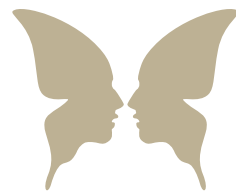


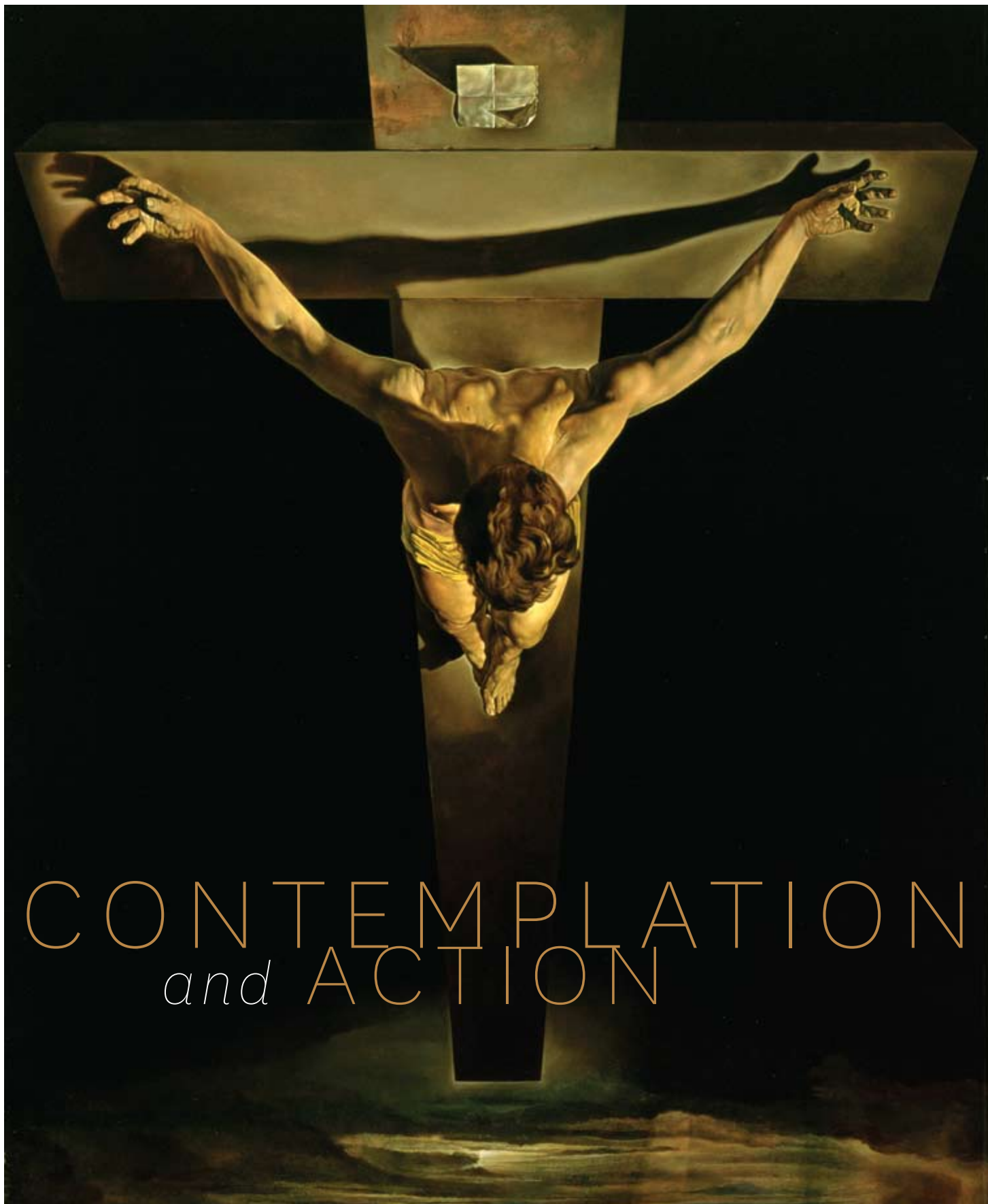
CONVERSATIONS



volume

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A FORUM FOR *Authentic* TRANSFORMATION FALL | WINTER 2010



CONTEMPLATION *and* ACTION

CONVERSations

A FORUM FOR *Authentic* TRANSFORMATION

PROVIDES SPIRITUAL
ACCOMPANIMENT AND
HONEST DIALOGUE FOR
THOSE WHO LONG
FOR RADICAL
TRANSFORMATION
IN CHRIST.

→ IT STIMULATES
HUNGER AND
ILLUMINATES THE
PATH BY DRAWING ON
CLASSICAL WISDOM
AND PRACTICE,
EXPLORING THE VITAL
ROLE OF COMMUNITY,
AND ILLUSTRATING
THE JOURNEY WITH
REALISM AND HOPE.

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CONVERSations

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IN KEEPING WITH THE IDEA OF THE SOUL AS A UNIQUE REPRESENTATION OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY, THE FORMAT OF CONVERSATIONS INCLUDES FIVE CONTINUING THEMES. EACH REPRESENTING AN ENDURING ASPECT OF THE SOUL—THOUGHT, EMOTION, BEHAVIOR, RELATIONSHIP, AND INTENTION.

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GETTING NAKED WITH THE FRIENDS OF JESUS

|||||

LIVING *the* REALITY *of* COMMUNITY

|||||

BY TOM SMITH

|||||

Albert Luthuli was the first African recipient of the Nobel peace prize. In his autobiography he wrote, “If the Christian concern is with people and not disembodied principles, its concern must be with the conditions under which its people live. Christianity must be concerned with what is going on... here and now.”¹

1. Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* Tafelberg/Mafude Edition, 2007, 131.



Luthuli wrote these words in the midst of apartheid, an inhumane system that ravaged the lives of millions of people in the country where I live. The “disembodied principles” to which Luthuli refers are an apt description of what my Christian life entailed

under the apartheid system. It was a kind of Christianity wherein I believed in Jesus as “my Savior,” yet this belief didn’t engage me—or my friends—with “the conditions under which its people live.” Somehow, I could believe in Jesus without attempting to follow Him. I lived in a cocoon (of whiteness), disengaged from the world around me.

As a beneficiary of oppression I comfortably practiced my spirituality while the majority of South Africa’s people struggled for their lives. It was this disembodied version of Christianity that, among other things, led to the theological justification of apartheid. Believing in Jesus and following Jesus were severed from each other. I followed Jesus with my intellect but not with my body. Faith was in my head and not in my hands or my feet.

In the Gospel of Luke we read about a walking Jesus: “And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.’”²

After reading this a decade ago, I wrote in my journal, “What does it mean to deny myself and take up my cross daily?” I had no idea! My Christianity was not made flesh. I believed in Jesus, that He died for my sins so I could go to heaven. My version of Jesus was highly individualistic and very personal. This was true, but not true enough. Since writing those words in my journal, I’ve been on a quest to put flesh to my beliefs, to discover the way of Jesus.

AN HONESTY QUEST

In 2003, a group of us came together with more or less the same quest. We wanted to know what church could look like, so we decided to read through the Gospels. Somehow we knew that the church question could be answered only in the light of Jesus. Out of this quest a church called Claypot was planted in Johannesburg. Our church got its name from 2 Corinthians 4:7, where

Paul writes, “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”³ We believe church happens when people follow Jesus and then collide into each other.

During the first four years we studied Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Jesus we encountered in those narratives challenged us radically; He invited us to follow Him, but we had to remove some “butt skins” in order to do that.

In my school days our teachers used corporal punishment as discipline, usually with a rod. The maximum penalty was six strikes of the rod. Some of us would remove the inner tubing of a bicycle wheel, cut a circle out of it, and then punch some holes in the tube. We would then place it under our pants for some extra protection. This was called *’n gatvel* in Afrikaans (a literal translation is a “butt skin”). The holes would muffle the sound of the tubing and minimize the pain—and woe to those who were caught wearing it!

Kierkegaard used this image in his writings. He said that all of us have become accustomed to facing the reality of Jesus with a “butt skin.” He writes:

Can’t we be honest for once! We have become such experts at cunningly shoving one layer after another, one interpretation after another, between the Word and our lives (much in the way a boy puts a napkin or more under his pants when he is going to get a licking), and we then allow this preoccupation to swell to such profundity that we never come to look at our lives in the mirror.... All this interpreting and re-interpreting... is but a defense against [God’s Word].

It is only too easy to understand the requirements contained in God’s Word (“Give all your goods to the poor.” “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the left.” “Count it sheer joy when you meet various temptations,” etc.)⁴ The most ignorant, poor creature cannot honestly deny being able to understand God’s requirements. But it is tough on the flesh to will to understand it and to then act accordingly. Herein lies the problem. It is not a question of interpretation, but action.⁵

As we were invited and confronted by the Jesus in the Gospels to follow Him, we had to admit that we had many “butt skins” protecting us from God’s call to action. Our worship leader was one of the people who pointed this out. He showed us how we were making use of lan-

3. The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, 1989. Scripture quotations marked (NRSV) New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Divisions of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

4. Matthew 19:21; 5:39; James 1:2

5. Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, <http://www.plough.com/ebooks/pdfs/Provocations.pdf>, 84, boldface added.

2. Luke 9:23–24, English Standard Version. Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

guage and Plato to get away from actually obeying what Jesus calls us to do. Here's what happened.

We were singing one Sunday; it was one of those magnificent moments wherein you can feel God's presence. We sang enthusiastically, the kind of singing where you secretly close off one of your ears so that you can hear how you sound (or maybe it was only me engaging in vanity like this). The song extolled Jesus, and we declared, "We raise our hands to you." The decibels were raised, but our hands were not. The worship leader challenged us to be honest with God, to "look at our lives in the mirror," to use a Kierkegaardian and Jamebian phrase.⁶ He invited us to create true synchronicity

We are discovering that the rich and the poor need each other: the rich are not God and instead have something to receive, and the poor are also made in the image of God and have something to give.

between the words "we raise our hands" and our bodies. Instead, our hands were clamped to our sides.

"I know what some of you are thinking while you're singing this song," he said. "You think that you're not going to raise your hands right now, but that Jesus knows that 'deep in your heart' you are raising your hands."

It was this spiritualizing that the worship leader challenged. He confronted a kind of Christianity wherein we follow Jesus "deep in our hearts" without any kind of movement with our bodies.

The next song we sang that day had the words, "You let me lie down in green pastures." Laughingly, the worship leader sang the song lying down. We got his point. That morning, we realized that our bodies performed a very important part in our spiritual formation.

Personally, I realized that I rationalized a lot of inaction with the "deep in my heart" argument. Jesus challenges me to love the poor. I didn't know one poor person by name, yet Jesus knows that I love the poor "deep in my heart." Jesus challenges me to give generously. I didn't give actual money, but my heart was in the right place; I had the right attitude. Jesus knows that "deep in my heart" I am a really generous person. I realized that the Jesus who knew me deep in my heart was calling me to be His hands and feet.

One day Jesus was approached with the eternal

question, "What is the good life?" He answered,

The most important is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:29-31, ESV)

Jesus wants to be in our heart, yes. But Jesus also wants to be in the rest of our bodies in such a way that we become an embodying presence of His love. To journey towards this holistic embodiment requires a lot of honesty.

How can that happen? With steps both large and small. For example, imagine that you're singing the song that cries out that you will raise your hands to God in worship. Today, you don't feel like raising your hands. It's too embarrassing, or you're tired, or you just don't like God very much at the moment. Honest action suggests that instead of singing the song, you have a conversation

with God about why you don't want to raise your hands. At this point honesty creates a space wherein God can be encountered. Teresa of Avila showcased some of this honesty in a well-known prayer:

God, I don't love you.
I don't want to love you.
But God, I want to want to love you.
Amen.⁷

The apostle Paul encouraged the younger Timothy to "Stay clear of silly stories that get dressed up as religion. Exercise daily in God—no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever."⁸

The gymnasium Paul refers to was an institution brought to the Jews by the Greeks and further adapted by the Romans. After Alexander the Great conquered Judea, he started to influence the culture of the area with Hellenism, a belief that closely correlates with humanism. One of the vehicles used to disperse the Hellenistic culture was the gymnasium, and one was erected in Jerusalem.

7. Quoted in Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000, 13.

8. 1 Timothy 4:7-8, *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

6. cf. James 1:23.

The Greek word for gymnasium is *gymnos*. The verb Paul uses literally means to “exercise naked.” These Greek gymnasiums were an atrocity to the Jews because men and women exercised there in the nude. The rabbis warned against the “immorality of the baths.” In choosing this provocative word, Paul used an image that was recognized by his original hearers. It is an image that also connects with an aspect of our modern landscape centuries later.

The modern gymnasium is a place where all kinds of people congregate for different reasons. Some people want to lose weight; others already lost weight and want to keep it that way; others exercise with a certain goal in mind: maybe a marathon or a bike race or a triathlon. Another group is there for social reasons—they will be there for an hour and engage in maybe one exercise. Some guys scavenge around for the already thin single women, and vice versa. Then there’s the guy or gal who constantly compares himself or herself with others, feeling either proud or totally deflated. There’s also a guy who puts an enormous amount of weight on the machines and does one bench press, instead spending most of his time standing at the weights, wanting to be watched and adored.

Now in our day, thankfully, all of this happens with our clothes on. But imagine how it would be, standing at your local gymnasium, with everyone around you completely naked! There would be no room for pretense, no way strategically to hide your cellulite or flabbiness or skinniness or whatever; it would be just you, uncovered and real. I think this captures what Paul has in mind; the word he chose hints at the importance of formation without a “butt skin.”

EXERCISING NAKED

In order to train ourselves toward godliness, our community has developed a rule of life. For us, a rule of life is a rhythm of disciplines that a group of people follow together. The rule has a general direction, but its implications are as unique as the individuals partaking in it. It develops a movement or a vibe in the same direction.

We direct and orient our lives towards God. It’s our aim to seek Him and to place Him in the center of our beings, loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But what does it practically mean?

For us, it means a life based on six invitations. Our

fig. 1



love for God in our whole lives flows out into engagement with the invitations to (1) plug in daily, (2) eat meals with other people, (3) discover our piece of the puzzle and gift others with it, (4) place ourselves in other people’s shoes, (5) be committed to downward mobility and servitude, and (6) see our working lives as an essential expression of our discipleship. The rule of life is represented by fig. 1.

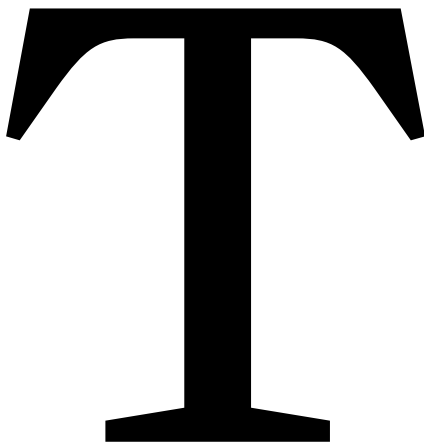
Every year in January all of the members of Claypot rededicate afresh to the family. In January we have no members. This creates a space where we can prayerfully discern whether Claypot is the specific community where we are to serve God in the following year. Those who discern God’s call to serve at Claypot for the next year participate in the following way:

- We partake in a pot-breaking ceremony where we take a clay jar and break it into pieces (resembling 2 Corinthians 4:7). All members take a shard with them and write a prayer on the inside. After a few days we get together in order to glue the pieces together.
- Every member teams up with at least one other member in order to keep one another accountable. This accountability serves as an encouragement and sounding board for the engagement with the rule of life. It is a relationship wherein we can help each other to see our “butt skins,” the ways we protect ourselves from God and His transforming work. We recommend that accountability partners meet at least monthly in order to stir one another up in love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:25).

If members discern God's call to commit elsewhere for the year, then we help them in their journey of finding another community where they can serve God and others. We have a special sending-away service where we bless them to be a blessing to the world.

We encourage every member in our community to develop exercises as an outflow to every invitation. These exercises are to be concrete and not just abstract. All six invitations flow out of a commitment to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength—or in other words, to place God in the number one position at the center of our lives.

DEALING WITH OUR CONTEXT



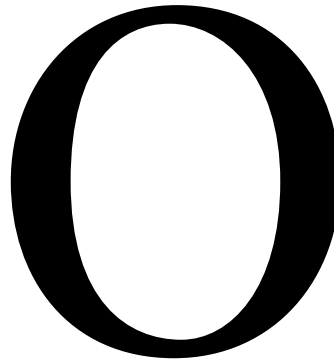
The rule of life helped our community to train in a way that is practical. But we soon realized that we were still not living into the “here and now”

to which Luthuli referred. At that stage of our journey we were a “middle class” white community meeting in the suburbs. I place middle class in quotation marks because that was another “butt skin” we had to remove. By labeling ourselves this way, we were successfully sidestepping the ways in which Jesus challenged the rich in the Bible. Isn't it amazing how we almost always define the rich as those who have more than we do? So we renounced the lie that we were the middle class (the median income in South Africa is \$330 per month for a household of four).⁹ We studied Jesus' words to the rich and wrestled with it in the first person.

In doing this, we found out that Jesus challenged us to be with the poor. I use this phrase as a purposeful reaction against the phrase “reach out to the poor.” We are discovering that the rich and the poor need each other: the rich are not God and instead have something to receive, and the poor are also made in the image of God and have something to give. In the last few years God has diversified our community and helped us to be an embodiment in the “here and now” of South Africa. We are learning how to exercise naked with people who are different from us.

⁹ You can visit www.globalrichlist.com to see where you are in terms of wealth in the world's context.

TRANSFORMATION IN A SHEBEEN



One afternoon we were scheduled to have a church finance meeting. (God wants to use even these meetings to shape us.) Instead of having our meeting in the usual place, we decided to go to one of the local squatter camps around Johannesburg. This particu-

lar camp has about 80,000 people living in shanty houses on a one-square-mile property. A friend of mine who lives in the community hosted us. By seeing the “here and now” around our comfortable neighborhood, we were challenged to appropriate the Lord's money in a different way.

After showing us around, our friend invited us into a *shebeen* (an African tavern). He asked if he could buy us drinks. As he went to the counter to buy our drinks, everyone turned to me and asked if we were going to pay him back. We were incapable of receiving from the poor. When my friend returned, we were all surprised. Instead of buying five beers he came back with one tall bottle (called a quart). We had expected individual drinks. My friend opened the bottle, took a sip and passed it on.

Instantly we were being challenged to become a community instead of individual consumers. The bottle was passed, and we all took a sip. In the corner, next to our table, a lone man was sitting. He was invited into the community. The bottle went around the circle twice.

This event played a huge role in the formation of our finance team. In contemplating this action, we realized that being with the poor was so much more than just “reaching out.” We were being shaped into a new community. Engaging our “here and now” with some of Jesus' other friends had helped us to grow closer to Jesus and His kingdom.

FORMATION OF COFFEE CUPS

Over the last few years we've become friends with the people in the squatter camps. We like to create spaces where we can get to know one another and share life together. At one of these meetings we were an eclectic group of people spanning different races and socioeconomic classes. We talked about Jesus and what it means to follow Him in South Africa. My wife prepared some muffins and cookies for us. As we were drinking coffee and tea and eating delicacies, we listened to one another's stories and experiences, learning from each other. It was a glorious time.



A few days later, I met with my friend Eddie, who is the pastor of the people who visited us. I asked him how they experienced the evening.

He told me the story of one of the women who joined us. When they got home, she approached Eddie and told him how shocked she was to be invited to have coffee and snacks by a white person.

“How can I drink from white people’s cups?” she asked Eddie.

During apartheid blacks and whites seldom mingled at tables. One of the ways in which blacks were reminded of their “inferiority” was through a separate set of cutlery set apart exclusively for blacks, usually a tin cup and plate. These tools of segregation were usually stored in a cupboard on the lower level—all of this serving as symbols of oppression. It was a way to communicate that blacks weren’t on the same level as whites.

The woman explained that after she saw Eddie and the others making coffee and drinking from white people’s cups with so much liberty, she mustered the courage to follow. She got up and made herself coffee in a “white person’s mug.” Eddie told me that the lady described this as one of the most liberating moments of her life. She said she wanted to stay for the rest of the evening! After this incident I have noticed with an impregnated imagination how many times Jesus used the table and eating as a vehicle for transformation.

Our rule of life has helped us to engage in the rhythms of contemplation and action. By becoming more engaged with South Africa’s “here and now,” we are growing closer to Jesus. We have taken our prayers, our worship, and our community out of the hidden places within us and chosen engaged action instead. As a result, we have been changed by our transforming God. We still have many “butt skins,” but we want to remove them; we want to be vulnerable and available to Jesus and those He loves.

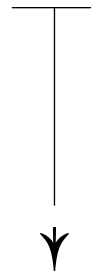
Every community and journey is unique. The Jesus who calls us into this adventure beckons us with a “Follow me.” That path may take you into the squatter camps of South Africa or the suburbs of Colorado Springs, but it will mean two things: engaging your body in compassionate action and removing your “butt skins” that keep you safe from the transforming love of God.

So, my friend, may you experience the wild adventure of becoming naked when you remove your “butt skins.” May you engage with your “here and now,” and may you befriend some of Jesus’ other friends and so become a blessing to the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tom Smith is married to his best friend, Lollie. They have the sacred privilege of parenting Tayla and Liam. With some friends they planted the church Claypot, which they serve as pastors. Tom has a passion for integrating spiritual formation and social justice in post-apartheid South Africa. They live in Johannesburg with their two dogs, Lillo and Mocha. Tom blogs at www.soulgardeners.com.



**COMMUNITY
BROUGHT TOGETHER
IN BROKENNESS
THOUGHTS FOR
REFLECTION**

1.

What communities have you been part of—formal or informal?

2.

What rhythms bound the community together?

3.

Consider some of your strongest, deepest friendships. Do you observe any Claypot’s Rule of Life active in those relationships? If so, which? How might those relationships take on a greater intentionality and impact if you were to incorporate some of these elements?

4.

When you think of a Rule of Life, what comes to mind?

5.

What elements of the Rule of Life are appealing to you? Which feel challenging?

6.

Take the remaining space here to jot down some ideas for your own version of a Rule of Life. If your community already shares one, use this space to thank God for them and the ties of intentionality that bind you together.



NOTES

Series of horizontal wavy lines for taking notes.

CONVERSations

A FORUM FOR *Authentic* TRANSFORMATION



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