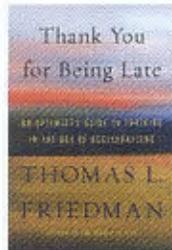




## A time of dislocation

We're in the midst of such a time right now, observes Thomas Friedman, *New York Times* foreign affairs columnist, in his newest book, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2016). Friedman wrote this book before the recent U.S. presidential election, so he wasn't specifically referring to it, but many of us feel even more dislocated now as a result of the election.



“Dislocation,” as Friedman uses the term, “is when the whole environment is being altered so quickly that everyone starts to feel they can't keep up. That is what is happening now.”

In Friedman's view, “we are living through one of the greatest inflection points in history.” He thinks it's probably unequaled since Gutenberg, a German blacksmith and printer, launched the printing revolution in Europe, paving the way for the Reformation. “The three largest forces on the planet—technology, globalization, and climate change—are all accelerating at once,”



Friedman observes, and they're all affecting each other, making the total acceleration happen even faster. “As a result,” he writes, “so many aspects of our societies, workplaces, and geopolitics are being reshaped and need to be reimagined.”

## Writing to influence, not just inform

Friedman's account of what's now available through digital technology and “big data” was especially informative to me, though scary in some ways. His description of experiencing discrimination because of being Jewish was also eye-opening. But I especially appreciated his explanation of why he writes his regular *New York Times* column and why he's written this latest book.

## What basis for unity?

Unity is a big topic in the United Methodist Church right now, and other mainline Christian denominations are also giving it a lot of attention. Disagreement about the UMC's official policy

on homosexuality has become so fierce that serious discussion of schism is happening, and the realization that schism may be a real possibility has brought impassioned pleas for unity. But how important should unity be as a church goal? And what should be the basis of our unity?

**Holy Father, protect them in your name ... so that they may be one as we are one.**

—John 17:11

## Untruth or unchristian policies? No



Being unified in doing something unchristian surely wouldn't be a worthy aim for the church. Unity based on allowing only heterosexual people to participate fully in the church, for example, surely isn't appropriate for followers of Jesus to demand. Neither is claiming what has been shown to be untrue, such as portraying the world as flat, with God up in the sky and a fiery hell underground. Mere organizational unity doesn't seem to be what Jesus called for, either.

## Unprovable beliefs? No

Unity in beliefs whose truth can't be proven, such as beliefs about the nature of God and the role of Jesus, also seems wrong to expect, although many Christians see such beliefs as Christian essentials. Many also believe that the Bible was uniquely delivered by God, therefore has a unique claim as the source of truth. Yet scholarship seems to refute this claim, so it surely isn't a valid basis for church unity.



## Doing what Jesus did--yes!

What kind of unity should the church try to achieve? Many church leaders rightly say it is unity in Jesus Christ. But that unity, it seems to me, must be based on doing the kinds of things that Jesus did: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming even people that society considers inferior, and promoting non-violence instead of war. And we can do these more effectively if we work together, not apart. How can we help to promote this kind of unity?

“When you are a columnist or a blogger,” he writes, “... your purpose is to influence or provoke a reaction and not just to inform — to argue for a certain perspective so compellingly that you persuade your readers to think or feel differently or more strongly or afresh about an issue.” That interested me because it’s why I write *Connections*. Of course, in both the scope of our subject matter and the extent of our experience, there’s little comparison between Friedman, a world-famous Pulitzer-Prize-winning writer, and me. But within the areas that each of us addresses, our aims seem very similar.

“Every column or blog” says Friedman, “has to either turn on a lightbulb in your reader’s head — illuminate an issue in a way that will inspire them to look at it anew — or stoke an emotion in your reader’s heart that prompts them to feel or act more intensely or differently about an issue. The ideal column does both.” That’s what I try to do in *Connections*.



## Values, priorities, aspirations

Friedman finds that this kind of writing involves “mixing three basic ingredients: your own values, priorities, and aspirations; how you think the biggest forces, the world’s biggest gears and pulleys, are shaping events; and what you’ve learned about people and culture — how they react or don’t — when the big forces impact them.”



“When I say your own values, priorities, and aspirations,” Thomas Friedman explains, “I mean the things that you care about most and aspire to see implemented most intensely.” *Connections* is more often about the church’s “gears and pulleys” than the whole world’s, but it’s definitely about what I intensely aspire to see implemented.

## Time for reflection

Friedman’s book title, he says, came to his mind when someone he was due to meet for an interview was late. Instead of getting mad, he was glad, because it gave him some unexpected time alone in the midst of his usually packed schedule. It gave him time to reflect on his values, priorities, and aspirations, on what he saw happening with the world’s “gears and pulleys,” and on what he might want to say about the current situation.

Doing that is important, however, not just for the people who write columns or



blogs but for everyone. We all need to be reflecting and then trying to influence what’s currently happening — in the church if we’re part of it, and the nation and the world.

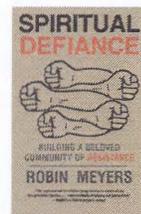


What do you care about most? What do you most intensely want to see done? What are your main values, priorities, and aspirations? Do you take time to reflect on these often, and then speak openly about them? I hope so. Especially at this crucial time in the U.S., with a President-elect who has no political experience, who speaks impulsively and often untruthfully, and many of whose values are contrary to Christianity, recognizing and expressing our values is essential.

It’s not always easy or comfortable, of course. It can mean expressing disagreement with family members, friends, and fellow churchgoers. That can even mean losing friends, but it often leads to finding new friends whose values are more in line with those that Jesus taught.

## Spiritual defiance

Becoming more aware of your real values and of how they compare to the values of Jesus can lead to what author Robin Meyers calls spiritual defiance. In his compelling book *Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved Community of Resistance* (Yale University Press, 2015), Meyers, the senior pastor of Mayflower United Church of Christ in Oklahoma City and a philosophy professor at Oklahoma City University, calls the church to be such a community. But



he asks, “Who thinks of the church any more as a defiant community? Or faith itself as embodied resistance to the principalities and the powers?”



Very few church members even see the church as *needing* to be defiant, or faith as needing to be embodied resistance, Meyers finds, yet that’s a big change from what the church originally was and is still meant to be. “Whatever else may be said of the Jesus Movement,” Meyers observes, “it was born in opposition to the status quo.” But sadly, he observes, “now it largely sanctifies the status quo.”

“Now,” Robin Meyers finds, “we are as compliant as the subjects of any empire, ... resisting nothing that threatens our comfort, our success, our reputation, or our safety.” We’re sometimes briefly tempted by prophetic voices, he notices, but only if what they advocate would cost us nothing. Meyers

is especially concerned about clergy who won't risk showing resistance. "Many clergy," he finds, "see it as their primary role to put out fires, not to start them."



## Opposing death and indignity

The kind of resistance that Robin Meyers is urging us all--both clergy and laity--to provide is "a form of direct or indirect action opposing anything in the dominant culture that brings death and indignity to any member of the human family or to creation itself." What would that mean with regard



to the incoming U.S. officeholders who want to leave many citizens without health care and good-quality public education, or who talk reck-

lessly about using nuclear weapons? What about the church members who want their churches to keep inflicting indignity on the LGBT community?

## Not a word about what to believe

Sometimes the resistance we need to display is resistance to what is labeled as Christian orthodoxy. We often need to do what Meyers calls "pushing back against the idea that faith is a set of creeds and doctrines demanding the total agreement of 'true believers.'" "



"In the Sermon on the Mount," Robin Meyers reminds us, "there is not a single word about what to believe, only words about what to do and how to be in the world. Yet in just a few hundred years, that radical ethic would be subsumed by the great creeds, in which there is not a single word about what to do, or how to be in the world, but only words about what to believe."

## Certainty is not the flag of faith

"To be a disciple of the resister from Nazareth," Meyers writes, "is to challenge more than individual sin. It is to resist theological perversions as well."

But he observes that in our culture, certainty is often equated with strong faith—an unwavering, unquestioned allegiance to doctrinal propositions. Yet, he assures us, "certainty is not the flag of faith."

## Indistinguishable Christians?

"Many Christians today," Meyers observes, "appear to be absolutely indistinguishable from anyone else walking the streets—except that they are angry, nostalgic, fearful, and quick to judge what they don't understand." If that observation is accurate, as it often seems to be, it's no wonder that church participation shrinks.



"Dwindling church attendance," Meyers believes, "is itself an act of resistance by human beings who suspect that, down deep, they have been lied to by an institution that often refuses to let them grow up, intellectually or spiritually. Many have now learned through their own study (often of books that their pastor recommended they not read) that both the message and the purpose of the church today bears almost no resemblance to those underground Beloved Communities that were first called 'The Way.'" "

## A community of resistance

The church was born, Robin Meyers reminds us, as an act of collective defiance, and it prospered as a community of resistance to the dominant culture. And yet, Meyers notices, "any move by the church today to subvert the dominant culture is met with charges of 'socialism' and/or lack of patriotism."



"Put simply," he continues, "followers of Jesus have always been called to resist, with heart and soul and mind (and yes, even in a Pauline sense with our bodies) the very oppressive systems we live in, work for, are enriched and protected by, and whose material abundance we conspicuously consume—no easy task."

This issue, many years' back issues, a list of back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections*-related information are available free from my website, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know by e-mailing me at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). I no longer send new issues of *Connections* by U.S. mail. To get paper copies of any of the 1992-2014 back issues, send me \$5 (address on page 1) for each year or any 12 issues that you want, and let me know which ones you want.



I'm a lifelong lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself, from personal funds. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics that I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

## The most dangerous Bible verse

The most dangerous verse in the Bible, in Robin Meyers's opinion, is this: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2) I've never thought about that being the most dangerous verse, but I think it's vitally important for anyone who's serious about wanting to be Christian. What's most important in this verse may be the part about renewing your mind. That includes changing your mind when new insight or information becomes available,



instead of keeping on believing what you've always believed, despite the emergence of new information or of questions that need serious consideration.

## Individuals are the catalysts

"Institutions are seldom responsible for change," Robin Meyers reminds us. "Individuals seized by a vision are the catalyst." What about you? What needed change will you become more of a catalyst for, at least by speaking up among your friends, colleagues at work or school, or family members? In the church and the world right now, there's an especially crucial need for Christian catalysts.

*Barbara*

### Political correctness, or simply kindness and logic?

I'm tired of reading and hearing complaints about political correctness. Sometimes they refer to using expressions like "vertically challenged" to refer to short people or "waste disposal agent" as a title for a garbage collector, and such expressions may be overdoing it a bit. But the complaints more often refer merely to avoiding the use of masculine words for groups that include women. Sometimes the complaints refer instead to avoiding derogatory references to someone's appearance or race. Doesn't avoiding such words really mean simply being kind? And doesn't being Christian, especially, require being kind?

I don't think it's too much to ask, to say "men and women" or "people" instead of only saying "men," and to say merely "you" instead of "you guys," for groups that include women. It's not even too much to say "humankind" instead of "mankind." That's simply being kind. It's acknowledging women's and girls' existence and worth, rather than acting as if they are invisible, don't exist, or are inferior to men.

Neither do I think it's asking too much to avoid using all-masculine words to refer to God. Yet use of these words for God happens constantly, even in churches--especially in churches, in fact, in songs, prayers, and scripture readings, even though we claim to believe that God has no gender. It's time to stop this illogical habit--long past time, in fact. Otherwise, we're essentially saying that men are God-like in a way that women aren't, and that's dangerous as well as unkind and untrue. It may have been considered acceptable in earlier centuries, but we know better now. Can't we act like kind 21st-century Christians now?

### Thanks!

I've been getting a steady stream of replies in response to my having restarted *Connections* last month, and what a treat it has been! So many generous comments about how valuable readers have found *Connections* over the years! Many of these notes and phone calls have been from longtime *Connections* readers who've been on my e-mail list all along and just wanted to say thanks. Others have come from recipients who've been getting *Connections* by U.S. Mail and are now willing to change to e-mail. And others are from people who have just now been introduced to *Connections* by friends or family members and want to start getting it regularly. I'm delighted to be getting reconnected or newly connected with all of these!

I've had to make some changes because the local Internet Service Provider that I had always used for hosting my website and for e-mailing *Connections* went out of business a few months ago, and I found that when I changed providers I could no longer e-mail *Connections* to my large list in the same way as before. My friend Deborah Dykes of the Dykes Foundation (faithandreason.org) generously came to my rescue, and the Dykes office is now doing my monthly *Connections* e-mailing for me. Consequently, you may have felt temporarily confused when you got the November issue and it didn't look like it was from me. Debo and I hope to get our method more streamlined soon, but whether we do or not, the way for you to reach me by e-mail is still at [bcwendland@aol.com](mailto:bcwendland@aol.com). Also, *Connections* fan and website designer Paul Kirtley, in Boerne TX, is still very helpfully keeping my website going, and we're going to get some needed revisions done on it soon. Thanks for your patience with these changes!

