

Study Guide

for

Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian

By Thomas G. Long

Guide prepared by

Don C. Richter
Associate Director of the Valparaiso Project
www.practicingourfaith.org

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INTRODUCTION

Discussing a book can be a stimulating and enlightening experience. In a good conversation, we delve more deeply into the material an author has presented. Just as important, we question it and wrestle with it. We apply it to our own situation, adding our own insights to those on the pages and discovering how the ideas we have encountered can make a difference in our lives.

The books in the Series on the Practices of Faith are especially suitable for group discussion. This is partly because of the nature of practices themselves. Practices are activities that are shared with other people. We do them with and for one another. And so growing in our understanding of practices is something we must do with other people too. Moreover, practices are not abstractions. Growing in our understanding of and participation in practices requires us to look hard at the everyday realities of our lives--not in general, but in the specific places where we live, work, worship, and play. It is wise to look at these realities with more than one pair of eyes. This is surely so when it comes to the vexing topic at the center of *Testimony*: how shall we talk faithfully and responsibly about the matters at the heart of our lives?

Pondering this question with others will itself require faithful and responsible talking and listening. It will take conversation. But excellent conversation is not inevitable. Excellent conversation is more likely when a discussion is carefully tended, and this takes some planning. Excellent conversations are structured to allow space for attention to the particular contexts and thoughts of participants. They are attuned to the life situations and learning styles of those who will gather in search of deeper understanding and more authentic action. They need to be set within the framework of a certain period of time, a certain physical space, and a certain commitment to persevere when tough issues emerge. It is the task of a leader to attend to these needs.

This guide is for the leaders who will be responsible for hosting such conversations. We hope that it will be helpful as you think through how specific

occasions can help a specific group of people, gathering in a specific place, to explore how they might find their voices, faithfully and responsibly, both within your group and in the many contexts of life. We hope instead to provide the kind of guidance that will help you to structure conversations that are appropriate for your own group.

The first section offers an orientation to your role as a leader, together with some guidelines for structuring group exploration of Christian practices for opening the gift of time.

The second section provides an assortment of resources that can be used to help groups draw on their own experience and explore their own context in connection with each chapter of *Testimony*.

The Series on the Practices of Faith began with the book *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. It is no accident that *Practicing Our Faith* was written by a team of thirteen authors, rather than by an individual. We found that talking about Christian practices together helped us to see our way of life more clearly and to envision fresh possibilities for faithfulness more imaginatively. That book contains a wonderful chapter on the Christian practice of testimony written by Bishop Thomas Hoyt Jr. Now I am delighted that Tom Long has offered a longer consideration of this crucial practice. To these two perspectives it now time for readers to add their own wide range of insights as well, as they bring to this book and to their efforts to practice faithful testimony their own gifts of wisdom rooted in other traditions, knowledge drawn from other fields, observations made in other places, and lifetimes of experience. I hope that your discussion of this book will be full of discovery and the beginning of a richer practice of conversation one with another, through the grace of God.

Dorothy C. Bass
Editor, Series on the Practices of Faith
Director of the Valparaiso Project
www.practicingourfaith.org

HOSTING THE CONVERSATION

Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian can provide a focus for reflection in a wide variety of contexts. Many church groups--including Bible study groups, sacramental preparation classes, youth groups, retreats, and governing boards--will find it germane to their concerns. It can also be used in classrooms, within families, at the workplace, and in nonprofit organizations. Less formally, a group of friends could agree to read and discuss this book together.

Whatever the setting, it is important that the person or persons hosting the conversation honor the hopes and longings participants will bring to this disciplined consideration of how we live in time. This host is charged with shaping a community of learning--one that may last only a few weeks, to be sure, but one whose structure will be an important factor as participants seek to help one another to learn and grow. After all, every group will not only *study* the Christian practice of talking about faith during its time together. It will also *engage in* this practice and other practices while together--saying yes to clearing time for reading and talking, discerning together what action will result from their learning, offering testimony about their convictions, forgiving one another for the misunderstandings that will surely occur at some point along the way, and, perhaps, honoring one another's bodies by exchanging hugs or sharing a meal. These are small acts in a way, but how the leader helps them to take faithful form is a crucial matter.

Leading as Teaching

When you take responsibility for leading a series of conversations or even a single session, you become, in effect, a teacher. Whether you are a solo teacher or part of a leadership team, it becomes your special charge to foster a situation in which those present can help one another grow in the practices of faith. This does not require that you be an "expert," for your role is not primarily to impart information to the participants. Your book, *Testimony*, will provide much of the "information" your group needs.

Becoming a teacher/leader does, however, require that you give deliberate attention to the specific nature of your group and how it can best explore your topic.

As a teacher/leader, you will be guiding a specific group of people on a specific day for a specific period of time. This is the "live event" of teaching. In that live event, energy will surge and recede, momentum will develop and ebb, the flow of conversation will twist and turn, and any number of planned and unplanned things will happen.

Creating a good educational design is an artistic process. It is a process that is unique to each situation--as unique, indeed, as the teacher, the participants, and the local culture are unique. A fruitful educational design will connect all of these elements--teacher, participants, and local culture--with the larger contexts discussed in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, including the Bible, history, and what is happening in the world beyond this place.

Preparing to Lead Educational Events

The following pages offer suggestions for charting a single group session. In most cases, such a session will be one in a series--so a few words about creating a series are important as well. Many different formats are possible: a weekly study group (possibly during Lent), an intensive process of reflection during a weekend retreat, a day-long workshop, or a series with meetings once or twice a month--any of these, or others, may suit your situation. Whatever format you choose, help the group be clear about what it promises to do over the term of the series as a whole--to read, for example, or to undertake certain activities such as journaling or experimenting with ways of talking and listening at work, at home, or elsewhere.

These suggestions are offered to help you, the teacher/leader, as you prepare an educational design for any given session. Use it in conjunction with other sections of this Guide. More importantly, rely on your own common sense and educational experiences as you chart the educational course of your group.

First, develop a clear sense of what the session is about. Read carefully the relevant chapter(s) in the book. How does the author define the problems people face, and what practices does he commend? What stories, quotations, and Biblical material touched you in this chapter?

Second, wrestle with the material in the chapter. Allow your reflection to go beyond the discussion in the book. What other examples of this practice occur to you? What other Biblical stories are relevant? What questions do you have? Where do you resist entering this practice as the author has portrayed it?

Third, reflect on your personal and institutional involvement in this practice. Try to identify the ways in which you are already involved in the patterns of activity described in this chapter, both positive and negative. Some may be hard to recognize because you take them for granted. What assumptions, prejudices, and passions do you bring? What yearning, pain, or experiences of new life do you bring? What responsibilities do you have regarding this practice within your own community, and what are your hopes and fears about exploring the practice in light of these? Do you have a special perspective that arises from your denominational or cultural identity?

Fourth, think about the people with whom you will be in conversation. Teaching only works when it is designed with these participants and all that they bring to the event in mind. As you chart an educational event, reflect on who is likely to be present. How do the communities and traditions that they represent already engage this practice? What life circumstances are you familiar with that may resonate with this chapter? Do you suspect that they have experienced pain in relation to time? Joy? Confusion? What prejudices and passions do you anticipate they will bring? What gifts and wisdom? Where do you think they need to be challenged? What styles of learning and group structures will be comfortable for them?

Fifth, identify your hopes for the session. Try to articulate in your own mind what you hope for those who will gather. The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* had

certain hopes when we wrote the book about the kinds of reflection that book might generate. These hopes now inform the Series on the Practices of Faith. As you identify your own hopes for the group you are leading, you might find it helpful to dialogue with the hopes of these authors.

The authors hoped that readers would develop a way of thinking about their lives and the life of the world. And we hoped that this way of thinking would lead them into a way of living. Breaking that large hope into parts, we hoped that readers would

- come to greater recognition that God is active in the world, in our communities, and in our lives;
- become more aware of their yearning for a way of life that is whole and holy;
- understand more deeply the rich resources biblical faith and Christian tradition hold for shaping a way of life that can be lived with integrity today;
- become more aware of the various forms of practices developed by faithful people in history and around the world today;
- reflect critically on the deformations of practices that exist in church and society;
- grow in the skills and language that will help them engage in Christian practices with greater fluidity;
- discover fresh forms of the practices that are responsive to God's activity in the changing circumstances of our world, communities, and lives; and
- be challenged and motivated to engage in practices with greater intentionality, energy, reflectiveness, and commitment.

Sixth, consider how you can provide a variety of ways of engaging with the practices in each session. Reflecting on Christian practices takes more than general conversation. It happens best as part of a process in which participants engage with this material in a variety of ways. Fruitful sessions will usually include activities, exercises, and questions that nurture various forms of personal and communal engagement. The following forms of engagement are crucial to exploring a practice fully:

- exploring participants' experience by helping them to identify formative memories, present realities, and hopes for the future;
- considering the emotions stirred by the practice--the group's yearning for it or joy in it, and the stories, dreams, and promises it evokes;
- thinking through the analysis set forth in the book, making sure that its main points are understood but giving participants an opportunity to affirm, question, or challenge issues raised by the reading;
- exploring the theological character of human talking, biblically and as the author presents it, and relating this to God's activity and our faithful living;
- reflecting critically on how speech can become deformed and violated in our lives and in our society; and
- encountering a challenge to live more fully and faithfully, beginning perhaps with some change the group will decide to undertake together.

Seventh, create a design. Arranging elements like these into a design appropriate for a particular group is one of the chief challenges of the teacher/leader. Often, posing discussion questions seems to be the easiest way to proceed. But in most education--and particularly in education in Christian practices--other approaches must also be incorporated. Creative exercises, field trips, forms of artistic self-expression, rituals, songs, writing in a journal, interpreting a piece of art, reflecting in silence, sharing in groups of two or three--all these are activities that can enhance learning when used with good judgment. The second section of the study guide offers a number of such suggestions for nurturing reflection. Look through these as you prepare a session, but don't rely solely on them. Develop your own ideas, attuned to your hopes, the suggestions in this Guide, and--especially--the specific character of the people and place of your teaching.

There are no firm rules about how to design an educational event. Different groups are led by their own traditions or deep convictions to prefer one starting point

vastly more than another; for example, in some churches it will be important to start with the Bible, while in other places starting with a contemporary ethical issue or an invitation to share a personal story would work better. Use your common sense, experience, and powers of observation as you determine what will be most fruitful in your situation.

Two more words of advice arise from our sense of what kind of education growth in faithful practice demands. First, be alert to the *concrete* character of practices, and actually do something together. Try speaking some difficult words, or listening with fresh ears, in a situation where you believe language has become stale.

Second, be alert to the *challenges* inherent in Christian practices. It is easy to get people talking. However, we hope that your conversation will evoke more than smiles of recognition. We hope to stir up some discomfort, too, and perhaps even change.

Eighth, set up the physical environment. Though it is easy to overlook, this step is a crucial one. A conversation among adults sitting in a standard classroom feels different than a conversation held in the warmth of someone's home. Reflect with care about how the physical space available to your group can be arranged to enhance the educational climate.

Ninth, create an appropriate emotional environment. The emotional climate of any educational setting is crucial to its success. But this is especially so when the topic at hand is the life of Christian faith. How can the life of the group that will gather reflect the quality of Christian practices themselves? How will hospitality, forgiveness, testimony, healing, and other practices be practiced in the very shape of this small community of learning?

An atmosphere of mutuality is important. When people are treated with dignity and respect, they participate more fully in transforming and challenging reflection. Remember, as teacher/leader you need not have all the answers. Try to show respect for each member and instill in others a sense of mutual regard and gratitude for the variety of gifts and experiences members bring to the group.

An atmosphere of trust also needs to be fostered. Sharing thoughts and experiences, people expose vulnerabilities and are sensitive to how they will be received by others. Attentive listening, a supportive word, and a nonjudgmental spirit help to create an atmosphere of deeper conversation and greater growth. In many groups, it may be helpful to make these expectations explicit and to agree not to repeat personal information shared in this setting.

Directive but non-controlling leadership can also enhance your educational event. Conversation that meanders without any direction can be frustrating for everyone involved. One of the roles of the teacher/leader is to gauge the interests of the entire group and assist it in moving toward its goals. On the other hand, you should not act too heavy-handedly or feel that you have failed if the group does not address all the issues you had charted. Stifling honest and lively engagement frustrates participants too. What you are seeking is a delicate balance sustained by close attention to the needs and interests of your particular group.

Honest questioning is another aim. The questions you will pose--including the ones you discover in this Guide--should have the purpose of opening up dimensions of human experience and reflection. They should not be used to trick participants into saying something you want them to say, and they are not meant as quizzes to which people might give answers that are correct or incorrect. Ask questions in order to open, not close, discussion.

Encouraging shared participation is also important. Everyone has been in groups where one or two members dominate the conversation. If we are lucky, we have also been surprised by an unexpected insight from a person who usually remains silent. Try to find comfortable ways of making it possible for everyone to participate, even if this means asking a dominant person to give someone else a chance to speak. Let the group be silent for a spell when that is helpful, too. Show that you think it is all right if there are some minutes when no one speaks at all.

Encouragement: Beyond the Guidelines

Reflecting on the practices of faith as they take shape in our lives and communities can be a generative experience. When you lead others in doing this, you are initiating a process far richer and lengthier than the group meetings themselves. As we have noted, your sessions are occasions when people practice many of the practices together. They are also times of planting, times when ideas are encountered that may lie dormant at first but later grow in unanticipated ways.

You cannot control the outcome of a single session or of the group's experience as a whole, nor should you hope to do so. But you are nonetheless offering a wonderful gift when you agree to serve as a host at the table of mutual learning. May you find this table to be one where you are a guest as well.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR EVERY CHAPTER

In this section we offer a sampling of material from which you might choose as you design educational events using *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*. This sampling is not a set of lesson plans but rather a collection of suggestions from which you should select whatever may address the concerns and stretch the thinking of your group. You should feel free to ignore some and alter others, depending on the needs and rhythms of your specific group. You will also want to devise fresh questions and activities tailored specifically for your own situation, and often to invite participants to contribute to this creative process as well.

Chapter One: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian

Write the word "TESTIMONY" on the board. How is this term used in courts of law? How is it used in a worship setting? What do you expect to hear when someone gives a "faith testimony"? What are some similarities and differences between these uses? How does the subtitle of this book suggest yet another way *testimony* might be used?

Has there been a time when you experienced the activity of God in your life? Can you tell that story, speak it out loud?

Read aloud Lynna Williams short story "Personal Testimony" (mentioned on p.4) and share your responses to Lynna, her customers, and their motivations. Do you identify with any part of this story?

The author claims that, in spite of the various lies we tell one another, the desire to tell the truth is a fundamental human need (p.5). Do you agree or disagree with this claim? Share examples from your own experience or from stories you know (e.g., Jean Valjean's deathbed testimony to his adopted daughter Cosette in *Les Miserables*).

Recall and list several "whistleblowers" who have made headlines in recent years. (A fine movie on this topic, based on actual events in the tobacco industry and starring Russell Crowe, is *The Insider*, released in 1999). In what ways do you suppose that whistleblowers people feel compelled -- even driven -- to tell the truth?

Learn about *StoryCorps*, a national project to instruct and inspire people to record each others' stories in sound. They provide tools, guidelines, and technology to help people

interview a grandmother, an uncle, the lady who's worked at the luncheonette down the block for as long as you can remember—anyone whose story you want to hear and preserve. In October 2003, StoryCorps opened StoryBooths in New York City's Grand Central Terminal. Listen to a sample of these stories and discover ways you can participate in this project at <http://storycorps.net>

On p.6, the author observes that "saying things out loud is a part of how we come to believe." Recall an occasion when this has been the case in your life. Do you currently recite certain words in worship (prayer, creed, litany) that you have difficulty believing in your heart?

When a couple joins hands and says "I do" in the context of a marriage ceremony, human utterance brings something new into the world. What are some other situations in which this occurs? List several similar examples, including gestures that accompany the words. How do these special words differ from the majority of the words we speak, or do they?

Read Romans 10:15 ("How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.") and consider the author's comment that "speaking faithful words to other people often means going to be with them, journeying down the road to the place of meeting, being people of 'The Way'" (p.15). Share a time when your feet have been literally moved to bring good news to someone. Describe someone you know who has "beautiful feet." [Option: distribute notepaper and envelopes so that participants can write "thank-you" notes to those who have "beautiful feet."]

Chapter Two: Can I Get a Witness?

The author states that "sometimes church folk talk about God, but it is actually just a pious form of marketing" (p.24). Have you ever engaged in such "marketing" in ways you now regret? Do you remember times when you felt that you were being "marketed to" in this way?

Describe someone whose life has been a "wordless witness" to the gospel. Putting your examples together, try to identify some common traits in how these witnesses lived and spoke.

During a college course on "U.S. Foreign Policy: 1945 to the Present," a woman named Susan was moved by her faith as a Christian to speak out against a U.S. bombing raid (pp.26-27). When have you been moved to public speech by your faith, even though your words may have been unpopular?

Have you ever been summoned as a witness for a trial? What three words would you use to describe the experience? Compare courtroom testimony to one's daily testimony as a Christian. Are they the same? Different?

In the book *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, the "Truth" chapter opens with courtroom testimony that contributes to discerning "the whole truth" in a legal case. Read this chapter and discuss this question: What is the relation between "telling the truth" and "living a truthful life"?

Read together the story of the prophet Jonah from the Bible -- or ask the group to construct the tale from memory, listing main plot developments (God calls Jonah to preach to Nineveh; Jonah rebels; sailors discover Jonah's identity and throw him overboard; a large fish swallows Jonah; Jonah prays and the fish spits him onto land; God again calls Jonah to preach; Jonah reluctantly preaches and people repent; Jonah becomes resentful; God uses a bush as an object lesson to teach Jonah about compassion). Then discuss as a group what we can learn from Jonah about the practice of testimony.

Thomas Long urges us to think of church as "the language school of God" (p.32). What words, accents and gestures have you learned in this language school that you are now trying to *un-learn*? What have you learned that you intend to keep?

As a group, listen to selections from several Speaking of Faith audio programs archived at <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/index.shtml>. Discuss initial impressions, then consider how Krista Tippett explains her strategy for hosting these conversations. What can this approach teach us about testimony as *bearing witness*? Tippett writes:

Journalistic reporting about religion often asks people to speak for a tradition, or for God. And for understandable reasons it favors guests—including religious leaders—who are willing, even bound, to do so. Therefore many discussions about perspectives that religion/faith/belief could bring to our civic life begin like this:

"Christians believe..."

"Judaism asserts..."

"Muslims insist..."

"The Bible says..."

The trouble is, these kinds of pronouncements put listeners on the defensive. In fact, they even foster division within traditions. The first-person approach behind *Speaking of Faith* sidesteps the predictable minefields and opens the subject wide, making it inviting, both in ambiance and substance. It insists that people speak straight from the experience behind *their own* personal beliefs. How did they come to hold the truths they hold? How are religious insights given depth and nuance by the complexities of life? This way of speaking also has the effect of opening the listener's mind. I can disagree with another person's opinion; I can't disagree with his or her experience. Because I know where they are coming from, I am capable of some understanding—even compassion—about why they think that way. Moreover, because I have heard their story I am able to attach a person,

a humanity, to their conclusions, and I will never quite be able to dismiss that position or denomination in the abstract in the same way again.

Chapter Three: Sunday Words

How do your "Sunday morning" words compare to your "Saturday night" words? Which words feel more "real" to you, and which are you more comfortable speaking?

Read the short story "Revelation," by Flannery O'Connor. What stories, images, and hymns from Christian worship helped shape Ruby Turpin's disturbing yet liberating vision described at the end of this story?

Interview one another (and perhaps also other members of your congregation) using this question: What hymn best expresses your faith, and why? Use at least one of these hymns each week in a series of worship services, accompanied by a story of why the hymn is important in the life of the member who chose it.

Find a Psalm that embodies each of the following: joy, gratitude, comfort, delight, sadness, despair, revenge, acceptance. Do you find words here that you can or do use in prayer? In daily life? In what ways do the Psalms teach us the language of prayer? What range of emotion do the Psalms permit or invite?

While serving as pastor of a Presbyterian church, Eugene Peterson evaluated how the congregation used words in worship, especially in reference to God. Peterson identified three categories for the congregation's God-talk: information (talking about God), motivation (asking God to do things for us), and relationship (intimate conversation with God). Peterson observed that his worship leadership involved plenty of language of information and motivation, yet too little language of intimacy and relationship with God. Distribute copies of a recent worship bulletin and use Peterson's three categories to evaluate how your congregation addresses God.

Attend a Pentecostal worship service where glossolalia is practiced. How does "speaking in tongues" stretch our understanding of testimony (52)?

Attend worship at a Society of Friends' (Quaker) Meeting House. What do you notice during the periods of group silence? How would you characterize such "expectant silence" (53) as testimony?

What surprises you in Stephen Carter's description of "The Most Dangerous Children in America" (pp.55-56)? How would your group respond to his assessment of which group is more dangerous?

Write an epitaph for someone whose living and/or dying has been a testimony of faith. Or begin a goodbye letter for when you die, giving testimony to your faith journey and to your hopes for the future, blessing those you leave behind.

Outline a typical service of worship in your congregation. Then identify how each element of worship ripples out into the language of your family life (see pp.58-65). Can you think of ways to intensify this *ripple effect*?

President Harry S. Truman was known to compliment a ginko tree for "doing a good job," for flourishing in its divine calling as a ginko tree (p.60). In what respects do you feel that you're doing a "good job" of living into your divine calling as a unique person?

Read aloud the poem "Ring-Worm Boy" by W. Dow Edgerton (Volume 45, Issue 2, July 1988 issue of Theology Today available online at <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/search/index-browse.htm>). Contrast the words spoken by the neighborhood children with the "word" spoken by the ring-worm boy's friend. How does recollecting this childhood memory become a confession of sin for the poet? For the reader?

Chapter Four: First Light

With what words do you greet each new day? Conversation with family members? Good Morning America? NPR? Talk radio? What do your "first light" words reveal about you?

Instead of asking "What do I have to do today?" or "What would I like to do today?" Thomas Long encourages people of faith to ask "What can I do today that would be *joyful*?" Can you think of a particular moment in your life when you were filled with joy? What were you doing, and who else was involved with you? Reflect on what it means for our days to be guided by joy rather than obligation or desire (70-74). How would this make a difference in your approach to life?

A man recalls that when he was growing up, his mother used to say to him each morning, "John, I know God has great things in store for you today. I wonder what they will be...?" Young John carried this sense of wonder and expectancy as he went out the front door every morning. How might we nurture this sense of wonder in one another -- adults as well as children?

Some Bibles are "red-letter" editions, using red type to indicate the words of Jesus in the four gospels. What would the Bible look like if we highlighted every text in which God speaks? Distribute copies of Genesis 1 and ask learners to highlight or underline every phrase in which God speaks (commands, calls forth, names, or blesses). How much of this chapter describes God talking? What can we say about a God who speaks Creation into being? In what ways does human speech reflect God's creative chatter (74-77)?

Use John Calvin's four "rules" of prayer (78-79) to evaluate the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. Does the prayer of the Pharisee really qualify as a *prayer*? Why or why not?

Watch a few scenes from the movie version of *Fiddler on the Roof* in which Tevye talks to God. How are honesty, humility, and humor woven through Tevye's prayers? If you were to pray in this manner, what would your prayer be?

The author claims that God-directed prayer prompts us to seek out companionship in other people (79). Do you agree with this claim? What is it about this form of speech that draws us toward communion with others? That draws us even toward reconciliation?

In one of his letters from a Nazi prison, the pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed: "While I often shrink with religious people from speaking of God by name -- because that Name somehow seems to me here not to ring true, and I strike myself as rather dishonest (it is especially bad when others start talking in religious jargon: then I dry up completely and feel somehow oppressed and ill at ease) -- with people who have no religion I am able on occasion to speak of God quite openly and naturally." Can you identify with Bonhoeffer's sentiments?

Recall an occasion when you felt estranged, outcast, or disconnected, and someone uttered a simple word of acceptance to you. What did that word sound like? How did it make you feel?

"Sometimes the most faithful testimony doesn't sound very religious," Long writes on page 86. Do you agree? Share examples.

Chapter Five: Walking the Walk, Talking the Talk

Examine a "Christian Yellow Pages" phone directory. What do testimony do these listings give? How do these businesses claim to differ from their competitors?

Have you ever worked with someone like Helen, the "office evangelist" (89-90)? Or have you on occasion acted like Helen, forgetting to "choose well the times, places, and means for speaking" about your faith?

A couple hosted an office Christmas party in their home. Throughout the house, the couple displayed their collection of nativity sets. Several guests did not know the Christmas story and had never seen a nativity set up close. The hosts' children delighted in showing these guests the different figures and explained how they arranged the figures to depict aspects of the nativity story. Would you consider this effective testimony?

Kerygma is the Greek work for "proclamation," meaning what is proclaimed as well as the act of proclaiming. Identify several dominant *kerygma* within our society, the messages that most shape our dreams, expectations, and values. In what form are these messages conveyed?

The author suggests that our reliance on trustworthy words makes us vulnerable to deceptive words (92). As a group, examine magazines or watch TV together and consider how advertisements prey upon this vulnerability by asking:

- What is being sold, and to whom?
- What need/vulnerability does the ad exploit to sell the product?
- What do you suspect this product will in fact do?
- How might trustworthy words be used instead to promote this product -- or not?

Read aloud Genesis 3:1-13, assigning speaking lines to a narrator, the serpent, Adam, Eve, and God. How do deceptive words lead to behaviors that express shame, guilt, and blame? (94-96) Then ponder this statement: "In a world that uses words as camouflage and as weapons, in a world that uses words as a kind of shell game to hide the truth, to have people who bravely tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth is a radical, refreshing, and even disruptive event." (98)

The author describes form of "wise truth" that is more complex than mere factuality (99). How would wise truth respond graciously to the following situation: Joan, a thoughtful elderly neighbor, prepares a casserole for your family. The kids can't stand the taste and refuse to eat it. When you return the dish, Joan inquires, "So, how did your children like my casserole?"

Name a few comedians who get laughs by insulting people. Why do we laugh at this form of humor? How does this way of "putting people in their place" differ from putting people in their God-given place? Consider the example of the Reverend Will Campbell befriending Klansman Sam Bowers (101-103).

The author notes that "Sometimes the hardest, most demanding words we speak to each other out in the world are not born of rage or offense, but of love." How does the example of Sandra Herron illustrate how speaking the truth in love can be *challenge* as well as *blessing*? (105-107)

Chapter Six: Conversation Over Lunch

How often do you invite friends, co-workers, or your spouse to lunch? Rarely? Regularly? Frequently? Do you agree with the author that an invitation to lunch is an invitation "to talk about stuff that matters"? (109)

Read the story about Mister Rogers's lunch talk to the National Press Club (110). Then take two minutes of silence to recall those in your own past -- parents, teachers, coaches, friends -- who have guided you faithfully along the way. Invite those who wish to share to do so. [Option: If you were writing a book, to whom would you dedicate it? What words would you choose for your dedication?]

A woman recalls that when she and her husband were dating during the Great Depression era, he used to leave half a candy bar in her locker. Another suitor would bring watermelon not just for her, but for every woman in her dorm. For many years, she laughingly referred to her husband's gesture as a signal of his frugality: "I should have known I was marrying a man who would be tight with money!" Now she sees the gesture in another light: "By giving me half a candy bar, he wanted me to know that whatever he had in life, no matter how much or little, half of it would always be mine." Recall some similar gesture from your own past that time and grace now allow you to see in a new light.

The author tells of a Christmas Eve service when the singing of "From a Distance" provoked the counter-testimony "God came near to us at Christmas!" (113) When have you felt provoked to offer counter-testimony, especially to testimony about the nature and activity of God?

Does it bother you that when it comes to validating Jesus' Resurrection, "...all we have are words. All we have is testimony." (115)?

Consider the story of Barbara and the talk show host (114-116). How do we distinguish between testimony that is *life-giving conversation* and testimony that has been reduced to *sales pitch*? When we believe something deep in our heart, what's wrong with trying to persuade others to believe as we do?

Without naming names, describe the person to whom you would most like to give a "no-strings-attached" gift of healing, freeing words? Also without naming names, describe someone who would be flabbergasted to receive such a word gift from you.

When have you had the urge to tug on someone's sleeve and say "Look, look!" at a display of God's handiwork and glory? (119-120)

In his book *Reaching Out*, Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen observed that, "Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place" (120-121). How might our understanding of teaching be transformed when we view teaching as "setting the table" and "hosting the conversation" for learners?

A man recalls a special meal shared between a mission team from Texas and villagers in Senegal. Previous mission teams had visited the village to "share the gospel," then retired to a nearby resort to dine and spend the night. This team wanted to stay in the village and break bread with the Senegalese. The hosts assumed that their American guests would

want hamburgers and chicken fingers, but the Texans requested local food instead. "We shared from a common bowl, seated on the floor, eating together with our hands. It was like taking communion together." How did the Texan mission team proclaim the gospel differently than their predecessors? Consider how changing some established patterns in your home context might accomplish something similar.

Use tableau technique to illustrate sequential scenes in John 6: 1-14, the loaves and fishes story. Assign different roles: Jesus, Philip, Andrew, the boy, a few other members of the "large crowd." Create a tableau for each of the following scenes by posing still bodies as in a frozen moment or photograph: verses 1-6, verse 7, verses 8-9, verses 10-11, verses 12-14. Challenge actors to use body posture and facial expression to convey the drama and surprise of unfolding events. Then discuss: When have you offered a mere fragment that Jesus has blessed and multiplied to nourish others? (123) How are the plot fragments of our daily lives woven into "the great design of God's tapestry, the full plot of God's story"? [Option: Use Michael J. Rosen's accordion book *The Greatest Table* to illustrate how table fellowship links us to tables throughout the world.]

What signs do we get that our little plots are indeed linked to this big plot? (124-128)

Create a jigsaw puzzle with large pieces. Give each participant a piece with the instruction to write words or draw images of hope. Assemble the puzzle pieces and admire the collective design.

Read aloud *The Tale of Three Trees: A Traditional Folktale* as retold by Angela Etwell Hunt (Lion Publishing PLC, 1992). How does each tree eventually "become part of the biggest, best, most hopeful drama of all"? (124)

Chapter Seven: The Six O'Clock News

In what places that you frequent would a saying of Jesus feel awkward? Why? (129)

We hear the saying "religion and politics don't mix." Yet during the 2004 U.S. Presidential campaign, both the Democratic and the Republican candidate spoke openly about their Christian faith. And weekly news magazines report that religion cover stories are their most popular issues. Would you agree or disagree with Stephen Carter's 1994 assessment that religion is ignored and unwelcome in the American public square? (130-131)

The 1968 trial of the Catonsville Nine exposed the power of religious testimony to challenge conventional social standards -- even the laws of the land (133). Where do you see this happening today? Do you view it as hopeful? Dangerous?

The author describes a redemptive encounter between a United Church of Christ minister and a police officer who arrested her for civil disobedience (135-137). Have you ever witnessed such an encounter? Experienced a similar one yourself?

Watch video clips from *Eyes on the Prize* that bear witness to the fruits -- and the costs -- of non-violent resistance during the Civil Rights movement in this country.

What voices are silenced in your church, your workplace, your home, and the larger society? How might the testimony of these voices be encouraged? Invite people to meet with your group or faith community to give testimony from life on the margins -- migrant workers, refugees, homeless, ex-convicts, people of color, people on welfare. Where do these people see God active in their lives? How does their faith sustain them with courage and perseverance?

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Joseph J. Ellis lied about his past a few years ago; he told bogus stories to college students about being a platoon leader during the Vietnam War. In an NPR interview (<http://www.npr.org/rundowns/segment.php?wfId=4124835>), Ellis reflected on what he had done: "The way I would put it is I did something that was stupid and wrong, and that it was more than just a mistake, it was, in my judgment, a sin. The only thing you can do with a sin is face it, confess it, do penance, and then, after a decent interval, ask for forgiveness." Would you trust the scholarship of a person who told lies yet has made public confession? Consider this case, and also parallel cases of restoration after dishonesty that you have encountered.

Chapter Eight: Whispered Secrets and Bedtime Prayers

On p.144 the author notes how our speech can do others great harm: "The tongue is not very large, James says, but it can be full of deadly poison (James 3:5-12)." How does this differ from the childhood proverb "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me"? List some of the different ways our words *can* be poisonous to others.

Recall a time when you gained personal satisfaction by hurting someone else with your words. Why do you suppose saying such words in that situation made you feel better? If you could replay that incident now, or if you encountered a similar situation in the future, what would you say instead?

Notice how the above invitation to imagine a different future is less shaming and more freeing than asking "How *should* you have used more graceful words in that situation?" Do you find yourself using "shoulds" frequently with yourself? In addressing others? Is this a speech pattern you'd like to change, or not? Why?

Lynda Graybeal, former editor of the quarterly *Renovare Perspective*, recalls how her father grew up using coarse language on a Western ranch. "Having been raised in that environment, he naturally spoke the same way as an adult, so I heard profanity every day of my life as I was growing up. Speaking without using profanity has been the most difficult of my inner habits to corral. Words reveal our heart." (*Renovare Perspective*,

Vol.14, No.2, July 2004). Is the use of profanity or "cuss words" a problem for you or someone you love? How might this habit be changed?

Compare your understandings of gossip and testimony (145-150). Can you think of times when speech that has been labeled "gossip" might be testimony that has not dared to go public for fear of reprisal? When are secrets healthy and necessary? When are they harmful and destructive? How can our faith community help us discern the difference?

How does it make you feel to be "put on hold" when speaking with someone on the phone? One company has a policy never to place telephone callers on hold in order to answer an incoming call. Nor do they interrupt a face-to-face conversation to answer the phone. They believe that doing either of these things communicates to one's current conversation partner that he or she is not as important as the person on the other end of the ringing telephone. Could you envision yourself adopting this policy?

"Especially we wonder whether our own children will share our faith and be able to give testimony of their own" (150). Read the accounts of conversations between Miroslav Volf and his son Nathaniel, and between Brad Wigger and his son David. What insights do these stories offer about sharing faith with our children through our conversation with them?

What words do you utter at the end of the day, before closing your eyes to sleep? If you pray, do you pray a Psalm? A bedtime prayer you learned in childhood?