

The NewesLetter Vol. 25, no. 1

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January, 2021

It has been a long time since I have sent out a NewesLetter. Let's just say it has been a long year, right? So here is my summary of the year:

I began the year 2020 by teaching a class at a couple of churches on "The Bible and Politics." Boy, I had no idea where this year would take us on *that* topic. We had a few good conversations in and out of class, and I was able to do a lot of biblical preparation for my book on *Monasticism(s) and Socio-Political Engagement*. I had a meeting with a couple of friends and we began dreaming of making a new set of videos. At the end of January I started a journey through *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola. This is a nine-month set of meditations (done each day) complete with required reflections and a weekly check-in with a spiritual director. I had done something like this over 30 years ago and it was life-changing. This time it was equally significant. Cheri and I also began a co-taught class at a church on spiritual practices.

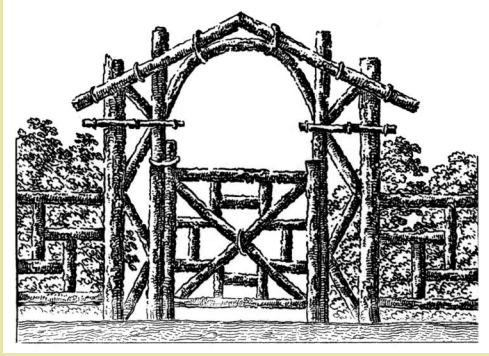
The first week of March we co-led, in our living room, an afternoon training for InnerCHANGE, a group of inner-city missionaries we have been friends with for many years. The next week I was scheduled to speak at a "gathering" from the United Kingdom using this communication technology called *Zoom*. As we met, the leader mentioned that she had planned on being in a different location, but the country banned travel that morning due to a virus called COVID.

Surprise. And welcome to 2020.

My daughter Claire and her new husband Caleb returned from Thailand about this time. They were exploring ministries in the US to serve with for the next few months before they went back to Thailand in the Fall. They ended up here in Montrose along with a friend who could not return to Florida. They stayed with us and got hired by a Christian wilderness therapy program. Their friend stayed in our "hermit hut" while Claire and Caleb turned their bread-truck into a tiny home parked right next to our house. In April I was scheduled to speak at a conference with the Society of Vineyard Scholars. They cancelled that gathering and I ended up using various means to do some consulting with the Association of Vineyard Churches on fostering thriving congregations and developing a regular and close relationship with the Order of the Common Life, a network of committed Christians mostly associated with the Vineyard. Another network, the Nurturing Communities Network re-organized a conference into a series of bi-weekly Zoom meetings. I attended nearly all of these and have begun serving this group. I am scheduled to lead a meeting this coming April on "Discerning Life in Community." Many one-on-one connections have grown from these gatherings.

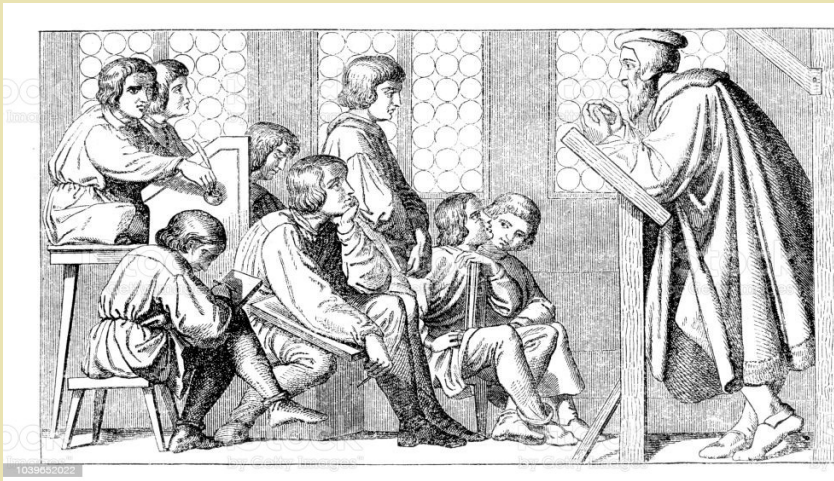
Both Cheri and I offered contributions through podcasts, Zoom presentations, and video productions uploaded to YouTube. I continued to upload some my more scholarly papers ("Who Should Be Poor? How Poor? and Why?"; "The Beguine Option"; "Pentecostal Monasticism") both to my website and to other locations.

In May we began work at the ranch repairing fences.



A couple of weeks later we got a call, while at the ranch, from Cheri's father (we call him 'Pa') that he had fallen at home and could not get up. We drove home and helped him up. That day was the beginning of a new stage of Parkinson's disease for Pa. In previous years we were his partners in ranch work. We were without him this year. During this same season a student from Fuller asked if I would supervise him in an independent study on monasticism and we had a great summer together talking every two weeks on the phone.

In June I co-taught a class at Tyndale Seminary.



I offered to co-teach this class with Tom for two years in order to mentor him so he could teach the class himself in the third year. It was to have been a week-long intensive in Toronto, with common devotions and meals and so on. Sorry, not in 2020! We ended up uploading videos and having five hours of Zoom meetings every day. The whole seminary summer student body would show up for the evening devotions. I would have liked the

face-to-face interaction, but it still worked OK. And, thanks to some experiments with solar panels and internet hotspots, I was able to attend some of these meetings from the ranch!

There was one week late July where I had a number of calls scheduled and everyone cancelled. Perfect timing! I was just at the point in my *Spiritual Exercises* where I needed to think about writing (or in my case re-writing) my Rule of Life: a document that summarizes where God is leading me in this coming season. That process was a gift of God. Such clarity about where I was going! Fuller was downsizing, releasing faculty, and I did not know where I might end up "making a living" in the season ahead. But now I knew how I wanted to live no matter what.

Three weeks later I got a notice from Fuller. They had retained me as faculty, but only as an adjunct and they scheduled the 2020-2021 year without me. I was functionally unemployed. OK - so now I knew how I wanted to live but did not know how I would "make a living." Then the next week I opened a letter from the Social

Security Administration informing me that I qualified for retirement. If I were to retire right away I would collect benefits comparable to what I had been making from Fuller. Bingo! God's provision for God's calling.

I went right to work studying a topic that I consider to be very important to Christian communities--and to the development of a theology of religious life--the question of divine [and human] expectations. I traced this question from the fourth through the sixteenth century and discovered all kinds of insights: historical, theological, and practical. If you want to read my conclusions see "What Does God Expect? From Whom? and Why?" available at spiritualityshoppe.org. I also did some reading in Thomas Merton's writings from the early 1960s. His writings from this period are a superb test case for discussing monasticism and socio-political engagement.

By the end of July we were also spending a little more time helping Pa here and there. He needed some help replacing a tire. He needed a new device so he could turn on his irrigation system and I made my first experiment with welding. Cheri's uncle passed away in June and Cheri helped her cousin, who came from Arizona, to sort through possessions. At the first of August we spent some time cleaning out our own collection of farm garbage, some of it left here twenty-five years ago by the previous owner, and made room for Claire and Caleb to move their bread truck to a more pleasant location on the property.

In the first week of September Cheri and I did a formal "visitation" of the InnerCHANGE team in Minneapolis. We were schedule to fly there and visit face-to-face, but well, you know the story. We had Zoom interviews with each member and met with the whole team a couple of times. Then we reviewed our insights and gave the team (and the InnerCHANGE staff care director) our thoughts about the team. Again, not the best, but we discovered that virtual "visits" could work. This was the first time InnerCHANGE had tried it.

By the way - notice how much I am talking about Cheri and I doing things together. In November, we also co-lead a Zoom seminar on Spirituality and Nature for a nearby congregation. Probably better to start thinking about Spirituality Shoppe as a partnership.

Without any teaching responsibilities with Fuller, my Fall was taken up with studies, meetings with new monastic folk, and ranch work. We opened the ranch up a bit for ministry. Cheri led a retreat for a women's recovery program at the ranch and we worked with the Wilderness therapy group there a couple times. Our girls and their husbands came up once and we had a great time building a new table out of logs.

Just after we finished ranch season in November, Pa began to fall more often. We watched his wants growing more and more basic. And as I watched this, I was led to think about how important it is, especially in this crazy time, that we seek to meet other people basic needs when and where we can.

Reflections: Touching the Basic Wants

As I mentioned, Pa's decline kicked in with a series of falls. His legs just didn't hold up any longer. He would call us from the house he had lived in for thirty years. We would make the drive from our home, ten minutes away, and help him up. Pa was frustrated with these falls, especially as things got worse. Once, we arrived to Pa's pronouncement, "I guess you're just gonna have to commit me." Cheri looked at him and asked, "Is this what you really want?" Pa said, "No." What he really wanted was to preserve his independence, with a few caring visits when needed. In time our drives grew more frequent and finally we made arrangements for one of us to "visit" on a 24/7 basis.

Cheri remembers having a lovely conversation with him about "polyrhythms." Pa has a doctorate in music. He helped create the Montrose Joyful Sounds, an ensemble of people with various abilities and disabilities. He was arranging music up until his final month. Pa's mind grasped the complex but his body required the simple. One day, in his last week or so and barely able to mouth words, he rallied and began sharing with Cheri how he has been thinking about music with different rhythms going on at the same time. "Polyrhythms." Cheri listened, asked questions, and then responded to Pa's request for water: offering him a sip of water through a straw. What Dr. Pa wanted, but could not provide for himself, was a conversation and drink of water.



There was also this one night when I was keeping vigil in his room. Unable to swallow by now, he had not eaten for a couple of days. His voice was weak, only communicating very slowly in single words. Consequently, I was unsure when I heard him. "Choc - late." I approached the side of his bed. "Pa, did you say, 'chocolate?'" He repeated, "Choc - late." I ran to the kitchen and broke off a piece of his favorite chocolate bar, wondering if I would be endangering his life to offer him this treat. But I knew how he loved sweet chocolate. I put the piece in his mouth and he sucked on it a bit, and spit it out. Then the next word -- "Milk." Again, I poured some milk in a small cup and offered him the straw. Pa took a few sips. Then again he spoke, very slowly. "That. was. good."

Jesus, in his last weeks, spoke about a time when King God would honor those who attended to his most basic wants (Matthew 25:31-46). "I was sick and you visited me." "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat." "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." "I needed clothes and you clothed me." Those he was speaking to questioned, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?" The King replied, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." One night this passage came to my mind and I realized that within the past few hours I had done them all. I was serving Jesus by meeting Pa's basic wants.

Many of us--especially when we include the Body of Christ around the world--have friends whose wants have been reduced to the basics in 2020. Friends in Asia who are literally starving for lack of food shipments. Friends in nursing homes who are isolated and in need of communication. Friends nearby who have lost jobs and need a helping hand for a while. In those last weeks with Pa, Cheri and I felt like we were walking on sacred ground. Serving Jesus. And we were. As we all step into 2021, let us not forget that when we respond to the basic wants of those around us we respond to Christ himself. Who is that person for you? - - - -

The rest of December was spent picking up pieces. We had moved to Montrose to be near Cheri's parents. Her mom had passed away in 2007. Structures that had governed our lives for the past twenty-five years were gone. We occupied ourselves with estate management, applications for Medicare, and cleaning things up here at home.

Yet something was being born. Though I felt loss, I also knew how I wanted to live. I had no idea what this all would look like, but I had a sense it was time to start again. Ranch, ministry, relationships, my own sense of vocation, were all shifting and Cheri and I could see that this Advent season, this new year, was a start of *new* for us. We still have the phrase up on our house whiteboard: "Welcome to the new." And at 9:20pm on December 31 Terese, our youngest daughter gave birth to Carbon, a healthy, happy son, our first grandchild.

Evan may be retiring, but Spirituality Shoppe is re-fire-ing. I am more committed to this organization than ever before. I have spent the past few weeks dreaming of writings, videos, meeting venues, and much more. Already I have been adding to the website and arranging for video productions. I called my publisher yesterday to say that I want to be on track for completing a draft of the *Deep and Wide* book by the end of this year. Stay tuned!