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AND DOUG SCHAUPP

I ONCE WAS LOST

What Postmodern Skeptics Taught Us
About Their Path to Jesus




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THE POSTMODERN PATH TO FAITH

I can remember that afternoon as if it were yesterday. I (Doug) was standing out in the middle of the green grass of the quad on campus, singing as loudly as I could. Twenty of my Christian friends and I were holding guitars and singing to “witness” to the students who lounged nearby on the sunny patches of grass in the middle of the Cal Berkeley campus. We wanted to show our fellow students our authentic joy and love for Jesus. What better way to witness than with bold worship?

And man, did we grow that day! It was a profound faith experience for all of us who were willing to be “fools for Christ.” We stood publicly and shamelessly for the gospel. Our faith was tested and affirmed.

But as for those who were trying to catch some rays on the lawn—well, no one was curious about issues of faith after our public spectacle. Instead of being attractive or intriguing witnesses for Christ, we were just one more random thing in their day, it seemed.

Our bold worship had grown our faith, but it made for weak evangelism. Our fatal flaw? We came up with our evangelistic strategy while we were alone in a room together with a bunch of Christians. Not once in our brainstorming and planning did we ask where our non-Christian fellow students were coming from. Not once did we try to find out what they might need to take a step toward Jesus. We were mostly coming up with something we wanted to do, not something that would

be actually helpful to those unsuspecting sunbathers in the quad. I'll never forget that afternoon.

Over the past twenty years, we have had many such awkward moments as we slowly learned, helter-skelter, to walk the path of faith with our skeptical and cynical friends. Since that worship-on-the-grass event, God has granted us the humbling privilege of walking the journey of faith with more than two thousand people who were once lost but now are followers of Jesus.

Seeing all these conversions is exhilarating and humbling, because we clearly remember all the inglorious (and even embarrassing) moments that were part of the learning journey. But seeing all these folks coming to faith in Jesus has done something else to us as well: it has taught us about conversion.

Somewhere along the line we started asking the questions we never asked before going on the quad that afternoon: What is it like for those who are lost to take steps toward Jesus? And how can we truly be helpful to them on that journey?

There are two foundational truths about conversion that all these new believers have taught us over the years, two foundational truths about what it's like to become a Christian in this postmodern age.

IT'S MYSTERIOUS

The first lesson they have taught us about the path to faith is that it is, in the end, mysterious.

Again and again we found ourselves marveling at transformations that we never would have anticipated and shaking our heads in frustration at those who seemed near to faith but never got there. The gospel seeds that had been planted in some grew in spite of the weakness of our

efforts. Other seeds that we tended with great care never took root.

Ultimately, the postmodern path to faith is a mystery. It reminds us of the truth of Jesus' parable in Mark 4:26-27: "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how."

As kingdom farmers in postmodern soil, we must welcome this mysterious nature of that path to faith. In fact, there is something spiritually liberating when we admit and declare what is beyond us and where we are powerless. We cannot create life. It is impossible for us to predict why some of our friends will choose Jesus and why others just won't. We don't know how to change hearts. We don't know which seed will take root and which will bounce off the hardened ground.

This lesson has freed us from the modern temptation to view conversion as mostly a psychological phenomenon, an inner event that can be controlled and manipulated and triggered if we preach the gospel just right, sing the worship songs loud enough and dim the lights at just the right time. If conversion were psychological and controllable by humans, we'd be under a lot of pressure to get it done!

Our friends have reminded us that conversion is much more soul-deep and mysterious than all that. The path to faith is mysterious. To admit that is liberation. The monkey is off our back, and onto God's back, where it belongs. The Scriptures teach us that God is ultimately in control of salvation. No one, Jesus reminded his followers, can come all the way down the path to Jesus unless God calls them (John 6:44, 65).

When we plan outreach events, when we pray for our neighbors,

when we consider whether to honestly answer the friend who asks about why we serve the poor, let us learn from the farmer in the parable. Let us look the seed in the eye and say, “You are a mystery to me. I am about to throw you out there, but I still don’t know how you really work.”

This is the first thing we have to learn from our new brothers and sisters about the postmodern path to faith in Jesus. And it is an important lesson to learn. It’s important to hold on to this truth, because it is so tempting to grasp for control. Instead of living in this freeing biblical truth, we are often tempted to try to predict and reduce and control the mystery.

In order to keep embracing the truth of the mystery of conversion, we need to beware of declarations of certainty: This is how to program evangelism . . . This is how to share the gospel . . . This is how to reach seekers today . . . The postmodern new believers we’ve walked alongside would warn us against such declarations.

Heeding this lesson, we choose to humbly embrace the mystery of conversion like the farmer in the parable.

IT’S ORGANIC

The second lesson this group of new believers has shown us is that the postmodern path to faith is organic.

As we sat and listened to their stories we were struck immediately by the mystery but also by the similar seasons of growth that each of them went through.

Five distinct seasons, in fact. These were what we came to call “the five thresholds.” While this second lesson surprised us, we have found it to be an equally important lesson to learn.

Remember how Jesus' parable ends? "All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:28-29). Heeding this lesson, we are able to recognize the different stages of growth (seed, stalk, head, full grain, ripe) and seek to love our non-Christian friends wisely and sensitively, adjusting to where they are in their growth.

The farmer in the parable can see the different stages of growth and act accordingly. Seeing this organic nature of heading to Jesus has freed us from the temptation to see conversion as primarily binary.

If our most sophisticated understanding of the path to faith says that our neighbor is either a Christian ("on") or not a Christian ("off"), then we tend to have just as unsophisticated a response to them. If they aren't a Christian, well, it's time to pull out our evangelism shotgun to try to force the switch to the "on" position. That's what it means to "do evangelism," after all. (Which tends to explain why we so rarely engage in evangelism.)

But just as no farmer would spend all her time scattering seeds, or all his time swinging a sickle, we see such one-trick evangelism as foolish spiritual farming. There are five distinct seasons of growth that we've noticed again and again. Realizing this organic way that people make their way down the path to faith frees us to respond to our friends' particular needs at the time.

While one-trick evangelists always seemed to annoy our friends, they've also told us that they never would have traveled all the way to Jesus if someone hadn't come along and helped them with the different parts of the journey they were on.

But if the path to faith really is organic, if there really are five distinct

thresholds along the way to faith in Jesus, then is it really mysterious? Is conversion mysterious or organic?

IT'S BOTH

In the end, the path to Jesus is both mysterious *and* organic. Back to Jesus' whole parable:

This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:26-29)

This image Jesus paints is full of tension, isn't it? At the same time it underlines the mysterious uncontrollable nature of conversion (the farmer sleeps and yet the seed grows in ways he can't understand) *and* the need for work (scattering seeds, harvesting with the sickle).

While it affirms the hidden nature of change (it happens at night when no one is looking), it also shows the natural, organic process that change follows (first seed, then stalk, then head, then the crop is ready).

While the growth of the plant is mysterious, it still follows nature. It is organic, and that means that for the seed to become a ripe plant, it will grow in a certain way.

This was the lesson our friends were teaching us. Each individual path to faith was a unique mystery. And their collective paths to faith had surprising similarities. These tremendous people who once were so jaded about Christianity and who are now dedicated believers have

told us, in surprising unison, that the path to faith these days is both mysterious and organic. So their stories place us in a tension.

How do we stand in awe of the mysterious growth while at the same time helping them to the next natural threshold along the path? Well, living in that tension is what the five thresholds is all about.

THE FIVE THRESHOLDS OF POSTMODERN CONVERSION

So what are these similar landscapes along the path to faith, these so-called thresholds of postmodern conversion? Of course these look different in different people, they are paced differently, they are always experienced in the very real-life colors and contexts of each person. (Enough qualifiers yet?) But there *are* five significant shifts that tend to go on in postmodern folks as they come to faith.

First, our friends moved *from distrust to trust*. Somewhere along the line, they learned to trust a Christian. Mark was guarded and aloof. He did not trust us Christians. This kept him far away from exploring Jesus with us. It was impossible for him to shed that distrust. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened, and Mark crossed this threshold.

Second, they moved *from complacent to curious*. The fact that our friends actually came to trust a Christian didn't necessarily mean that they were at all curious about Jesus. Matthew, for example, had started trusting a Christian but was pretty uninterested in Jesus. Matthew was successful and had everything going for him and had no reason at all to be curious about Jesus. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened, and Matthew crossed this threshold.

Third, our friends moved *from being closed to change to being open to*

change in their life. Interestingly, this always seemed to be the hardest threshold to cross—not for all of them but for most of them. Abner, for example, had started trusting some Christians and was even asking questions about Jesus. He was very curious. But he had no interest at all in examining his personal life. That was off limits. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened, and Abner crossed this threshold.

The fourth threshold is the move *from meandering to seeking.* Even when our friends became curious about Jesus and open to change in their life, it didn't necessarily follow that they began actively, purposefully seeking God. It was more natural for them to meander. Steve, for example, was very intrigued after some Christian students (whom he met sleeping in cardboard boxes at an event to raise awareness and dollars for the homeless) talked with him about Jesus. Steve accepted invitations to Bible studies, worship and even to a mission trip to Mexico. But he wasn't necessarily wanting to come to conclusions, to really seek answers. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened, and Steve crossed this threshold.

Finally, each of our friends had one more threshold to cross. They needed to *cross the threshold of the kingdom itself.* They needed to repent and believe and give their life to Jesus. Many people who journey well along the path to faith, learning to trust a Christian, becoming curious about Jesus, becoming open to personal change, even seeking after answers, never become Christians. Sarah might have been one of those folks. She was interested in Jesus, loved her new Christian friend and even went to conferences and Bible studies. But she was a scientist and couldn't imagine becoming a person of faith—not without physical proof. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened, and Sarah crossed the threshold into the kingdom itself.

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH THESE THRESHOLDS?

These foundational lessons about conversion have been freeing for us to learn. Understanding the mysterious nature of the path has freed us from activism and ushered us into a humble place of wonder and prayer. And understanding the organic nature of the path has freed us from the frustrations of one-trick evangelism and empowered us to get involved in the specific unfolding mysteries of our friends.

We can now look at someone and ask, “Where on the path are they?” Once we figure out more or less where they are, we can more easily empathize with their situation. We can fully appreciate the wonder and importance of where they are.

A few years ago, my (Doug’s) son Mark Lee entered the first grade and ran up against a powerful threshold: reading. Though he was fluent with the alphabet, he could not put words together. He would look at the first letter of a word and then just throw out a wild guess. He was frustrated. Would he ever learn to read? It seemed impossible. For my part, I couldn’t remember what it’s like *not* to be able to read. Words instantly have meaning, and understanding seems to come naturally. Yet it would have been ridiculous for me to say, “What’s the problem? Just read!”

We see learning to read as crossing over a threshold. On Mark Lee’s side, the threshold seems intimidating and insurmountable. He almost can’t imagine life on the other side. For us the threshold seems easy to cross, almost insignificant.

The spiritual thresholds that our non-Christian friends go through today are just like this. From where they stand, that next threshold seems insurmountable, no matter how obvious or easy it appears to us. They are in the land of the lost, which colors how each successive threshold appears to them.

Lostness, of course, looks different depending upon your perspective and personality. It is like getting lost while driving. Take our friend Jenny, for example. When she drives and gets lost, she is often so caught up in the scenery or the conversation that for a long time she doesn't even realize she is lost. She just keeps going farther and farther from her intended destination.

Then there are those like me (Doug). I know when I am lost, but I'm pretty sure I can figure it out by intuition. I admit I am lost, but I expect I'll find my way any minute now, as soon as I turn the next corner.

Finally, there are those smart people who know they are lost and know they need to get some directions. They stop and ask for help.

It's important to remember these different ways lostness can feel. "Lost" may be an accurate description of non-Christian friends from our perspective, but it may not feel like lostness to them. We can't know what each threshold feels like for the person going through it. But we can ask, and listen. This is what we did. We asked our friends to describe each threshold to us from their perspective. And here we try to use their words to talk about each part of the journey.

And the great news is the better we listen, the better we can serve those on the journey. If someone hasn't even crossed the first threshold, for example, we can stop handing them copies of *More Than a Carpenter* and realize they are at a place where considering the claims of Jesus isn't the issue; just trusting a Christian is the issue. And handing them that book (even if it's done out of love) might actually push them even further from crossing that first threshold.

Knowing where someone is on this postmodern path of faith can help us empathize with them. It can soothe our frustration as we real-

ize how insurmountable that next step may appear to them. And it allows us to ask another wonderful question: “How can I enter into the mystery of this stage of their growth?”

If a friend hasn’t even begun trusting a Christian, we can stop hounding them to go to church with us and try to figure out how to build trust with them. If our neighbor has been past the first four thresholds for years and is an active seeker, we can stop trying to build trust and try to figure out how to help them cross the final threshold.

Of course, these thresholds are not magical or prescriptive. The reality is not everyone will cross a threshold, not everyone will become a Christian. Even if we become aware that someone hasn’t even crossed the first threshold, that doesn’t mean they will end up trusting us or any Christian—no matter how much we try to be trustworthy. Some people will never receive the seed. Jesus was very clear about this (for example, in Mark 4:14-19).

What these thresholds are is helpful. The more we heed the lessons of those who have walked this postmodern path to faith, the more freedom and joy we experience, and the better we are able to love our other postmodern friends.

In the next five chapters of this book we will look more carefully at each successive threshold. We will highlight their characteristics by telling the stories of some of our friends and will then consider what we have learned about stepping into the mystery of crossing each specific threshold with our friends. After walking through each of the five thresholds we will unpack the journey of new believers, followed by a few concluding thoughts on how to use the five thresholds.

If anything helpful comes of this, credit is due to our wonderful new

brothers and sisters for their honesty and vulnerability and faith. Anything confusing or muddy likely comes from the two of us. We pray we might be faithful storytellers of those who once were lost but now are found.