

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

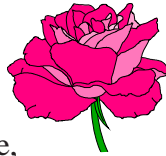
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Has your time to blossom come?

“The time came when the risk it took to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” This quote that a *Connections* reader sent me, by Cuban-French author Anaïs Nin, struck me as an apt description of how many Christians come to expand their understanding of God and the Christian faith.



Too many of us spend years clenched in tight buds with regard to our religious beliefs instead of letting ourselves open into the blossom that every bud is meant to become. Instead of doing the questioning and exploring



that spiritual growth requires, we mindlessly stick with the first descriptions of God and Jesus that we ever received, from our parents, the church, or our culture. We tend not to risk blossoming until something nudges us into recognizing the pain that staying in a tight bud is causing.

Nudges can be necessary

Providing the necessary nudges is part of what churches need to do for their members and for the wider world, but too many churches prefer to provide only comfort. That’s unfortunate, because they harm us when they keep us so comfortable that we never feel motivated to blossom into more mature faith.



I hear a lot from Christians who have finally felt the pain enough to risk blossoming. After years of trying unsuccessfully to believe what their upbringing or a church told them they were supposed to believe, these Christians finally started considering what they really did believe. They’ve made some changes as a result. Some have decreased their church participation or changed churches. Some have become active in trying

to promote change in the church. Most have started working more actively to promote justice and combat injustice.



What’s most transforming—information or practice?



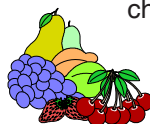
A *Connections* reader recently sent me an article that made me think again about this question that I often see church leaders raising. Most of them seem to see practice as more influential, but I’m unconvinced by that. I know many churchgoers who, like me, have had their beliefs and as a result their behavior changed by getting new information, and I rarely see such change resulting from practice alone.

I believe that a person’s behavior—what the Bible calls “fruits”—is what counts, and that the main world-changing behaviors are compassion (love) and justice. Seeing Jesus as the reason for them isn’t necessary. Simply seeing the need for them and practicing them, for whatever reason, is enough. But many churchgoers have to get more convincing information about Jesus, the Bible, and the church in order to see what they consider a good enough reason for practicing compassion and justice.



What kind of practice? What kind of information?

The information mentioned in the article I read was Bible stories and “generalized theology,” which I took to mean what’s expressed in familiar creeds, hymns, and such. But many churchgoers get that kind of information constantly without its motivating them to act compassionately or promote justice. They don’t learn about the Bible’s origin and development, the Roman Empire setting Jesus lived in and his response to it, or the history of Christianity and the variety of belief and practice it has included. Consequently, these churchgoers don’t seem to recognize what fruits Christians need to be producing.



The practices mentioned in the article I read included mainly attending church, being in small groups, and reading the Bible, yet it’s easy to do all those things for years without noticing the kinds of injustices that need to be exposed and opposed by Christians in today’s world.

So is information or practice more transformative? It depends on what kind of information we’re referring to, and what kind of practice.



Reading and hearing some blossoming Christians' stories recently, plus working with PCCS friends to describe what we see as progressive

Christianity, has made me think again about my own current beliefs. As a result, during the past few months I've been trying to put them into writing. I've often done bits of this in *Connections*, but now I've been trying to say it all at once—to write a "credo."

It can be hard and even scary

Writing what I now believe has helped me get clearer on it. But doing that isn't easy. Every few days I look back at what I've written and see a spot that still isn't clear enough, so needs revising. I may never finish. And I suspect that even if I reach the point of seeing the writing as good enough, by that time I may realize that some of my beliefs have changed slightly. I see continual, lifelong reevaluation and occasional revision of them as important parts of being a Christian.

My credo effort has been scary at some points. Trying to write exactly what I believe about Jesus, for example, required admitting in a way I hadn't quite dared to do previously, even to myself, how different my beliefs are from what many of my friends and fellow church members apparently believe about him. That realization made me wonder if I should just go back to trying to make myself believe what "everyone" else seems to believe. But I can't do that.



Painful, risky, but exhilarating

Turning loose of beliefs that have never seemed convincing but that we've thought were compulsory can feel risky, but the risk is greater for some of us than for others. For me, the process has included pain but the risk has been relatively small and the benefit has been great. I've lost some friends and been shunned by some

church leaders, but I've also found new friends who have essentially become my church, and the new insights and friendships have often been exhilarating.

For other lay Christians, the risk is greater. Some risk losing not only friends but also customers and therefore income if they openly admit having minority beliefs. If they're in the political world, they may lose votes.

For Christians in church-related professions, openly straying from church doctrine or majority views is more risky. Pastors may lose income or status if they openly disagree with official doctrine or policies. Pastors' openness can make members uncomfortable by making them aware that beliefs they have counted on might not be true, and most pastors, it seems, want to comfort people rather than to risk making them uncomfortable.



Letting the bud blossom can be risky for professional scholars, too. Expressing beliefs that differ from what they have previously written or taught can lessen their credibility. It can even jeopardize their jobs. Besides, as editor Charles W. Hedrick points out in *When Faith Meets Reason: Religious Scholars Reflect on Their Spiritual Journeys* (Polebridge Press, 2008), " 'Confessions' have never been part of the modern academic study of religion, since they fall outside the purview of the objectivity demanded by critical studies." But he notices that "scholars generally avoid such subjective personal reflections for a wide variety of reasons, not the least of which is an inability to resolve some of the basic questions for themselves."

No escape if we're true to ourselves

Here's what scholar Robert W. Funk, whose personal story also appears in *When Faith Meets Rea-*



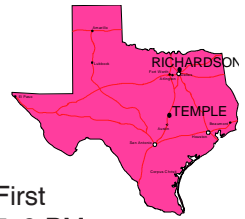
This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 17 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

October 23-25 Crossan-Rieger seminars in Texas—pre-register now to get the best value!

Texas FAITHANDREASON seminars featuring John Dominic Crossan and Joerg Rieger are almost here!



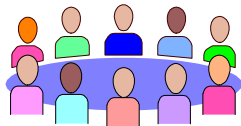
The first, entitled “**God & Imperial Power; Jesus & Economic Injustice,**” will be at First United Methodist Church in **Richardson**, just north of Dallas at 503 N. Central Expressway, 7–9 PM Friday and 8:45 AM–3:30 PM Saturday, **October 23-24.**

The second, entitled “**Empire and Grassroots Resistance,**” will be in **Temple**, between Austin and Waco, at the Cultural Activities Center, 3011 N. 3rd St. (I-35 exit 303 to east access road), 2:30–7:30 PM Sunday, **October 25.**

If your registration is received at the Dykes Foundation office by Oct. 19 (see phone numbers and address below for registering), your \$45 fee for the Richardson seminar will include a box lunch, **For the Temple seminar we need your registration by midweek.** You can register later—even at the door—for either seminar, but we can’t guarantee meals with late registrations. Cost for students is \$10. Additional discounts are available for those with financial need.

Meet progressive-minded people and hear scholars known around the world

John Dominic Crossan is one of the world’s leading historical-Jesus scholars, widely known for his many books and radio, TV, and video-study-course appearances. **Joerg Rieger** holds an endowed chair in constructive theology and is known around the world for his speaking and his numerous books. For more about each of these speakers and their books, see www.faithandreason.org or the September *Connections* at www.connectionsonline.org. Both Texas seminars will feature Dr. Crossan and Dr. Rieger in short talks, dialogue with each other, and responses to questions from the audience. Their books will be available for purchase. And to help Texas-area progressives and other interested people get to know each other, seminar participants will also have the opportunity to share mealtime discussion in small groups.



The Progressive Christian Center of the South will co-sponsor the seminars with SMU’s Perkins School of Theology, the D. L. Dykes Jr. Foundation, and the Joe B. and Louise P. Cook Foundation. Richardson seminar supporters include Arapaho UMC, Dallas Area Progressive Christian Alliance, First Community Church, Grace UMC, Greenland Hills UMC, Northaven UMC, Pax Christi Dallas, The Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration, and The Progressive Center of Texas. Temple seminar supporters include Discoverers Class of First UMC, Belton; Journey of Faith UMC, Round Rock; Sojourners Class of Foundation UMC, Temple; Temple area Living the Questions group; and the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bell County.

I hope to see you at one or both of the seminars. But even if you can’t attend either one, please watch for more on videos, study materials, discussions, or projects that may grow out of these two events.

To register for one or both of the Crossan-Rieger seminars, phone 800-882-7424, see www.faithandreason.org, or fill out this blank and mail it with your check to D. L. Dykes Jr. Foundation, 200 S. Lamar St. Suite 130-S, Jackson MS 39201



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Name (please print) _____

U. S. Mail address _____

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son, says he had to consider in deciding whether to risk blossoming. "At what point does the discrepancy between what I know, or think I know ... and what I am willing to say publicly become so acute that my personal integrity is at stake?" But he reached the conclusion that I and so many others have also reached: "There is no escape if you wish to be true to yourself."

Spiritual sleeping pills don't help

As scholar Robert M. Price writes in *When Faith Meets Reason*, "The quest for answers is itself a spiritual exercise, one more bracing and productive than

thinking one has all the answers. ... Dogmatic beliefs seem to be sleeping pills for the spirit."



In future issues of *Connections* I'll include more reports from lay people, pastors, and scholars, about their experiences in letting their tight buds open and blossom. One *Connections* issue may even be my credo. Meanwhile, I suggest that you try stating yours, in your mind at least, if not in writing. Even if you've done it earlier, it may have changed by now.

I hope you'll stay connected. Hearing each others' stories of blossoming is much more helpful than taking spiritual sleeping pills.

Barbara

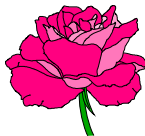


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Has your time to blossom come?

October 2009



"The Church is not and perhaps never was chiefly for people who have a deep and serious intellectual interest in religion. On the contrary, the Church is for people who want to keep up comfortable old habits and associations, who want a feeling of reassurance and self-righteousness, and are happy to live by a ready-made Truth. They are content to go on slumbering peacefully. They want to be *delivered from* the extreme terrors and joys of real religious thought, and nothing is so effective a protection against religious terrors as conforming church membership. At least ninety-five percent of the hierarchy and of church members alike will never see the radical theologian as a liberator and rebuilder: instead, they will *always* see him [or her] as a troublemaker, a nuisance, an irritant who should be got rid of."

—Don Cupitt, in *Radical Theology*

Do you agree with Cupitt? Are "intellectual interest in religion" and "slumbering peacefully" the only choices? How else might we respond to what we hear churches presenting as "ready-made Truth"?



"Truth is not religion's ultimate agenda; security is."

—John Shelby Spong, in *Eternal Life: A New Vision*

Do you agree with Spong's observation? What do you think the church's "ultimate agenda" should be?