

Crossings

Lent/ Easter 2011

The newsletter this time is part of a conversation I'm having with a 25 year old man about spirituality. He was raised in a Christian household, but has found his connection with the Divine through a 12 step community since he was a teenager. Now, as he is moving into another phase of life, he is looking for something, but he's not quite sure what. The first part of the newsletter is me offering him my take (using the Crossings method) on the story of the man born blind from John 9 (<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=165318745>). The second part of the newsletter will be his response.

Dear ----,
I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation Saturday and am looking forward to further time together. We touched on some deep topics and opened some interesting possibilities. Obviously, discussions like these aren't complete after a couple of hours on a rainy Saturday afternoon. By the end, I could tell we were both struggling to say what we thought, to listen to and stay connected to each other. It's not easy to talk about matters that stretch us in so many ways, yet such effort is rarely wasted.

This letter offers you what I promised to send, a look at John 9 through the six step Crossings' method.

As I dig into John 9, I am astonished, again, by the power of this Gospel from a literary and spiritual perspective. The richness of the text offers levels upon levels of meaning that we can continue to discover for years. To get a big picture overview I recommend the Sandra Schneiders book (http://www.amazon.com/Written-That-You-May-believe/dp/0824519264/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1298320998&sr=1-1) I told you about. She does a wonderful job helping the reader start to understand John as a whole as well as how the parts fit together.

"The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." John 9:11



What the Crossings' method we talked about on Saturday does for me is help me connect a text like John 9 with my own life. It is a way to dig into a portion of the Bible, in this case one story in the Gospel of John, and begin exploring what it might have to do with my life.

I know you're still exploring religions in general and haven't decided on a particular path yet. Even so, I think it's important to try to get a glimpse of what a faith tradition looks like from the inside out, rather than just looking at it from the outside, usually through the lenses of the media. I believe that exploring the Crossings' method is an opportunity to do just that with Christianity.

So, here we go.

After reading the whole chapter a couple of times, I see that the cast of characters is large and far-ranging. We've got Jesus, his followers (the disciples), the man who was blind and is given his sight by Jesus, the neighbors, the man's parents and the Pharisees, also called the Jews in this text. Quite a panoply of folks, but if you notice, nobody has a name except Jesus. Schneiders says that's because the author of the Gospel of John wants the reader to be able to put themselves in the story. Think of it like one of those cut-out figures at carnivals -- Superman, for example. Everything is there except for the face. You step behind the cut-out, stick your face into the hole and somebody snaps your picture. Now you have a souvenir to take home of you as Superman.

The characters are all acting in different ways. They are playing different roles in the story. Which of the characters do you relate to at this moment? The man born blind? His parents? The Pharisees? More likely than not, you'll see parts of yourself in all the characters at one time or another, and sometimes in none at all. For me today, I relate to the neighbors. They see a guy they've known forever, a blind beggar, and now he's changed, dramatically changed. This is step one (<http://www.crossings.org/newsletr/lent96/lent96-2.shtml>) in the Crossings method, the external reality of what these folks are doing. They are looking at this guy and scratching their heads. "What's going on?" they say.

Looking at the outside is the first step of understanding what's happening in this text. But it's only the beginning. Now we want to push a little deeper and look at what's going on inside in step two (<http://www.crossings.org/newsletr/lent96/lent96-2.shtml>).

What is making these people act the way they do? Sometimes the text tells us what's going on inside someone. In this story, we're told in verse 22 that the man's parents answered the way they did "because they were afraid of the Jews." Often, however, this is where our own reality pushes its way more fully into the text.

Back to the neighbors. They were asking questions, trying to figure out what's going on. Supposedly, this guy used to be the blind beggar, but the neighbors are divided about whether this is really the same man they've always known. They're confused, so they take the man to the Pharisees. Why did they do that? One way to look at it might be that they respect the authority of the Pharisees and want to hear their opinion. Another way might be that the neighbors realize that something big has happened and they don't want any responsibility for what's going on. Either way, they don't see, they're blind and confused.

When I'm honest, I spend a fair amount of time blind and confused myself. Things happen around me and often I'm perfectly happy to stay blind and confused rather than get involved and become a sighted person with responsibility. Ignorance is bliss, right?

Now we've come to the place where step two shifts to step three (<http://www.crossings.org/newsletr/lent96/lent96-2.shtml>) and the subject of the sentences shifts from you and me to God. Up to this point the emphasis has been on what we do, what we think, how we feel. Now we're going to hear from another voice



Forty-three people attended the Cross-Training Seminar **How is Jesus Good for You, Really?** in January, including 2 special guests from Singapore, 7 seminarians, and 13 lay ministers. Ron Neustadt (front left) led the afternoon "tracking" and "crossing" session.

about our doing, thinking and feeling. In verse 39, Jesus says, "I came into the world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." God sees my willful assurance of how to live my life according to my own standards and says, "You may think you see, but now I, your Creator, leave you permanently blind, willfully ignorant of the realities of my demands on your life."

Thankfully, this word of law, God's law, slicing down through the optic nerves of our lives is God's penultimate word to us. Step four (<http://www.crossings.org/newsletr/lent96/lent96-3.shtml>) brings God's ultimate word in Jesus Christ for us. Because of God's love for humanity, even in the face of our willful disobedience and blindness to the reality of our position as God's creatures, the Father sent the Son, both God and man, both light and soil/saliva, into our world. Through Christ's life, death and resurrection, the possibility of a new way of seeing is brought into being for all of humanity. It was Jesus living the life the Father gave him to live, being willing to take our blindness onto himself and be nailed to the cross for it and then on the third day being raised into the brilliant light of new creation life that made our eternal sight possible. The optic nerves of our lives can be revived with the new creation light as Jesus' words to the disciples in verse 5 shine into our hearts, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

With step five (<http://www.crossings.org/newsletr/lent96/lent96-3.shtml>), our position as subject of the sentence returns. How do we respond to God's word of hope, life and sight through Jesus Christ? Do we run to the pool of Siloam, wash and see for the first time in our lives? That is what we can now do because of the touch of our Lord and his love for us. Such trust may be a whole new reality in our lives, or maybe we have had trustworthy relationships in the past with which to compare this way of living. Either way, the core of Christianity is not about believing a series of doctrines or living by a particular set of rules. The core of Christianity is here in a relationship with the One who is the Light of the World, who gives sight to those of us who were born blind.

With God's new creation sight dispelling our darkness and confusion, how do we now live? This is step six (<http://www.crossings.org/newsletr/lent96/lent96-3.shtml>). We tell the world what happened to us, we share our experiences. The formerly blind man just told his story, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." (verse 11) We walk into our lives with the new possibilities now visible through the Light of the World. The man born blind, throughout this chapter, merely tells his story. The other characters react in a variety of ways, but he just tells his story.

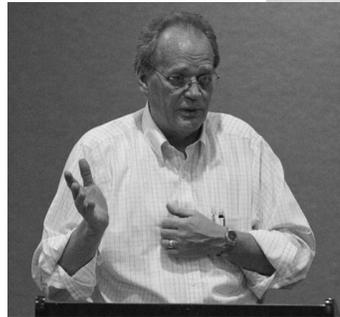
With this fundamental change in his life, the man who had been blind would begin to live differently in the dailiness of his existence as well. Obviously he can't be a blind beggar anymore! How that works out in his life, the specifics of the way he changes, is a function of the Holy Spirit. Many of us prefer to have a strict code of conduct, either we are right or we are wrong, that demands certain behaviors from us -- something clear, just hard enough to break a sweat, but definitely doable. However, a life based not on a set of rules, but on a living relationship, tends to have some gray area that can be messy and disconcerting. But it's also more real.

Of course, we could talk about a myriad of other topics in this text. One in particular that needs to be acknowledged before I close is John's use of the term

"Jews" as the bad guys throughout the Gospel. Horrifically, this emphasis has been a theological justification over the years for Christian anti-Semitism. The use of the word made sense in the context of the Johannine community of 90 AD, but has been taken out of context since that time and used to perpetrate unspeakable evil. Not a happy note to close on, but an important reminder of the power of this book, even 2,000 years later.



Jerome Burce (left) opened the seminar explaining the benefits of distinguishing Law and Gospel and later "crossed" the Gospel of Matthew. Steven Kuhl, (above) explained and demonstrated the Crossings six-step method.



I look forward to your response and further discussion as we continue our journey together.

Peace,
Robin

Dear Robin,

Our conversation left me with a lot to think about. I am obviously still a person who is constantly re-evaluating my own spirituality and where I fit in in the universe. Being raised Christian there was a solid base to rely on when I really needed it. However, my own personal beliefs have strayed from the Christian tradition since then.

For starters, my own view of the divine has a lot to do with the relationships I have with people in my life. A primary example of this (since I am a member of a 12-step community) is with my sponsor. He is more or less a spiritual adviser for me. We talk about the bigger questions, but the primary focus of our spiritual discussion is entirely related to the moment and what is going on in my life today. Essentially, it is a very "keep it simple" mentality. I find that my mind will "spin out" quickly if I don't have a solid base like this.

One of the most intriguing parts of our discussion was your question regarding what would I do if those I rely on for my spiritual life were to fail me, die, etc. I thought about this question long and hard, ultimately discussing it with my wife, who is very like-minded to me. We ultimately came to the determination that, while my spiritual life is absolutely based on the people I have in my life, it is in no way, shape or form dependent on any person. This simply means that while

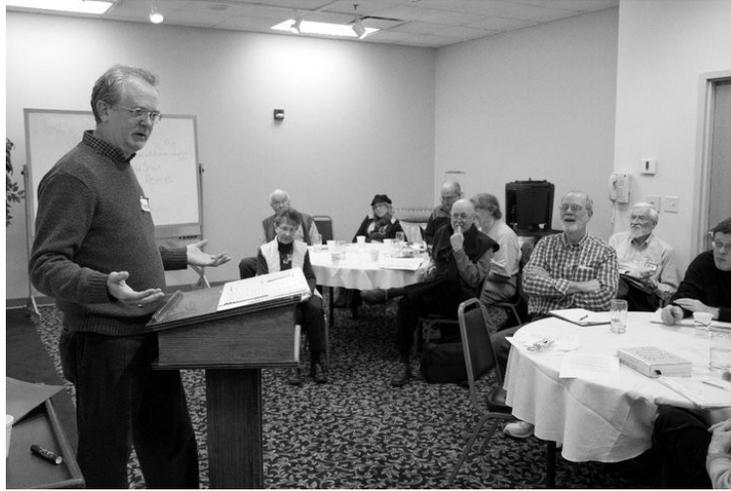
people come and go from my life all the time, the underlying love and peace of the divine I encounter in this way doesn't change. I have personally undergone many transformations in my own personal group of supporters, yet have never found myself left out in the cold. In other words "the faces change, but the love remains the same."

I firmly believe in the idea that God exists within each of us. I often relate this idea to people as the Jimmy Cricket on our shoulders. Regardless of how far from God I have wandered (which has been far at times), I have never been without guidance from my own internal divinity. I know that can sound arrogant to some, but to me I have no other solid explanation for the miracles from within that I have witnessed in my own life and the lives of countless others around me. So often in my life I have had no idea what path to take with a certain decision and, as if by magic, some divine guidance has sprung forth from my own mind...often in words I have never used. This at first shocked me, but I have come to see the maintenance and growth of my connection to this part of myself as an essential part of my own spiritual practice.

I also have a need to be able to explain things logically. I am a child of the age of information and have always had a hard time believing in something that is not rationally observed. All of my own spiritual beliefs have actual scientific backing, as odd as that may sound. I see the glory of God and the divinely natural side of humanity in all scientific laws, from natural selection and adaptation to Newton's Laws of Mechanics. It seems odd that these discoveries would become the basis of a working spiritual life, but to me I found solace in no other viewpoint. The world makes sense to me through this lens.

The other question you posed that stuck with me was, "What is your relationship with God based on?" If you remember, I had no good answer at the time. You

told me your relationship with God is based on what Christ did for you. I have since thought of that question and came to some form of an answer. My relationship with God is based on what I do. I know we said this was a risky view, but on my end the relationship is entirely based on what I do. If I lie to God (moot point, God being omniscient and all), ignore God, or deliberately do things opposed to God's will I feel it in the connection we have. Now, on God's end, I believe describing it as a relationship is almost silly. I believe that on God's end, calling what we have a relationship is almost like me describing the relationship between myself and my foot. There isn't one...we are the same.



Marcus Felde explaining how he uses short stories to help his parishioners understand the depth of God's diagnosis. Feedback was that the seminar was extremely informative, helpful, and inspiring.

Love and compassion are not an act or a feeling in this case, they are a given. I think that is my biggest hurdle to a truly Christian faith. I find it hard to see the need for reconciliation in the relationship. In my opinion, God would no more hold my sins against me than I would spite my foot for a hairline fracture. We are one (I know I sound like a new-age hippie, which I assure you I am not). I do believe God would rejoice when the sin is recognized and atoned for, same as I would rejoice when the cast came off, but never would anger or judgment towards the offending appendage exist.

I know I didn't even touch on the Bible verses we discussed, but honestly we didn't discuss them very much...there seemed to be more important lines of conversation to be explored. I do hope that this honest description of my own beliefs will be helpful, or at least open up more topics for our future discussions. Thank you for your kind and sympathetic ear.

Sincerely,
Spiritual Seeker

Printing and mailing this quarterly is paid for by your gifts, thank you. If you are a reader but not yet a giver, we can wait. When you are ready to be both, we won't object.