



Pop the Corks & Pass the Butter Tarts

CHAPTER THREE: EARLY DAYS, EARLY QUESTIONS, EARLY LESSONS

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“The great conversion in our life is to recognize and believe that the many unexpected events are not just disturbing interruptions in our projects, but the way in which God molds our hearts and prepares us for his return. Our great temptations are boredom and bitterness. ... But when we believe that patience can make our expectations grow, then fate can be converted into a vocation, wounds into a call for deeper understanding, and sadness into a birthplace of joy.”

– Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life*

Touchstone’s first few years proved to be a time of laying groundwork, building hundreds of relationships, holding group meetings, obtaining our charitable status, and completing the process of incorporation. We crafted a mission statement; “Offering, encouraging, and teaching friendship in Christ among leaders in business, political, arts, and spiritual marketplaces.” Later we added a vision statement; “To nurture an ever-expanding circle of friends who: experience God’s love; love God in return with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength; and express leadership which emerges from our identity in Christ.”

Those guiding statements sound polished, but we were experimenting, learning, and making mistakes, shaping things while we went along.

As we brought people together in board rooms, restaurants, and coffee shops, we realized they were coming from different backgrounds, denominations, and spiritual experiences. Some did not identify as being people of faith but were interested in delving into spiritual values. It was a time of great learning as we tried to figure out what it looked like to keep Jesus at the centre of our gatherings—such that exploring his life, his words, and his actions would shape the nature of our relationships as we listened deeply to one another’s lives.

Many of us came from backgrounds where having the right answer was the important thing, and we were attempting to create an environment in which questions about belief could be discussed without necessarily resolving the issues.

At times someone would have a theological concern that they were dealing with, or a relational problem in terms of marriage or family, a conflict at work, or a recent job loss. We wanted to develop an environment in which they could be free to explore what was going on in their lives as others listened, asked questions, and offered help without offering solutions. We had to find a way to have some sense of unifying centre in the person of Jesus, while at the same time allowing for diversity in opinion, attitude, behaviour, and faith practice. It became a very complex thing to discover and organize.

With so many of the people we were serving coming from churches and faith-based organizations, I knew that I needed to come alongside in friendship, without being a competitor—for funds, or for board members. Participating in the leadership challenges of people in the world of faith-based organizations led to coordinating retreats and providing spiritual guidance to such organizations and to churches. It was also critical to find a way to come with compassion, not judgement.

In Touchstone, I had been given freedom to explore the things of faith outside of formal structures. But many of my friends had given their lives to leading faith-based organizations in which there were sensitivities around prescribed beliefs, which they had to respect. As part of their role, they were expected to represent a particular message or to present a particular profile without revealing their personal weaknesses, vulnerabilities, inner struggles, or doubts; their communities (donors, constituents, or congregants) wanted them to live up to a kind of standard that did not allow for that sort of thing.

I remember an early retreat with a group of clergy: we were away at a cottage, and I was trying to teach them some things about my new-found understanding of contemplative prayer. I became increasingly frustrated by their inability to just listen to a gospel story and respond to it, without pronouncing on the passage, without bringing what they had previously studied to our conversation, but just to respond in a fresh, new way. What I learned was that it was much harder for these guys to do that. Years later, one of the fellows, Rick Tobias, said, “We have all been trained to be talkers and speakers, not listeners.” In Touchstone we learned to listen to God, to be passive in God’s presence, under the guidance of the Spirit. We learned to listen to the words of Jesus, or to a Psalm, or a reading from the epistles, and to allow it to shape us. But it took me a long time to recognize that in some ways, it was harder for my friends in ministry to lay down their guns of communication and just participate with each other as friends. It was easier for a banker, lawyer, accountant, or consultant to go away on a retreat, because the whole experience was so outside of their comfort zone that they had to relinquish control and just participate.

As for the business community, some of the big questions we were wrestling with in the early days were: What is the place of faith in the marketplace? How does my vocation as a banker, lawyer, accountant, consultant, executive, teacher—or whatever it might be—become an expression of my faith in God? Many of us came from faith backgrounds where we believed that we were placed in positions by God so that it was to be used as a platform for evangelisation. But such a perspective gave little value to the actual work that we were doing.

As we began to explore what the Scriptures teach, what Jesus taught about the value of work, the dignity of being in a particular position, and making it a holy vocation, we saw that we are all called to be followers of Jesus, wherever we go. It just happens that some of us are placed

in business and professional settings to express our God-given gifts and to put them to work in the marketplace. Not necessarily to be a platform for evangelism, but to be the best you are at whatever you do. If you are a banker, be the best banker you can be to honour the gifts that God has given you.

In Touchstone's early days, it was hard for people of my generation, particularly men, to come together and be open with one another. It took a long time to figure out how to facilitate people in becoming comfortable with each other, developing trust, and establishing that anything said amongst a group remained confidential. Time and again I experienced people who would meet with me one-on-one, and they would pour out a story of pain. But then when we would get together with a group that they were part of, they would be reticent to be open because they were not sure whether everybody around the table was trustworthy.

Something else I heard repeatedly as I worked with people back then was that they would like me to meet with someone they knew who had a particular need. In response, I would ask why wouldn't they meet with the friend themselves? Invariably, the answer would be some form of, "Well, you're the professional." In those situations, I learned it was important to help people realize that as a follower of God, this was something they could do; that in going about their work and marriage, family, and community commitments, they were working out what they believed about God. And they could come alongside somebody themselves, and give good friendship, and spiritual guidance. We do not always need to have the religious professionals, or the therapists, or the psychiatrists involved.

What we were trying to do through Touchstone in that first decade was to build infrastructure of relationships so that when we were in trouble, we could help one other with the kind of wisdom and street smarts that I think Jesus loved. I say this because Jesus told parables, and he taught that the people of the world are not as clever as people of the light in understanding how to manage the world. (When helping people help others, it's good to remember that street-smarts in combination with God-smarts is a powerful thing.)

Another big learning curve for me involved discerning my role as Touchstone's leader. I wasn't then, nor am I now an ordained clergyman. I have no formal theological training; I am a lay person trying to learn about God. Of course, I had a lot more freedom to explore than many lay people do. And as the years went on, in my exploration of Ignatian, Franciscan, Benedictine, Celtic, and Orthodox spiritualities, I realized that one of my roles was to go and experience those things. I needed to take the time to learn to pray and to access the Scriptures in different ways, and to use my imagination to be part of Jesus' life. But then I had to find acceptable ways to bring those practices out of the great, historic streams of the faith and to share them in community and friendship with others, such that others might embrace them for their beauty and relevance and not reject them out of preconceived bias or prejudice against the unfamiliar.

I needed to find a way for my leadership to be something that allowed others to see that I was just exploring things out of my own brokenness, my own need. And I was finding health and hope and healing and wanted to share it. That methodology became one of our great teaching principles.

I've frequently reminded people that I'm the worst person in Touchstone; and if I can find something that helps me, it can help anybody else. Simply being transparent and honest—that I am as flawed as the next person—somehow cultivated all the spiritual authority needed for the context of what we were doing.

Another challenging question during that time became: What about my work matters to God? How could I believe that what I was doing in offering friendship to someone in a tower on Bay Street was just as significant as what anybody else was doing?

I found my answer as I was developing friendships—in the business community and among the people who were working with the impoverished in Toronto: Rick Tobias at Yonge Street Mission, Greg Paul at Sanctuary, and others who were involved in similar kinds of work. One day, I was with our friend, the late Michael Wilson, a real estate developer. I had been invited to come with him to meet some of the staff of Evergreen, which at the time was on Yonge Street ministering to street people, to talk about how he viewed the world. We went in there with fear and trepidation because we were from the other side of the street: we were suits.

We met with a lot of people, some of them ex-street people who had gone on to work with street people. Michael talked a lot about how he built homes, saying that he built communities; this was how he saw the world. But he also talked about how he saw the brokenness in our society, and the need to care for the poor. Towards the end of that gathering, a big, scary-looking guy (who once lived on the street and who remains a friend to this day) stood up and said that while we scared him(!) he could see that we had a lot in common.

He was right, of course. Again and again during those years, Rick Tobias and I talked about how, even though we both worked different sides of the street, we were working with people who shared sins of omission and commission, who had insecurities that caused them to have addictions and difficulties coping with life. My side of the street could hide their struggles better with good suits and affluence, expensive counsellors, and therapists, whereas street people had fewer resources. We would talk about the fact that the people we each worked with were very similar, and we were working the same Kingdom message of friendship in Christ, we were just doing it on different sides of the street.

Over time, I was one of a few people who helped Rick become a friend to many people in business, who helped him raise money for Yonge Street Mission. He developed profound relationships with powerful people who helped with the projects that he was trying to engage in serving the poor. These businesspeople would sit and talk to him about the brokenness in their families, the fears that they had for the future, the difficulties they were facing. Rick, who looked nothing like a businessperson, was offering spiritual friendship to businesspeople, and the common threads of what we each were doing connected in a wonderful way.

It was a time of group building, a lot of work with both clergy and NGO leadership, as well as with business and professional people. In and through it all, we were trying to determine what it means to be a friend in Christ, where Jesus Christ is the highest common denominator.

We had varied views about issues like creation, the virgin birth, gay marriage, abortion—what we believed about any number of the things that divide us including communion or the Eucharist. We were sorting out how to come together in a way in which Jesus was the highest common denominator, without allowing all those other things that we may have disagreed about to break our fellowship. We were trying in a gentle way to really build people up together to the point where they would be comfortable in their differences of opinion, while at the same time having a high degree of regard and respect for each other, because they sensed the presence of Christ and a respect for Christ in one another.

In short, during those first few years of Touchstone we were trying to find the intersection of prayer, friendship, vocation, and mission. And it was not an easy thing. But it was well worth doing. I will share more in the coming chapters about the journeys I went on, and ultimately, how we arrived at a deeper more profound and transformative understanding of spiritual friendship.

A TOUCHSTONE TESTIMONIAL

It began with me pouring out a story of crisis. Alongside Norm and a few others around a table at Touchstone's Sacred Space, I shared how the community organization and church I worked at might not survive. I knew already that there were two options: re-imagine how to be a place where there is an intentional centering of people dealing with poverty and a structure to support it, or close. Norm listened and asked questions that prodded me to think about next steps. His trademark humour helped to alleviate some of the strain I was feeling. I left that day invigorated by the challenge to be the best I could be with the gifts God had given me.

What sprung up after that conversation was the inception of The Dale Ministries. The early days of The Dale were deeply informed by the early days of Touchstone. We took time to lay the groundwork, sought feedback from the existing community, experimented with programming, strengthened our Board, and sought incorporation. With Jesus as our foundation, we learned, made mistakes, developed relationships, and even experienced a shift from scarcity to abundance. I often referred to the notes I made when meeting with Norm during that time. His encouragement was invaluable.

Since those days, I have been repeatedly inspired by the work of Norm and Touchstone, especially when it comes to the building of friendship. It is rare to find spaces where people can meet across difference, especially in our increasingly polarized world. In my experience, Touchstone is one of those places where people can feel safe to explore varied views. I, like Rick Tobias, work on a different side of the street than Norm. I also affirm what those two talked about with such frequency: that we share a common humanity whatever our circumstances. Whichever side of the street you may be on, the message of friendship in Christ is the same.

I believe that building friendship requires a willingness to be open about oneself. Norm is a leader who models transparency and honesty. We need more like him. It is refreshing to meet

someone who can share about their own questions, struggles, and need. His openness encourages others, including me, to practice the same. Such a posture means that friendship can more easily flow both ways. At The Dale I do not just care for others but am cared for too. I know that is true for Norm at Touchstone. As we care for one another, we can journey toward deeper health and wholeness in Christ.

To me it is clear the hand of God has shaped Norm and the vision of Touchstone. Norm is someone who has practiced listening to the voice of God and encouraged others to do the same. Jesus modelled a kind of leadership that was unfamiliar and caused discomfort. He did not wield power in the way the world expected. Norm, in all his beautiful and complicated humanness, has sought the same. A lot of people have benefitted from Norm's example. Not least of which is me.

- Erinn Oxford, Executive Director, The Dale Ministries

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION:

1. Again and again in this chapter, Norm emphasizes that Touchstone's early years were a time of learning and trial. What do you think are the advantages to that kind of approach (as opposed to having a well-defined plan and working out the details of the plan)? What are the disadvantages?
2. Many of the people who came together in friendship through Touchstone came from backgrounds, "where having the right answer was the important thing." How important is it to you to have the right answer? How can such a perspective help in your relationship with God or with others? How can it get in the way?
3. What do you think about the role of doubt and questioning in the journey of faith?
4. Norm writes that his clergy friends, or those from faith-based non-profit organizations tended to experience obstacles to hearing from God in fresh ways that businesspeople did not. What do you think about that?
5. Consider Norm's comment that "street-smarts in combination with God-smarts is a powerful thing." How would you describe someone with "God-smarts?" How are you cultivating "God-smarts" in your life?
6. In Touchstone's early years, the foundation was laid to keep Christ at the centre of gatherings, and to not let differing opinions or theological positions become things that would divide. Does it feel remarkable to you that this was even possible? What can you learn from this?