Deliberately structured conversation as a way to “see through” popular media

Abstract:

In cultures permeated by digital images religious educators need to develop the capacity to “see through images” in ways that support healthy religious practice and belief. Within Christian contexts where the confession of God requires a Trinitarian acknowledgement of God’s creative power, Incarnation, and ongoing revelation, it is helpful to think in terms of a spirituality of displacement which prepares the ground for entering into reconciliation. Such a spirituality can be developed in part through theological reflection which promotes encounter with the deeper layers of popular culture – even that most commodifying form of popular culture, the television commercial.

Paper:

In the summer of 2016, in the heat of the US presidential campaign, the president of Union Seminary published an essay in *Time Magazine* entitled “How to heal the spiritual pain of America” (Jones, 2016). Her essay was focused on the stories we tell in the United States about ourselves as a nation, and asked us to remember that:

> There is no religious or spiritual tradition, at least any worth their salt, that does not begin with a serious account of both the good and bad that people can do. There are many names for the negative side of human existence, such as sin, evil, illusion, moral absence, iniquity, transgression and negative karma. All recognize that human beings, alone and collectively, can do really bad things. This doesn’t mean we don’t have a good side. But these stories insist that if we do not existentially reckon with the ugly side of our beliefs and actions, we will not have healthy communities. Egregious harms will continue to unfold and profound despair and alienation inevitably set in. Why? Because deep down, we are living a spiritual lie.

I have a hunch that this spiritual lie is something that many people who are leaving religious institutions have sensed and cannot endure. What is heart breaking, however, is precisely Jones’ point: that religious institutions have profound convictions about human brokenness, and vital ways of engaging in reconciliation and healing.

In multiple papers over the years I have shared stories, not simply stories told by individuals, but stories which give us frames for thinking about stories, stories which offer us paths towards healing. Whether it’s Kegan’s “deconstructive propositions” (Hess, 2008), Shweder’s “ways of thinking through others” (Hess, forthcoming), Cannon’s “dance of redemption” (Hess, 1998), Stevenson’s “four elements” (Hess, 2016) – all of these are frames for engaging our stories, for finding ways to think more wisely about what it means to have and to hold faith in the midst of
digital cultures. In particular I have argued for a Trinitarian stance as envisioned in a “create, share, believe” circle of knowing and engagement (Hess, 2014).

What I propose to do in this paper is to return to that circle and to think carefully about the “share” element, and to ask what role sharing might play in hospitality. On a basic level it’s clear that when people create something they care about, something of which they are proud, they generally feel compelled to share it. But what does it mean to share out our sense of brokenness? What does it mean, to build on Jennings’ invitation to imagine Christian faith in orthopractical, rather than orthodox, terms? (Jennings, 2010).

As we are exploring in this collaborative REA session, structured around the story of hospitality in Genesis 18, Abraham shared food with three visitors. But what does the community of truth model contribute to understanding how this sharing proceeds in a world suffused with digital media (Hess, 2005)? Is there any way in which we can imagine the potential of strangers we might encounter through digital media as transformative, potentially even connected to transcendence? How do we develop the kind of wide, deep, and genuine hospitality which is so often described in scripture? Particularly hospitality to those whom we have named as “other”? Beginning from an epistemological conviction that a community of truth can be observed when we remember that we are interdependent and intimately interconnected persons, Christians confess a God who is Trinity (LaCugna, 1993; Johnson, 1992). This confession requires us to recognize the wholehearted and whole person way in which dialogue has to unfold, and in which ordinary everyday experience brings forth glimpses of God’s revelation (Scharer and Hilberath, 2008). As Heim notes, “the divine nature is communion-in-difference,” and “communion is the substance of salvation, but also the path that leads to it” (Heim in Ross, 2015, 138).

In the world we are inhabiting in 2017 we have to struggle with context, and with the challenges of context collapse. Both of these are bound up with digital media. Our contexts are thoroughly suffused with digital media – dialogue with context requires dialogue with digital media. But that same media floats fragments of meaning on a vast sea, uprooting them from context, and in the process collapsing that context (Wesch, 2009).

Further, as Bevans and Schroeder write: “we do not so much see images as we see through images. Images, we believe, especially a constellation of images, help us to move beyond the conceptual and the abstract to the level of emotions and the imagination, where we can be motivated to think in a way that leads more immediately to action” (2011, 31).

Are we seeing through the images of digital media? Focus for a moment just on “what” we might be seeing there. For some of us at least, much of what we are seeing is division, polarization, brokenness, absence of the transcendent. The “database,” if you will, of popular culture leaves much to be desired when it comes to religious education. Building bridges from our database – the database of scripture, of tradition, of prayer and practice, for instance – to the database of

1 Please note that I write this paper from a very specific social location: as a white woman, as a Roman Catholic professor of education at an ELCA Lutheran seminary, as a mother of young adults in the upper Midwest of the United States. I intend that my argument here be evocative, rather than prescriptive.
popular meaning-making, the databases of film, tv, YouTube, Spotify, and so on, is not a simple or an easy task.

We need an API – an “application programming interface” -- that piece of code which creates access points between two software programs, that gives us access in either direction. It is an API, for example, that allows for my tweets to automatically become status updates in Facebook. It’s an API that reaches into the database of membership in an organization and constructs a directory for that organization on the web. We need an API that bridges popular meaning-making to the bones and flesh of our tradition, and does so in ways that are helpful for religious education.

Bevans notes that “Christian tradition sees human being arising at the intersection of three types of relation: our relation with God, with other persons, and with the rest of creation” (Ross and Bevans, 145). If this is so, then two of these three relationships are represented in popular meaning-making, perhaps no more so than in the brief effervescent world of commercials. But how do we connect that world to our relationship with God, to religious meaning-making? What are the APIs that we can use to do this for religious education?

Retrieving mission, and reconciliation at its heart

To begin with, we can retrieve theological ideas, and patterns of practice, from the long tradition of mission within Christian community. It might seem quixotic to draw on ideas from within the church’s long engagement with mission, since for far too many people that term either signals “missionary” – a label with a legitimately problematic history – or “mission statement” – a label which causes most people to sigh and their eyes to glaze over in boredom.

Given a community of truth model for knowing, however, and given the potentially global way in which digital media surround and permeate and carry our communication, there are actually glimpses of meaning and insight from practice within what is termed “missiology” in academic terms that hold resonance and power, that can help us to create this API for which we are searching.

Bevans and Ross argue that:

...mission is best understood as prophetic dialogue. “Prophetic” because it is both word and deed, a “speaking forth” and a “speaking out.” And dialogue, because “the divine nature is a communion-in-difference, and creation is an overflowing of the divine nature,” hence our constitutive need to be hospitable, open, humble, vulnerable, and joyful (xvi).

This is a definition that is very far removed from much of what people have understood about the church and mission. Yet this is a definition profoundly rooted in the community of truth model with which most of my writing has been engaged. In order for this prophetic dialogue to work, however, we need a grounding which both recognizes this fundamental conviction about knowing and which embodies it deeply. Indeed, Bevans and Ross suggest that perhaps it is a spirituality we need, rather than a pedagogy. (I might quibble a bit with a claim that separates
those two, because I think that there is not so much a difference or dichotomy between pedagogy and spirituality, but rather they both contain elements rooted in an underlying conviction about the community of truth.) What is important to remember is that at the heart of Christian understanding is a conviction about grace which is rooted in the Incarnation.

As Bevans reminds us:

Jesus modeled powerlessness and vulnerability by being a guest in our world, by letting go and being among us in our place and space. ...

The three major festivals of the Church — Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost — all have to do with the advent of a divine stranger. In each case this stranger — a baby, a resurrected Christ, and the wind of the Holy Spirit — all meet us as mysterious or strange visitors, breaking into our world, challenging our worldviews and systems and welcoming us to new worlds (2015, 70).

This strangeness, this stranger, breaking into our established world-views, our “taken-for-granted” ways of knowing, continues as the Holy Spirit breathes amongst us. I am convinced that God continues to reveal Godself in our midst, and perhaps more and more in the midst of the strangeness and strangers which digital media place in front of us.

Day after day, moment to moment, people experience in digital media a connection, a relationship of shared meaning, of shared resonance, even (for many) a community. But are we finding ways to invite the stranger into our relationships, into our communities? Are we open to seeing how estranged we have become from much of who we really are (in the deep sense of shared communion)? Are we open to the wisdom of our tradition that might actually be found there, or least connected to, in the midst of digital media?

I fear that far too many of us have experienced ourselves as strangers in church communities, and instead of being welcomed as such, have been pushed out, have been resisted, have been shamed and mocked, have been judged and found wanting. This personal experience extends into digital media practices which create enclaves of similar meaning-making, which build bubbles which do not touch each other, rather than shared streams of living water. Further, instead of being open to the deep wisdom of religious traditions, we have accepted the narrow definitions these experiences push us towards, and we have rightly rejected them – but rejected the tradition as well in that process.

Contemporary missiologists – those theologians seeking to explicate what the tradition, what the Gospel, tells us about mission – strongly assert that relationship is at the heart of the “communion in difference” which is God. Further, the story they seek to share, the over-arching narrative, is one of reconciliation.

For many of us that term – reconciliation – has very little meaning. What little meaning does exist is often captured in economic terms, the “reconciliation of accounts” that occurs in a bookkeeper’s office, or that entails ensuring consistency across spreadsheets. But that very
narrow definition is far from being the primary meaning of the word. Even dictionaries list several others first – the “restoration of friendly relations,” or “the action of making one view or belief compatible with another” (MacOS dictionary).

And in Christian terms, reconciliation is the very heart of the Gospel, the very heart of all that the Incarnation accomplishes. Recall Jones’ plea: to heal America’s spiritual pain we must acknowledge our brokenness and seek healing. This path is what Christianity is all about, no matter how warped or deformed it has become in the intervening two millennia since Jesus gathered a community committed to reconciliation.

Schreiter (in Ross, 2015) summarizes reconciliation in theological terms as follows. It is:

- the work of God (126)
- God begins the reconciling process with the healing of the victim (127)
- the healing process in reconciliation makes of the victim (and the healed wrongdoer) a ‘new creation’ (127)
- a path towards reconciliation requires finding a way to cope with suffering (128)
- reconciliation will only be complete when God has reconciled the whole universe in Christ (128)

Schreiter continues by suggesting that the principle practices of reconciliation understood as mission, are:

- healing (of memories, of victims, of wrongdoers) (129)
- truth-telling (130)
- the pursuit of justice (punitive, restorative, structural) (131), and
- forgiveness (132)

The hypocrisy which young people consistently name in polls as the reason they want nothing to do with religious institutions rests here, in the heart of how we embody the Gospel. Are we living into reconciliation? Or are we retreating from it into narrow silos of closed-in meaning-making?

Bevans again:

salvation is a particular Christian aim distinguished from others. Yet its nature draws us towards others (religious others and social others) and their witness and experience. We cannot seek salvation apart from healing the broken relations and structures that connect persons. The Trinitarian communion which is source and end for the Christian path is not an identity of isolation or contradiction, but of reconciliation (Ross, 148).

This means that reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel, and by implication, then, at the heart of mission and knowing and meaning and practice.
Until we acknowledge pain, we cannot begin healing. Christ on the cross is the very heart of Christian community, but how often have we averted our eyes – not only from the cross, but from the deep pain in our midst? There is significant evidence that young people are not only open to the pain of the world, but energized by engaging it and seeking healing (Hutt, 2016). There is also significant evidence that they are motivated and encouraged by the social media they consume – including even the video games they play (McGonigal, 2011).

What might be an API that we can use to begin to connect our experiences in digital media to reconciliation rooted in religious community? What are the practices that invite us beyond our self-enclosed circles and into a hospitality for, a recognition and engagement with, the pain within, among, around, between and in front of us?

Bevans suggests that we need a “spirituality of displacement” that invites us into listening:

A spirituality of displacement allows those of different cultures to listen and learn from one another and permit appreciation of diverse comprehensions of God’s relations with humanity. Exploring the idea that we are strangers together in the world, however short or long we may have lived in a particular nation, may allow us to think beyond the categories of migrant, native, guest, host with which we live” (in Ross, 64).

This is an unfamiliar stance for many of us, however, and like any spirituality requires disciplines we can practice, emotional and cognitive muscles we can strengthen, to move into this kind of listening.

Building structures for listening that can lead to reconciliation

There are more and more communities who are finding their way into practices of conversation that build structures that can lead to reconciliation. Perhaps the more famous of such are the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of South Africa, and of Canada. But there are also smaller, more local kinds of conversational structures which are emerging. The practices used in the Respectful Conversations Project of the Minnesota Council of Churches, for instance, are simple but profound, and applicable to just about any difficult conversation. They offer a structure for conversations – guidelines and practices – that grow out of appreciative inquiry, rather than out of analytic frameworks.

Appreciative inquiry is a research methodology oriented towards finding what is working in a setting, and from there, what the underlying commitments and effective practices of that setting are. To use Peter Elbow’s turn of phrase, it is a stance that first practices “believing, rather than doubting” (1986). We are immersed in media who do the opposite – we practice doubting, first, we even practice a kind of angry engagement that some have come to call “angertainment” (Garvis, 2012).

What can it look like to begin in “believing”? It looks like hospitality, it looks like learning a way of attending, or practicing attention, which invites room for deep listening. So few of us have any practice with this kind of listening that it takes support and structure to invite us into
such a process. The good news is that dozens of organizations have woken up to this challenge, and are offering support and tools for doing so.

Kegan and Lahey have written about “language for transformation,” because of their understanding of how language structures meaning and practice. In particular they have identified a shift they recommend from “rules and policies” to “public agreements” (Kegan and Lahey, 2001, 103ff). A public agreement is a set of commitments that a group agrees to at the beginning of engagement. As such it becomes a covenant which any member of the group can use to call the group back to the center when it veers away from the agreement.

The Forum for Theological Exploration has a lovely agreement they use in their vocation discernment weekends (see Appendix 2). The Respectful Conversations Project also has an excellent agreement (see Appendix 2). Considered together you can immediately see the similarities. These agreements form the groundwork for shaping attention in ways that invite hospitality rather than confrontation. The Respectful Conversations Project, for instance, notes that they seek to “soften hearts rather than to change minds.” This is an invitation to respect, to honoring of difference, to deep listening – to real hospitality.

Moving from these initial agreements, there are dozens of examples of ways to structure exercises to support practicing this kind of listening. Consider the Art of Hosting/Liberating Structures frameworks. These are two groups of practices which form an umbrella of sorts for a whole host of ways to structure conversation. More information about both of these frameworks is readily available online.²

One of my favorite such exercises is the four person story circle. You begin this practice by dividing people into groups of four, and then explaining that each person in the group will have a particular role, and these roles will rotate until every person in the group has had the opportunity to try each role. The exercise then moves to asking one person to tell a story – keeping it short, timed to no more than three minutes. While the storyteller is sharing their story, the other three people in the group listen carefully in three ways: one listens for any feelings expressed in the story, one listens for any actions expressed in the story, and one listens for any values expressed in the story. Once the storyteller is finished, the other three listeners share what they have heard. After a short pause, the roles rotate one person over (so the storyteller now becomes a story listener, the person listening for feelings now listens for actions, and so on). Once all four people have had a chance to experience each role, the small group joins other small groups to process the experience in a large group.

This is an example of a structure, a set of “rules,” if you will, that creates a space in which people are focused on listening carefully.

Another example is what I call a “story titling” exercise. Much like the previous example, this is geared towards a small group and towards listening to a story. In this case it’s important to ensure that you have someone who can time what is going on – most people use a phone alarm

² Cf. The Art of Hosting (http://www.artofhosting.org), and Liberating Structures (http://www.liberatingstructures.com)
set to three minutes. Here one person tells a story, and then turns around so that they are not facing the other three people. At that point the listeners offer possible titles for the story. The storyteller listens to these possible titles, all the while not looking at the listeners. Then the storyteller turns around and chooses one of the titles, or offers one which she has made up and prefers herself. The group writes down the title, and then the next person tells a story, and the process is repeated. When all have experienced each of these roles, the list of titles becomes a “table of contents” for the group, and can be shared in a larger plenary setting.

In this exercise both the timing (no story longer than three minutes), and the process of not watching the faces of people offering titles, are important. And for both of these exercises – the story circle and the story titling, I’ve found that it helps to remind people that stories come or not, and that it’s fine for a person to “pass” on telling a story. It’s also important to remind people that these are stories for the telling, not for the fixing (and here you can refer back to the public agreement set at the beginning of the exercise).

In my experience with both of these processes, rich and interesting conversations emerge, even in groups which are very similar in background and commitment. But it is in groups which are quite different that the real depth of these simple practices takes important shape. The Minnesota Respectful Conversations Project is a good example here. That project began in 2012 at the beginning of a statewide public campaign for a constitutional amendment declaring marriage to be between one man and one woman. This definition was already the law in Minnesota, but there were fears on the part of many religious communities that that law would not be upheld in higher courts. Having watched campaigns for similar issues unfold in other states – complete with accompanying public rancor – the MN Council of Churches sought to find a different path through the thorny brambles of public opinion. The churches which make up the Council do not agree on the issue, and it was incumbent on the Council to find ways to be present in the state-wide discussion that supported open dialogue and deep listening without taking a specific position.

The MN Respectful Conversations Project has a simple shape, which unfolds largely in two separate sessions – both of which are roughly three hours long. The first is a session for volunteers from a given setting who have volunteered to be table hosts during the actual conversation event. These volunteers are trained in the art of supporting deep listening, which includes helping groups to follow the agreements they make as well as finding genuinely respectful ways to intervene if a conversation breaks that agreement in some way.

The second session always begins with a shared meal in which participants are invited into conversation that is explicitly not about the controversial topic to be engaged later in the evening. This simple table fellowship embodies a gentle hospitality which can crack open any defensive postures participants might have been tempted to retreat into. After the meal the entire group is shown a short – and humorous – video about the conversational agreement they are being invited to make, and then they are split into smaller groups which convene around a table with a table host.

The conversation then proceeds through three rounds of carefully structured questions. The questions begin with a general invitation to state why they have come – for instance, “Tell us
about why you decided to come to this conversation today. You could be doing many other things, but you chose to come here. What was the “pull” of this event?” Each participant is given two minutes to answer this question, with participants timing each other. Rather like a “talking stick,” a phone set to a two-minute alarm is passed around the group, so that one person times while another person speaks, then the phone is passed to the person who has just spoken and s/he times the next person until each person at the table (with the exception of the table host, who remains a facilitator/observer rather than a participant) has spoken. The second question is generally one which invites reflection on how one’s background experiences contribute to one’s position. For instance, in a conversation on criminal justice and local policing the question was “What in your own background or core commitments shapes your experience of the criminal justice system at the level of local policing?” Again, each person has the opportunity to answer the question in a limited amount of time, and the task of timing the responses is given to each person one at a time. The third question invites participants to reflect on what is messy or unresolved in their position. For instance, in the marriage debate the question was “within your own perspective, what questions do you still wrestle with?”

During these three rounds of questions, there is no opportunity or invitation for follow-up, instead, people are asked simply to listen, and to jot down any questions they might like to ask of other circle participants on pads of paper which are provided. Finally, after all three rounds have been completed, the group is invited into a “popcorn” round of questions. This is the time when real dialogue begins to occur, because participants have had the chance to practice with the guidelines in a tightly structured way, and now can use that experience to invite open reflection with each other.

The key in each of these structured conversations, whether it is the story circle, the story titling exercise, or the larger respectful conversation project – is that participants are invited into a space that “holds them” in ways that create room for deeper listening, for more respectful engagement, indeed, that create room for practicing a kind of “spirituality of displacement” (to use Bevan’s term) that can open us up, that can become deeper hospitality for those of us schooled in cultures which have not practiced such hospitality for far too long.

Keeping in mind this need to create such structures of participation, the final example I want to use offers a clear API with which to connect the bones and flesh of our religious beliefs with the fluid and rapidly changing stories of digital media. This example draws on the classic work of Patricia O’Connell Killen, who along with John de Beer, articulated a practice for theological reflection back in the early 90’s which has proven remarkably fruitful even as our contexts have shifted and changed (1994). Her process invites participants to walk through a series of reflective prompts, and in doing so to perceive resonances between their own experiences and those of scripture and tradition. I commend the book to you, as she goes into much greater depth than I can here, and she offers many permutations of the process.

I have found that this is a process which works best in a setting in which there are at least a few participants who have some degree of familiarity with scripture and tradition. A retreat setting, for instance, led by someone with that knowledge. Or in a classroom or other formal learning space. I have taken Killen’s process and tweaked it just a bit so that the experience participants are reflecting upon is centered on a television commercial. There are myriad commercials that
are rich sources of such reflection (see Storyingfaith.org for more), but here where I have been reflecting upon hospitality, and where this collaborative session has focused on the hospitality Abraham showed to three visitors as told in Genesis 18, it seems most appropriate to use a commercial that centers around food and hospitality.

My practice is to show a television commercial three times – that is, to invite participants to view it once without doing anything other than experiencing it. The second and third times I ask them to attend to their physical and emotional responses to the commercial. From there I walk them through Killen’s process (see Appendix One of this paper for the specific questions I use). Here I will use the 2017 President’s Choice commercial as my example. This commercial was produced in 2017 for the brand President’s Choice, which is a private label/store brand of Loblaw Companies Limited, a grocery chain of more than 2000 stores in Canada.

The commercial is a short narrative which portrays people caught up in their phones and isolated from each other. One young woman notes this isolation and sets up a potluck dinner in the hallway of her condominium. Soon many diverse residents join in and there is a clear sense of shared, public enjoyment. The commercial ends with a small child inviting one last person from the floor to join the potluck.

There are myriad ways in which to connect to this commercial, and all of the people to whom I have shown it – mostly through this exercise – have found deep meaning in it. The commercial both invites reflection upon a perception of isolation caused by digital phones, and “solves” that problem through inviting table fellowship. Readers of this essay who are steeped in religious traditions are likely already imagining potential connections to stories and practices from their tradition.

I have mostly invited participation in this exercise in predominately Christian communities, so the stories that emerge include all four gospels’ telling of the so-called “Last Supper,” the Isaiah 11 text about “letting a little child lead them,” and the Matthew 18 text about “become like children.” In discussion I have also heard the Genesis 18 text emerge, as the conversation widens to talk about hospitality more generally, and the ways in which our current practices do or do not ignite such hospitality.

Television commercials – at least the ones with which I practice this exercise – are beautifully produced short form narratives. They are very effective at eliciting some form of desire, some kind of yearning, which their audience might reasonably expect to exhibit. I find what is necessary is to help people to name the yearning, and then to identify a deeper response than whatever “product” the commercial is attempting to salve that yearning through. I use the word “salve” quite intentionally, because it has been my experience that commercial forms of digital media quite often promise a certain kind of “salvation” through purchase. I would like to support a different form of agency all together: both personal agency through creative reflection, as well as reflection upon God’s agency.

I wrote near the beginning of this paper about the need to find an “API” – or application programming interface – that can connect our experiences within digital media with the flesh and bones of our religious imagination and practices. Killen’s process is one such API. My
colleagues in this collaborative session have offered two other very rich processes. My hope is that our work here will ignite your own imagination for sharing practices which can open us up to deep hospitality to strangers, and those from whom we are estranged.
References:


Garvis, N. (2012). *Naked Civics*. NakedCivics, LLC.


Appendix One: An exercise in theological imagination


2. Begin by attending to your physical and emotional responses to this piece. What adjectives come to mind to describe how you are feeling right now? Try not to judge yourself, simply write the words down quickly. Regardless of what the producer of the commercial might have intended, how did you experience it? is there a word or a symbol or a theme that emerges from your listening to your feelings in relation to this commercial?

3. Pause for a moment, and sit with that word or symbol. How might God be present and calling to you? What is existence like within this symbol? What is lifegiving and joy-filled about it? What is broken or sorrowing about it? What possibilities for healing and newness exist within it? Write down your thoughts as they occur to you, in brainstorming mode.

4. Take that theme/symbol/word to scripture. Brainstorm a list of places/stories/passages in scripture where this theme/symbol/word emerges for you or resonates with you. Avoid asking why a passage or passages emerged for you. Simply trust that a possible connection exists.

5. Pick one of these passages and find it in the bible (a google search can often help you find it). Read the passage a couple of times, think about what surrounds it in the text. Ask the same questions you asked initially of your theme/symbol/word, now in relation to this passage: what is existence like here? what is full of joy? what is broken or sorrowing about this passage? are there possibilities for newness and healing within it?

6. Give yourself some space to think about what has emerged for you as asked these questions. What resonances and explorations accompanied this process? Have any insights emerged for you from this conversation between a piece of pop culture and the structures of faith? Have any pressing questions emerged for you? Are you being called in any way to direct or concrete action?

7. Finally, how will you take whatever you might have learned from this process into your daily living? Write down at least one intentional step you will take. When will you begin? Who will support you?

(based on The Art of Theological Reflection, Patricia O’Connell Killen, John deBeer; New York: Crossroad Press, 1996; p. 88-89)
Appendix Two: Public Agreements

The Forum for Theological Exploration’s “vocation care agreement”

Covenant of Presence

1. **Be fully present, extending and presuming welcome.** Set aside the usual distractions of things undone from yesterday, things to do tomorrow. Welcome others into this story space and presume you are welcome as well.

2. **Listen Generously.** Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. As Quaker Douglas Steere writes, “To listen another’s soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest gift we can offer to another.”

3. **Author Your Story.** We all have a story. Some might say, “I don’t have a story” or “a story worth telling,” but you do and the world is in need of hearing it. You must claim authorship of your own story and learn to tell it to others so they might understand you, be inspired by you and discover what calls you to be who you are, to do what you do or to love what you love.

4. **We come as equals.** We don’t have the same gifts, limits or experiences, but no person’s gifts, limits or experiences are more or less important than another’s.

5. **It is never “share or die.”** You will be invited to share stories in pairs and in a large group. The invitation is exactly that. You will determine the extent to which you want to participate.

6. **No fixing.** We are not here to set someone else straight, right a wrong, or provide therapy. We are here to witness God’s presence and movement in the sacred stories we share.

7. **Suspend judgment.** Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgments and reactions, we can listen to another person, and to ourselves, more fully.

8. **Turn to wonder.** If you find yourself becoming judgmental or cynical, try turning to wonder: “I wonder why she shared that story or made those choices?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me?” “I wonder what he’s feeling right now?”

(This agreement can be found in the Fund for Theological Education’s Guide to Vocation Care, and is based on a set of touchstones first written by the Center for Courage and Renewal).
The MN Respectful Conversations Agreement

a. **Speak for oneself:** Use “I statements.” Own and offer your thoughts and feelings honestly; avoid grand pronouncements or stating positions of others.
b. **Practice respect** in speaking and listening; accept that others may have different views, without needing to debate or set them straight.
c. **Be brief** in comments; honor timeframes and refrain from interrupting.
d. **Listen carefully,** especially when something is hard to accept; suspend judgment.
e. **Respect confidentiality:** After the conversation, do not attach names to comments made without permission.
f. **Allow people to pass,** or pass for now, if they are not ready or willing to respond to a question.

(http://www.mnchurches.org/respectfulcommunities/respectfulconversations.html)