

God Is Closer Than You Think

John Ortberg

EDITOR'S NOTE: *John Ortberg, who is quickly becoming the evangelical Garrison Keillor—minus any prairie home companions—has written and spoken extensively concerning the journey of transformation. His latest effort will be released in 2005 (Zondervan) under the title God is Closer than You Think. The topic of the book seemed to be a natural fit with the focus of this issue of the Conversations Journal. John graciously agreed to provide an adaptation from his forth-coming book and to sit for an interview—although mostly he stood and paced.*

“Over the margins of life comes a whisper, a faint call, a premonition of richer living.”

Thomas Kelly,
*A Testament of Devotion*¹

During the first year of our marriage, Nancy and I spent 2 months traveling around Europe. We lived on a budget of \$13.50 apiece—for food, lodging, and entertainment. We breakfasted every morning on bread and cheese. We lodged in accommodations that would require an upgrade to achieve Bates Motel status. Entertainment on that budget consisted of buying *Time* magazine once a week and ripping it in half so we could both read it at the same time.

Our big splurge came in Italy, where we blew one whole day's allowance dining alfresco and

spent money we could not afford to look at the treasures of Western art. The highlight of the day came after standing in line for hours at the Vatican to view Michelangelo's brilliant painting of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. His masterpiece is a work of art that serves as a touchstone for this article. If you look carefully at the painting, you notice that the figure of God is extended toward the man with great vigor. He twists his body to move it as close to the man as possible. His head is turned toward the man, and his gaze is fixed on him. God's arm is stretched out; his index finger is extended straight forward; every muscle is taut. He is rushing toward Adam on a cloud, one of the “chariots of heaven,” propelled by the angels. (In our day they don't look quite aerobicized enough to move really fast, but in

Michelangelo's day they suggested power and swiftness.) It looks as if even in the midst of the splendor of all creation, God's entire being is wrapped up in his impatient desire to close the gap between himself and this man. He can't wait. His hand comes within a hair's breadth of the hand of the man.

The painting is traditionally called *The Creation of Adam*, but some scholars say it should be called *The Endowment of Adam*. For Adam has already been given physical life—his eyes are already open, he's already conscious. He is being offered life with God. “All of man's potential, physical and spiritual, is contained in this one timeless moment,” one art historian writes.²

Apparently, one of the messages that Michelangelo wanted to convey is God's implacable determination to reach out to and be with the person he has created.

God is as close as he can be. But having come that close, he allows just a little space, so that Adam can choose. He waits for Adam to make his move.

Adam is more difficult to interpret. His arm is partially extended toward God, but his body reclines in a lazy pose, leaning backward as if he has no interest at all in making a connection. Maybe he assumes that God, having come this far, will close the gap. Maybe he is indifferent to the possibility of touching his Creator. Maybe he lacks the strength. All he would have to do is lift a finger.

The fresco took Michelangelo 4 years of intense labor. The physical demands were torture. Because he was forced to look upward for hours while painting, he eventually could read a letter only if he held it at arm's length above his head. One night, exhausted by his work, alone with his doubts, discouraged by a project that was too great for him, he wrote in his journal a single sentence: "I am no painter." (*Lew Smedes, Standing on the Promises, Nelson, 1998, p. 28*)

And yet for nearly half a millennium, this picture has spoken of God's great desire to be with the human beings he has made in his own image. Perhaps Michelangelo was not alone in his work after all. Perhaps the God who was so near to Adam was near to Michelangelo as well, at work in his mind and his eye and his brushes.

This picture reminds us—God is closer than we think. He is never further than a prayer away. All it takes is the barest effort, the lift of a finger. Every moment—this moment right now, as you read these words—is the "one timeless moment" of divine endowment; of life with God.

"This is my father's world," an old song says. "He shines in all

*God is
never further
than a
prayer away.
All it takes is
the barest effort,
the lift of a finger.*

that's fair; in the rustling grass I can hear him pass; he speaks to me every where."⁴ The Scriptures are full of what might be called the everywhere-ness of God's speaking. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; day after day they pour forth speech."

He talks through burning bushes and braying donkeys; he sends messages through storms and rainbows and earthquakes and dreams and sometimes in a still, small voice. He speaks (in the words of Garrison Keillor) in "ordinary things like cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet corn and flowers, through sports, music, books, and raising kids—all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through."⁵

The story of the Bible isn't primarily about the desire of people to be with God; it's about the desire of God to be with people.

I was sitting on a plane one day next to a businessman. The screen saver on his computer was the picture of a tow-headed little boy taking what looked like his first shaky step. "Is that your son?" I asked. Big mistake.

Yes, that was the man's son, his only child. Let's say his name was Adam. The picture on the

computer was taken when Adam was 11 months old. He's now 14 months. He told me about his son's first step and first word with a sense of wonder, as if Adam had invented locomotion and speech. There was a more recent picture of him available on the man's palm pilot. He showed me. The same picture could be viewed more clearly on the man's computer. He showed me that. He had a whole string of pictures of Adam doing things that pretty much all children do, and he displayed them one at a time. With commentary. My seatmates and I got a graduate course in Adamology.

"I can't wait to get home to him," the man said. "In the meantime, I could look at these pictures a hundred times a day. They never get old to me." (They were already getting pretty tiresome for everybody in my section of the plane.)

Why was the man so preoccupied with Adam? Was it because the boy's achievements were so impressive? No. Millions of children learn to do the same thing every day. My own children (I wanted to tell him) had done the same things at an earlier age with superior skill.

He was preoccupied with Adam because he looked at him through the eyes of a father. And all Adam did was cloaked with wonder. It didn't matter that other children do them as well.

"You obviously miss your son," I said to him. "How long ago did you leave home?"

"Yesterday."

One day away from his son was one too many. So he was rushing through the skies, taking a chariot through the clouds, implacably determined to be at home with his child. He didn't simply want to love his son from a distance. He wanted to be with him.

And then it hit me. I am the child on God's screen saver. And

so are you. The tiniest detail of our lives never grow old to him. God himself is filled with wonder at our faltering steps and stammering words—not because we do them better than anyone else, but because he views them through the eyes of a loving Father. God shows our pictures to the angels until even the angels get a little tired of looking. And the story of the Bible is first of all God's story: the story of a father rushing through the clouds to be at home with you. At home with me. One day apart is one day too many.

And then it hit me.

I am the child on

God's screen saver.

And so are you.

The central promise in the Bible is not "I will forgive you," although of course that promise is there too. It is not the promise of life after death, although we are offered that as well. The most frequent promise in the Bible is "I will be with you."

Before Adam and Eve ever sinned or needed forgiveness, they were promised God's presence. He would walk with them in the cool of the day. The promise came to Enoch, who "walked with God." It was made to Noah, and Abraham and Sarah, to Jacob and Joseph and Moses and David and Amos and Mary and Paul and too many others to list. It is the reason for courage: "Do not be terrified, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." It kept them going in darkness: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

God gave Israel the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant and manna and the temple and a pillar of cloud and another one of fire, like so many Post-it notes saying, "Don't forget. I am with you."

When God himself came to earth, his redemptive name was Immanuel—God with us. When Jesus left, his promise was to send the Spirit so that "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."

At the end of time, when sin is a distant and defeated memory, and forgiveness is as obsolete as buggy whips, then it will be sung: "Now the dwelling place of God is with human beings, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Revelation 21:3, NIV)

"The unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life with God as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus."⁶ God is determined that you should be in every respect his friend, his companion, his dwelling place.

Some people seem to have a knack for sensing the presence of God. Friends of ours have a daughter who said when she was 5 years old, "I know Jesus lives in my heart, because when I put my hand on it, I can feel him walking around in there."

Sofia Cavaletti is a researcher who has pioneered the study of spirituality in young children. She finds that children often have an amazing perception that far surpasses what they've already been taught. One 3-year-old girl, raised in an atheistic family with no church contact at all, no Bible in the home, asked her father, "Where did the world come from?"

He answered her in strictly naturalistic, scientific terms. Then he added, "there are some people who say that all this comes from a very powerful being, and they call

him God."

At this, the little girl started dancing around the room with joy. "I knew what you told me wasn't true—it's him, it's him!"⁷

The author Anne Lamott was raised by her dad to be a devout atheist—all the children in her family had to agree to a contract to that effect when they were 2 or 3 years old—but she started backsliding into faith at an early age. "Even when I was a child I knew that when I said Hello, someone heard."

Some people seem to have a kind of inner radar for detecting the presence of God. But I am Adam. I believe my life hinges on the presence of God. I know that courage and guidance and hope all reside with him. But I'm aware of the gap—even if it's only a hair's breadth. And in the midst of all my ambiguity—my weakness and my spiritual indifference sometimes—I long for the touch that will close the gap.

Dallas Willard (who lost his mom as a young child) writes of a little boy whose mom had died. He was especially sad and lonely at night. He would come into his father's room and ask if he could sleep with him. Even then, he could not rest until he knew not only that he was with his father, but that his father's face was turned toward him. "Father, is your face turned toward me now?"

"Yes," his father would say. "You are not alone. I'm with you. My face is turned toward you." When at last the boy was assured of this, he could rest.

Dallas goes on: "How lonely life is! Oh, we can get by in life with a God who does not speak. Many at least think they do so. But it is not much of a life, and it is certainly not the life God intends for us or the abundance of life Jesus came to make available."⁸

I want to live with God's face

toward me. I want to experience—in the dark of night as well as the light of day—the reality of the priestly blessing: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you” (*Numbers 6:24,25, NIV*)

Who is a candidate for such a life? Saints and mystics, of course. The devoted and the wise. But not just them. Also people who are chronically unsatisfied. Restless people and demanding people, whiners and complainers, the impossible to please.

Consider what happened to Jacob. He was no spiritual giant. His dad never cared for him much because, according to Meyers-Briggs, he had an INFP temperament and liked to hang around indoors. His dad preferred his other son, who, while not the brightest bulb on the chandelier, and having a serious body hair problem, was a jock with hunter-gatherer potential.

One night Jacob was running away from his brother Esau, who was trying to kill him because Jacob had cheated him and deceived their father. Jacob stopped for the night, the text says, at “a certain place.” That’s a Hebrew way of saying no place in particular. Cleveland, maybe. It could have been anywhere. Some spot by the side of the road with nothing special about it.

But that night Jacob had a dream. He saw a ladder with angels ascending and descending. God said to him:

“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac....I am with you, and will watch over you wherever you go” (*Genesis 28:13, 15, NIV*).

“When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.... This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.’” (*Genesis 28:16, 17, NIV*).

*Apparently,
it is possible for
God to be present
with somebody,
and for that person
not to recognize
that he’s there.*

“When Jacob awoke from his sleep...” There is more than one form of sleep. It happens sometimes: the birth of a baby, an unexplained healing, a marriage that was headed for divorce being turned around, and somebody wakes up. Somebody’s eyes get opened to the fact that God is right here in this ordinary place, this ordinary person.

The striking phrase is, “and I was not aware of it.” Somehow, I was looking in the wrong direction. Apparently, it is possible for God to be present with somebody, and for that person not to recognize that he’s there. Apparently, it is possible that God is closer than you think.

This is Jacob’s discovery.

He calls this place where he had the dream: Beth-el, “the house of God”—“the place where God is present.” It is transformed for him from “a certain place”—nowhere special—to the place inhabited by God himself.

We used to sing a song about this story in the church where I grew up. “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder.... Every round goes higher, higher.” But the song gets the story wrong. It’s not a ladder for human beings to climb up. It’s a ladder for God to come down. All the way down to where we live.

What if it begins to happen in our lives? What if these ordinary moments: this cubicle, this e-mail, this room, this house, this job, this hospital room, this car, this bed, this vacation—what if they all begin to become Beth-el, the house of God?

Jacob’s life starts to change. Eventually, he decides to take the enormous risk of reconciling with his brother; instead of ripping him, off he wants to give back to him. He sends extravagant gifts on ahead: 220 goats, 220 ewes and rams, 30 camels, 50 cows and bulls, 30 donkeys, and a cat. (Actually, I made the cat part up. There is no cat in the story. The cat is not a Biblical animal. Apparently even God doesn’t like cats. But I digress.)

Jacob sees his brother after two decades of separation and hatred; we wait to see if Esau will kill him. “But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.” (*Genesis 33:4, NIV*).

After a whole childhood of living as enemies, and two decades of living as strangers—now they are brothers. And Jacob makes one of the great statements of Scripture: “When... I saw your face, it was like seeing the face of God” (*Genesis 33:10, CEV*).

Because once you meet God at Beth-el—once you see God in an ordinary moment at an ordinary place, you never know where he’ll show up next. You could start seeing him anywhere. Even in the face of someone who’s been your mortal enemy for 20 years.

God is closer than you think. In a city called Dothan, a servant of the prophet Elisha was terrified because he and his boss were surrounded by Israel’s enemies. “What shall we do?” he cried. Elisha told him to chill out, for “those who are with us are more

than those who are against us.” Then he prayed for him: “O Lord, open his eyes so that he may see.” And the Lord opened his eyes, and he saw that he was surrounded by horses and chariots of fire—the power and protection of God.

*What if God
is available to
you and me,
flowing all the time,
welling up within us;
quenching our
unsatisfied desires,
overflowing to
refresh those
around us?*

What if through this article the prayer of Elisha should be prayed for you? What if every time you are challenged or burdened, you, too, are surrounded by his power and protection? And what if God should open your eyes?

In the temple, in the night, a young boy named Samuel heard his named called out. He thought it was the priest, Eli, and kept running into his bedroom. Finally, Eli realized that it was God speaking to Samuel—but Samuel did not yet recognize God’s voice. So Eli instructed him that the next time he heard the voice, he should assume it was from God, and invite him to speak further, and then be ruthlessly obedient.

What if as you read these

words God were to have the “ministry of Eli” to you? What if God has been speaking to you, calling your name—only you didn’t know it?

Two early followers of Jesus were walking on the road to Emmaus after the crucifixion. They were joined by a third man. It was Jesus, walking and talking with them—but they didn’t know it. Until he began to pray. And then they knew. And then they said, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he explained the Scripture to us?”

What if when you are on the road to Emmaus—maybe the road on which you commute to work, or school, or home—Jesus is walking beside you? What if through this book you join the “fellowship of the burning heart,” and actually recognize and experience his presence in your midst?

How close has God come? So close that “every creature will be to you a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine.”⁹ So close that “each moment is a revelation from God.”¹⁰ So close that he can flow in and through your life from one moment to the next like a river. So close that your heart will be beating with life because Someone is walking around in there. God is closer than you think.

Set aside for now the question of to what extent any of us is capable of experiencing God’s presence in our current spiritual condition. Set aside your past failures or future worries.

What if God really is present right here, right now. What if Michelangelo’s picture really does express spiritual reality? The apostle Paul wrote, “Don’t quench the Spirit.” And in a sense, the whole business of spiritual life can be reduced to that single command.

What if he is available to you and me: flowing all the time, welling up within us; quenching our unsatisfied desires, overflowing to refresh those around us? What if

spiritual disciplines are simply those practices that help us to stay in the flow of the Spirit?

What if God is at work all the time, in every place? What would a life—your life—look like?

There are real people who claim it has happened before. It happened to a man named Nick Herman in the food service industry. He had tried stints in the military and in transportation now he was a short-order cook and bottle-washer. But he became deeply dissatisfied with his life: he worried chronically about himself, even whether or not he was saved.

One day he was looking at a tree, and the same truth struck him that struck the Psalmist so long ago—the secret of the life of a tree is that it remains rooted in something Other and Deeper than itself. He decided to make his life an experiment in what he called a “habitual, silent, secret conversation of the soul with God.”

He became better known by a new name given to him by his friends: Brother Lawrence. He remained obscure throughout his life. He never got voted Pope. Never got close to being the CEO of his organization. He stayed in the kitchen. But the people around him found that rivers of living water flowed out of him that made them want to know God as he did. “The good brother found God everywhere,” one of them wrote, “as much while he was repairing shoes as while he was praying with the community.”¹¹ After he died they put together a book of his letters and conversations. It is called *Practicing the Presence of God*, and is thought to be, outside the Bible, the most widely read book of the last four centuries. This monastic short-order cook has outsold John Grisham and Tom Clancy and J.K. Rowling put together.

He wrote, “The most holy and necessary practice in our spiritual

life is the presence of God. That means finding constant pleasure in His divine company, speaking humbly and lovingly with him in all seasons, at every moment, without limiting the conversation in any way."¹²

What if God could be that close? What if I miss him because I fail to see him in the ordinary moments of my life? What if every heartbeat was not just the mechanism of a sophisticated plumbing system; what if it were the echo of God's voice, the murmur of God's love? There are people—saints and mystics—who seem to find God in their lives as easily as the morning newspaper. They check their hearts, and feel him walking around in there.

No one else has ever lived with a sense of the presence of God as Jesus did. He was so dependent on God that he said all he did, he did as a result of God's power. He was so surrendered to God that he said his greatest delight was to do the will of his Father. He was so confident of God that neither stormy seas nor hostile crowds could shake his poise. The river of life flowed strong through this man Jesus as it had never flowed through anyone before him. And when he died, the veil that kept people out of the Holy of Holies, the veil that symbolized the separation of God and human beings, was torn in two. In Jesus, God touched Adam.

Now, according to the clear expectation of the teaching of Jesus, it's our turn. What happened to Enoch and Abraham,

what happened to Peter, James and John; what happened to Brother Lawrence in a kitchen in France, can happen again.

The expectation of Jesus was that this unseen river of life will flow again: in an office in San Francisco, a home in the suburbs of Atlanta, at a desk in a classroom in Chicago. It can happen for an attendant working at a gas station in Detroit; it can happen for plumbers and traders and homemakers and retired folks; it can happen for CEOs and seventh graders. It can flow through the life of a young single mom with all the demands of raising young children. It can surge in a hospital bed where a solitary individual lies in the valley of the shadow of death.

For centuries now, people have stood in line to view the picture of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But what if the miracle that is hinted at on that fresco became a reality in our lives? What if an artist greater than Michelangelo is at work on the canvas of our ordinary days? "God alone is capable of making himself known as he really is," Brother Lawrence said. "God Himself paints Himself in the depths of our souls."¹³

"God Himself paints Himself in the depths of our souls." It can happen anywhere, anytime, for anyone. Anybody's age, or season of life, or temperament, or job—these are no obstacle at all. God is closer than you think. All you have to do is lift a finger.

Conversation with John Ortberg

GM: John, I love the titles of your books: *The Life You've Always Wanted*; *Love Beyond Reason*; *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of The Boat*, but the one you are working on now, *God is Closer than You Think*, is my favorite of the litter. Have you had any title ideas that were turned down for being too funny for a religious book (and can I buy them)?

JO: I was going to do a religious children's book called *Good Night, Gary Moon* but it didn't make it past the marketing team. I also thought about *Leaving Behind the Purpose-Driven Prayer of Jabez*. That will probably get the green light.

GM: I'm puzzled the title for the children's book didn't make it. It had a nice ring to it. And I guess you heard about Jabez telling God, "I don't know what happened with that one becoming so popular; it wasn't even one of my better prayers."

But I digress. Your description of the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* is so compelling—I of course wouldn't use the word compelling if this weren't going to print. I had always missed what you observed about the significance of the difference in the postures of the reaching

There are people—saints and mystics—who seem to find God in their lives as easily as the morning newspaper. They check their hearts, and feel him walking around in there.

God and the indifferent Adam. I always thought Adam had the stomach flu and was about to be healed. Why do you think it is so difficult for most folks to imagine God in the posture of being present, close and extended?

JO: This is probably one of those questions that has answers at multiple levels.

A simple one is the fact that I can't actually experience God directly through my senses. A deeper one is probably that I find it hard to believe that God would really want to be with me. More important people, maybe, or more spiritual people—but not me. There's probably another book that needs to be written along the lines of "God is better than you think." And I suppose at a deeper level yet, this is simply a consequence of the Fall and sin in me. It makes me incapable of seeing God. Or perhaps creates in me the kind of condition that means my soul could not survive seeing God in its current state.

GM: Thanks, John. Your stories about how some people just have a knack for sensing God's presence are great illustrations. What is the most striking thing for you, personally, in discerning whether or not you are experiencing the presence of God?

JO: This is not a very original answer...

GM: Well, just pass then...

JO: ...but the best I can do would probably be to sight the growth or lessening of the fruit of the Spirit in my life. I was talking to my wife about this yesterday: I'd had a run of several days where I was involved in activities that are mostly outside my areas of spiritual giftedness (they are very small areas—about the size of a postage

stamp.) And I was feeling stretched, dry, and thin inside. I could feel the kind of spiritual strain that comes from trying to do things "on my own," trying to take on too much and act bigger and smarter and stronger than I really am.

I think in those times when I am most aware of God's presence with me I have a sense of being loved, and it results in a greater sense of freedom and ease and capacity to notice and love others.

GM: I like that very much, John, the presence of the fruit of the Spirit—particularly love, a return of peace, and joy—as indicators of our experience of the presence of God.

Along this line, John Piper often references Dan Fuller as being inspirational to his appreciation of joy as a beacon that points to God—and for planting the notion of "Christian hedonism" (the pursuit of God for the joy set before us) in his mind. What has God whispered to you about transforming—instead of repressing—your desires?

JO: I remember Dallas Willard saying one time that desire itself is one of God's great gifts and inventions, and that often (though not always) when we ask God what his will for us is, he will reply: "What do you want to do?" Desire is an indicator of God's will. He made birds not only with the capacity for flight but also the instinct to jump off the branch; he made dolphins to love the water and bees to crave nectar. His plan was for creation to have perfect alignment between desire and design.

One of my biggest problems is that I have spent so many years trying to please other people that often I'm not even aware of what my desires are. I can try to pretend that the attempt to please others is love, but it's really not. It's a twisted form of self-love in which I'm really just using other people to win the applause that will give me a

*I could feel the kind
of spiritual strain
that comes from
trying to do things
"on my own," trying
to take on too much
and act bigger and
smarter and stronger
than I really am.*

short term burst of gratification.

So God has whispered to me that I need to spend enough time in solitude to get clearer on what it is I really desire at the deepest level where the Spirit speaks. I think "redemptive desire" is aligned with the Spirit and leads both to fulfillment and servanthood. John of the Cross used to speak of a discernment process where when he thought of winning fame, it produced a kind of gratification that quickly evaporated, but when he thought of serving God produced a gratification that lasted. That lasting quality is an indication of deeper desire.

GM: I love that, John. And feel free not to answer, but I've got to ask. When you have followed your deepest and truest desires, where have they taken you?

JO: I think they have probably been in small ways. Moments when I want to open up deeply with a friend, and take the risk, and we end up with a level of intimacy that we would not have had otherwise. Moments with my kids when I know I really want to be with

them, and look at and notice them, and create moments that will last in their memories. The desire to preach and communicate and speak to the heart is a very deep one of mine. I think big decisions for me are generally more ambiguous; they are “over-determined,” as Freud used to say.

GM: Thank you. Reflecting on your chapter and the notion of God being closer than we think, I recall that I’ve heard you use the phrase “following Jesus right down into your gut.” That’s being pretty close. What do you mean when you say that?

JO: There are certain beliefs that I hold with my whole body. I believe in gravity; so I don’t let my body walk off the roof of a fifteen-story building. If I stand on the edge of a cliff, my sweat glands go into overdrive, because they too believe in gravity.

There are other beliefs that—if I’m honest—my body is more divided about. I affirm that God is omnipresent. But my sweat glands are a little apostate on this one, because if they were more spiritually mature, they would be calmer in many situations where right now they behave as if I were totally on my own in the universe. I affirm Jesus’ teaching that it’s better to give than to receive. But my hands are often much quicker to put stuff into my wallet than take stuff out of it.

I want rivers of living water to flow out of my belly. I want to be a person who trusts Jesus and his teachings in the same way that right now I trust the law of gravity. I just think it’s right, and therefore observe it in my life and behavior without strain or conscious effort.

GM: And trusting God to have our best interests at heart—trusting enough to dive into the river of his presence—seems foundational to

awakening (with delight) to the notion that God is closer than we think. But what is the most uncomfortable thing, for you, about being with a God who never goes away?

JO: The first is sin. The second is my hypocrisy or duplicity in being so much more diligent about seeking God when I’m in trouble and feeling needy than in “normal” moments.

GM: And your cleanest definition of sin...

JO: It’s from Neil Plantiga: sin is the personal, culpable violation of shalom.

GM: I really like that, sin as a violation of intended relationship that causes a departure from a state of peace and communion with God. Robert Barron uses the phrase “grasp and hide” to describe the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden. In a sense the antithesis of sin is to “let go—of attachment to all that is not God—and come out of hiding from God.”

John, when you speak and write, you often use the imagery of water—a river, the ocean—to describe how we are presently engulfed by the presence of God. But what might you say to someone whose perception is that the river of God’s presence seems very dry?

JO: Been there, done that. Will be there and do that again. It is worth asking, “Why?” especially with the counsel of a wise friend or guide. Sometimes (for some reason this often doesn’t get talked about in “spiritual formation” circles) it is simply the result of sin. If I am deliberately defying God in some area of my life, it will deeply damage my capacity to be with him. At other times, it seems to be connected to the fact that human

life always involves rhythms and cycles (C.S. Lewis writes about this in *The Screwtape Letters*). Sometimes it may be connected to physical problems. This doesn’t sound too profound, but if you’re hypothyroid you probably won’t be experiencing what feel like epiphanies of joy every day. Sometimes it’s just mystery. Sometimes the eras of greatest dryness turn out to be eras of greatest growth.

But I do think it’s important to say that God’s basic desire is to be with us and for us to know that he is with us.

GM: What does a life—your life—look like when a river runs through it?

*I want to be a person
who trusts Jesus and
his teachings in the
same way that right
now I trust the law
of gravity.*

JO: It looks a lot like Jesus.

GM: Okay, fair enough. Better question. What is your best brief advice for moving from a place of trying to do what Jesus would do to experiencing his loving presence?

JO: Noticing. I got a book the other day that suggests that we now live in an “attention economy”: that what companies and agencies (and powers and principalities) most compete for is our attention. It is our scarcest and most valued commodity. If Jesus really is always present and always at work, in a sense my

only job is to learn to notice him, and then tell him what I'm noticing.

GM: Yes, the real issue is not God's presence but our awareness of and experience of that presence. And a view of God that causes us to want to come out of hiding.

With only a little time left, let's make an abrupt shift. There are some unsettling things in your article. For example, I learned that Brother Lawrence's real name is Nick Herman. This hit me hard. Just last week I heard that John Wayne's real name was Marion Michael Morrison. Are you aware of any other important figure—like Billy Graham—who is going by an alias?

JO: Many people don't know that Dallas Willard used to wrestle professionally under the name of Edmund Husserl.

GM: I was not aware of that. I did know he played power forward at Tennessee Temple. I guess the wrestling career was a natural follow-up.

Both Brother Lawrence and Frank Laubach decided to make their lives a grand experiment in experiencing God's presence. Have you ever felt that when you tried to replicate what they did you turned out to be the null hypothesis?

JO: One of the most helpful things I've learned from both of them is how to handle failure in that regard. That is—not to get too carried away with wondering how I'm doing, or measuring myself against some other person or my theoretical spiritual potential. They both speak about how the best response to feeling they have been disconnected from God is simply to invite him back in to the next moment of their life without wasting too much energy on their own lack of progress.

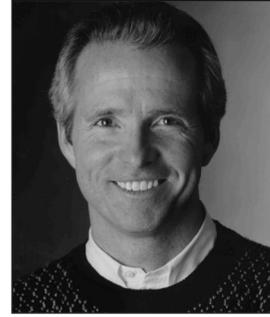
GM: John, I've always appreciated your honesty—even when you are lying. Sorry. Honesty is always so refreshing, so disarming. I wouldn't trust anyone who could not resonate with the words I've heard you speak: "What goes on in the core of my being is often self-preoccupation, or anxiety, or petty little ambitions, or fantasies of anger and revenge. If experiencing rivers of living water flowing in our bellies was as easy as turning on a faucet—I'd do it."

What is an example of a time when you have seen God in the ordinary moments of life, and how has that caused you to wish for a transformation of desire?

JO: This is a very ordinary moment, but it has stuck with me. A few years ago I was going through a painful time in life. I went to a forest preserve, and stood all alone for a while in a field of tall prairie grass. The wind was going through it, and it produced a sound very much like whispering, almost as though someone were trying to say something. And I had this very strong inner sense or impression or thought (there's never quite the right word for this sort of thing) that I was to receive this as an expression of God speaking his love and care for me. So I stood there for a long while and just listened. It was almost as if I expected a conversation to break out, or as if at some level it did. It made me want to have that kind of desire and sensitivity as a more constant part of my life.

GM: Thanks, John, for being the deepest funny person I know. I hate we've run out of our allotted paper and ink.

(References on p. 42)



JOHN ORTBERG is a senior pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California, and previously served as teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church. He is the bestselling author of *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*; *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*; *Love Beyond Reason*; and *Old Testament Challenge*. He has written for *Christianity Today* and is a frequent contributor to *Leadership Journal*.

Out Take from Ortberg Interview

GM: I once heard you speak and you made repeated references to the Cookie Monster. I was wondering if there are any other Sesame Street characters that have impacted your ministry.

JO: When my children were growing up, one of the favorite songs around our house was "You've Got to Put Down the Ducky if You Want to Play the Saxophone." I've always tried to live my life by that. I may use it as a book title.

GM: And I think you have lived your life by that John; perhaps more than anyone I know. But as a book title it may limit your audience to ducky-toting musicians. But while we're on this topic, which do you think is a better name for a Sesame Street character, Larry Crabb or Benny Hinn?

JO: I thought Larry Crabb was one of the characters from VeggieTales.

GM: That's right. I think he's the tomato. Never mind. Back to your book...