives?

I believe that this central idea of loving our neighbor as ourselves is a core teaching in most of our religious traditions precisely because loving one another—genuinely loving one another across all of our differences in our daily lives—is so incredibly hard. We need to hear it again and again in different languages, through various traditions, and different teachers: Love God, and love one another as ourselves.

Throughout time, we humans have tackled and found ways forward through some of the most intractable dilemmas that have confronted us. We discovered that wheels not only helped speed the production of pottery, but could facilitate the transport of both objects and people. We found that penicillin could stop infections and prevent people from dying from toothaches and minor cuts as well as more serious ailments. We created calendars and mechanical clocks to track time and organize ourselves across multiple locations. We mastered flight to take us from one end of the world to the other in a matter of hours. We discovered that we could harness electricity to provide light in the night, to sustain energy, to wire our homes, and ultimately to shape life as we know it.

And yet, we still can't figure out how to solve one of the most entrenched and basic obstacles in all of human history: how to help people love one another. How can we build genuine care about the survival, well-being, and thriving of those who are "not us"? How do we cultivate responsibility for their daily lives and opportunities, and grow this care regardless of circumstances—meaning regardless of what they think and how they see the world, regardless of the choices they have made in the past or are making now. How do we care about their well-being as much as we care about our own—no matter where they were born or whom they love? How do we work both to "see" them and to treat them with dignity in our personal interactions and systemically by assuring that our laws, policies, and cultural norms also support their survival, well-being, and

thriving? This requires seeing, hearing, listening, imagining, letting go, and wondering.

How we convince people genuinely to care about one another—really love and care about one another as much as we love and care about ourselves and our families—is an intractable problem we have not yet figured out. We have done it neither in our daily interactions and life together nor in our political systems.

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When I use the words *love* and *politics* in the same sentence, most of us have a guttural reaction of discomfort. Add *religion* to the mix, and we have some real trouble! Yet given that the central tenet in Christianity and in each of our great religious traditions is to love, shouldn't this shape the way we live together personally and politically? Love is *not* lawlessness or anarchy. Love does not make us a softy pushover. Love is a posture, a way of being in the world that honors the deepest humanity of the other. Love is a commitment to seeking the well-being and thriving for the other as much as we seek that for ourselves.

Loving beyond ourselves is the lifelong, revolutionary journey of work to which we are called. That journey starts with us. In the process of trying to love "the other," we learn things about ourselves that we really didn't want to know—much as I learned uncomfortable things about myself when we adopted our son. Yet step into uncomfortable places we must. And because of that, our hearts will be broken, our egos will be humbled, and our resilience will be tested.

In my first year as an adoptive mother, I realized that such loving is so much harder than I thought it was going to be, and that *I was the only obstacle*. For me, realizing my deep desire and commitment to care for these children I loved and acknowledging my own shortcomings prompted me to get my act together. I embarked on a journey to do my personal spiritual and reflective work so that I could care for our three beautiful children. Through these experiences, my eyes were opened to how this learning to love beyond would shape the ways I build relationships with people from multiple religious, racial, cultural, and political backgrounds, and would develop my ways of working for political and systemic transformation.

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Five years ago, I found myself working in a place I hadn't fully expected to be in—at the intersection of faith and politics in one of the more divisive times in recent American history. When I began working with the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, I had no idea of the incredible opportunities for learning and growth I would find. Yes, we are in a time when our differences are being exploited, and often we are pitted or pit ourselves against the other. There's nothing new about this. Our country was built on dehumanizing and exploiting people based on differences in skin color, language, and culture. Tribalism and us-and-them thinking are deeply embedded in our American psyche.

This truth had been relatively easy for me to avoid, as an able-bodied, straight, white, Christian woman—that is until I started to enter spaces where the pain of our history and our time were unavoidable, and where my call as a Christian to work for mutual liberation was too insistent. In the past five years, the seed that was planted through my experience of adopting a child and learning to love beyond has taken root in the daily work of building relationships across radical difference, and through a commitment to the long-haul work of living into the hopes we share for personal and systemic transformation and liberation.

As I walk through the halls of power and sit in hearings listening to the sausage-making of democracy in the form of people's stories of hope, pain, and desire for systems that will support our connected lives, I am humbled by both our collective human pain and hope. It certainly seems at times that we are living in entirely different worlds from the worlds of those with whom we disagree on critical issues. However, we can find small points of our more profound humanity in a moment of eye contact, or a laugh about our little mistakes, or a need to stop to share a sandwich amid a long, contentious meeting. In working with people and organizations who come with varying interests and radically different life experiences, I have learned that when it comes down to it, we are each trying to survive the days. We are seeking love in our personal lives and seeking friends who "get" us. We are worried about our children. We are frustrated when we get stuck in traffic or can't seem to arrive at the next place on time.

But some of us have very different obstacles. Some people are prevented from thriving by systemic realities that keep them from getting loans or education or healthcare, or from being able to afford the ridiculous rent for a one-bedroom apartment. Some hold the scars of abuse or carry the burden of generational trauma and suffering. Others have grown accustomed to being able to get what they want when they want it and have lost sight of those who are harmed by their desires. These are realities that must be seen, understood, and addressed. I now recognize that the only way we will find true healing and mutual liberation is by caring for one another, by observing the full humanity of those with whom we are working—and even those against whom we are working.

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One evening, when my son was about five years old, I tucked the bedcovers up over his little chest and under his chin. It had been a rough day. I am sure he had had a tantrum about something or other, and I am sure I had had a tantrum as well. I don't recall what had led to the blow-up, but I do remember the exhaustion and exasperation. I leaned down to kiss his forehead, and he looked me in the eyes and said: "Mom, I *still* love you." A wave of breath moved through my body. I call it grace. I paused and said, "I *still* love you too, buddy." Never in all my life had I felt such love and acceptance in the midst of the messiness and pain. I have come to see that *this* is the heart of the matter. As we enter the painful realities of living together, we are called to wade through and love each other *still*. We are called to keep working for what's right. To keep speaking up, to keep reaching out. To listen, reflect, learn, think. To mess up, to win, to lose. And in the midst of it all, the first step in building relationships across our differences is to remember this central call: *to love each other, still*.

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### **Love is like a lawsuit**

I am amazed at the seeker of purity  
 who when it's time to be polished  
 complains of rough handling.

Love is like a lawsuit:

to suffer harsh treatment is the evidence;  
when you have no evidence, the lawsuit is lost.  
Don't grieve when the Judge demands your evidence;  
kiss the snake so that you may gain the treasure.  
That harshness isn't toward you,  
but toward the harmful qualities within you.  
When someone beats a rug,  
the blows are not against the rug,  
but against the dust in it.

—Rumi

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### Questions for Reflection

1. What were you taught about love?
2. What did your religious upbringing teach you about loving your neighbors? Your enemies? How does this relate to political life?
3. What feelings arise in your body when you hear the words *religion* and *politics*?
4. When have you struggled to “love beyond yourself?”
5. How are you experiencing the current political climate in your family? Community?
6. What do you need to navigate religious and political conversations better?