Leaving Room to Know One Another

BY JOHN HIMMELBERGER

I miss the curiosity that makes us want to know someone before deciding who they are.

That thought has stayed with me lately as I read conversations filled with anger, disappointment, and certainty. Sometimes I recognize something true in what different people are saying, even as I struggle with how they are treating one another.

I have been trying to understand what troubles me about it all. There is frustration, some sadness, and, if I am honest, some anger. What I keep returning to is the goodness we miss when we stop being willing to know each other.

Some of the relationships that have shaped my life grew because my family and I made room for people whose experiences were different from ours. Knowing them required more than knowing something about them. It required time together.

Having experienced the fruit of those relationships, I find it painful to watch people close off that possibility before a conversation can begin.

When a label arrives first

Thirty years ago, I was a Christian playing guitar in a punk band. Depending on who was looking, I could be too Christian for the punks or not Christian enough for the Christians.

I knew who I was. I had a family and close friends who knew me, too. Their presence helped me live in that space without needing everyone to agree that I belonged.

Decades later, I recognize something familiar.

Someone hears “Christian,” and an entire collection of assumptions can arrive before the conversation begins. Political loyalties, motives, and attitudes toward other people may already be settled in their mind.

We do this with many labels. We learn one thing about someone and let it answer questions we have never asked.

I would rather be known as a person than assigned an identity through someone else's expectations. But that experience also makes me wonder how often I have done the same thing. Whose story have I assumed I understood? Who might I have enjoyed knowing if I had stayed curious a little longer?

What sharing life has taught us

For decades, my wife, Amy, and I have opened our home to people experiencing homelessness, immigrants, people caught in addiction, and people walking through divorce or other difficult seasons.

We have done this unto the Lord. We believe Jesus meant what He said about loving our neighbors and loving our enemies. Opening our home has been one way we have tried to respond.

That life has included beautiful relationships and painful experiences. We have been praised for it, and we have lost relationships over it. Neither response determines why we continue.

Sharing life has taught us how much there is to discover about a person.

A circumstance can tell you something about someone. So can a conviction, a mistake, or an affiliation. But none of those things gives you the whole person.

Time together creates opportunities to listen, help, misunderstand, forgive, and try again. It reveals the limits of your own patience and understanding. It also allows friendship to grow where there might otherwise have been only distance.

The people we have welcomed have brought their own experiences, perspectives, and gifts into our lives. Making room for them has shaped us, too.

Love has a cost. So does division.

Love asks something of us. Time, attention, resources, patience. Sometimes it asks us to remain present when we would prefer an easier situation.

I take seriously the challenge to a Christianity that speaks about love while avoiding its cost. That challenge belongs in my own life. I need to remain willing to ask what following Jesus requires of me when loving someone becomes inconvenient or difficult.

But division has a cost as well.

People experience estrangement from family, suspicion toward neighbors, and exhaustion from conflict. They can bear considerable pain over their affiliations while missing the fruit of loving, helping, and relating to another person.

That is where I feel the ache.

There is joy in sharing a meal, helping someone through a difficult season, and discovering that a person has more to their story than we understood. There is goodness in being able to disagree and still care about what happens to one another.

I grieve the opportunities for those relationships that we lose.

Our disagreements matter. Beliefs and policies affect real lives. Some things need to be challenged. Loving someone may involve a difficult conversation, accountability, or a necessary boundary.

Curiosity can remain part of that. We can ask honest questions without promising agreement. We can listen carefully while holding a conviction. We can take harm seriously and still remember that a person is more than the thing we oppose.

Leaving the question open

Curiosity requires admitting that I do not know everything about someone.

I may know what they said. I may strongly disagree with it. But do I understand how they arrived there? What experiences shaped them? What are they afraid of losing? What have I assumed without asking?

I need those questions myself.

I can become frustrated with people for reducing others to categories and then quietly do the same thing to them. I can decide I know why they are angry or what they hope to accomplish. Grieving the loss of curiosity does not make me immune to losing it.

Following Jesus keeps bringing me back to how I treat the person before me. Can I speak honestly, listen carefully, and remain willing to love? Can I allow what I learn about someone to challenge my assumptions?

I am still working through these questions. They matter to me because I have experienced something worth remaining open to.

Amy and I will continue living the life we believe Jesus has asked us to live. There will be more to learn, more occasions to practice patience, and more opportunities to discover what can grow when we share our lives.

I want to keep making room to know people beyond my assumptions. There are people I have yet to know, stories I have yet to hear, and relationships worth making room for.