

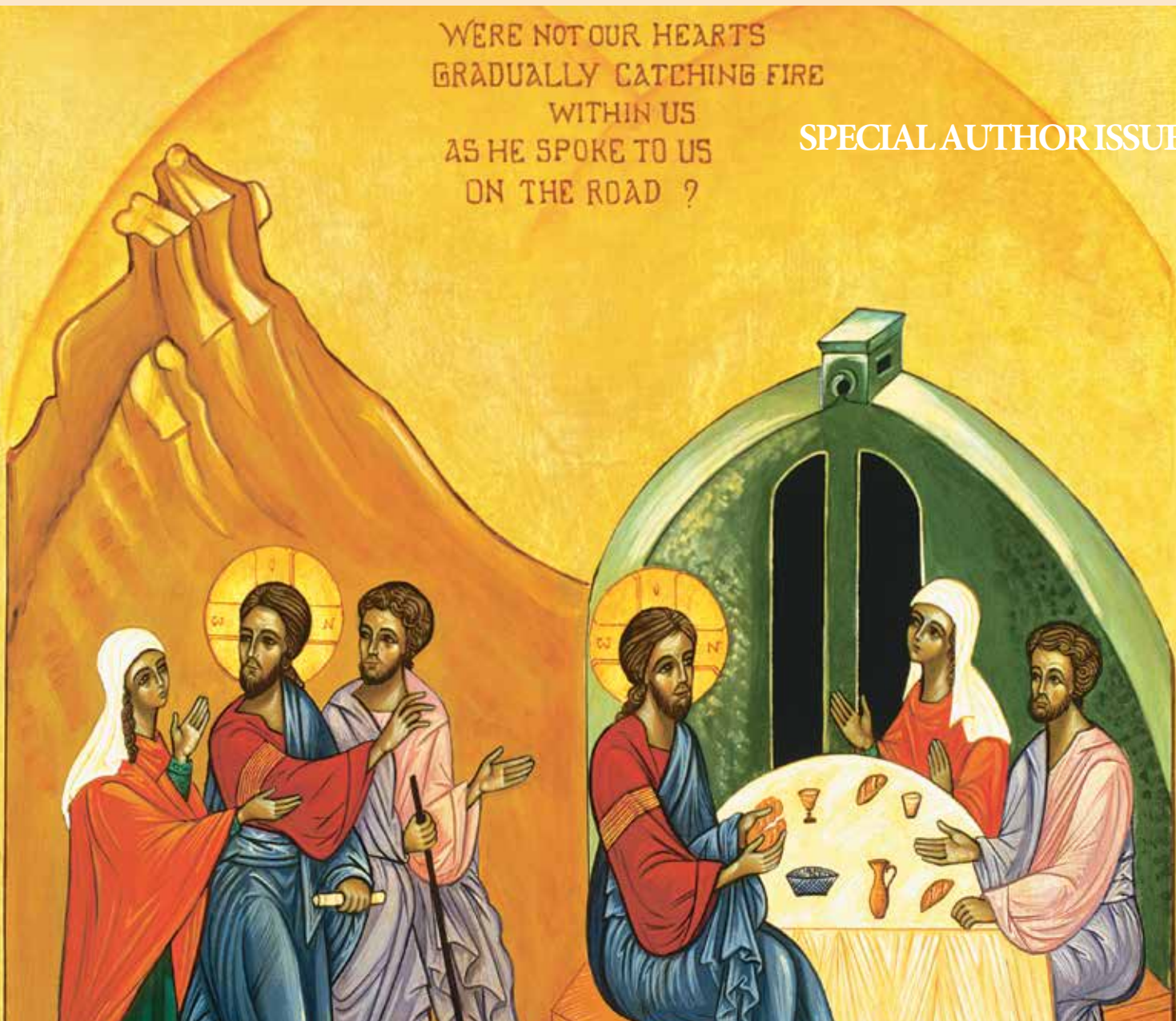
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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 38 Issue 3 Spring 2018

WERE NOT OUR HEARTS
GRADUALLY CATCHING FIRE
WITHIN US
AS HE SPOKE TO US
ON THE ROAD ?

SPECIAL AUTHOR ISSUE



MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

Do you sense the Lord present in your conversations?

A Publication of

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CONTENT

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Human Development Magazine is a quarterly publication for people involved in the work of fostering the human and spiritual growth of others. This includes persons involved in religious leadership and formation, spiritual direction, pastoral care, education, counseling, healthcare and those interested in the development of the whole person.

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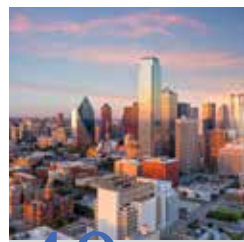
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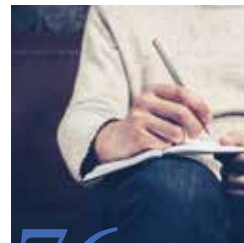
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Spring 2018

Dear Friends of Human Development Magazine,

One of the most satisfying experiences of life is having a great conversation with a good friend. Conversely, regret over a conversation that never took place or a long-awaited encounter where the discussion was merely trivial or went “south” can be terribly frustrating. Conversation is a critical aspect of our lives; as we articulate joys or fears or share stories that are significant, we often understand in a new way something hidden in the recesses of our heart. Hearing another speak his/her story deepens a relationship and helps us understand our own life story. When a conversation takes place on a regular basis over many years, deep friendships emerge and family bonds are strengthened.

Conversations “define” our lives and give meaning to all we do. Such is also true of the “meaningful conversation” we all long to have – and need to have – with God. In fact, do we not most frequently encounter the Lord in conversation with each other?

Many months ago I proposed the topic “meaningful conversations” as a theme for one of our issues. Everyone at the Editorial Board meeting agreed that it would be a timely topic especially given the way our speech patterns have become quick sound bites, often fraught with sarcasm or anger. We hardly take the time to prepare for conversations or to evaluate them afterwards; most things are immediate and spontaneous and lacking in thoughtfulness. Tweets and sound bites, conversations about sports, politics and weather become such a monotonous loop of information that we tire of words and lose hope that there can be indeed meaningful conversations and honest dialogue on any level of society. In my own experience as a spiritual director, I have found that quite often the best conversations are those with “pregnant pauses,” when the directee struggles to reach a place of hidden wounds and unsettled issues. We cannot have a “meaningful conversation” with God unless we are also having “meaningful conversations” with each other; the two complement each other.

We are blessed with eight very diverse essays in this issue. As you read the various authors, try to imagine all of them seated around a table discussing what it means to speak from the heart! Hopefully the reflection questions attached with each essay will spark you to have a face-to-face conversation with friends or co-workers.

Brother Guy Consolmagno, Jesuit Astronomer for the Vatican, offers a cosmic perspective in the introductory essay. He reminds us that a divine-human conversation has been going on since the creation of the world; it is written into the “DNA” of all life. As Psalm 19 reminds us that “the heavens declare the glory of God,” is not the ebb and flow of water a reassuring message without words? Do not birds chirping, dogs barking and cats meowing, all express some form of conversation? Brother Guy reminds us that in contemplating the starry skies above, we can engage in a timeless, all-encompassing conversation with the mysterious source of life and love.

A retreat master for decades, Fr. Pat Brennan, a Passionist Priest, reflects on the two sides of conversation: speaking honestly and simply in a way that encourages participation and listening intently to retreatants

as they open their hearts. He offers many vignettes for reflection and suggests ways to define the building blocks necessary for a “meaningful” conversation.

In the third essay, Sr. Janet Ruffing, RSM, reminds us that conversations can open doors for new discovery of self and others; they can build bridges between people and bring about change. Sr. Janet’s essay helps us see the connection between “conversation” and “conversion.”

Fr. Rich Bartosek, a Diocesan Priest and hospital chaplain in Detroit, shares stories of conversations with people facing their final hours; he describes these conversations as “holy moments.”

Dr. Daniel Keating, a professor at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, writes on “Ecumenical conversations.” He shares with us the story of his own journey from a “Catholic Ghetto” to fellowship with other Christians in dialogues of faith and service. He notes the importance of humble listening and deep respect for each one’s experience and language for articulating encounters with God.

In our sixth essay, Fr. David Songy, a Capuchin priest-psychologist-spiritual director, identifies the importance of understanding and accepting our vocation to find healing.

Fr. Steven Krupa, S.J., presents beautiful insights on contemplative prayer. He speaks of the “meaningful conversation” that we can all have with God, especially a conversation of “Infused Contemplation,” that is, God directly at work within us as we silently rest in His love. A director of the Exercises of St. Ignatius for decades, Fr. Krupa draws his insights together with an extended story from real life.

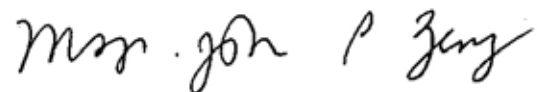
We are blessed to welcome back to these pages an essay by Fr. Ben Harrison, a Missionary of Charity. He offers us a letter written to his “Mumma” who died when he was only 11 years old; it is an example of a conversation that never took place while she was on this Earth but now takes place in a meaningful and healing manner as he writes to her sixty years alter. As I read his short essay, I was moved to prayer and thought about the urgency of making every effort to see that all conversations are as meaningful as possible. How important it is to take the time now to say what’s in our heart.

Finally, as I reviewed the essays, I realized there were some “odds and ends” that had not been directly mentioned but, nonetheless deserving of attention. For this purpose I composed a brief Epilogue.

Again, try to think of the authors in dialogue with you and each other, engaged in a “meaningful conversation,” and discovering the Lord among them!

Your brother in the Lord,


Msgr. John Zenz



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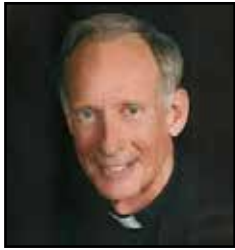
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A photograph of a church interior during a service. In the foreground, the back of a priest's head and shoulders in white vestments is visible. He is facing a group of people seated in wooden pews. The pews are filled with people of various ages, including a woman in a red jacket and a young child in a white dress. A table with a white cloth and a bowl is positioned between the priest and the pews. The background features a brick wall with religious art and a window with a plant.

*“Were not our hearts burning
within us while He spoke to
us on the way and opened
the Scriptures to us?”
(Luke 24:32)*

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July 9-11, 2018
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Somerset Inn
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August 5-11, 2018
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August 27-30, 2018
Guest House Alumni Reunion
Holy Cross Retreat Center
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September 30- October 4, 2018
Guest House Fall Retreat
Miramar Retreat Center
Duxbury, MA

October 3-5, 2018
Walking with the Wounded
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Lake Orion, MI

October 18, 2018
Detroit Bishop's Dinner
Detroit Institute of Arts
Museum
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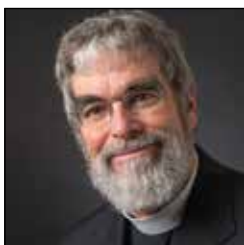


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Fr. Rich Bartoszek



Dr. Daniel Keating



David Songy



Stephen Krupa, SJ



Ben Harrison

INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

The editors of Human Development are quite eager to publish articles that translate the latest research in psychology, health, medicine, and spirituality to ministry, formation and practice. Our hope is that Human Development will be known as the most user-friendly ministry publication. This will require making complicated theoretical knowledge, research, and concepts understandable and applicable to the personal and professional lives of our readers.

Since ministry is in a time of significant transition and change, we anticipate that the articles we publish will enlighten and positively influence the daily decisions and practices of those in Church leadership, ministry formation, spiritual direction, and counseling of any kind. There are also a number of previously under-appreciated forces that uniquely influence ministry and ministers: cultural, organizational, and situational factors. We intend to highlight and honor these factors in the pages of Human Development. Accordingly, we ask prospective authors to be mindful of these considerations in their manuscripts.

Manuscripts are received with the understanding that they have not been previously published and are not currently under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than six recommended citations and/or readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting sacred scripture, the New Revised Standard Version is preferred. All manuscripts are to be prepared according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th edition).

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and Bibliography/suggested readings. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Manuscripts should be submitted to Msgr. John Zenz at editor@hdmag.org as an email attachment.



CONVERSATIONS AS DOORWAYS FOR CONVERSION

Dr. Janet K. Ruffing, RSM



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “CONVERSATION?”

Conversation is such an ordinary human activity that we take it for granted, yet most of us have not really thought through all its potential, complexity and challenges. Given our technological environment, more and more of us are rapidly losing the art of conversation. We do so at the peril of diminishing our humanity and our connection with one another. Various forms of dialogue and conversation have long been essential components of education and the development of relational and empathic skills. Face-to-face conversation builds connection, cooperation, and shared insight. Conversation makes possible conversation on a personal and communal level; we cannot have genuine change without conversation on many levels.

The Miriam Webster Dictionary [2018] defines conversation as “informal talk involving two people or a small group of people.” It includes an “oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas.” Basically, talking with one another. According to its Latin roots the word conversation means “turning toward one another.” Some form of conversation has always been integral to educational processes as a way of helping people of all ages articulate explicitly what people already know implicitly.

Such conversations need to be distinguished from “argument” or “debate” which are competitive forms of interaction, governed by a different set of rules. Rather than looking for a cooperative or collaborative way of connecting with one another, an argument often becomes verbal combat. By its very nature an argument requires the speaker to persuade the listener/reader through a coherent series of reasoned statements that move from a premise to a logical conclusion. An argument frequently progresses antagonistically, ending in a win-lose outcome between the parties. It is competitive and minimizes the areas of agreement or the common ground between the parties. Rather than resulting in a shared understanding of a problem, a situation, or simply the life-world of one’s conversation partner, someone “wins” and someone “loses.”

GENUINE CONVERSATIONS CONNECT

Conversation brings the conversants together, often furthering the mutual understanding of a question, a situation, a relationship, an issue or an experience. Conversation not only opens the mind

but also touches the heart. Observations, feelings, new information, facts, and ideas coalesce into relationships that are strong enough to set aside any tendency toward domination. Cooperative conversation expands one’s own knowledge to seek points of agreement and understanding that respect and incorporate the viewpoints of the other conversant.

Face-to-face conversation is the way each of us learned to relate to family members and to understand the environments around us. Within the family, hopefully children experience an empathic connection that can also replicate itself with other care-givers, relatives, teachers, coaches and friends. In the proper environment, a child learns to interpret the feelings of others and respond appropriately. Even after a child begins school and gains some autonomy through reading and education, healthy emotional learning continues in settings where respectful dialogue is encouraged.

At this time in our culture, though, these relational ways of experiencing self and others are diminishing because technology inserts screens into our relational worlds. Families are finding it harder to maintain their emotional connections with one another because of iPhones and other devices; people easily become addicted to on-line activities of one kind or another at times when families used to engage with each other in spontaneous and undistracted ways. Sherry Turkle’s research shows that the simple presence of a phone on the table - even when it is turned off - distracts and diminishes the conversation at the table and the affective connections of those present. [2015, 368]

“It takes courage to start a conversation. But if we don’t start talking to one another, nothing will change.”

CONVERSATION OPENS DOORS

Conversation is not only about building relationships. Conversation is also, according to Margaret Wheatley, “the natural way that humans think together.” “When we ...don’t talk to one another, we stop acting intelligently. We give up the capacity to think about what’s going on. We don’t act to change anything. We become passive and allow others to tell us what to do. We forfeit our freedom. We become objects, not people. When we don’t talk to each other, we give up our humanity.” Drawing on the wisdom of Paulo Freire, Wheatley continues, “It takes courage to start a conversation. But if we don’t start talking to one another, nothing will change.”

Through conversation, we discover how to transform the world. When people talk, they can develop strategies to change local and even international situations. Often creative ideas and the impetus for changing harmful situations arise spontaneously in conversation. Once a shared understanding of a situation arises, conversation leads to brainstorming and then acting together to address the problem.

Connecting to others through conversation helps us realize that others are having the same struggles we are enduring. This kind of shared understanding frees us from a sense of isolation and leads us to the reassurance that others see, feel, and understand the situation in a way similar to our own perceptions. Sharing of information expands our understanding of the situation and we can decide on a common response. Wheatley challenges us all to recognize and change learned habits which impair our capacity for conversation about addressing pressing issues that require collective action.

TEMPTATIONS AND FRUSTRATION OF TECHNICAL “CONVERSATION”

If Sherry Turkle is correct, the arrival of the iPhone in 2007 began an even greater breakdown in the practice of conversation as technologically-

developed countries promised 24-hour connectivity. This has led to many finding themselves alone on their phones even when in the same room with others. Her research discovered that “in the past twenty years, we’ve seen a forty-percent decline in the markers for empathy among college students, most of it within the past ten years. [2011, 21] In her best-selling book, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, she makes a passionate case for the necessity of re-learning the practice of conversation – actual, even messy, conversations instead of the superficiality and supposed non-intrusive act of texting. The onslaught of endless information from various feeds and the temptation of efficiency and time-management lead to avoiding real conversation. [2015, 22-3] Throughout her book, Turkle documents the losses involved in this situation: “...frequent use of social media leads to feelings of depression and social anxiety. And trouble with empathy. ...Those who use social media the most have difficulty reading human emotions, including their own. ...Yet we are resilient. Face-to-face conversation leads to greater self-esteem and an improved ability to deal with others.” [2015,25]

There is enormous paradox here. The addictive effect of the iPhone also leads to an inability to be alone. Tolerance for solitude diminishes. The illusion of never being alone because someone is always reachable on the phone decreases one’s capacity for self-reflection and the happy solitude of direct relationship with the natural world or with one’s own inner world. The effect is that: “If we are unable to be alone, we will be more lonely.” [2015, 23] Turkle is by no means anti-technology, but rather pro-conversation. She advocates recovering the art of real conversation and face-to-face interaction sans technology as the remedy for the deficits too many people of all ages are incurring through the addictive and unrestrained use of technology.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AS “CONVERSATION”

While there are many ways of fostering genuine, spontaneous conversation, the pastoral ministry of spiritual direction can offer many positive insights for opening up unique “channels” of communication. Therapeutic conversations and spiritual direction have long been opportunities for self-reflection and healing through conversation. Therapy offers the client an empathic, skilled listener, who helps the patient reflect more deeply on his or her own core story and positive or negative memories of formative relationships. The therapist unconditionally receives the client’s narrative, feelings, and interpretations and then offers suggestions, questions and empathic connection. The therapist creates a positive environment that supports the client in the work of repairing wounds, expanding the patient’s repertoire of relational responses in the present and for the future. There remains significant asymmetry in this relationship because the focus is on the client and his/her story; by definition, the therapist remains objective and “professional.”

The Spiritual Director also maintains a similar asymmetry yet there is something unique which happens in direction as opposed to therapy. The director offers a hospitable environment in which the directee reflects on his/her on-going experience of God. Over time, this ongoing conversation becomes a spiritual autobiography. Together, director and directee are engaged in an interpretive process through their regular conversations with one another. Most significantly, as two believers listen and reflect, God is a third on-going presence within the relationship: both conversational partners discover the Divine presence. God’s Spirit is influencing both director and directee as the conversation unfolds. While the spiritual director is fully engaged in the conversation, the director and directee both realize the ultimate director is the Holy Spirit.

An on-going spiritual direction relationship supports the directee’s commitment to spending time in prayer

and personal reflection. This regular conversation also contributes to the directee’s interpretation and understanding of experiences of both solitude and community and the felt presence of God within them. Within the conversation, God becomes one of the interlocutor’s, often named or referred to by both director and directee and sometimes felt as tangibly present in the session. The entire process takes place under the eye of God and under the loving influence of God.

The focus and subject matter of the conversation is the directee’s experience and reflection about it. This focus creates a space for the directee to experience without having to take turns with the director; at times, however, the director may join in the directee’s story or introduce a new story that relates to what is being shared. Throughout, spiritual direction is a collaborative process. The two conversants focus on the directee’s experiences. At first, this can seem strange to a directee because of the normal expectation of mutually interactive conversation.

SOMETHING NEW EMERGES

This interactive exploration of the directee’s experience allows something new to emerge for both director and directee. It is the nature of human knowledge that each person (director as well as directee) is limited in some way. When these limits are recognized in a genuine search for understanding of the mind and heart of the directee this can lead to the discovery of new questions to explore. Previous and often long-held assumptions no longer necessarily limit possibilities. New experiences and insights no longer fit an old frame of reference. They require people to change their minds and actions. In religious terms we speak of conversion. Conversations can initiate conversions and also help interpret a conversion already underway; continuing conversations support the changes in thinking and behaviors needed to consolidate and integrate the conversion. In this process, the director’s own point of view, or taken-for-granted assumptions, are challenged by the directee and require the director



directee gradually grows more comfortable and confident about a new understanding of God.

DIRECTOR AND DIRECTEE GROWING TOGETHER

In the “flow” of this conversational interchange, both participants relinquish some prior assumptions and together arrive at an understanding or interpretation that neither would have discovered without the conversation.

In the spiritual direction conversation both parties are growing in their understanding of the experience being shared and its implications. The spiritual director is continually learning more about how God affects and influences different directees. The spiritual and ethical decisions of the directee to the new understanding can often console and inspire the director. Although the director has not been talking about his or her personal experience of God or growth in

faith like the directee has, nevertheless, the director benefits from witnessing the directee’s deepening growth in intimacy with God.

In the process of seeking to understand the directee’s life in God, the director’s capacity for helping others deepens, and the director may also personally benefit from the graced experience of the goodness of directees, their courage in confronting and growing through challenging and difficult situations. In describing these experiences of challenge and grace, the directee often notices aspects about their experience that he or she knew only implicitly but had not yet named.

to join the directee in understanding the directee’s experience, and in the process, the director’s own assumptions are also changed; he/she also experiences some type of conversion.

This is how the process of understanding unfolds. The experience of God’s grace in the directee can contradict a deeply held conviction. It may be difficult for the directee to adjust to this new reality. For instance, if a directee tends to relate to God as if a perfectionistic parent, and God reveals Godself to the directee in tenderness and love, the directee might say something like, “I did not know God was like that.” As the director supports the directee holding onto this new awareness and understanding without fear or trying to run away from it, the

Entering into such conversations requires the capacity and willingness to be vulnerable within the mutual influence of the spiritual direction relationship. The practice of spiritual direction is an on-going commitment to living with a certain spiritual intensity so as to have something to say month after month. The regularity of spiritual direction conversations exerts a gentle pressure to be faithful to personal and communal prayer and a life of compassionate service to and with others. There are ups and downs, challenges, and set-backs, luminous experiences of grace and connection, and hopefully deepening awareness of how God acts in and through the directee's life. In the process of talking about this broad range of graced experiences, directees deepen their awareness of how God is acting in and through them, how they are growing in their ability to compassionately accompany others in their life challenges. The Gospels come alive for

both director and directee as their conversations unfold and the lights and shadows of these graced lives manifest over time and become formulated in the spiritual oral autobiography that the directee elaborates over time that has been heard into story by the director who has been connecting the dots over time. [Ruffing, 2011]

For directees these conversations support them in creating a rhythm of reflection about the grace experienced in the interval between sessions. While there may be stress in ministry or work, illness and setbacks, a peaceful serenity and quiet, steady confidence emerges. Spiritual direction conversations console and comfort, guiding the directee to recognize the deep presence of God in these events and help the directee remember the entire circle of grace.

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Often we discover and understand the things we are passionate about when we connect with another person, a small circle of friends or colleagues. We discover that we are not alone, that others may be experiencing the same stresses and struggles, hopes and dreams. As we engage in conversation, we arrive together at a more focused and shared consciousness. By connecting and sharing in various conversations with those with whom we feel safe enough to be

There have always been pitfalls in social conversation. Some people need a stage and expect others to give them a platform upon which to demonstrate their superior knowledge about a narrow field or their encyclopedic control of much information. These may know a great deal about many things, but they are rarely interested in the other person's views, feelings or knowledge. Conversation partners are meant to engage with



ourselves, we discover that we are not alone, that others have similar joys, concerns, and passions. When those conversations coalesce around matters of some importance beyond ourselves, we are far more likely to move toward concrete actions that may result in significant social changes.

FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATIONS

The theme of this issue of *Human Development* is “Meaningful Conversations.” The theme implies there has to be something more significant about these conversations than the mundane conversations or meetings that bore us or tire us from much talk and little action. Unsuccessful conversations occur when the participants cannot find a common ground of interests, experience, and expertise. What is it we ardently long for? If Sherry Turkle is right regarding how people have been changed and are changing through technology, there is an urgent need to re-learn (or for younger people to learn for the first time) how to engage in face-to-face conversation.

one another in a mutual give-and-take, not lecture one another nor judge or evaluate the other. The emergence of the manipulation of on-line communication that is aimed at sowing division, tricking us into thinking that disinformation is true, eroding confidence in reliable information and knowledge that is scientifically evidence based and true, gives us pause.

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges of technology and the perennial difficulties of conversation, there are also promising signs that some of us, at least, are seeking to engage in genuine conversations. The emergence of the TED Talks, while not conversation per se, have become conversation starters. The format of short, focused reflections on topics a person is passionate about in a friendly environment has become very popular. Krista Tippett’s “On Being” is also very popular for reflective people who want to expand their understanding of a variety of topics that are presented in a congenial way. Many



people appreciate the way that Tippet conducts her interviews in a conversational format, not simply questioning her guests.

The art of conversation requires a certain altruism and generosity of spirit. It takes effort to discover the common ground for conversation in diverse groups. Meaningful conversation requires a genuine interest in other people and a willingness to discover the common ground shared by both parties. Meaningful conversation is not only about topics but about connection. So long as we are unable or unwilling to expand beyond our ideological niches, our conversations will suffer. So long as we fail to discover and celebrate the many diversities among us, our humanity will be further impoverished unless we commit ourselves to turning these differences into new forms of conversation and connection. It is important for each of us and for society that we learn (or relearn) ways of engaging with one another in meaningful conversations that change our minds and

our patterns of relating to one another.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Dr. Ruffing speaks about the transforming power which emerges through genuine conversation – healing of past misunderstanding, emerging of new insights, the gift of knowing “connection” with others. Reflect on a particular conversation which helped change your life. What factors made it all come together?
2. Theoretically, technology can foster conversations across the miles yet it can also stifle actual face-to-face conversation! Is “technology” impeding you from having genuine and sustained conversations? What might you do to improve this situation in your own life, family home or workplace?
3. Having written extensively on spiritual direction, naturally Dr. Ruffing points out the unique potential of spiritual direction for growth and change on the part of both director and directee. Are you currently engaged in direction – either as director and/or directee? Reflect on the dynamic at work in your own experience as speaker and/or listener. Do you sense the presence of the Holy Spirit in your conversations? How does the direction experience impact your prayer life? If you are not currently in direction, might it be helpful? Are you willing to take the risk of engaging in the process?
4. Throughout her article Dr. Ruffing also makes references to “group-sharing” as settings for meaningful conversations and thus, doorways for potential personal or communal growth, change or conversion. Many of us are part of therapy groups, some find meaningful conversation in Scripture or faith-sharing groups, still others are perhaps in professional discussion groups. Evaluate your own commitment of time, openness/self-revelation, patient listening, etc. If not in such a group, might it be timely to consider such a possibility?



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EPILOGUE:

John P. Zenz

As Editor, I have the privilege of reviewing each article in great detail and thus entering into the mind and heart of the author. Each of the authors in this issue has shared very inspiring and thought provoking insights into the importance of meaningful conversations, their impact and potential for individuals and communities. When I finish with all the essays, I look back over them and think about what might have been missing from the articles. For this issue, since it is particularly on the theme of conversation, I thought it would be appropriate to write an Epilogue, highlighting various points that were not directly addressed, but could be of practical assistance. I frame these under the general theme of “questions to think about...”

1. “Book Ending” Our Conversations

In conversations that are planned or anticipated (appointments, daily visits with a close friend, scheduled dinners or time with faith sharing groups, etc.) I have found it helpful to think ahead of time about topics I would like to raise and stories I would like to share. I also consider open ended questions I would like to raise. I try to find some time for quiet before each appointment or casual meeting, praying for openness to hear the other and what he/she might want or need to say. I ask the Lord to make our conversation something that touches on matters of the heart in a positive way. I pray for the courage to be able to open

my own heart to speak about recent experiences of God’s gifts/presence and my partnership with Him or resistance to Him. I find this preparation to be an important way to link prayer with the conversations of life and ministry.

At the other end of things, as much as possible, I like to take a few breaths between appointments or meetings or even the casual times to evaluate and review what happened in a conversation. Considering whether I was really honest and open. Did I hold back unnecessarily? Did we reach some sense of direction through our discussion? Certainly I like to thank God for the gift of quality time with another – whether in a mentoring capacity or in a friendship.

2. Liturgical Prayer as Conversation

While many of the articles talk directly or indirectly about prayer, not much was brought up about the fact that liturgical prayer can actually be a meaningful conversation. As a presider the way dialogue is delivered, the manner of the homily presentation, the way prayers are spoken to God in the name of the community are all aspects of a sacred conversation that we share together. We know the difference between a liturgy that is perfunctory and one that is more gracious and deliberate. As a participant, it truly helps to hear the words of the Scriptures as an invitation to a certain type of dialogue with the Lord in an opportunity for self-exam. Most of the prayers of the liturgy are dialogical and there is an invitation for response: am I enthusiastic or simply reciting things in a rote way?

3. Patience with Pregnant Pauses

In conversations of any kind, it is always tempting to rush in with a suggested word or phrase when we are in a hurry or think that our conversation partner needs help in articulating just the right word. I have always found by biting my lip and waiting longer some deeper truth begins to emerge. In those awkward moments, I pray for the Holy Spirit to partner with the person struggling for the right words.

4. Conversations Across Boundaries

Most of the articles presumed two or more conversants able to speak the same language, able to connect on a similar intellectual or emotional level. In today's diverse society and Church, many times conversations are in fragments of various languages (diverse languages, cultures, theological viewpoints, etc.). These situations can be frustrating but also illuminating: the struggle for a common "vocabulary" helps us understand each other in a very profound way and gives us new insights into the very things we want/need to express in a non-confrontational manner.

Conversations with people of various ages have potential for something meaningful but again it takes a special skill set, patience and openness. Some people have limitations of hearing and depend on reading the lips of another. Some have very little speech ability but can communicate – in a meaningful way – by an intent stare, a warm smile, frown or a shrug. Again, conversations can be extremely meaningful if we have the patience and desire to hear what the person is trying to say.

5. Praying the Truth

Our conversation with God depends on absolute honesty and openness, radical honesty to articulate needs and dreams, our darkest fears, our anger and our experiences of feeling deeply loved. St. Paul reminds us that "love rejoices in the truth." God is love and so God rejoices when we speak the truth

of our struggles, name our addictions and offer our tears and restless loneliness to Him.

6. Virtual "Real Presence?"

None of our articles directly addressed the possibility of "meaningful conversation" via internet; most of the references about technology suggested it was likely an obstacle to genuine conversation. Might it not be also possible for technology to open doors? Consider for example facetime connections with people separated by long distances for considerable periods of time. Is it not possible that a few well-chosen words in a text message might bring instant consolation to someone going through intense darkness? Obviously, "real presence" ordinarily happens "face-to-face" but for those who are truly in love and open, amazing things can happen!

7. Listening to the Conversation of Another

Undoubtedly we have all been in situations where we have overheard two people in a very intense conversation, very likely full of pain or anger. How are we to be a part of something that is not ours? Many of us are privileged to "eavesdrop" on people's confessions to God as they pour out their heart and soul in the Sacrament or in counselling, looking for healing. What a privilege to listen to such sincerity, but what a challenge simply to try to be as invisible as possible, nonobtrusive and respectful! I think of the image of two people before an icon in an Orthodox Church – each confessing to the Lord but in the presence of one another. So many meaningful conversations are constantly going on all around us: do I stop to thank God for the mystery of how the Word keeps taking on flesh again and again?

CONCLUSION:

Praise be our God and Father who has taught us how to speak and how to listen in the gift of his own Son and through the gentle whispers of the Holy Spirit! May our conversations be part of their eternal communion and dialogue of perfect love.

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