

George West

Ecumenical Institute, Chicago  
Order Council Report

Spirit methods  
& conversations

August 26, 1971

SPIRIT METHODS:  
Spirit, Gospels, and Psalm Conversations

Transparency and Dimensions of Consciousness	3 Types of Conversations								Guru Style and Dangers		
	Relation- ships	Spirit		Gospel		Psalm					
1	19	20	23	24	28	29	38	39	54	55	57

1. I've been assigned to talk about spirit methods, but I feel something like the proverbial mosquito in the nudist colony. Where do you start, how do you cover the ground, and then, how do you select the very choicest, in the small amount of time we've got? We've been experimenting with spirit methods for years now, but I'm going to talk just about these three conversations: spirit conversations, Bible-Gospel reading conversations and Psalms conversations and try to pull them together in some way. There are no experts in this area.

2. For 300 years we have not been present to the flowing of the spirit deeps. Now, we are driven by our task to seek out ways to release the wellsprings of resources that are there. We're driven just by the pressure that you and I are under. Each one of us has to become a field marshal in a world revolution. Each one of us has to become a social engineer, pioneering out on the edge of the social process. Each one of us has to become a religious genius, and in the midst of that, to be a first-rate theologian and 20 or 30 other things.

3. Now how, in the midst of that pressure and in the midst of going headlong down that path, do you keep creativity bubbling up underneath? In the midst of going a thousand miles an hour down the road in your car, knowing that if you took your eyes off the road for one second and were to hit a bump unexpectedly the car would flip over, how do you, in the midst of that kind of horrifying pressure, keep creativity just bubbling up? How is it that you piddle? How is it that you just fool around? How is it that you enable the spirit deeps to be appropriated while at the same time having the overwhelming burden that's on us at every moment?

4. Now, the other kind of thing that drives us, I think, to spirit methods is the necessity that each one of us has to create, wherever we are, giants among our colleagues out in the regions, or in our houses, or at base. And how is it that you take a little big man and grow him up overnight into a giant, into a big big man. That is the task that is upon us. This task is why we're driven to seek out and to find new ways, and to take the ways that we've got, of appropriating the deeps. The way you get giants is that you go to the land of giants. You journey over into the place where giants walk, there giants are, and that is into the land of awe.

5. A young colleague of mine and yours whom I have been watching for a couple of years all of a sudden, over one quarter, grew up. I'd been watching him, watching him carefully and trying to get ahold of how it was you would take that human being and enable him to become a man, to become your colleague. One quarter suddenly, almost overnight he became a man. When I pushed him as to why that was, how that had happened, he wasn't able to tell me -- or he may have told me, and I was not able to hear what had happened to him. It became clear to me a little bit later when he made a statement something like this: "I spent that whole quarter with a colleague who kept taking everything that was going on and turning it into awe. Every time we ran into a situation this colleague of mine would take it and go through it into the presence of awe, would take it and make it transparent to awe. I believe that was what created that man.

6. Let me try to explain that. When you see transparently through to the raw nakedness of life, that is to the radical contingency of human existence, to the tragedy of human existence, to the fatefulness, to the fragility of human existence, when you see through that and are able, on the other side of seeing through that, to say "nevertheless"; what you've got on your hands is a new creature.

7. Let me take that one step further. When you take life and make it transparent and see the raw nakedness of life, it's there that you have the first opportunity of affirming life in its totality. Any affirmation you make of life on this side of transparency is to affirm part of life, not the whole of life. It's only in the affirmation of life on the other side of seeing through transparently that you are then able to say your "nevertheless" which affirms all of life and therefore gives you your freedom, because your freedom is based in your affirmation of life. Therefore it gives you a way of operating responsibly or that is to say that the foundation of your contextual ethics is finally in this transparency where you are able to affirm all of life. Comprehensive responsibility, you want to say, is possible only on the other side of this transparency.

8. Let me take that one step further. You don't understand what cruciformity is, and the principle of cruciformity cannot become your life style, until you see through transparently to the way life is. It's when life becomes transparent that you see, that it becomes obvious to you, that life is expenditure. Before that it's an idea in your mind, but when you see through then you see that that's all there is in life, is expenditure. The principle of cruciformity comes alive when you see that. You don't have anything else except expenditure, and if you try to escape expenditure then what you escape is your living. He who would avoid expending his life shall lose his life; he who would save his life expends his life. Then once you have permission to expend your life you have permission to constantly intensify your life. That's what grows up giants.

9. When you see through transparently to the bottom of life, every value that you hold is radically relativized. You have only one vocation, to go back and serve the world. You have only one task, to love the world. When you see that your vocation is no longer to be a lawyer but to love the world in being a lawyer, when you see that your vocation is no longer to be a doctor, but to love the world, then that grows up giants. Whenever life becomes transparent, it's just there that you're given the possibility of becoming a giant, because it's just there that you're given the possibility of assuming radical responsibility. When you put responsibility on a person before he has seen through to the bottom of life it crushes him. It's only the man who has seen through who can then take that responsibility and appropriate it as an activity of love for the world. There's nothing else for him to do. Paul said, "I might as well go ahead and be with Jesus." But instead he went back to be a servant, to love the world.

10. The second thing you've got to say in creating giants is that there is never a moment when you cannot take a situation and shove it through to the transparency. There isn't a single time with your colleagues, that you can't take just that moment and shove it through to its transparency. All of you have seen this happen. All of you have participated in it- all of you have done it at one time or another.

11. One example that we all know very well is the R.S.-I course. You're about to have a very nice meal and the pedagogue stands up and says, "Now you think you're going to eat some food here, but what you're really feasting off of is some animal that's given up its life." Do you remember that story? "What you're really feasting off of is some plant that's given up its life so that you can live, and that's not all ( you're getting down now through to the transparency), some cook gave up his life so that you might have this feast. Some farmer literally gave up his life that you might have this feast." The participants sit down and begin to eat and by about the third bite they begin to taste the flesh of the cook. I remember in Austin, Texas where I first had R.S. I. We had steak that night, and it was about three bites into that steak when I shoved the plate back. At moments like that you see through to the radical dependence of one life upon another. You see through to how you live your life off of the death of others. That's to shove through. There isn't a single moment that can't be shoved through. Shall we look at this moment? You've got 600,000 hours to live, approximately. And here you are spending 3 of those 600,000 hours listening to this lecture. There are thousands of ways you can take situations and shove them through to the transparency.

13. As I talk I'm still trying to set a context for talking more practically about the methods. One of the ways I'd like to set that context is to look at a short passage from the Transparent Being lecture that Joe Mathew did at Summer 70. I was getting ready to talk tonight and discovered, there in the lecture, the theoretical background or the theoretical basis of everything that we've done in spirit methods since Summer '70. I urge you to go back and read the whole lecture.

14. To be a man at the center is to be a man who never knows who he is. All he knows is that he's loved by God. To be a man of the center is to be one who can no longer be defined by any task, any profession, any relationship save that one relationship to the center. He is a man who stands on the verge of being a giant. Or, in one sense he is already a giant, he is already 121 years old.

15. Now, one other thing before we go into the practical, and that's to look at this upside down triangle (The Consciousness Model) which is a model, a way for you to think about what's going on in the spirit conversation and to delineate the arenas within which you work. Self-consciousness is divided into the more subjective dimension, the more objective, and the transparent.

16. The more subjective is made up of your operating image, the accompanying affections that go with the images, and then the existential decision, by which you mean the decision below the decision below the decision, the creation of your context.

17. The more objective dimension is made up first of all of the episodic event, those events in your life which have bled meaning, those events which have taken you through the veil, through the transparency. Second there is the meshing of those episodic events into dramatic pictures in your mind, into your montage. Last there is the controlling universe, the world, the world-picture that you operate out of, which is at the same time your view of man.

Now--I'm ready for the center. In the midst of that arid desert, in the midst of that burning Hell, cut off from the Father, in midst of that blindness, you levitate. We were joking recently. I believe that the moment that you and I could be utterly dependent upon the forces in the universe, we would levitate. But none of us, you know, speak much anymore about the times we've levitated. But I suggested to some that we all have levitated. But we don't speak about this, either--not out of humility, but because in our day we've lost the poetry.

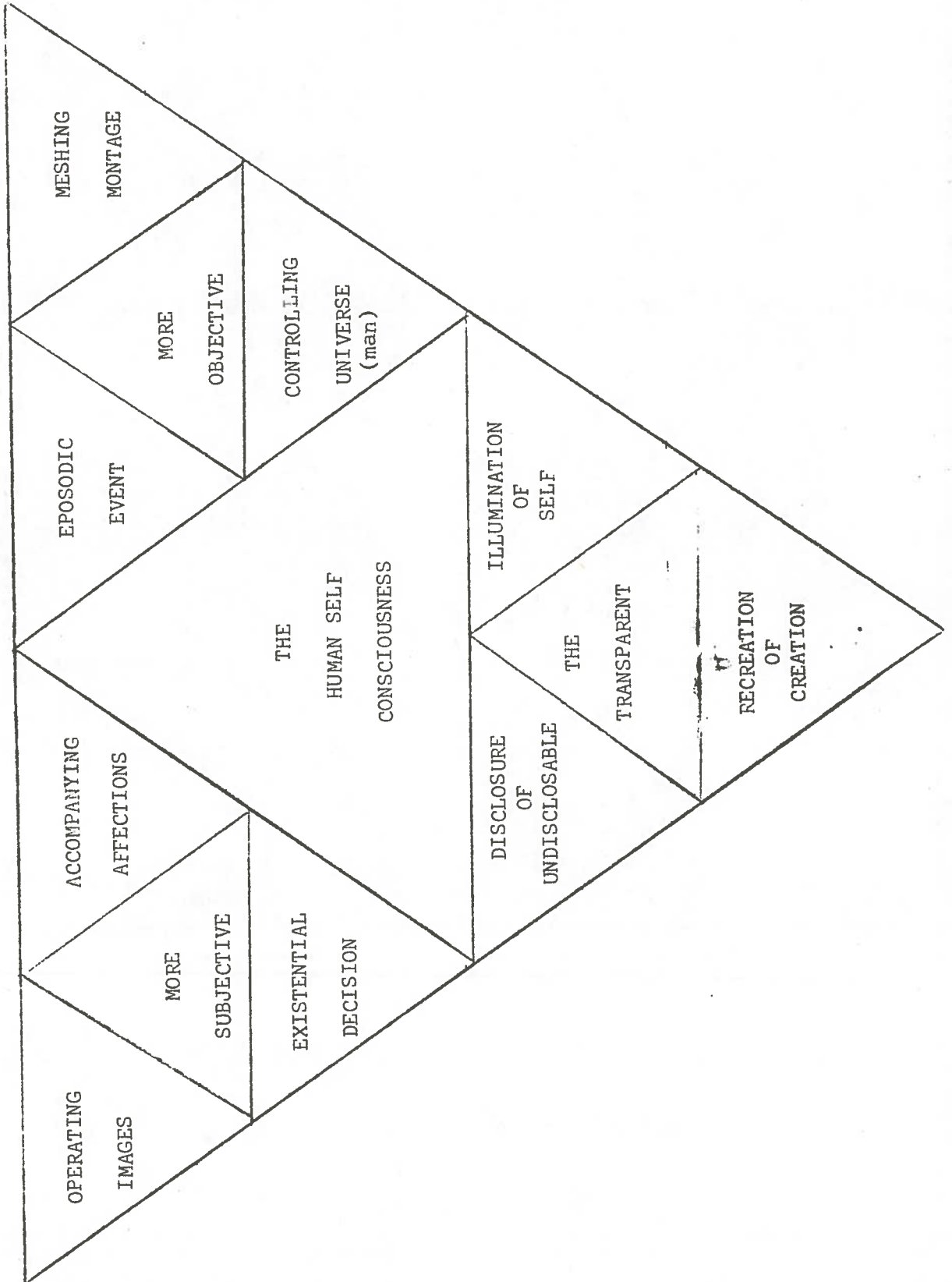
Well, you levitate. For you were standing here, see, and you didn't move, you didn't walk, but suddenly you woke up here--and the darkness is intensified. Ohhhhh, I mean it is pitch black darkness at the center. And as you stand there in that blazing light which is sheer darkness, you see what you cannot see, a figure, the center of the center. And you say, "Aha! Is it a stone? Now that I am at the center of the consciousness of consciousness, what's there? Is it a stone?" And it seems as if you are drawn closer, and you peer at it: it's no stone. Oh, the Aborigines in Australia would like to be here this morning. You say, "Is it a tree, the Tree of Life, maybe?" You're drawn closer, and you peer into the darkness, "It's no tree!" And you're drawn another step, and you say, "It's nothingness!" That's what ought to be at the center!" And you say, "No! It's no nothingness!" And you come a step closer and behold! It's a man! It could have been naught else. Once you behold it, it is a man! I mean a common ordinary dirty, smelly man. It could be naught else.

This is what the mystics have talked about in every culture when they have talked about the union of reality with the center of the interior universe. It's a man! Is it Gautama? Yes! Is it Moses? Yes! Is it John Smith? Yes! Is it Sally McGillicuddy? Yes! Is it Henry What-ever-his-name-is? Oh, you bet it is! And so you're drawn another step closer. And you peer, and behold, it is The Man. I mean Jesus. I don't mean Christ. I mean Jesus! You remember when they came to Gethsemane to get him? Jesus said, "Who are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Now they go around this twice in that story. The first time I am sure that Jesus, who could out-act any actor, said, "I am the man." And they all fell down as if struck by lightning. Do you hear what I say? And when they got up, Jesus started over again. "Who are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." He says, "I'm the man." You get that story? At the heart is Jesus. Not Christ. . . Jesus. Oh, I don't care whether you want to use other poetry. At the center of the universe is the figure that represents everyman, or consciousness of consciousness of consciousness in all of its fullness.

And then--you won't believe what I'm going to tell you now; it's sort of like a Martian science fiction thing-a-ma-jig. For you see, down in the center of that figure of Jesus, a little light glows, in the midst of the pitch darkness that is bright light. And you notice exactly at the same time a kind of circle of light surrounds him, and the light grows stronger, and brighter, and hotter, and you step back, for there's the key: the Mystery shines through a common, ordinary man. Then as you stand there, you hear for the first time in your life--No! No! You behold it with your own eyes--what Jesus meant when he said, "I am in the Father (I am in the light of the Mystery), and the Father is in me."

But you're not through. For you notice a strange glowing in yourself, and you step back up to the figure, and do you know whose face you see within the face of Jesus? Your own unrepeatable, crummy, broken, perverted face. No, that's not quite right. It's the face of that crummy, perverted one who has passed through the dark night of the soul, in which he is stripped of everything behind which he can hide his utter contingency. The same old crummy me, but collapsed into sheap of shaking palsy. The mystics called the dark night of the soul the "time of purging." But you say that only on the other side, if you please. For you know that you cannot behold the meaning of consciousness of consciousness as long as you have any way to hide from it--even spiritual exercises, even spiritual poetry, even awakenesses that are rare. It's your face. And then for the first time in your life you understand. And because you say, "Now, I have beheld it with my own eyes," you understand the second part of what Jesus said: "Father, as I am in you, and you in me, so I will be in them, and they will be in me."

THE CONSCIOUSNESS MODEL



18. The first element in the transparent dimension of the human self-consciousness is the disclosure of the undisclosed. That's where that which is unknowable is known, that's where you confront the mystery. And then the transparent dimension always includes the illumination of the self. It's not an experience of knowing something new about yourself, but it's more the experience of being known, and more the experience of having yourself illuminated, or exposed. The third element is the recreation of all of creation in which all things become new in which everything is new happening.

19. In Summer '70, after we'd done about six spirit conversations, one man in our group came wandering into the meeting early with a dazed look in his eye, and he said, "You know, those wood chips out there in the yard look different." Everything is created new, I mean even the wood chips, the whole creation becomes new. Because you've related differently at the bottom of existence every relationship, even to the wood chips, becomes a new creation for you.

20. That is the theoretical background for doing the spirit methods. I think you need to get utterly on top of those if you're going to be working in this area, and have them at your fingertips. I want to move now more practically into the 3 basic spirit methods that we've used, the spirit conversations, the scriptures conversations, (we have worked primarily with the gospels) and the psalms conversations. To try to get some feel as to the relationship or the differences of these, I think about the spirit conversation as a whirlpool, the scriptures as an earthquake, and the psalms as lightning striking.

21. It's something like this: with the spirit conversations, you're invited to go on a canoe trip down the river. You get in the canoe trip and wind very casually down the river, and then all of a sudden-but not too suddenly-you hit a whirlpool. And you say to yourself, "My, isn't this a nice experience!" And then all of a sudden --SHSHSHSH-- you're in the awe. Then you end it.

22. Now the scripture conversations, on the other hand, happen something like this: You read the scripture and you feel a tremor somewhere: then you go out to look for what happened and you find a crack. And you stand there --if you dare to stand there-- and look down into the crack. Then the crack opens up on both sides of you and you're standing there like the wolf in the Roadrunner cartoons -- over the abyss. While the spirit conversations take you into the awe something like SHSHSHS, the scripture conversations on the gospel take you into the awe sort of like RRRRRRRRRR.

23. The psalms, however, take you into the awe, or experience of the transparency, something like this: The clouds become dark. And then WHAM!! And you say, "What happened?" You're like a man coming out of an operation when he's just not quite conscious, not quite awake, but certainly not asleep. The task there is to get him to full consciousness about what happened. In the Psalms you go into the transparency and then out, and in coming out of the transparency, out of the lightning flash, where the bolt has struck you, you bring self-consciousness to that and so appropriate the awe in that way.

24. Now I want to talk about each one of these methods separately, and then we can come back and look at their relationship in another way. First, the spirit conversation: here I want to go to the highly, highly practical aspect. And that is, basically, how do you do them? How do you go about preparing one? First, you use a worksheet (Spirit Conversation Workshop Form) in which you take the basic categories of consciousness and put them out across the top of that sheet. You select an area, or you select some sort of arena where you're going to do the spirit conversation, and then you brainstorm out whatever you can get out in the top row, your immediate response. Then you take that and you shove that down into the transparency. And I find that when I do this, that the questions that I need for the spirit conversation almost bubble up out



of that workshop. I find I don't have to go around making up questions, they just sort of emerge. I make notes of them at the bottom of the worksheet and then I group them.

25. Then I use another form to lay out my conversation. (The N.R.M. Spirit Conversation Format) I like to state the one question, the one ontological arena that I'm dealing with or the one focus that my conversation is going to have and put that across the top of my page so I can keep that in my mind. Now the first step in doing the conversation itself is to set your master context. I always find it better in setting the master context to get my first question somewhere in there, so that they can be thinking about my first question before I ask the first question. While I'm telling my story or setting my master context, they are brooding about the question that I've already placed in their minds so that when I get to the first question there's not a dead silence. Now silence can be used in the spirit methods where silence screams. But anytime you have a dead silence, that will negate, if not destroy, your spirit conversation.

26. Then I have a series of questions. I can't really say how I put those questions together, it just seems to me that there's certain questions that just fit together. They have to be in the same arena. You can't ask a question this way, and then a question that way, because a spirit conversation has to flow. You have to be going down that stream, and there are no waterfalls or rapids in this stream until you get to the whirlpool. It's slow curves. You don't have any abrupt shifts. The questions have to be similar kinds of questions, they flow naturally. Before you move over into another kind of question you have a turning context so that you get smoothly around the curve into the next set of questions. The sets of questions seem to fall naturally into three groups for me, but some people do it in four and I have seen them done in five.

27. Now, generally it's over in the third (or last) series of questions that you drop your pearl. You want to drop your pearl at the moment of highest tension in the group, just before you reach the highest point of the experience of awe in the group. To use my other image, you want to drop it just before you hit the bottom of your whirlpool, because you never want to end with your pearl. Your pearl is the one pedagogical shove that you make in a spirit conversation. You select that moment when you want to take whatever is going on and just shove it through to the transparency. Your pearl is not some new insight, it's not some new data, but it's taking the conversation and the subject arena and shoving it through to transparency, or at least punching a hole so that you can see into the transparency.

28. Then, after your pearl, you want to have a few underscoring questions. You never end with your pearl, because if you do, they don't go away with the experience of awe, they go away thinking, "What an intelligent guru that is," and they forget about the awe they've got on their hands to deal with.

29. Second, let's look at the scripture conversation in terms of four categories. First you have the address, then the activity of locating that address, and then the activity which I'm going to call intensifying the address, and last the activity of I'll call it transparency, but it's the activity of just spinning in the transparency. Once you're through into the transparency you just spin a few minutes before you drop the conversation. Another way of saying it is, first you are startled, then apprehended, then exposed, and finally universalized.



THE N.R.M. SPIRIT CONVERSATION FORMAT

The ONE QUESTION;

THE WELL SPRINGS

III

II

I

THE TURNING CONTEXT

THE TURNING CONTEXT

THE MASTER CONTEXT

THE QUESTION SERIES THREE

THE QUESTION SERIES TWO

THE QUESTION SERIES ONE

1.

1.

1.

2.

2.

2.

3.

3.

3.

THE PEARL:

GIMMICKS

## SPIRIT CONVERSATION

## OPERATING PRINCIPLES

First, the spirit conversation is ontological. You are dealing with the person's being.

Second, it is tangentially spinning the interior being. You come in the side door.

Third, it is always a groan. You do not have this wrapped up.

Fourth, it is always passion. You are passionately involved in it.

Fifth, it comes from your own experience. You have to have dealt with it and pushed it to the bottom.

Sixth, it is sharing your experience. You have to translate into the experience of mankind, the universal.

Seventh, it is a soliloquy. You speak through the mouths of the other people.

Eighth, it always turns curves. You never expect to turn a corner.

Ninth, it is a spectrum of one reality. You have only one focus.

Tenth, it has one direct pedagogical push. You have a pearl ready to drop.

	ADDRESS	LOCATING THE ADDRESS	INTENSIFYING THE ADDRESS	TRANSPARENCY
	Startled	Apprehended	Exposed	Universalized
EARTHQUAKE	Tremor	Finding the Crack	Studying the Crack	Over the Abyss
PETTICOAT PATCH OF NATTY BUMPO	Aware of Missing Maiden	Finding the Patch	Patches take on Patterns	Find the Indian
KNOTHOLE IN WALL OF BALLGAME	Bump into Wall	Finding Knothole	Looking Through Knothole	See the Ballgame
PIECE OF BURNING PAPER	Heat	Turning Brown	Flame Breaks Through	Hole

30. Other ways of dealing with these four categories are gimmicks that I have found useful in the conversation itself. In the metaphor of the earthquake, the address is the tremor, locating it is finding the crack in the earth, intensifying it is studying the crack, and the transparency is having the crack disappear leaving you standing over the abyss. Another one is the petticoat patch story of Natty Bumpo in The Deerslayer. In the first step you become aware that something's missing, you are aware of the missing maiden. Then you find the patch, and third, the patches take on a pattern. And last you find the Indian, or something like that. Another gimmick we've used is the knothole in the wall of a ballgame. First of all you bump into the wall, then you find the hole, then you look through the hole, and finally you see the ballgame.

31. We've also used a piece of burning paper. (I advise you not to use it in the actuality; talk about it. I tried using it once. I ruined a perfectly good shirt. It would be OK if you had a very small piece of brown paper. I used a whole bag. It became very transparent.) What I'm talking about now is what happens when you hold a match under a brown paper bag. First you experience the heat, then you experience the turning brown, then the flame breaks through, and finally you've got a hole in the paper (or in your shirt) which you can see through. Transparent to the mystery. (And that's better than having a hole in your pants.)

32. The "Address" section is comprised primarily of giving the group a gimmick and then reading the scriptures. You give them a way to appropriate it, and then read the scripture with some dramatic fervor. In the area of locating the address what you're doing basically is trying to locate where it was they were tripped up, where it was they felt the heat, where it was they felt the shudder, where it was the scriptures broke into them, where was it that their mind left, where was it they were

taken into a new universe. You're not trying to get ahold so much of what happened to them, you're not trying to push, you're just sort of feeling around the room to see where it was that the scriptures addressed them.

33. Where you have to do your work is in the area of intensifying the address. It only takes one person--you don't have to have three or four people break through into the awe, because once one person breaks through, everybody's in it. Anytime one person's life is exposed to the awe in your presence, then your life is exposed to the awe also. So you take one person and you push or you cajole. You can never hurry these conversations. You do whatever is necessary to push them through to the experience of the awe or the transparency, whatever will enable them to go through that.

34. Let me give you an example from one scripture conversation that we did back last spring. Here's some of the cajoling. "Wonder why you got wrapped up at that place." (You may know, of course, that he lied.) "Have you spent all your life working for the local church?" The leader is still picking on this one guy. "Take your eye off the scripture for the moment and put it somewhere else. Say whatever's on your mind. Go on, say it. What was that patch?" See, back to the scripture now. "What was it?" No answer. "Go on, look at what that was--what comes to you? Ever go fishing? Boy, do you like straw hats when you go fishing? Have you ever dreamed about taking giant steps? What's the most creative thing you ever accomplished in your life? Which child are you fondest of? If you were assigned to Japan, would you take your children or your wife? Is your parish richer now than it was before, or less rich? You're more soft than you used to be when you first came here. When did you first come upon yourself as a man? Guess how long you're going to live." I'm embroidering these just a little. "Remember the first day in school--did you wet your pants? What was that petticoat patch? Where was it you just had an "aha" down inside you?"

35. Well, that's the kind of job you have on your hands here, to intensify the self-consciousness of whatever it was that addressed them and really broke them into the awe in the first instance, but of which they were not yet self-conscious and therefore not transparently in the experience of the awe.

36. Now, when you move over to the transparency, it's something like this: You see through and you see yourself, and then you see not yourself, but you see that your journey is the journey of mankind. It's here that you become universalized, or you see through your journey to the journey of all men. It's here that your life at the bottom of your life become radically objective, the life of everyman. When that happens, then you have broken through to the awe.

37. The key thing in the gospels for me is how it is you recover the humanity of Jesus. We have taken Jesus and put him up on a pedestal somewhere so that he doesn't address our lives, so that he doesn't impinge upon our lives and throw us into the experience of awe. If you can keep something far enough away from you up on a pedestal it doesn't address your life. You're out in the scripture conversations to recover the humanity of Jesus. Therefore you ham it up. You put drama into your reading of the scriptures. You're out to get at the humanity of Jesus and once you do that, then what happens is that the divinity of Jesus impinges upon your life, do you see that? That's the most important thing to remember in all of this: if you can recover Jesus as a human being who went through to transparency, then he comes back to you as the divine impingement upon your life. To be authentically human, that is to live over against that one and only final reality.

38. You've got to be careful not to get sacreligious, but the scriptures are a quick trip to the awe. They're instant awe: just add water. It's more like this. Those symbols which you and I have been bathed in from the beginning of our lives (because we live in society, not only because we go to churches), the symbolism of the Christian story that you and I have been bathed in, has built up within us the potential to move into the awe quickly, and that's why the scriptures enable you to do that. They electrify your self-consciousness into the experience of awe. They're the dynamite caps, those little things that you put with the powder to explode the powder. The scripture is that dynamite cap which you swallow and which explodes the powder that's already there inside you. For you exist at every moment in the awe, and it's only the question of how you become self-consciously present, and stay self-consciously present, to it.

39. The key in all three of these methods is drama, the drama that you put into the conversation, into reading the scriptures, and into setting the stage for the psalms. That's because no word has any existential meaning, save it has a drama connected with it. Any image that you use, like the image of lightening, if it doesn't have some drama that you've experienced, then that has no meaning. Unless the image that you use of the drama that you create enables the meaning, you do not ignite the passage through to the transparency. Any kinds of words or images you use that do not have the dramatic connected to them are simply intellectual game playing, or else they're intellectualizing off into some abstraction. Take the word "failure". That word doesn't have any meaning unless you've had some dramatic experience of that word, of the reality that it's pointing to. Otherwise it's some abstraction floating around. Take the word "apprehend," or the word "earthquake." Any word you take, unless you have some dramatic meaning to fill it, has no meaning for you.

40. In all three of these methods you're out to create a frame with the dramatic. The framing itself is what focuses and shoves it through to the transparency. To take a simple illustration draw any symbol, then draw a frame around it and watch what happens to you when you frame that symbol. The reason Joe Mathews always insists upon a half-inch margin around a page is because that frames the page, and therefore burns that page into your mind. Now drama does the same thing in all three of the spirit methods. You frame the reading of the scripture or the psalms in some sort of drama,

41. Let me try and illustrate the effect of the drama framework with an example about the context you set for reading the psalms. I'm going to give you two contexts, and read the same psalm after each one. Now, so that the illustration will work, try to forget the way you have been conditioned to hear psalms while I'm giving you the first context, so you will feel the difference.

42. First, imagine yourself in the great hall at base, listening to a psalm. Are you there? You're in the great hall, now. Nowhere else.

.....  
(psalm reading)  
.....

43. Now, this time, image yourself in the coliseum. I always have to start in a theater in the round, and go to the coliseum, to get myself located. There you are in the coliseum, and out in the middle of the coliseum is the psalmist: With him are 12 or 15 other people whose outlines you can barely see. The third person from the psalmist to his left is your face. Then you look up into the first three rows, and on the third row you see your own face again. Except it's pitch dark. You can't see your hand in front of your face, it's that dark. Up around the whole gallery is all of humanity and everywhere you look closely there you see your face. At the same time

that you see yourself in the coliseum, you also see that you're standing outside the coliseum, and above the coliseum, looking down into the coliseum. On the cyclorama, going on around the edge of the coliseum, pictures are flashing on and off, mountains appear, deserts appear, parched grass appears, people are running, an old man of 70 years with a cane is there, slowly walking for a moment on the pnaorama that goes on.

44. Now the psalmist is out in the middle of the stage and there's a light upon him which reflects off enough light for you to see that there are 15 other people or so around him. They are all asleep and the psalmist is sitting looking into a fire. The fire's almost out, except for a few burning coals. The first statement the psalmist makes comes as sort of a surprise, or you see surprise on his face when it suddenly comes out. You see upon his face a man who is scarching, who is puzzled, who is in trouble, who's also just a little bit angry--but anger that's way beneath the surface.

Lord, thou hast been our refuge  
from generation to generation.  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or earth and world were born in travail,  
from age to age everlasting thou art God.  
Thou turnest man back into dust;  
'Turn back,' thou sayest, 'you sons of men';  
for in thy sight a thousand years are as yesterday;  
a night-watch passes, and thou hast cut them off;  
they are like a dream at daybreak,  
they fade like grass which springs up with the morning  
but when evening comes is parched and withered.  
So we are brought to an end by thy anger  
and silenced by thy wratch.  
Thou dost lay bare our iniquities before thee  
and our lusts in the full light of thy presence.  
All our days go by under the shadow of thy wratch;  
our years die away like a murmur.  
Seventy years is the span of our life,  
eighty if our strength holds;  
the hurrying years are labour and sorrow,  
so quickly they pass and are forgotten.  
Who feels the power of thy anger,  
who feels thy wrath like those that fear thee?  
Teach us to order our days rightly,  
that we may enter the gate of wisdom.  
How long, O Lord?  
Relent, and take pity on thy servants.  
Satisfy us with thy love when morning breaks,  
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.  
Repay us days of gladness for our days of suffering,  
for the years thou hast humbled us.  
Show thy servants thy deeds  
and their children thy majesty.  
May all delightful things be ours, O Lord our God;  
establish firmly all we do.

45. To prepare to lead a psalm, the first thing to which you must give your attention is the state of being that the psalmist is dealing with. This is the key to doing the psalm methodology, I think. It has to do with mood, it has to do with images, with the montage--it has to do with all of those things on the upside

down triangle of human self-consciousness I talked about earlier. The second thing that you have to do in preparing to read the psalm and lead the conversation is to locate yourself in the coliseum. There are basically 5 places that you locate yourself in the image of the coliseum. You are the psalmist; you are in the immediate community around the psalmist; you are in the first 3 rows; you are in the masses; and you are above outside the whole coliseum. If you wanted to add a sixth place, sometimes you show up in the panorama. You must locate yourself in the coliseum, it seems to me, before you can locate yourself imaginarily above the coliseum.

46. You also have to locate the speakers in the play. They are the psalmist and God, and you have to delineate where they are saying what they are saying. Then you've got to delineate the breaks in the psalm. Finally, you have to locate the audience. Now, the basic audiences (and I think I speak cororately here) are Jerusalem, Israel, the masses, the gods of the world, and God. Probably you can find others who are the object of the address of the psalmist, but those 5 seem to be the major audiences.

47. You've got to determine what type of psalm you are reading. We have delineated 4 types to my knowledge: exhortation, praise, dependence, and imprecatory psalms. You've got to be clear which one you're doing. You must be clear on what the psalmist is doing towards the audience: is he making a witness? is he exhorting? is he making a supplication? What is his seeming intent towards the audience? Next you have to locate the keystone of the psalm. What is the one phrase or those two or three words that hold that psalm that is the keystone, or the window, that you look through to see the entire psalm?

48. I've got another arena that I call practicing. To do the psalms, you have to practice reading them. In the scripture conversations we've found that you don't want to practice too much. You want to go over them enough so that when you read them you don't stumble over them, but you want to have it fresh enough so that it surprises you a little bit as well. In the psalms you've got to pull off reading the psalms. They've got to be practiced, and you've got to have them fairly familiar to yourself. You need to practice pace, the mood, the expression, and the gestures that you intend to use in them.

49. Now, in presenting the psalms I have seen my colleagues use some sort of spirit gimmick to get onstage, and I think it's a good idea. Sometimes it's a one question spirit conversation, sometimes it's something like, "Be careful now, I'm going to ask you a difficult question." And everybody gets ready, and then he goes on with the psalm. Or sometimes it's something like, "When was the last time you heard God speak an inaudible word?" Anyway, you have some sort of spirit gimmick to get the attention, or to get yourself on stage.

50. The first major task you've got in presenting the psalm is to set the context. Here you are creating the drama which is going to frame the bolt of lightning that comes in the psalm. You create the coliseum, setting forth the basic structure of the stage, the audience, the cyclorama, and locating the people in the coliseum. Then you have to create and design the setting in which they're going to listen to the psalm. That has to do with the darkness, and the lighting, other props, the panorama, the backdrop, what characters are in the cyclorama, what movement is going on, kneeling gesture, and so forth. Is it a soliloquy that's to be overheard? is it a prayer that's being offered? Is it a hymn? Finally in contextualizing the psalm I've got a category which I call spelling out the dramaturgy. That has to do with who's talking to whom about what, and how. It has to do with the manner of the address. Where does it shift? It has to do with postures, and it has to do with side comments, with dramatic devices of the psalmist, the intent of the psalmist.

51. Second, you read the psalm. I would emphasize again attention to the mood, to the dramatics. The appropriate emotion that goes with the psalm, the facial expression and gestures, and any side comments that you're going to make should be written in carefully.

52. Then you move to the conversation, and here is where we have the most difficulty. I have ferreted out four things that you have in the conversation. First, you try to get ahold of the state of being, the happening within the happening. Secondly, you try to get ahold of the tensions that are going on between man and man, between man and God, between man and his enemies. Thirdly, you deal with the images, both the psalmist's, and your images in relationship to them.

53. Fourthly, you deal with the external event. The important thing to remember here is that the awe has already taken place. You are not trying to create the awe now. You are trying to enable the group to appropriate the awe that's already been there. It's like you take the people there and turn them into spirit, and then you bring them back to matter. And once they're back to matter, that matter has already turned into spirit by coming back from spirit, to try to talk about it poetically. Here you're not in any way intellectualizing or interpreting the event. You're writing a novel or a story about what happened.

54. To sum up the psalm methodology, then, you might call the four steps the dramatic frame, the bolt of lightning, the recovery period, and the self-conscious spirit.

55. The key to the guru style in all three of the methods we've talked about is that you never get sucked in to the awe. You have to be two places at one time. You have to be experiencing the awe. You can't be anticipating what's coming in the conversation unless you yourself are participating in it. But if you ever get sucked in to it, you're lost. I think of that classic story about the doctor who decided he was going to be a criminal so that he could study criminology. He would listen to his heartbeat as he was opening the safe, but he got so interested in opening the safe and being a criminal he lost being a doctor and ended up in jail. You have to be something like the hostess at a party. A hostess has to be anticipating every need of her guests at the same time that she is participating in the party. She's never in the party entirely, but she's in the party, enjoying the party. You have to participate in the awe but at the same time be sensing what has to come next. In a sense, that destroys your participation in the awe, but that is the price you pay. It's like watching yourself die and at the same time taking objective notes on watching yourself die.

56. There are 4 dangers to watch out for when you are using any of the spirit methods. The first one is psychologism, in which the method turns in upon itself and becomes a way not of standing before the awe, but of tickling your belly button and hiding yourself from the experience of transparency. It becomes a way of escaping the pain. The second danger is moralism.

If you slip out of the ontological category into moralism, you're dead. The third danger is intellectualism. There are 2 basic clues that you are slipping into intellectualism. The first is when people begin to abstract themselves in order to interpret what's going on. Your second clue is when people begin to universalize before they reach the point of transparency. Whenever you universalize on this side of transparency, then you are intellectualizing. You are playing an intellectual game, you're abstracting from the experience itself. The experience of universality takes place only on the other side of the experience of transparency. The fourth danger is the obvious danger of deciding how much to push in any given situation into the transparency. Generally, once you've broken through to the transparency, then you let it work itself out where it will. But you need to take care there to know when to back off. You need to be careful to avoid shoving people into more self-conscious awareness of the contingency of life than they can handle.



57. Let us leave simply with this reminder: Giants are created when you enable a man to experience the transparency of life. A spirit man is always the man who runs the universe. Whatever is happening anywhere, it is radiating out from some spirit man somewhere. Gandhi is one of my key images there. Someone once said to me that if you're a spirit man, and you're in charge, then you're in charge of the whole world, therefore you don't have any enemies. Both the disestablishment and the establishment are your friends. If you are in charge of the world, you don't have any enemies. So I send you out to be in charge of the world.

-- George West