



CONVERSATIONS GUIDE

BY KIM ENGELMANN

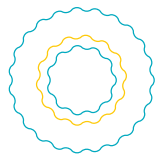


OPENING TO GOD: *LECTIO DIVINA* AS PRAYER: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID BENNER

BY GARY W. MOON

The article begins with Benner's theme in his new book. What would it be like if at every moment you were open to God? Benner explains that once you have tasted connection with God, desire for more (not willpower) moves you forward in the spiritual life.

One of the biggest barriers to being open to God's presence is ego; this is because ego resists surrender, and surrender is necessary in order to be open to God. We must move from an egocentric life to one that is theocentric. Another major block is thinking that openness to God is a matter of behavior (doing the right thing) rather than a matter of the heart. Benner also speaks about prayer as a natural outflow and response to God, who has already initiated the dialogue. We ought therefore to begin all our prayers with silence and tune in to the One who has already spoken. Ultimately, prayer is not simply communication; it is a way of being. It is turning toward God in complete trust, moment by moment, and



allowing his presence to flow through our being. In this way our entire life can be a prayer. In God, who is love, I find my true self.

From *lectio*, Benner suggests the model of four broad prayer paths for

all of life—not just for scripture reading—as follows: *prayer as attending*, *prayer as pondering*, *prayer as responding*, and *prayer as being*. Creation is not a moment in the past, but the ongoing activity of a living God in the present. Learning first to pay attention in the moment to God—to recognize him in the *now*—is essential to developing openness and is the first step to prayer. We find God in our lives in the places where we are being called to be more than we are. Pondering prayer is learning to talk to God about our thoughts, our wonderings, and our reflections on life. Responding is next, because prayer without action means we are just talking to ourselves. All loving action reveals the presence of God. Finally, prayer as being, or contemplative prayer, is described as “unworded stillness because our knowing of God remains shallow when we fill all the space for God with words.” Contemplation and action are complementary. “Allowing our actions in the world to flow out of contemplative stillness gives them a potency that will never be present when they simply come from conviction, compulsion, or reactivity,” states Benner. All of life is meant to be lived in relationship to God. We live and move and have our being in Him.

1. Which one of the four parts of prayer that Benner identifies comes easiest for you?
2. Which one is the hardest to practice?
3. What would it mean for Christians if we did not compartmentalize God, but were more aware of his presence in all of life?
4. How can you practice more openness to God in the days ahead?

GETTING NAKED WITH THE FRIENDS OF JESUS: LIVING THE REALITY OF COMMUNITY

BY TOM SMITH

Do you just believe in Jesus, or do you also follow him? Do you live in a cocoon, disengaged from what is going on in the here and now, or are you involved? Is faith in your head or in your hands and feet?

Author Tom Smith benefited from apartheid. He enjoyed being a Christian in his head, while most of his African brothers and sisters struggled for their lives. Smith was a part of the formation of a church called Claypot, where he became the pastor. This church sought to discover what it really meant to be the church in the world. He compares many Christians to children who put padding (a “butt skin”) in their pants so they don't feel



the pain of a spanking so severely. Throughout the article Smith asks us to remove our “butt skins” and get real about what Jesus

asks of us. The Word of God is extremely pointed and often painful for the flesh to bear. For instance, “sell all you have and give it to the poor and come follow me” is one such verse. We have put padding, Smith says, between our flesh and God's command so that we have many rationalizations and ways to keep our faith from becoming active and relevant for those around us. Sometimes we use “God knows I love the poor deep in my-heart” as a way to keep ourselves from getting to know any poor people in reality.

In order to stay honest before God, Smith says his community came up with six principles for living a disciplined, vulnerable, authentic Christian life, as follows: (1) plug in daily, (2) eat meals with other people, (3) discover our piece of the puzzle and gift others with it, (4) place ourselves in other people's shoes, (5) be committed to downward mobility and servitude, and (6) see our

working lives as an essential expression of our discipleship. These principles pushed Claypot out to “be with” the poor in squatter camps and other areas in Johannesburg. Smith says “being with” the poor is a much better way to describe their ministry than “reaching out” to the poor since he is convinced that the poor and the rich need each other. Being with the poor taught them about community, inequality, and the ways in which many live in abject poverty. Wherever your journey takes you (and every journey is unique), Smith contends it will mean two things: engaging in compassionate action and removing the “butt skins” that keep you safe, so that you can be transformed by the love of God.

1. Are you aware of any “butt skins” in your own life that keep you safe and hidden from the truth of what God’s word is truly saying?
2. How might compassionate action take hold in your own faith community to a greater degree?
3. Which one of the six principles that Smith suggests is something you might like to work toward more fully?
4. Does the “deep in my heart” excuse for not engaging practically in the “here and now” of the gospel strike a familiar chord? Share.

FOOD FOR THE SOUL: EATING AS AN ACT OF JUSTICE

BY LISA GRAHAM MCMINN

“A view of the Gospel that focuses only on saving souls minimizes the goodness of creation, stopping short of acknowledging and honoring God as the Creator of something amazingly wonderful that fosters the flourishing of life.”

McMinn talks in this article about the goodness of creation and the capacity for us to be involved in creation in ways that promote justice and compassion for people, animals, and life itself. McMinn emphasizes that our connection with the physical world is profound; we cannot separate the physical from the spiritual. If we love the creation given to us by God, then we will make choices that promote social equity, change, and growth. This is



because we are God’s representatives on earth, “charged to fulfill Earth, bring it to its potential for life to flourish and in doing so reflect honor back to the Creator. A more complete formation of the soul comes from remembering we are physical beings living in an amazing physical world.” Our actions in the world need to be actions that honor creation, not exploit it. McMinn talks about these principles in terms of promoting community agriculture, in order to be able to eat just, wholesome food locally. Also McMinn identifies being a “good” shopper as not simply finding the best bargain. From a Christian perspective, being a “good” shopper entails understanding what makes something cheaper than something else. If paying less promotes exploitation, oppression, and lack of compassion, then we ought not purchase a product to save our own pocketbooks. Spending more for products might hurt us a little, but it takes a stand against destructive production practices. We must be informed, not ignorant. Ultimately, we need to learn to live in more harmonious, interdependent relationships with all of creation. Transformation of the soul begins, says McMinn, with what we put in our shopping carts, on our plates, and in our mouths.

1. Do you agree with McMinn that if the Gospel is focused only on saving souls, it minimizes the goodness of Creation? Why or why not?
2. Do you see most Christians acting in a way that displays social responsibility and informed awareness? Are you aware of churches that educate in this way? Do you think this is a good thing to emphasize in church?
3. How might you take some steps to live justly and honor creation by what you put in your shopping cart, on your plate, and in your mouth?

DEVELOPING A PILGRIM POSTURE: INTEGRATING CONTEMPLATION, COMPASSION, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

BY TREVOR HUDSON

Trevor Hudson’s article begins in a very humble way, the author admitting that although he wants to live a life where he “does justice, loves mercy, and walks humbly with God,”

his transformation is not complete. He admits that those closest to him see his darker side and that he often sabotages the relationships of those dearest to him with ingrained selfish behavior. Transformation, he says, is a slow process that takes time and is continual throughout our lives. It is an inside, unfolding work of the Holy Spirit. Yet he contends there are things we can do to cooperate with this process of transformation that is an integration of contemplation, compassion, and justice. Our relationship with



God doesn’t just happen. It requires our determined and planned cooperation. One major thing we can do to make more

space for God in our lives is to expose ourselves intentionally to those who suffer.

Hudson shares that a Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope was born as he took members of his congregation (a white suburban church) to the places in South Africa where people were suffering. These pilgrimages had three essential ingredients: *Encounter*, *Reflecting*, and *Transformation*. As we choose to encounter those who suffer, we must have a “pilgrim’s posture.” We must learn to be present to those who suffer, learn to listen, and learn to notice. In reflecting on our encounters, we become aware of insights that can change our lives. We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting upon experience and recognizing God’s voice in the voice of human cries around us. Finally, transformation is a unique ingredient because it cannot be planned. It happens to us as we stay open to God. Hudson believes these essential components ought to be lived out in normal daily routines (we don’t need a pilgrimage), beginning with intentionally exposing ourselves to those who suffer. From this we will find that Divine compassion begins to flower within us. There can be



no spiritual formation without exposure to and involvement in our broken world; anything that keeps us isolated from those suffering is counterfeit and a distortion of Jesus' message. As John Wesley declared, "There is no holiness apart from social holiness."

1. Do you intentionally seek out people who are suffering in your own life, in order to be present to them? What might be hard about this? What might be good and formative?
2. How do you suppose you might be able to integrate what Hudson is saying into your daily routine?
3. Do you believe there can be no spiritual formation without involvement in another's pain? Explain.

**WORKIN' FOR THE LORD:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
SINGER-SONGWRITER
KATE CAMPBELL**

BY EMILIE GRIFFIN

Songwriter and artist Kate Campbell reflects on her musical past with Emilie Griffin, who interviews her. Kate was influenced by the '60s even though she was just a



child at that time. She heard and responded to the music of Peter, Paul, and Mary, along with Bob

Dylan, who wrote "music that does justice." She herself has written music that deals with race, inequality, spirituality, and tradition. This music comes out of a contemplative place, but moves the listener toward action. "Delmus Jackson," one of her songs, was inspired by a man who worked in the church where her father was a Baptist pastor. When Kate had to "hang out" at the church with her dad, Delmus Jackson was there, telling her about Jesus, cracking jokes, bringing her Cokes, etc. His quiet presence influenced her deeply, and not a day went by that she didn't notice how he lived the Christian life. Another song, "In My Mother's House," has a poignancy about it: despite their differences, Kate knows there will

always be a place for her in her mother's house. Her own spiritual life has been influenced by the Rosary, the Benedictines, and the singing of the Psalms, with her own Baptist roots always being a strong presence. She is beginning to see her songs as a vocation given to her by God.

1. What is your favorite art form?
2. Have you ever been inspired by a work of art? Share.
3. How do Kate's memories of her past touch you?
4. Do you have memories that might touch others? If you feel that you do, how might you share them?

AUDIO DIVINA

BY EMILIE GRIFFIN

A song becomes a prayer when we use *lectio divina* to help us listen. This term means sacred reading, and usually this form of listening is done using scripture. However, the Jesuits suggested we can come into a place of contemplation by being in a beautiful environment or by listening to music. This is because contemplation is thinking more about God than ourselves. When we are swept up in music or awed by beauty, this is what is happening.

In order to use the *lectio* format to listen to "My Mother's House," listen through the first time prayerfully. Then the second time, listen and see if a salient phrase or word rings especially true and draws you into personal prayer. Pray this phrase shortly and repetitively, rest in the Lord, and conclude with a prayer of thanks. Doing this can make a song a prayer.

1. What songs do you know that are especially meaningful for you?
2. Discuss as a group what songs these are, and then practice *lectio* on some of them together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kim Engelmann is Sr. Pastor at West Valley Presbyterian Church in Cupertino, California. She is the author of seven books, including her most recent book, *Running In Circles*. She has also written *Seeing Jesus, A Walk With God Through Friendship*, and three children's books entitled the *Joona Trilogy*.

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