



CHAPTER FOUR: ILLUMINATING KINGDOM CONNECTIONS, EXPERIENCING JESUS

April 3, 2024

“As the hand is made for holding, and the eye for seeing, You have fashioned us for joy. Share with us that vision that shall find it everywhere.

And, when our song of joy dies down to silence, come, hold our powerlessness with love! Then shall our fear be gone, and our feet set on a radiant path.”

– From Celtic Daily Prayer Book Two, Wm. Collins

Almost 200 friends celebrated Touchstone’s 10th anniversary under a marquee on the property of our family home. With food, music, laughter, and storytelling we looked back over a decade of discovery.

The theme of the event was “Leaving His Mark in the Marketplace,” with the subtext “without leaving our fingerprints.”

By then many circles of friendship had been established. In them we learned to become better at listening than advising, creating environments of safety and confidentiality where deep issues related to leadership and business ownership and operation were shared, lessons gleaned from one another. Touchstone Forums had also been established for occasional one-day conferences during which we explored being people who write the “Fifth Gospel” with our lives in the marketplace. In and through both avenues, we created disciplines so that everyone could learn from the diverse faith experience of those who participated. (There were many with evangelical roots like mine, some with mainline Protestant roots, some Roman Catholics, and some who identified as atheist, agnostic, or just confused.)

During our gatherings we tried to reduce our natural tendency to debate and encouraged listening deeply to one another and to Scripture. Those who always had or who always wanted the “right” answer were encouraged to listen and to learn from those whose experience of God was different.

I was learning to guide—firmly but gently—in enabling our strong, A-type constituents to be listeners, not debaters. Thomas Merton used the term “God’s ushers” to describe the role of the spiritual guide or director. In other words, people serving in this way ought not to declare what God is saying to someone else but should usher them to a place where they can hear what God is saying for themselves. In our Touchstone circles we were becoming friends based on shared relationship with Jesus rather than for networking purposes, projects, or causes.

My tendencies to impatience and defensiveness sometimes created conflict. I needed to learn—again and again—that listening and gentleness were far more effective in “ushering” than my desire to be right, or to create whatever preconceived result I hoped for. My ego was as strong as anyone’s in our circle, and learning to manage that was one point on which I empathized with our constituents. We learned together.

We all hungered to share our needs, weaknesses, doubts, and fears. We all were so used to putting on our various masks at work, church, and in our community that the desire to be open and vulnerable was strong. As usher, I was helping leadership emerge among the groups; it was terrific to see tough-minded business types demonstrate pastoral care for one another. Few of us felt that our church homes understood the idea that God was at work on Bay Street. Jesus was present in the dispersed church, regardless of franchise, and connecting us to one another became another of my roles.

My friend David Stiller, founder of Opportunity International Canada, once described my task in Touchstone by mapping out a spider web design. He placed Jesus at the centre, my wife Susan, and our children next, then the friendship groups, faith-based organizations, and individuals mapped out at various points on the web. He described my role as the spider busily spinning webs of connection among all of this. (The weakness in the metaphor is that a spider builds a web as a trap.) But one subsequent morning I was sitting outside facing the early morning sun as it rose over the horizon. The grass was sparkling with dew in the sunlight, illuminating thousands of webs connecting individual blades of grass. That became my visual metaphor for our work; with the light of Christ, I’m helping Touchstone friends see the many Kingdom connections in our world that are already there. Jesus is present in all our worlds. Learning to see his presence is and has been the work of a lifetime.

Our first decade focussed on faith in the marketplace with retreats and events supporting group and individual friendships, using resources from writers like Henri Nouwen, Richard Foster, Thomas Merton, and others—all directed toward encouraging inner spiritual life.

My holy curiosity continually prodded me to learn more from the various streams they represented, and to bring that learning to our building of friendships. We hadn’t yet developed an understanding of spiritual friendship with a connection between contemplative listening to God and to one another. But we had begun a subtle shift in that direction.

A friend introduced me to Don Postema’s Space for God, and I learned ways of praying meditatively. I was more and more curious about how to create stillness, silence. We all knew that we needed quiet, to not always be chattering, to be able to hear the voice of God.

Some 20 years ago Robert and Lise Struthers, leaders in the business and non-profit sectors, kindly loaned Susan and me their Vancouver home while they were away, so that we could audit a couple of Regent College courses on spiritual direction and spiritual formation by the well-known and respected authors and scholars Eugene Peterson and Jim Houston.

I really enjoyed Houston; he was a wild man with lots of resources, ideas, and an ever-expanding reading list. Texts from his course on spiritual direction defined the director as being a trusted guide, and I came to understand that a spiritual director is a lot like a swing coach in golf. You want a coach who knows the correct way to swing, and who won't try to impose something on you that you're incapable of doing, who doesn't do any harm. Someone who says, "Why don't you try this?" and, "This might help."

Back home, Susan and I were invited to Loyola House in Guelph for a couples' Bible Study. Spiritual director Tarcia Gerwing was our leader that Saturday, and during a coffee break, I approached her and asked whether she might consider meeting with me so that I could learn more about spiritual direction. She kindly agreed.

During one of our early sessions she said, "I am going to teach you the prayer of faith. But not the prayer of faith that you are used to. This is not the prayer of faith that if you have faith, you will move mountains. This is the prayer of faith that says: 'As I sit here in my chair doing absolutely nothing, sensing that there is nothing going on around me, I believe that God is present and communicating to me.'" So began a journey with Tarcia that has lasted to this day.

One of the reasons she is so helpful is her open-handedness in pointing to other traditions. One of her colleagues at Mount Alverno was a leader in the Franciscan order. I spent some time with him doing Franciscan spiritual direction, which was different from Tarcia's Ignatian direction. Later, on a visit to Assisi, I discovered Francis's contemplative friend Clare. Her methods of imitative prayer have become one of our more important prayer patterns at Touchstone. I learned much from the Franciscans about connecting to nature in prayer, being poor with the poor, communicating the Gospel by life—more than words—words only when necessary. It was also helpful for me to learn that although Francis is best known and had great influence, his order would never have gotten off the ground without the organizational and teaching gifts of Bonaventure and the prayer gifts of St. Clare, who founded Sisters of the Poor.

Eventually I completed a version of the Ignatian 40-day retreat exercise—designed to be experienced while still busily engaged in work. I committed to an hour of daily scripture meditation with the Ignatian exercises and a weekly meeting with Tarcia as she led me through them. It took 50 weeks to finish because of travel and Touchstone responsibilities. But it was a profound experience, one I believed I needed to better serve as an usher within our community. I was required to mine the depths of my soul, engage Jesus in my history of blessings and wounds, discover the ground of my being in Christ, and learn a particular and life-giving discernment process that was not so much about finding answers to specific questions, but about relationship with God amid storm or calm, success or failure.

I've come to believe that no single practice or tradition is ever all we need. I've learned to love all the way stations in my life, embracing practices that are helpful but regularly adding to them. Henri Nouwen once compared spiritual practices to scaffolding around a building under construction. Once the internal structural integrity is achieved, the scaffolding is no longer necessary. In the same way, all spiritual practices aim to enrich our relationship with our loving God. But practices can become problematic when they become an end in themselves. You may leave one form of practice to experience a different way to nurture friendship with God, but never lose sight of the fact that the goal is the relationship, not the practice. I've been with friends on a day or weekend of quiet who suggested not using any of our formal shared practices, but just sitting together in the presence of God. The scaffolding had done its work.

By the early 2000's I was writing Touchstone's retreat materials, borrowing liberally from many sources, and using my extensive collection of historic prayers from all the streams of the church universal at our many gatherings.

From 2005 to 2013, thanks to the vision and leadership of Touchstone business friends and leaders Tom McCullough, Michael Wilson, and Jack Kiervin, Touchstone operated what we called the "Sacred Space," in a condo at the foot of Bay Street in Toronto. It became a gathering place in the heart of the business district for Touchstone friends to meet, reflect, regroup, and find a place of peace and solace in the frenetic pace of their working days. We saw it as a building block for the spiritual friendships that Touchstone ignites, nurtures, and protects. We also made it available for other Christian organizations who wished to meet in and be a presence to one of Canada's most expensive and exclusive districts.

Over the years, Tarcia became aware that I was interested in Benedict's Rule—precepts written by Benedict of Nursia in about 530 A.D. for a communal way of life, which seems to have stood the test of time. She connected me with her friend Father James Gray at St. Peter's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Saskatchewan. St. Peter's is a silent order, but Father James said he could be free to chat with me once a day.

I went out there and spent a week in conversation with him about life and God. I attended some of their seven daily prayer sessions. Once a day, they celebrated the Eucharist. And I found it all very attractive. I spent a lot of time in quiet, walking the area, and then in conversation with Father James at the end of the day. Our conversations were wide-ranging, covering topics from celibacy to world peace.

One day, at morning prayers, I took my place in the pew opposite his, and as he came into the chapel to take his seat, he winked and handed me a torn envelope remnant on which he had written, "No dogma or statement of faith is a replacement for an experience with the living God."

I was fascinated by his interest in hearing about what I was doing—teaching prayer practices to men and women in business with meditative prayer as part of golf trips, in board rooms, retreats, and coffee shops. He loved hearing about how we created times of silence, how we were fostering openness to share feelings transparently, and becoming more and more vulnerable with one another.

I learned a few things during my week with the Benedictine monks. They have their conflicts, addictions, and mental health issues like any group, and this was apparent as I watched and listened. The contemplative life is no more placid than mine. I was impressed that they practice their disciplines of work and prayer whether anyone else is watching, obedient to their call to Christ and to their order.

I was also impressed with their hospitality, which was evident in their kind welcome and generous conversation, but also in another moment that stood out for me. I had a big question: "I'm not a baptized Catholic. Do you, as a community, have rules about whether somebody like me can participate fully in the service of Eucharist?" Father James paused before answering. "We don't really have rules," he said. "It really depends on what you think is going on when we celebrate Eucharist."

I showed him the section, "Celtic Meal with Jesus" in Touchstone's retreat guide, where we bless the bread and wine with this prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, present with us now, as we do in this place what you did in an upstairs room, breathe your Spirit upon us, and upon this bread and this wine, that they may be heaven's food and drink for us, renewing, sustaining, and making us whole, and that we may be your Body on earth, loving and caring in the world."

"You believe in the Presence, then?" he asked.

"Yes, I do."

"Then you'd be welcome at our table. But be sure you are comfortable participating. Why don't you stay in your pew for tomorrow's Eucharist? Observe from your pew when we go up and stand around the table to celebrate."

The next morning, I took James' advice and stayed in my pew to watch as everybody moved around the table. The celebrant was another of the monks named Father Richard. As he welcomed everybody around the table, he saw me sitting by myself. He raised his hand and beckoned me to come, to welcome me to the table. It was a wonderful thing; it reminded me of Jesus' lesson: Don't push yourself into a seat where you're not welcome. You are better to wait your time and be invited to the table, because it gives you a different sense of welcome. It was Benedictine hospitality at its best.

John Veltri, a Jesuit priest and one of Tarcia's mentors, was a sort of godfather of spiritual direction in Ontario. With his encouragement, I have used many of his ideas and significant amounts of his material in Touchstone's community. When I first met with him, like Father James, I found him to be fascinated by the freedom and opportunities that I had in cultivating spiritual friendships in the marketplace. They knew that the sorts of people I was dealing with did not normally come to their retreat centres.

After Tarcia's first few times engaging with the Touchstone crowd, she said, "I was very intimidated, because there was so much energy there. They were such Type A, high-drive people. And yet, they were interested in listening, and in silence, and in sharing their feelings."

“When I have people at Loyola House,” she added, “it’s a much less aggressive and driven kind of crowd.”

It didn’t seem that way to me. We were all pretty well-behaved.

But there is a difference in the marketplace that Touchstone serves. We are highly distracted, highly energized people, and yet we have a desire to know God, to hear God’s voice, to have an experience of Jesus.

One of the great gifts that the Ignatian practice gave me was a new way to experience Jesus. Ignatius taught—and I have practiced it repeatedly such that it continues to be an important part of my prayer practice—a form of prayer that requires reflecting deeply on a gospel story, and over an extended period (20 to 30-minutes, or however long it takes), using one’s imagination to become part of the story. We imagine ourselves in the boat, as one of the disciples as the storm rages and the waves are crashing. And then, we hear the voice of Jesus, or see his eyes look at us, either with compassion or with correction or with love, or whatever it might be.

It changes our whole engagement with the gospels to become part of the story through our mind’s eye, rather than just to analyse it. It becomes an experience in which I become a friend of Jesus, either as myself 2000 years ago, sitting on the beach when he is barbequing fish and bread and serving it in his post-resurrection life, or praying through the eyes of Mary when she sees him in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is a whole new way of trying to experience God as He is revealed in scripture, focussing on the living word, Jesus Christ, the complete revelation of God. It’s what we receive from scripture that allows us to access this revealed God in Christ. This kind of imaginative prayer expanded my vision and experience, and I discovered, made the gospels, made scripture, accessible to believer and unbeliever alike.

That is the kind of journey that I have been on, as holy curiosity took me down different roads, which led to friendship with people who employed the spiritual tools of Ignatius, Francis, the Benedictines.

Friendship with Ray Simpson, the founder of what is known as “The Community of Aidan and Hilda,” which draws inspiration from the early Celtic Church in Britain, began with asking permission to use some of the prayers from his lovely book *Celtic Blessings: Prayers for Everyday Life*. Email conversations led to several visits to Holy Island, Lindisfarne to visit their community. Twice I stayed for several days, reading from their library, and getting into the rhythm of the tidal island life. (When the tide is out, the road to the island allows vehicle traffic and when it’s in, it doesn’t; you are either on or off the island.)

Ray and his community were generous with their time, and we had many conversations after my days spent reading from their extensive library on Celtic spirituality.

Since then, I have explored further Celtic material through scholar Esther de Waal, John O’Donohue’s *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, and others, including most recently, the new monastic Northumbria Community, who have a wonderful prayer book.

Through all these experiences, and over all this time, I've acquired a treasure chest, from which I can draw out material from any number of Christian traditions for use in Touchstone. In certain contexts, one thing will be helpful for one person, and in other contexts something else will be helpful to another. Touchstone has no "one-size-fits-all" program.

Amid all this learning over Touchstone's first decades, I came to understand that the role of spiritual director is something that we can do for each other. My spiritual director, Tarcia, has been a wonderful gift to me and to Touchstone. But I've come to believe that no one can engage my deepest longings better than a friend of long-standing, whom I trust to love me and know will have my best interests at heart, who shares my spiritual practices of some form of meditation and deep listening. In the best of my friendships, any subject can be safely shared, and on one day I may care for my friend and on the next, I may be the friend in need.

Ray Simpson has penned a prayer that says, "God grant us the inner stillness that we may sense the moves of the Spirit in our lives, and then be sensitive to the moves of the Spirit in others."

Much of Touchstone's work over the last 15 years or so has been trying to present opportunities to learn how to walk with each other, and to be spiritual guides to one another. How do we find the words of affirmation from Jesus that he is saying to each of us, rather than words of criticism or accountability? How do we find ways to support one another in moving in the direction of the good and the godly and the pure?

But in and through every conversation, practice, period of silence, or prayer, Christ is and has been the light illuminating his Kingdom and revealing its connections.

A TOUCHSTONE TESTIMONIAL

I've worked as a spiritual director for over 50 years, and I've known Norm for decades. He is the kind of person who is open and free, accepting of all people. He'll talk to anyone. And he doesn't approach people with an attitude of "I have something to teach you." Rather, his approach is "Let's listen to one another." He enjoys meeting people one-to-one, but he also enjoys groups, growing in faith together.

The friendship circles that have developed through Touchstone are about listening and calling others to share, so that everyone can grow in Christ together.

When I think back to the beginning of my relationship with Norm, I always saw those qualities in him. But I recall the way that he learned to listen to God about what he was supposed to do. He learned to listen for the guidance of the Spirit in a deeper way. There would be times when he would step out in a direction without first calling on God and listening for God's answer. Of course, that's not just Norm; we all must learn that, over and over. We all start out thinking that we know what we want to do in any given circumstance. We need to identify what we're looking for, take time for prayer, ask for help, and listen for the voice of the Spirit within.

And that's why talking to somebody can be helpful. A spiritual director isn't there to give you answers. Sometimes they do, but other times they might ask probing questions that can lead to deeper thinking. Sometimes it's in talking things out that you are better able to hear.

I believe Touchstone is serving God's purposes. Touchstone friends are a help to one another along the way. And they all gain a deeper awareness of God in their daily lives. When people get together and talk about life and doubts, questions, struggle and faith, their interest and desire for God increases, they become friends, and through friendship they grow. The times I met with them, I wasn't in charge of the gathering, I just listened. And I saw that they were honest with one another and shared freely. They were all desirous that their group would grow.

It's an important group. It has given me great joy to see that through all the ups and downs over the years, Touchstone has kept going because I believe so strongly in what they are doing. They are helping each other.

I would encourage everybody to find somebody that they can talk to about their faith. We aren't meant to walk the life of faith alone. We need one another.

- Tarcia Gerwing, Spiritual Director

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION:

1. "Those who always had or who always wanted the 'right' answer were encouraged to listen and to learn from those whose experience of God was different," Norm writes. What do you think of this? Does his description of people "who always wanted the right answer" resonate with you? Why or why not?
2. Thomas Merton's comparison of spiritual guides to "ushers" is a thought that Norm revisits throughout this chapter. Is there anyone in your life who plays that role for you? Do you play that role for someone else?
3. The image Norm describes of spider webs—glistening with dew in the early morning light as they connect one blade of grass to another—is a compelling image for him of Christ's Kingdom connections. Can you recall a time when you were surprised by a Kingdom connection because you had not been anticipating finding Jesus there?
4. Tarcia Gerwing encouraged Norm to learn to become quiet and cultivate awareness of God's constant, communicating presence. How does this story strike you? Have you experienced God's presence in the still moments of your life?
5. Throughout this chapter, Norm provides glimpses into some of the many and varied Christian faith traditions and practices that he has explored. Are there any that intrigue you, that you would like to learn more about?
6. Towards the end of this chapter, Norm writes that he "came to understand that the role of spiritual director is something that we can do for each other." What do you think about that? Is it an idea that appeals to you or intimidates you or do you have another reaction? Why?