

Between muddle and ambiguity

By [Jason Goroncy](#)

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Over these past days, I have been reminded again that at our best, to be human, and to be human community, is to live betwixt and between muddle and ambiguity. We are, unavoidably, marked by profound inconsistencies and misdirected hopes. We are an enigma—even, and perhaps especially, to ourselves.

A few months ago, the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams gave an outstanding [lecture](#) on what George Orwell can teach us about the language of terror and war. In that lecture, he drew not only upon Orwell's work but also upon that of the Trappist monk, poet, and social activist Thomas Merton. He argued that each in their own way were concerned with the power and the misuse of language. Williams suggested that "our current panics about causing offense are, at their best and most generous, an acknowledgement of how language can encode and enact power relations."

Certainly, the spirit of the age in which we live is characterized by efforts to entrench unquestionable power, power that makes unwelcome voices of dissent, and which feels little or no responsibility to those who do not serve its own proximate interests.

According to Williams, our thoughts and wrestles and debates about those questions that really matter for the flourishing of life often expose

a deep unwillingness to have things said or shown that might profoundly challenge someone's starting assumptions. If there is an answer to this curious contemporary neurosis, it is surely not to be found in the silencing of disagreement but rather in the education of speech: how is unwelcome truth to be told in ways that do not humiliate or disable? And the answer to that question is inseparable from learning to argue—from the actual practice of open exchange, in the most literal sense civil disagreement, the debate appropriate to citizens who have dignity and liberty to discuss their shared world and its organization and who are able to learn what

their words sound like in the difficult business of staying with such a debate as it unfolds.

Isn't that one of the reasons that we place ourselves in communities of faith? I often tell my children that one of the main reasons we go to church is so that we can learn and practice loving people that we don't really like that much—people who irritate us, people who we find odd and who we'd never be seen dead with otherwise, people who frustrate us and hurt us and disappoint us. We belong to the church because that is how we hope to learn the truth that is required for our being truthful about ourselves and about one another.

What is the Christian community if it is not a unique training ground for learning the lessons of being the kind of community that God intends for all humanity—for learning that to be truly human is to belong to and to relate to and to do life with those who are other than ourselves, those whom *God* has joined together?

And so we eat and drink—not only with friends, but also with strangers, with enemies and with betrayers, ... and with our own inner demons. For that is the context in which Christ makes himself available to us.

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