

# LEARNING TO BELONG

BE AT HOME IN GOD'S WORLD

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A 28-Day Devotional Journey

*Book One of the Learning to Live Series*

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JOHN VAN DE LAAR

*In memory of my father, Ken van de Laar*

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an introduction to the SERIES

# LEARNING to LIVE

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*All of us are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of the Lord as if we were looking in a mirror. We are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory.*

*This comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

*– 2 Corinthians 3:18 CEB*

*All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits.*

*– William James*

Everyone worships something. Human beings are hard-wired to build our lives around some object, goal, person or belief system that gives us meaning, and that, we believe, will lead us to a good life<sup>1</sup>. Whatever provides us with this sense of meaning, becomes the object of our worship. And, whatever we worship, shapes who we are, how we spend our money, how we treat other people, what we drive and wear, and how we decide between right and wrong. Our worship defines our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> For the inspiration for these thoughts, I am indebted to James K. A. Smith's book, *Desiring the Kingdom – Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2009).

During his ministry, Jesus made the startling claim that he came to give “abundant” life.<sup>2</sup> Through the centuries, a few brave women and men have risked everything on this promise. Their testimony is remarkably consistent that a truly abundant life is found when we build our lives on God’s Reign, just as Jesus did.

However, following Jesus does not come naturally to us. It must be learned through a constant process of visioning, listening, communicating and practising. This is why the act of worship is so important. Our worship services are classrooms in which we receive a vision of God’s Reign, in which we learn the words, actions and attitudes of Christ, and in which we develop the habits that shape our lives according to Jesus’ way. When we allow the habits of our worship to become the habits of our lives, we become true followers of Christ, and we enter into the abundant life that he promised.

This is the work of this *Learning to Live* series of books. Each volume will focus on one specific practice of worship, exploring what it means and how it teaches us to live well. The content is devotional, engaging both heart and mind, and includes guidelines for group reflection. My hope is that these books will deepen your worship, and enable you to reflect Christ in every facet of your life.

I am deeply indebted to the churches where I have facilitated worship and led training workshops, and to the individuals with whom I have shared these experiences. I am thankful for the many writers and theologians whose work has shaped my thinking. I am very grateful to Margaret Rundle who so carefully and generously edited the manuscript. Finally, without the support of my family, especially my wife and partner in ministry, Debbie, my writing ministry would not exist. Any value that may be found in this series is simply an overflow of the immense value that I have received from others.

May God be your teacher as you embark on this journey of *Learning to Live*.

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<sup>2</sup> John 10:10

INTRODUCING the JOURNEY

# LEARNING to BELONG

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*If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. – 1 John 4:20 CEB*

*We are psychologically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually hardwired for connection, love, and belonging. Connection, along with love and belonging (two expressions of connection), is why we are here, and it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives.*

*– Brené Brown*

At six in the morning on January 28, 2012, after 25 days in the cruel Antarctic, the South African team of Braam Malherbe and Peter van Kets completed the Scott-Amundsen Centenary Race to the South Pole. They crossed the line in third place, along with the British pair. Only four out of the original seven teams reached the finish.

Without the help of “Team Mission Impossible” as the South Africans were known, the British team would never have made it. Just before reaching the halfway mark, one of their members fractured his arm, making it impossible for him to pull his sled with its seventy kilogram load. But, with each South African willing to carry an extra nine kilograms, the British were able to

continue. It was a kind and sacrificial act that bonded these four competitors together in the last week of their gruelling journey.<sup>1</sup>

You don't have to trek through the Antarctic to know that this world can feel like a very hostile place. Evil exists and suffering is universal. This reality has led some people to question the existence of God, and others to seek safety in isolation from others. But, as people of faith have discovered through the centuries, it is only as we connect with God, with others, and with our world that we can really be safe. Real security and abundant life flow from knowing that we have a place where we truly and authentically belong. The problem is that a sense of belonging does not come naturally to us. It must be learned.

There are many rituals that can teach us to be at home in God's world, but few are as effective as the gathering of a community for worship. In the first few moments of most Christian worship services, four interrelated practices teach us how to learn to belong – the choice to *gather*, the *call to worship*, *invoking* God's presence, and *greeting* one another. This book explores how these simple acts can show us how to find our place and help one another to be at home in the world.

Like the two teams that finished the race to the South Pole together, we need one another. Sharing life is risky, and it will certainly hurt at times. But, if we're willing to take the chance, we can find life in communities of love, grace and diversity. I pray that you will join me in this journey as we learn how to be at home in God's world together.

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the South African team's participation in the "toughest race on the planet" can be found at: <http://www.myschool.co.za/blog/650-latest-news-on-the-2012-scott-amundsen-centenary-race-to-the-south-pole-braam-malherbe-progress-update> (accessed 30 October 2012)

week one

# GATHERING

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*And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near.*

*– Hebrews 10:24-25*

*But the very next thing we should consider is something that easily slips from notice: the very fact that we are here – that on a Sunday morning, one of the few times that the city's streets are quiet and even the steady hum of consumption and production gets a bit quieter, here we find people streaming into a space to gather for worship of the triune God.*

*– James. K. A. Smith*

# thought for the week

As the title of Dan Kimball's book suggests, many people have decided that *They Like Jesus, But Not The Church*. But if we engage with Jesus seriously, it doesn't take long to recognise that he drives us back into relationship with other people. We cannot follow Christ alone. Any authentic spiritual quest requires us to journey with others who will support us, challenge us, and help us to change and grow.

Other people are necessary for our health. They function as both mirrors and windows. As mirrors, they reflect back to us our goodness and our brokenness, revealing both our capacity to make a contribution to the world, and the areas of our lives where we need to do more work. As windows, other people open us to new insights and experiences of God and of the world. So, even though you may be wary of the church, you may well want to consider making some kind of faith community an integral part of your own spiritual journey.

In the first moment of any meeting of any group of people a significant thing happens: we gather. Simply by choosing to gather we recognise that we need other people, and we open ourselves to be connected to them and shaped by them. The moment of gathering, mindfully experienced, can lead us into a sense of belonging that can challenge, change and bless us more than we could ever have imagined.

day one

# WE ARE WIRED to connect

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*Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him." – Genesis 2:18*

*Without connection there is something dangerous and wrong about the world. – David Nichols*

to read

Genesis 2:4-8, 18-25

to think about

It was only when I felt alone that I became really afraid. Clinging to the rock face just below the cable station on Table Mountain, I resisted the temptation to look down at the long, sheer drop below me. *People die on this mountain*, I thought. As I searched for my next handhold and tried to balance my weight to climb safely to the next ledge, I kept reminding myself that this was not actually a true rock-climbing expedition. It was more like a tough hike with a few sections of rock-scrambling. Above me I could hear the happy chatter of my wife, my teenage son and our three friends. A voice in my head challenged me: "If you fall, would they even know?" That's when I realised that, as silly as it sounded even to me, I was frightened by what we were doing. It

was also the moment when I knew I had to stay more connected with the group.

As soon as I was secure on a flat, stable surface, I called out to the others and asked if I could move into the centre of the group as we continued on. I gladly agreed when one friend offered to carry the backpack with our refreshments. There was no way anyone could have caught me should I have fallen, but just knowing that I would not be isolated gave me confidence. Alone I was afraid. Connected, I was at peace and somehow more secure.

Human beings are sociable creatures. We find our joy and our security in connecting with others. As infants we cannot survive alone, and as adults, we need friends and family to keep us safe and healthy.

In Genesis, just after the world is created, God forms the first human being. As soon as the breath of life enters his clay-formed body, a search begins for a suitable companion for this lone man. All the animals are paraded before him, and he names each one, but none of them is able to be a true friend to him. Finally, God decides to create the perfect match for Adam – another human being who is completely like him, but very different. When the man first sets eyes on the woman, he exclaims in joy, "At last! This one is bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh!"<sup>1</sup>

This story, written to the Jews who had been conquered and carried into exile by the Babylonians, was meant to reassure God's people that they had not been abandoned. *God had created them to be connected to God and to one another.* As God had not ignored the loneliness of the first human being, so God would not ignore the loneliness of his exiled people.

Science agrees with the Scriptures that we are wired to connect. The University of Miami's Touch Research Institute has conducted extensive studies on the effects of touch on human beings. The results indicate that "...touch lessened pain, improved pulmonary function, increased growth in infants, lowered blood

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:23

glucose and improved immune function”.<sup>2</sup> Connection contributes to our health. Disconnection damages it.

But, we don't need science or the Bible to tell us that we're wired to connect. We know it in the depth of our souls. We also know that we live in a connected universe. Every ecosystem on our planet is a carefully balanced set of relationships between organisms and environment. On every level, from microscopic particles to planets and stars, the universe connects and works together to sustain life.

That's why we cannot find joy, meaning and fulfilment without deep relationships. That's why isolation is used in prisons and prisoner of war camps as the harshest of punishments. That's why, when characters are separated and threatened in horror movies, we find it so terrifying.

No matter how much we may want to be free to satisfy our personal dreams and desires, we all share the longing to know and be known, to love and be loved. That's why Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. That's why, when Jesus proclaimed that God's Reign had come, he formed a community to show what it looks like.

If we want to find our place in the world, if we long to live a life of meaning, abundance, purpose, fulfilment and joy, we have to learn to belong. It is only as we acknowledge our need to connect, and as we work to create strong relationships with friends, family and neighbours, that we are able to become the people God made us to be – the people we know in our hearts we want to be. When we fail to find a place to truly and honestly belong, we are stunted in our growth toward wholeness, becoming broken and even destructive. Larry Crabb suggests “...that the root of all our personal and emotional difficulties is a lack of togetherness, a

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<sup>2</sup> Bauer, Mary, *The Importance of Human Touch*, (Published at LivesStrong.com, March 30, 2011): [http://www.livestrong.com/article/186495-importance-of-human-touch/?utm\\_source=popslideshow&utm\\_medium=a1](http://www.livestrong.com/article/186495-importance-of-human-touch/?utm_source=popslideshow&utm_medium=a1) (accessed 16 August 2012)

failure to connect that keeps us from receiving life and prevents the life in us from spilling over onto others.”<sup>3</sup>

We are wired to connect, but until we learn to make the daily choice to live as connected people, we will never really know the life-giving power of true belonging. And we will miss out on the abundant gifts that can only be found in relationship with others.

## to do

Take some time today to sit still in a quiet place. Begin by closing your eyes and focussing on your breath. Feel the rise and fall of your chest as you inhale and exhale. Then allow your mind to reach out. Become aware of the environment in which you are sitting. Listen for the sounds, feel the temperature, and notice how much life is going on around you. Now allow your mind to reach out even further. Let your thoughts take in your whole country, the world, and even the universe. Sit with this awareness for a few moments and then allow yourself to feel the connectedness of it all. Become aware of God’s Spirit moving within you, and within the whole cosmos. Then, when you’re ready, open your eyes and prepare to carry this sense of connectedness with you into the rest of your day.

## to pray

God of Love, you have made me to connect with you and with others, and I open my heart to love.

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<sup>3</sup> Crabb, Larry, *Connecting*, (Nashville, Word Publishing, 1997), 32.

# to explore together

## ICE BREAKER

Tell the story of a gathering with other people in which you had a lot of fun, felt really welcomed, or learned a lot.

## WORSHIP

Take a moment to look around the group and become aware of how special it is that you have gathered together. Then, remember any members who are not present. Spend a moment in prayer, giving thanks for your group and your gathering. Sing or read a gathering hymn or poem together.

Allow a moment for each person to share a specific prayer request either for themselves or someone else, and then pray for these needs together.

Close with the Lord's Prayer and singing or reading a hymn affirming the gift of the faith community.

## READING

Psalm 133

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out for you in this week's reflections?
2. Share stories of harmony, and the lack of it, in the community of faith. How have these experiences affected you?
3. Do you wrestle with the fear of connecting with others? How does this affect you? What can you do to overcome it?
4. What benefits can be found in learning to belong in a community of faith? How does worship help us receive these benefits?
5. How can you commit a little more to living a "gathered" life?



week two

# called

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*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light.*

*– 1 Peter 2:9 CEB*

*This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.*

*– George Bernard Shaw*

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