

The Art of
DISRUPTION

IMPROVISATION and
the Book of Common Prayer

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INTRODUCTION

Why This Book, and Why Now?

This is a book about the subversive work of improvisation. More to the point, it is a book about how to think about improvisation in relation to the Book of Common Prayer, the only canonically sanctioned book of worship for the Episcopal Church. Improvisation means many things, but it at least means disrupting the norm for the sake of new insight. Although people can get uncomfortable and unpleasant when it comes to disruption, there is another way of considering disruption: it is an art. One way of thinking about the art of disruption is a metaphor that I'll be using throughout this book: hacking. The artist of disruption is like a computer hacker: making something new from a common language.

People are afraid of hackers. The past decade has seen the rise of hacking as a threat to national security. Elections are lost because of hackers. Money is lost because of hackers. People's privacy is violated because of hackers. But the reputation of hackers hasn't always been so negative. In 1983, the term "hacker" was defined by the *Internet Users' Glossary* as, "a person who delights in having an intimate understanding of the internal workings of a system, computers and computer networks in particular."¹ It's the sense of delight that is the key to hacking. Instead of only fearing hackers, we can learn from the delight that they find in creating a new pathway.

Delight was the approach in which the Episcopal Church's 1979 Book of Common Prayer was conceived. The writers, a

1. G. Malkin, ed., "Internet Users' Glossary," Network Working Group, archived from the original on August 5, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160605204821/https://tools.ietf.org/html/rfc1983>, accessed February 20, 2020.

group of imaginative men and women, understood that in addition to a solid grounding in the academic disciplines of liturgics, scripture, theology, and sociology, their work was informed by a sense of delight. They wanted to give the church a guide into the future that they imagined would propel the denomination into a new world.

The writers of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer were the original liturgical hackers. Although aware of the risks, they took the work of revision seriously and joyfully. They took the church's 1928 Book of Common Prayer and re-engineered it to be more flexible, more culturally attuned, and more responsive to the world that was changing around them. The 1979 text was the first truly indigenous American prayer book. Where all previous editions of the Book of Common Prayer had been imitative of the seventeenth-century English version, the 1979 text dared to break new ground in the service of God's mission in the world.

At the center of their re-engineering was the Baptismal Covenant, a pact made between the worshipping community and God that would form the way people lived their lives. This was the most radical innovation in the 1979 book. For the first time a very specific set of promises were made by the baptismal candidates, not just an ascent to the "Articles of the Christian Faith, as contained in the Apostles' Creed."² But the introduction of the Baptismal Covenant wasn't the only radical change in the prayer book. There were also outlines of rites and rituals that people, in different settings, could create themselves.

Chief among these is "An Order for Celebrating Holy Communion," a kind of homemade eucharistic celebration. Instead of being precisely defined as a rite, people would have to find the language that best fit their communities and contexts. There are other examples in the book that direct people away from "This is the way it's always been done" to "You're going to have to make this work yourself" in outlines for burial, marriage, and a liturgy

2. *The 1928 Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 276.

for the evening. In its inception, the 1979 Book of Common Prayer wanted its readers to be delighted in the work of creating the liturgy; it wanted to be hacked, to be freed for use by everyone who cared to pray liturgically. It continues to be a document that asks its users to become improvisers, following the lead of the disruptive Holy Spirit.

The writers of the prayer book seemed to understand that if the church was going to go from being a professional organization with an ordained class calling the shots to become a community of dedicated amateurs (those who act out of love), it would have to open up the operating system of worship to the people in the pews. They seemed to understand something about the future of the church that we're still coming to grips with: we have to learn to worship together in a world that doesn't share a sense of common prayer.

Improvisation is at the heart of this reality. Like any good practice, if you want to become an expert, you have to trust in the power of making new connections from older forms. Following a recipe to the letter may result in an excellent meal, but great chefs know how to take what they know about food and create something that nobody has ever imagined before. If you want to experience the fullness of life, you have to take off the training wheels. Risk is at the heart of the liturgy—just as it's at the heart of improvisation.

Maybe the most critical reason to hack the prayer book is that the Spirit is alive in the midst of the assembly and calls us to new life. This statement isn't a pietistic hope or a spiritual pipe dream; it is the promise of Jesus to his people. Whenever two or three are gathered together in his name, Jesus is right there with us. He comes to us, not as a third or fourth to our two or three; he comes in the midst of our relationships.

Whether we gather to worship with family or strangers, people we love, or those we merely tolerate, the Spirit of Jesus is there with us making all things new. The very least that this means is that we have to be ready for a surprise when we gather for worship. The most we can hope for is that we are

transformed, made a new creation when we gather in the name of our Savior. In this transformation, we know ourselves once again as the Body of Christ. As John 14:12 says, we are to do the works of Jesus and greater works. When we gather for worship, using our beloved prayer book, Christ is there making peace among us, making us agents of the peace that he longs to see alive in the whole world.

The Episcopal Church is trying to understand the prayer book and how we might revise it. In the summer of 2018, the church gathered in Austin, Texas for its triennial General Convention. The question of liturgical renewal played a crucial part in the work of that gathering. Although the news media focused much of its attention on the issue of inclusive language, going so far as to report that the church wanted to “neuter” God, there was much more going on in the deliberations of the Convention.

During the eleven days of its meeting, the deputies and bishops of the church debated resolutions about the sexual harassment and abuse of women clerics in the church. We voted on resolutions about the languages of prayer and the translations of our prayer book that are used by our many members. We welcomed back into our denomination the Diocese of Cuba, which had been cast out of the church in a frenzy of anti-communist feeling in 1964. We included trans members of our Body, not as an exception but as a regular part of our shared life. Marriage rites for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples were normalized for use throughout the church. And although there is critical work yet to do, we openly addressed the original sin of racism and white supremacy in the church.

In all of these deliberations, the Episcopal Church seemed to reveal something new: we were finding ways to grow into the identity we had imagined for ourselves for decades. The Episcopal Church was acting like a denomination where, as former Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning said, “There will be no outcasts.” Of course, this expression is not something to which Episcopalians have a special claim; we share it with all those

who follow the one who welcomes all people into friendship and rejects no one.

The Episcopal Church is poised to make a similar claim about our worship, and the question that must be asked is simple: will we include outcasts when it comes to our liturgy? More to the point of this book, how can we include everyone in the art of disrupting the prayer book? My greatest hope is that everyone will be welcomed into this work. I worry that there will be some who are left behind.

Our desire to include everyone at the table is held in tension with the reality that the work of prayer book improvisation and disruption is too critical to put off any longer. The future began five minutes ago.

We have two tasks in this work: we must consider the whole church when we talk about our worship, and we must learn from those who are not yet a part of our denomination: those who stand outside our doors and wonder if there is a place for them inside. Time is of the essence, and we can ill afford to leave anyone behind.

The art of disruption begins with the assumption that we are not a monocultural denomination. In every corner of the church, on any Sunday of the year and all the days between them, people come together to offer their sacrifice of praise to God and to receive God's blessing of peace. Some of these gatherings are in buildings that anyone who's ever watched *Down-ton Abbey* would recognize as "Episcopalian." In these buildings, you will find what church websites celebrate as the best of the Anglican tradition.

But there are other places that people gather for prayer. Some of these gatherings are in prisons, or houses, or storefronts that don't look that much different from any number of evangelical churches. In these buildings you will find singing that may be unaccompanied or supported by folk instruments. Some of these gatherings include worshippers whose language of prayer is Spanish, or Gwich'in, or French, or Hatian Kreyole. In these buildings you will find Episcopalians from Ecuador or Alaska,

in Paris among francophone Africans, or in our denomination's largest diocese of Haiti.

The diversity of worship styles in the Episcopal Church is one of our greatest treasures; it has the potential to form us as a denomination. And amid this great diversity, what matters the most is gathering to worship. Week by week, season by season, people come together to claim that the prayer of our many voices matters as much as the prayers of any single voice. This raises another critical question about the art of disruption: are we, as a denomination, willing not only to tolerate our great diversity, but to celebrate it?

Honoring diversity invites us to change not just our practices but the relationships we share with other Christians. Critically, it means engaging in dialogue with those who are members of different cultures. Expanding one's liturgical repertoire ought to change the community's relationship with people for whom the practice is meaningful while seeking to learn from their experience. Now is the moment to have the conversation about hacking the prayer book, disrupting the liturgy, and developing new skills as liturgical artists. People from across the Episcopal Church are not only ready to share their experiences of worship; they are already doing so.

My congregation, St. Gregory of Nyssa, has been sharing liturgical resources since we launched our very first website in 1998; at the bottom of most of these, we print these words: "Copying for local use is permitted and encouraged." This generous offering is not distinct to St. Gregory's. Many liturgists freely share their findings of worship and liturgical texts written for their local contexts. Deacons in local congregations compose and offer their prayers and intercessions for use in other congregations. Although some publish these kinds of materials in print format, the majority of resources are found online. Liturgical disruption is happening all around us all of the time.

My liturgical mentors, Rick Fabian and Donald Schell, founded St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in 1978. In 1996,

shortly after moving into our current building, the *SF Weekly* published a cover article about us entitled, “One Weird church,”³ that drew hundreds to worship. The article covered a lot of the objects and practices that make us “weird”—tie-dyed vestments from Africa, a theology of universal salvation, and congregational dance—among other things.

But what the article overlooked, the weirdest thing about us, is that we are a community where everyone works together to make the liturgy. One of our founding principles is both a wide-open welcome to everyone and a serious expectation that, if you come through our doors, you’re all in. Perhaps our most enduring value is giving work away, letting more and more people into liturgical leadership. At St. Gregory’s, everyone is free to receive what our community offers. But our sincerest hope is that everyone who comes to us will join in making church happen.

In many ways, we are counter-cultural in the highly secular context of San Francisco. But our most significant counter-cultural value is entirely theological. We claim in our words and our actions that God is calling all beings into a deep, intimate, transformative relationship.

Along with our patron Gregory of Nyssa, we claim that because God has called the whole world to live in a relationship of love, every person is on a journey toward God. We make this journey following the True and Living Way, which is Christ, who is all things and in all things. Within this context, we make worship together: adults with children, believers with skeptics, professionals with amateurs.

Week after week, like so many others in Episcopal churches, we gather and make church happen. One of the most surprising things that people find after a few Sundays is that our worship is quite conservative; the basic pattern and shape vary little from week to week. When innovation does happen, it comes to us slowly, emerging from the life of the whole community.

3. SF Weekly Staff, “One Weird Church,” *SF Weekly*, August 14, 1996, <http://www.sfweekly.com/news/one-weird-church/>, accessed June 29, 2019.

Our work is based on a shared understanding that we are all God's friends, both those of us who gather at St. Gregory's and every other human being. We repeat to anyone who will listen that God's friendship comes to us freely as God's gift of grace. And the surprise for many is that it comes with an expectation that God will transform our lives in the gift. Transformation happens in many ways, but we recognize that the experience of communal worship as one of the most powerful. Our worship is almost a rule of life: a deliberate pattern for growing in Christ. At the center of this rule of life is the commitment we each make to take responsibility for the liturgy.

People who visit St. Gregory's, sharing in the liturgy with us, often ask, "How do you get away with doing all of this?" Maybe they ask this because they believe that worship in the Episcopal Church is defined by a defined cultural understanding of "Anglicanism." Maybe they have been told that there are inflexible rules that really aren't supposed to be inflexible. We strive to express our theological grounding with delight. The liturgy is a joy for us. And everything that we do is informed by the practices, history, tradition, and texts of the Episcopal Church; that is the field upon which we make church.

But we strive to live by a rule of life that is corralled by freedom. We strive to say "yes" more than "no" when it comes to the liturgy. This is a crucial part of the art of disruption. As we recognize a set of practices, history, tradition, and texts that convene us, we also acknowledge that we must choose how we relate to these variables. If the structures of the church are like a fence that contains a field, protecting the flock from the dangers outside, we choose to walk right along the edge of the fence rather than stay in the center of the field.

We could choose otherwise; we could stay as close as possible to the safe center of the field, far from the fence and the dangers it holds at bay. But our sense of authority is that the field is broad, the fence stretches, and we can remain a part of the structure of the church while taking risks with the rules. We strive not to do this capriciously. We want to understand the rules before we bend

them. Our work of disruption is more than running through the church with a pair of scissors; we want the liturgy to make us a new people.

We claim that this approach is classically Anglican, as is the art of disruption. As one of our dancing saints, Elizabeth Tudor, said it, “There is only one Christ Jesus, one faith. All else is a dispute over trifles.” About a year ago, we welcomed a longtime friend of St. Gregory’s for a brief visit with us. She is an academic, an expert in liturgy and history. After the service, I shared with her my understanding that our practice is in the mainstream of Anglicanism, that the structure of our liturgy is classically Anglican. After a moment, she paused and said, “I’ve never thought about it that way, but you’re right!” A part of this genius is praying our way together toward insight. We don’t begin with a perfect liturgical text and offer a sublime reiteration of it; we come to know how to pray in the practice of prayer.

The art of disruption must find its context in love. It’s easy to choose some other motivation for disruption, as any number of tech billionaires can tell you. Sometimes it seems that love just isn’t enough to bring the kinds of change that the church needs today. Too often, congregational leaders choose disruption for the sake of short-term goals like novelty, or irony, or a superficial sense of justice. But, as our current presiding bishop Michael Curry has said, “If it’s not about love, it’s not about Jesus.” The most authentic prayer book hacks are those that create the liturgy out of people’s experiences with love.

In the following chapters, you will read more about the practices of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, the stories of our members, and the theory that guides us in the art of disruption. You will also read about the ways the earth-shaking events of 2020 continue to shape the liturgy. I was finishing this book in March 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic began to touch our lives. Although this volume is a book about liturgy and the art of disruption, it takes an early look at liturgy in the time of the pandemic. Other liturgists, theologians, and historians will

write other volumes that capture more of the findings of this era. This author writes at the very beginning of this new era in human history with humility and gratitude that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.