

Presence

The Best Presents Don't Come in Packages

STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

DECEMBER 19, 2012



Dear Friend,

At Cameron University earlier this year, a nervous young woman approached me and asked about our outreach. One of our more experienced volunteers named Natalie was standing nearby, so I said, "Natalie will be happy to talk with you." I walked away to motivate other volunteers to get into conversations.

Not more than 30 seconds later, Natalie was shaking my arm. "Steve, she said she was raped. I don't know what to say." We went back to the young woman, who was now bent over the "YES" side of the "Should Abortion Remain Legal?" poll table.

Without letting on that Natalie had shared some of the previous conversation with me, I asked the young woman a question. Very forthrightly, she said, "I was raped, so I definitely think abortion should stay legal."

At this point, I had a choice to make. I could focus on her view that rape justifies abortion, or I could focus on her. I chose the latter, and for the next 45 minutes Natalie and I spent the majority of our time gently asking questions to give this woman the chance to feel heard. At a bar in her college town, she had been followed into the bathroom and assaulted. As her story unfolded, it became clear that she had a big decision before her. Months after the incident, she still had not reported it to the police. She was concerned that another young woman might also become this man's victim if she remained silent.

It took all of my energy to decide which question would be most helpful at each point in this conversation. This dear woman had isolated herself from her friends, and she seemed to feel very alone. I didn't want to pry, but I knew that Natalie and I might be two of the only people to listen to this young woman without judgment.

Natalie gave the woman her contact information, and we promised to help in any way we could, including helping her go to the police. Unfortunately, we haven't heard from her since.

Although this conversation didn't have a happy ending, it's a good illustration of a principle we value and teach at JFA: *Be present to the person* in every interaction. This means setting aside every distraction, including the points I want to make in the conversation, in order to devote the whole of my mental focus to the person.

During this season of advent, I'm especially reminded of another type of *being present*: Christ decided to be



1. Univ. North Texas, Denton, TX (November)



2. Oklahoma City, OK (July)



3. Fresno City College, Fresno, CA (April)

Whether I'm (1) interacting on open mic, (2) mentoring volunteers in a training seminar, or (3) creating an ad hoc exhibit for a conversation on campus, **being present** means setting aside every distraction in order to devote the whole of my mental focus to the person. (Picture 3 shows fellow JFA staff member Jacob Burow, left, and volunteers helping me.)

present among us in his incarnation. Philippians 2:5-7 says,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

Christ emptied himself, or set aside his privileges, to become present to us. We can have a similar attitude, setting aside our agenda and our needs to become present to the person right in front of us.

Many distractions can get in the way. Cell phones and computers are obvious culprits, but because they are physical objects the remedy for their distraction is fairly straightforward. I sequester them to one room when I'm at home, and I shut them off or ignore them when on campus. Still, even when these are safely out of reach, a more mundane and insidious menace threatens to distract me: *my own thinking*.

During conversations with students on campus, I find myself distracted by trying to hold in my mind a point I want to make, by wondering what the person is thinking of me, and by feeling guilt over arguments I didn't master that might have been the key for this person. Even the goal of changing the person's mind can be a distraction. No matter how important some of these are, I set aside all of them to focus on the person standing in front of me.

Setting aside mental distractions is difficult enough with strangers, but for some of us, it's almost impossible with family. You have heard it said, "Familiarity breeds contempt." I don't hate the people in my family the more I'm with them, but too often I take for granted the small moments that make up a day or a week or a year.

My daughter Nora shows me how she learned to button her jacket, but I am distracted by making myself a snack, and I miss the moment when she completes the task and looks up at me for approval. I walk through the door, and Elsie assails me with an elaborate tale of the exploits of some just-married young woman she is pretending to be, but my mind is muddled with unsolved challenges from work. How easy is it for me, sitting in the kitchen just ten feet away, to hear my wife begin to speak but not attend to her words?

Would you join me this Christmas in practicing the virtue of being present to the family members around us? If we can master this skill with the people we love, then being present to the strangers God sends our way will be even easier. *Being present* is certainly the best present we can give.

Thank you for partnering with me and my family this year as I have emphasized the importance of this skill and have modeled it during conversations like the one Natalie and I had with the young woman at Cameron University. You have *been present* in still another way in each of these conversations: You've made them possible through your financial gifts and prayers. Thank you.

Merry Christmas,

Stephen

P.S. See my posts at www.hbmm.net (December 19, 2012) for practical tips on being present during Christmas and throughout the New Year.



At an Oklahoma workshop in October, I helped Natalie (left) and fellow students Carson and Jasmin learn to take leadership in the JFA training program.

For some of us, it is almost impossible to be present to the members of our own family.

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