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Stories from Thirty Years of "Celebration of Discipline"

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This morning I want to tell you a story. It’s a story about a book, its author, and a lot of other people. But as I’ve been thinking about it, it’s a story—or might be a story—about you.

You probably already know part of the end of the story. This year is the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Richard Foster’s book *Celebration of Discipline*. It’s also the thirtieth anniversary of the movie ‘Grease,’ which you could have watched in Newberg’s lovely Cameo Theater earlier this month. And October 1 was also the 100th anniversary of the introduction of the Model-T Ford. If you add in things like National Broccoli Month and Tooth Decay Day, we’d be close to more celebration than we could stand.

Now you may know that *Celebration of Discipline* has sold more than two million copies and has been translated into more than twenty languages. It has affected millions of people and created a whole new era in the life of the church. What you might not know is that it was written in Newberg, by a first-time author, in 33 12-15 hour days, holed up in a mobile home in the driveway of some Newberg friends and at The Quiet Place at Camp Tilikum.

You probably don’t know that the book’s distinguished publishing house, Harper and Row, doesn’t like to publish first-time authors. And that virtually nobody in 1978 was publishing or making money from books about Christian spirituality. Harper gave the book the modest publicity that first-time authors routinely get. Yet despite a slow start, book sales exploded. Individuals, study groups, schools, and many others began to use it with transforming effect. There’s more to this story, but let me tell you a bit about Richard Foster.

While Richard was growing up, mostly in Southern California, he was befriended by a youth group from one of the Quaker churches there. Through their nurture he became a follower of Christ. When it came time to go to college, Richard was broke. What college money he had had went to pay medical bills for his parents, both of whom were seriously ill during those years. That church loved Richard and saw his promise as a leader, so together they raised the money he needed to attend George Fox College (then) and later to attend Fuller Seminary. This last July I was able to attend an event celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Renovaré, the church renewal movement Richard founded in 1988. I was deeply moved when they introduced the now elderly woman who, with her husband, were sponsors of that youth group, and who led the way in raising funds for Richard’s education. Little did they know what their faithfulness and practical love would mean!

Some of you will be interested to know that the pastor of that church then was Eugene Coffin, one of the finest men and Christian leaders I have ever known. I was delighted when Coffin Hall was recently named after him, even though it has drawbacks as a name for a dorm.
So Richard came to be a student at George Fox College. I came a couple of years later, so we were contemporaries and became friends. Now I tell you that Richard is my friend, not as a credit to him—unless you want to credit him with grace rather than bad judgment. We were later colleagues for eleven years, teaching at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. Even with that, we’re still friends. I also tell you all this should you need a reason to discount my high regard for him.

Richard had an uncanny ability to be serious or intentional and, at the same time, maintain playfulness and live in a spirit of fun. While at George Fox, he pursued his studies well, learning things and learning to be a learner, as we all need to do in our college experiences. He cared for others and had fun. Richard and I, along with Lon Fendall and several others shared adventures in weekend youth ministry across the Northwest. The years here prepared him well to learn and serve as he went on to seminary and to pastoral ministry. Often Richard teaches that a disciplined person is one who does what needs to be done when it needs to be done. It seems to me that he understood that even in college.

Richard’s eagerness and capacity to learn, to go deep, to be authentic, and to genuinely help others eventually led to the book *Celebration of Discipline*. There are lots of good reasons to commend him, but Richard is quick to acknowledge and thank others for how all this came about. In the book he writes: “Books are best written in community. I am deeply indebted to those whose lives have surrounded mine and have given substance to the ideas in this book.”

The success of the book made Richard a star, in some sense, in the Christian community. But many people opened doors and offered support in ways both great and small. Their faithfulness is part of the story, part of the miracle of this book and what has grown from it. We have already noted his pastor Eugene Coffin and the youth group and sponsors of the church that brought him to faith. Several of the helpers Richard would call by name are here this morning. There are many:

- There’s Dallas, friend and mentor, who taught him so well.
- There’s Bill the “Lutheran evangelist” who helped him learn to pray.
- There’s another Bill and many others who prayed over him. (Bill prayed that Richard would have the hands of a writer).
- There are teachers like Arthur and Ralph, who challenged him.
- There’s an English teacher or two, I’m sure, and others who insisted that he learn to write.
- There’s Bess who listened to the manuscript’s words and made them better.
- There are the church elders at Newberg Friends, God bless them, who freed him to write.
- There’s Elton, who used his leverage to encourage Harper and Row to take a chance.
- There’s Ron and others who covered his back while he was writing.
- There are friends who cheered, pushed, and helped.
- There’s Carolynn, dear wife and the mother of young sons, who then and many times since made things possible.
- There’s Dave, who bought a case of the new book, kept them in the trunk of his car and gave them away to likely readers and who helped find money to support his ministry.
There’s Hal, who stuck his college president neck out a huge distance to appoint Richard to a position that would let his ministry prosper.

And there are many more.

I should also say that not only has Richard been quick to acknowledge the generosity of others, he has also been generous to support and open the way for others. Stirring up vision when needed, making introductions, creating opportunities, putting in a good word, encouraging, giving time and money. He knows how we help each other, how we need each other.

Now here’s where the story to this point becomes about you. At least for me it’s about you because I wonder often about what kinds of callings and opportunities will come to you. I hope that we at George Fox are inviting you to listen and prepare for how God is at work in you. I hope you discover the discipline and joy of being people of learning and depth. I hope we model and you learn how we lay the foundation of greatness for one another, how we open the way for each other’s dreams and faithfulness.

Sometimes we’ll know that we’re putting ourselves on the line for another, but often it may be a small act, a little gesture of kindness, a scrap of a conversation, a little detour in our busy rounds. God uses it all.

This is a sort of thirtieth anniversary for me too, I’ve been teaching full-time ever since *Celebration of Discipline* came out. And I often think of my good friend Richard Foster, in college a gifted but pretty ordinary guy who worked hard and wanted to follow God. And with each new class I wonder who, and how many among you might be, in some sense, another Richard Foster. I think it often happens. And frankly, I stay at a place like George Fox because it’s part of my calling and privilege to watch it happen and help it happen.

Now let me share a few big ideas about the book *Celebration of Discipline*. The parts of our programs this week will explore it in more detail.

Richard opens *Celebration* by noting that “the desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.” Young George Fox might have said “authentic people” as he called for people to “possess what they profess.” They both want people to live with integrity, to have lives in which we know practical ways to be free and empowered to become all God created us to be. They call us to lives in which our deepest longings are not distant hopes, but living realities.

What Richard does in *Celebration* is to invite readers into that life and to make practical tools, some long neglected, available for that journey.

Richard is like the experienced guide who, because he knows the territory well, can show the way. Perhaps he’s like the fishing guide who can show you the rivers best pools or edges of the current where the fish lie. And he can tell you which fishing fly, which little concoction of fur, feather, and tackle, might most attract them. Or you might think of a guide who can take you to beautiful vistas, surpassing discoveries, or hidden treasure. I love to travel with Dwight Kimberly to Malheur National Wildlife Refuge south of Burns because he knows it so well, loves it so much, and can tell insightful stories about the people who’ve been there before him. Richard Foster has become that kind of a guide for practical spiritual growth.

In a recent workshop Richard said: “Echoing through the centuries is a great company of witnesses telling us of a life vastly richer and deeper and fuller than what we today know.” Early on Richard set out to learn from this company of witnesses—this
communion of saints—and to befriend them. He read and studied deeply. He became an apprentice and learned their ways. Because they offered such practical tools for effective living, he shared these with his church families at Woodlake Avenue Friends Church in California and at Newberg Friends Church here in town. As an adjunct professor at George Fox, he also shared them with students. In time these experiments and discoveries became a book.

These practical tools of growth Richard and others refer to as “spiritual disciplines.” Such a phrase may seem restrictive or less than fun to some, but Richard firmly insisted on using the phrase “celebration” of discipline because he found these practices to be liberating and transforming. By steadily using them we collaborate with God, we invite God, we create space for God to fashion in us the life we long for, a life of depth, of freedom, of joy.

These “disciplines” or tools have been widely known in the church at large—tools such as prayer, meditation, fasting, service, confession, silence and solitude, and more. But among many they had been neglected or misunderstood. Celebration of Discipline made them accessible again for many people.

This led to the publishing of still more resources for growth. Richard’s own books include one on prayer, another on simplicity, and still another that explores money, integrity in relationship, and the meanings of power and service. I still like its original title, Money, Sex, and Power. Through the work of Renovaré other resources are available—anthologies of selections from Christian Classics, a spiritual formation study Bible, handbooks for spiritual formation groups, and much more.

What Richard longs for and, with Renovaré, continues to work for is that these practical tools and the reality of transformed living will find their way more fully and more concretely into the daily experience of individuals, of congregations, and even into our broader cultural life.

Telling you of these things today is to invite you into the experiment. When we open ourselves to God, the possibilities for our lives reach beyond our imaginations. And thanks to God, we have experienced and practical guides.

I also invite you to other sessions this week in which a variety of folk will tell you more specifically their stories of using and celebrating these disciplines.

May God bless you and bring you to be deep people for your joy, for this world, and for the glory of God.