



## Humpty Dumpty Sat on a Wall

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When I attended Garfield Elementary School in Boise, Idaho, I loved the school carnival. I especially loved the cake walk. It didn't require much skill to win, just persistence in buying tickets. My favorite part was selecting a cake from the winner's table: all flavors and sizes; some decorated and others plain. My choice!

So, naturally, when my daughter was school-aged, I volunteered to bring cakes to the carnival. Lacking actual cake-decorating skills, I tried to make them fancy and colorful enough to entice a grade-



schooler. One year, I used my large baking "bowl" to create a Humpty Dumpty cake. It took two baking sessions: the first bowl of cake created the lower half; the second created the upper half. Stuck together at the widest circumference with frosting, they made an upright, egg-shaped cake. With Twinkies for the feet, and a clever cap made from a Ding Dong, this was a grade-schooler's delight. However, because I didn't seat Humpty

Dumpty on his wall, but simply stood him up on the small base of the bottom cake, he was also very unstable – ready to have a great fall before I could even reach the school yard.

Held together with generous amounts of frosting, Humpty Dumpty made it to the car, where I placed him on the front floorboard. I ever so carefully drove Humpty to the school, taking every turn as slowly as I could, with one eye on the swaying egg-shaped cake. I knew that if I drove normally, no one could ever put Humpty Dumpty together again. Gladly, he arrived intact and took his place on the winner's table. In fact, he was the first cake selected by a young boy who shared my wonderment at tables of free cakes. I recall his mom asking with dread for her own drive home, "Really? That one?"

For all the joy Humpty brought, I suspect he unwittingly infuriated others – specifically, the drivers who followed me on the road to the school. My ultra-cautious driving and my timid turns had to have people pulling their hair. Because no one could see Humpty on my floorboard, no one could understand my caution. I've taken this experience to heart.

Now, when I see a slow driver, I've tried to tame my own frustration by wondering whether they have a Humpty Dumpty cake on the floorboard. In that moment, when I create space for some alternative for bad driving, I can lower my annoyance and make room for civilized interaction.

This works with more than driving. A tool in conflict resolution is to consider at least one plausible, alternative reason for another's unhelpful behavior or words. We are conditioned to immediately assume one reason, but if we intentionally consider an alternative, we can slow our reactivity. It creates space to not assume the worst. It creates opportunity to ask, in a sincere way, about the person's actions or statements.

Authentic relationships cannot rest on assumptions. If we, as the Presbytery, truly value authentic relationships with one another, then we need to be intentional about creating space for alternatives. We need to give each other the benefit of the doubt, at least until we have time for a frank conversation.

Perhaps the conversation will confirm our assumptions, but our willingness to engage in the conversation itself might build trust. Perhaps the conversation will reveal something that surprises us, releases frustration or hurt, and deepens our relationships. If we don't move beyond assumptions and reactivity, we might never know the joy that is just out of sight on the floorboard.

