

Of two minds: Interpretive charity

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

We are used to having opposable thumbs. They enable our hands to do things that are impossible for other creatures: write, thread needles, paint, sculpt, perform intricate surgical procedures.

Roger Martin, a business school dean in Toronto, urges us to imagine having an opposable mind. He contends that we are born with a capacity to hold two conflicting ideas in constructive tension, and says we can use that tension to think our way through to new and superior ideas. In his new book *The Opposable Mind*, he says, “Just as we can develop and refine the skill with which we employ our opposable thumbs to perform tasks that once seemed impossible, I’m convinced we can also, with patient practice, develop the ability to use our opposable minds to unlock solutions to problems that seem to resist every effort to solve them.”

Martin’s argument is not simply Hegel’s dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, although it bears some similarities. Nor is it just an attempt to find mediating or compromise solutions at the center of a spectrum defined by polar opposites.

Rather, Martin contends that we are born with a capacity for integrative thinking and that with practice people can become more skilled and confident at it. He is even more clear that we often “unteach” integrative thinking in much of our education and practice. Rather than teaching people to think integratively, we teach them to think oppositionally, with deleterious consequences for our communities as well as larger organizations.

Unteaching integrative thinking, says Martin, seems to be intrinsic to how we have ordered the world. I would put it in theological terms: though we are created with the capacity for integrative thinking, one of the conditions of original sin is our tendency to define ourselves over against others, whether we think of enemies or simply of opposing ideas.

To be sure, there are strands within any tradition, the Christian tradition especially, that call for pointed critique and opposition to sin and evil; prophetic preaching is

such a strand. But have we become so entrenched in being prophetic that we've lost our opposable minds in favor of default oppositional engagement?

More than half a century ago H. Richard Niebuhr noted in *Christ and Culture* that we tend to be right in what we affirm and wrong in what we deny (he was citing F. D. Maurice and John Stuart Mill). In our world, which unteaches our capacity for opposable thinking, Niebuhr's words sound prophetic. We live in a time, both inside the churches and in wider civic and political cultures, when we are so immersed in oppositional thinking that we get caught in webs of destructive denials.

What if we cultivated Christian leaders who exhibited opposable minds? My own Wesleyan tradition has, at its best, held together convictions and practices that are too often set in opposition. Can we hold together justification and sanctification, personal and social holiness, evangelism and social witness, revivalist small groups and sacramental congregations, disciplined communities and missional worldly engagement?

What about the hot-button issues? Sometimes we must choose sides, but given that it took more than three centuries for the christological controversies to sort themselves out, could it be that we are called to patience (not passivity) in our discernment?

Martin says, "Integrative thinkers also share an uncanny composure in the face of complexity. They wait patiently for the multifarious strands of a problem to become apparent and shape themselves into some kind of pattern." Could it be that the complexities we face require us to cultivate patience of a similar magnitude?

In college I was asked to take a position that I cared passionately about and then research the strongest arguments that I could find for the opposite view. I was graded on my capacity to understand and articulate the reasons why people could reasonably hold a position that I was otherwise tempted to caricature.

Such exercises do not ask us to become less passionate or to compromise our views. But they do help us learn to hold our own views in a deeper tension with alternative possibilities, compelling us to find new patterns, patterns that are consistent with Jesus' own teaching and life.

Through such assignments, and through years of sometimes hard-earned failures in administrative leadership, I've learned the importance of recognizing the merits of diverse positions. We might describe this as an effort to practice the virtue of

interpretive charity. If part of the prophetic vocation is to challenge cultural presumptions in service to God, one of the contemporary prophetic tasks may be to embody this virtue, and to cultivate our opposable minds in service to God.