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Spiritual Spring Cleaning

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Spring has long been the season to clean—clean the garage, clean out the closet, clean house. Each spring my mother tackles some new part of her house that she has neglected for far too long. She called me last week to tell me of the treasures she found in the guest room closet—in particular, if I still wanted or needed one item: my old electric typewriter.

This machine was quite advanced for its time. It held 25 characters in memory and flashed them across a screen before typing so mistakes could be corrected before white out became necessary. This is what I used to make it all the way through seminary. Computers existed, and I knew several people who had them; but their cost put them out of reach for me. I worked diligently, and my thesis was written with this electric typewriter.

I laughed when my mom called and offered to mail it to me. I don't even remember how it returned to my parents' house after seminary. I can't imagine trying to work on such an outdated machine. I transitioned to something faster, more efficient, and actually able to store entire documents, not just 25 characters. However, I do remember times during the transition of staring at the computer wondering how to make it do what I wanted it to do. I remember entire papers getting lost in its memory, of it freezing and making my work irretrievable. By no means was it a gut-wrenching, awful transition; but it wasn't exactly easy and fun, either. Computers aren't always as perfect as they're cracked up to be.

Embedded Beliefs

With every transition comes a paradigm shift. What once seemed cutting edge and vital is now antiquated and passé. I teach a course for freshmen in which we slowly but surely “spring clean” embedded beliefs. Embedded beliefs, those things we hold dearly and tightly to be central and true, can cover a great deal of ground from silly, daily stuff (toothpaste should be squeezed from the bottom) to

the more serious life-shaping concepts (all people, of all colors and sexes, able bodied and not able-bodied are created in the image of God). In class we talk about what we believe and why we believe it. The students often resist and get frustrated. Many fight me every step along the way, although some embrace the newness and enjoy each moment of learning to unpack their embedded beliefs. We start with simple things, like Christmas: What absolutely must be present for it to feel like Christmas? Is it tamales for dinner? Is it grandma's sweet potato pie? Is it the family's two-day baking marathon before Christmas Eve? Then we get down to the really divisive discussion. When does one open presents? Christmas Eve or Christmas morning? Or can you open one present Christmas Eve and the rest in the morning? For any married person, you've already had this conversation at some point. You had to figure out how to navigate the waters of two families' traditions and find your way together as a couple. These can be rather heated discussions.

The Lord's Prayer

Not all of the talks of embedded beliefs are so trivial. Here's a little example. Take a break from reading this, pull out a piece of paper, and write down the Lord's Prayer from memory.

Now, grab your Bible and turn to Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. Notice anything? Though you probably know the Lord's Prayer comes from Scripture, many don't realize there are two versions. And what's with the brackets or footnote (depending on your version) at the end of Matthew 13? While many of us learned this as the standard ending, most scholars agree this wasn't in the original writings. This extra piece is known as the doxology and was added to the Gospels as a result of its use in the liturgy of the early church. Many students are quite surprised by this—I've even had students argue with me that I'm not showing them the correct translation of the Bible that indeed shows the Lord's Prayer just as they learned it.

Can it really be that the way we learned the Lord's Prayer is as much tradition as Scripture? And if this is so, what else isn't quite as it has always seemed? This kind of revelation can be emotional. It reaches into our gut-levels of understanding and represents a paradigm shift in thought, a transition.

Change and Crisis

For some of us, the thought of a transition in thought brings about a great deal of anxiety. Change is often viewed with suspicion, and anything new is considered suspect. In a sense, transition can represent something of a crisis—a crisis of faith, a crisis of belonging, a crisis of what to hold onto as firm and true. The Chinese characters representing "crisis" are a combination of danger and opportunity. While transition may strike us as neither dangerous nor an opportunity, it can be both. The choice comes in how we navigate the change. In my example of couples navigating holiday traditions, two families, two cultures even, must discover how to forge their way together. Transition in

thought, particularly for Christians, isn't all that different—two worlds, the biblical world and our world with a dauntingly wide chasm between. What creates your bridge? Is it the Holy Spirit? Scripture? The traditions passed by your church? Apostolic succession? Or some combination? This is the first transition for Christians. It's a huge move from life before following Jesus to life after making that decision.

The idea that a man who lived 2000 years ago, was sentenced to death, and was executed on a cross could actually have anything to do with my life today seems irrational. We choose to believe that which we cannot see with our eyes or hear with our ears; we stake not just our eternity on this belief but our every waking moment. We submit our lives to God's will. We shift our finances, our time, our attitudes, and our vocations to honor God and join in the work of the Kingdom. We teach our youth groups that following Jesus will change the way they study, interact with parents, treat their friends, and dream about the future. Or do we? Is it possible that we haven't fully embraced the transition? That we're Christians but still keep our firm ties to this world and consequently never invite our students to a truly different way of life?

They're Worth It

I have a friend who serves as a youth pastor and community center founder and director—and I'd say functionally as a youth worker to her entire community. She works with many students who don't have the best home lives (if they have home lives at all). They often struggle in school and are considered troublemakers. They don't have the backgrounds, education, or families to be considered worth much. They're the throwaway kids—the ones overlooked by parents, teachers, and society as wastes of time; after all, so many others will succeed with far less effort.

But my friend doesn't see them as wastes of time. She pours all of her time and energy into their lives, and it should come as no surprise that they absolutely love her. While she doesn't condone much of what they do, neither does she reject them. She talks *with* them, not *to* them. She tutors and encourages; she attends basketball games and court hearings. And she shares Jesus in every aspect of her life.

She tells the story of a young man she has known for years—that kid she's known so long that she feels like he's her own, for good and bad. She has wanted to ground him, she's kicked him out of her office, and they have fought—and not that sweet, barely-raise-your-voice kind of fighting. She asked him one day why he keeps coming to youth group. After all, he knows where she stands, and he knows he can't get away with anything. His response was, "You're the only one who ever thought I was worth sharing the Bible with." She was the only one who ever invited him to transition—not just tell him to get his life right or else—but to change and be willing to walk through that transitional stage with him.

In the In-Betweens

Too many of us in youth ministry have the best of intentions and we really want to see adolescents come closer to God, but we lack the guts to be in the transitions. Stages are easier. They're tangible with clear boundaries. We create categories of "seekers" and "disciples"—kinda like the reading-level groups in my first grade classroom: the "eagles" and the "buzzards."

Categories feel easier to manage than the messy, in-between places. We don't often discuss the transitions—the seasons of change. These can be hard and uncertain, the boundaries blurry and unclear. Trying to bring together the biblical world and our world has, in too many circumstances, created a Christian ghetto into which many amazing, Jesus-following, struggling teenagers just can't find a place.

For those of us who've been following Jesus for quite some time, the understanding of that dynamic shift can fade into distant memory. As we share our lives and invite students to join us on this journey with Jesus, we must remember how radically different this walk is—or at least should be.

New ideas, new ways of thinking, having our eyes opened up—these can all create opportunities and dangers: realizing, perhaps for the first time, how deeply God's grace can penetrate your very being; having a sin in your life exposed and worked through; a time to drop old grudges and judgmental perspectives in exchange for the freedom of God; a time to rethink your ministry—to look at what's working and what's not.

I have a friend who talks of hospice care for ministries—the need to offer a way to celebrate the life of a ministry and let it die with dignity rather than keeping it on life support indefinitely. Dangers come when we don't take advantage of these transitional times to unload some of what we've been carrying. As the Lord grows us, we sometimes refuse to change because it would require admitting past wrongs. Other times, being an information sponge is the struggle. With each new idea, program, and curriculum, our youth ministries grow and we never drop any of the old. Our weeks are littered with activities and studies, and nothing is getting the attention it deserves. Worse, our students aren't getting the proper attention either. As with actual baggage, if you keep adding and never put anything down, eventually you'll be crushed beneath the weight—opportunities and dangers.

Spring is a wonderful time for cleaning—digging in the backs of closets and dusting out corners. It requires time and effort—and quite frankly, if you really do it well, you get a little dirty. Take a risk. Drop some of those old thoughts for new; let your students know they're worth God's time and yours; don't feel compelled to follow each new program and trend; lighten your load; keep what works and drop what doesn't. Shake the dust off, and enjoy the transitions.