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# The spirituality of tension

by Emily Carson


The room was silent for a long time before the first council member spoke up. “No one here seems to be getting along anymore. There’s so much gossip. Something needs to change.” There were many pauses that evening as church council members took turns digging deep and sharing openly.

Rather than continuing a long, familiar pattern of avoiding challenging dynamics, these council members did the opposite. They bravely stepped closer to the roots of the challenges they were experiencing, hoping that it would lead to systemic transformation and renewed vitality in their congregation.

Part of my job is to accompany congregations through challenges. This work has taught me that healthy transformation is often a result of people deciding to embrace tension rather than avoid it. Tension describes the mental and emotional state of being stretched. We encounter it in big ways and small ways every day.

Imagine you and your teammates have been working remotely for a year and a half. Some people are ready to return to being in the office together every day. Others would prefer to work from home indefinitely. The topic of working patterns comes up at a staff meeting, and it’s clear there is no easy solution. That’s tension.

Or imagine your extended family gets together for a summer vacation. All seems to be well until



suddenly no one can agree on what to do or eat. One person yells and slams a door. The kids start crying. An aunt threatens to go home early. A cousin starts blaring the volume on the television. That's tension.

Or imagine your congregational leadership is figuring out whether to require masks during Sunday school. Opinions around the table are many and varied. With a lack of consensus, no one knows what to do next. That's tension.

In my professional life, I've witnessed how tension can act as a transformational force in faith communities where people decide to respond to it as an opportunity rather than a hindrance. This new awareness has had a significant impact on my personal life and how I show up for friends and family.

I used to think the best way to deal with a challenging situation was to figure out how to cheer up the people involved. If I walked into a room and sensed that people were uneasy for any reason, I'd immediately shift into "fix it" mode and try to make them smile with small talk and kind gestures.

But even with the best of intentions, my cheerful efforts weren't all that helpful. By avoiding uncomfortable feelings in myself and others, I disrupted natural patterns of evolution, growth and change.

I'm learning there's another way: embracing a spirituality of tension. This framework is constructed on the idea that God is at work inside of disequilibrium – ever-extending us the wisdom, grace and courage to go deeper. Tension can serve as a kind of fuel that leads to transformation in households, congregations and communities.

To make good use of this type of fuel, we need to have the right tools that help us convert this fuel into transformation instead of toxicity.

### **Tool 1: Release expectations.**

I have a younger brother named Josh. His life philosophy has been to release all expectations for many years because expectations are a recipe for disappointment. I used to resist his guidance on this. It felt so natural to me to have a boatload of hopes and expectations in all areas of life. But sometimes, little brothers are right, and in this case, Josh is onto something.

Whether we're dealing with something at work or home, the more attached we are to a particular outcome, the harder it will be to let the tension serve in an authentically transformational way. When we can instead allow God to work in and through the disequilibrium, we will likely encounter solutions we hadn't even imagined. As we release control, new possibilities unfurl. Removing expectations is part of releasing control.

### **Tool 2: Prioritize silence and spiritual practice.**

When we find ourselves in uneasy dynamics, many tend to fill up the space with noise. It can be useful to get comfortable with silence in the process of welcoming tension.

It's in the quiet that God can sometimes speak most clearly and loudly. In addition to making silence a priority, engaging in consistent spiritual practice is essential individually and in groups. Whether we're Dwelling in the Word, Lectio Divina or singing a hymn or studying a poem, or going for a meditative walk, spiritual practices deepen our connectedness to the movement of the Holy Spirit. When we sense God's nearness and active participation in the details of life, we are even more equipped to make the most out of tension.

### **Tool 3: Practice grace with yourself and others.**

Most of us didn't grow up in family systems or congregations that embraced tension. Instead, many of us witnessed the opposite: conflict avoidance and passive-aggressiveness. Engaging in tension is like learning a new language; it takes time and practice, and a lot of grace.

You'll likely say and do things that you later reconsider and wish you could approach differently on this path. Other people will, too. Extend yourself a fair measure of compassion and grace. Direct it to others as well. The most toxic aspects of tension frequently arise from the defensiveness that comes up when we feel attacked. Grace is a useful antidote to keep handy whenever tensions arise.

### **Conclusion**

Life is not perpetual sunshine. That's normal. In our congregations and families and workplaces, tensions will arise – guaranteed. When they do, we can be on the lookout for the presence of God; we can trust that the Holy Spirit is near.

With intentionality and practice, we can learn to embrace the gifts of tension, knowing that it often paves the way for meaningful transformation.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. When have you recently experienced tension? How did it feel in your body and brain?
2. When have you experienced transformational tension? When have you experienced toxic tension?
3. As you think about the three tools highlighted in this article, which one might you practice in the near future? Why?



## Closing prayer:

Compassionate Creator, you are in all the details of life. When we experience tension, grant us courage and wisdom to step closer. You use what's hard to breathe new life and transformation into existence. Help us to trust you with conflict, challenge and tension so that all of life might become an opportunity to experience your grace. Amen.

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# Faith Reflection: From tension to transformation

by Emily Carson

Jesus consistently stepped into tense situations rather than tiptoeing around them. He didn't avoid difficult interpersonal dynamics; he embraced them and recognized that tension is often a catalyst for transformation (of people and systems).

Tension can be defined as the state of being stretched. We can experience it individually, and it also happens collectively within workplace teams, congregations and communities. While many of us tend to walk in the opposite direction of tension, Jesus offers an alternative: walk toward it.

As we figure out what to do with tension in our daily lives, it's useful to step into several narratives from the Gospel of Luke that reveal insights about the ways Jesus navigated disagreement and uncertainty.

## **Mary and Martha: Luke 10:38-42**

It's a story about two very relatable sisters. Sometimes I cringe a bit when I read commentaries on Mary and Martha because theologians and preachers are sometimes far too quick to make caricatures of them—especially Martha, Martha, Martha with all her busy work.

To me, they both seem relatable. Sometimes we're more like Mary—able to slow down and savor important moments of connection. Sometimes we're more like Martha—frenzied and distracted with work that feels sincerely important but perhaps isn't as pivotal as we might imagine.

Mary and Martha had different approaches to preparing for a visit from Jesus. Rather than avoid the tension that was going on between these two sisters, Jesus stepped into it. He valued them both immensely. But he didn't want to miss an opportunity to expand awareness and insight. Jesus wasn't a silent guest. He stepped into the tension and shared reflections with respect; he used the discord to invite Mary and Martha into a new way of thinking about what matters most.



## **Religious Authorities: Luke 15**

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus ruffled plenty of feathers. Jesus had been spending a lot of time with people characterized as tax collectors and sinners. Religious authorities were dumbfounded. They couldn't figure out why a religious person like Jesus would be cavorting with people of ill-repute.

Rather than dismissing their commentary and confusion altogether, Jesus steps closer and tells stories meant to expand their empathy and compassion. In Luke 15, we find some of the Scriptures' most beloved parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. Jesus embraces the tension in the system and offers stories. He did what he could to equip the people around him to see their environment and neighbors in new, less judgmental ways.

## **Fighting about Greatness: Luke 22:24-30**

The disciples were some of Jesus' closest friends. They ate meals together. They traveled together on foot. Even with their proximity to Jesus' ministry, the disciples weren't perfect. Like any other group of people, they sometimes disagreed.

In Luke chapter 22, the disciples get into a dispute about who was the greatest. They all aspired to greatness. As with Mary and Martha, it's easy to make caricatures out of these people, but perhaps they're more real and relatable than it initially appears. Maybe the real argument was about which disciple had the most useful ministry skills. Or perhaps they had different ideas about how best to share the Gospel, and some believed their ideas were much better than the perspectives of others.

Into the tension of this disagreement between the disciples, Jesus entered with a transformational perspective. He didn't allow them to fight it out. Instead, he said, "The greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves."

Jesus invited his friends to reimagine greatness, and he correlated it with humility and service. Into the discord, Jesus offered new insights, and the disciples' perspectives were reframed. Their tension paved the way for an important learning moment.

## **Conclusion:**

Being stretched is a normal part of life. When tension arises in our households, congregations and workplaces, we have options. Jesus shows us that disequilibrium is nothing to be feared but instead is an opportunity. A world of transformational possibilities opens when we courageously step closer to tension.

## Discussion questions:

1. How would you summarize Jesus' approach to tension?
2. What are some of the ways you generally deal with discomfort and disagreement?
3. What's a situation you're currently navigating that might be aided by a new approach to tension?

## Closing prayer:

God of Courage, we often strive after pleasant feelings, and that leads us away from tension. As we encounter stories of your ministry, we witness the ways you stepped closer to unease and disagreement. We pray today that you would help us to see the transformational opportunities that exist within tension. Amen.

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