Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.

FAITH FEEDS GUEST GUIDE
SUFFERING
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The FAITH FEEDS program is designed for individuals who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host facilitates conversation using the C21 Center’s biannual magazine, C21 Resources.

The FAITH FEEDS GUIDE offers easy, step-by-step instructions for planning, as well as materials to guide the conversation. It’s as simple as deciding to host the gathering wherever your community is found and spreading the word.

All selected articles have been taken from material produced by the C21 Center.
“There is no better wood for feeding the fire of God’s love than the wood of the Cross.”
—St. Ignatius of Loyola

Here are two articles to guide your FAITH FEEDS conversation. We suggest that you select one that will work best for your group, and if time permits, add in the second. In addition to the original article, you will find a relevant quotation, summary, and suggested questions for discussion. We offer these as tools for your use, but feel free to go where the Holy Spirit leads.

This guide’s theme is: Suffering
As he’s entered middle age, Franciscan Father Richard Rohr, who has been riding the spirituality circuit for more than 30 years, has started to think about life in halves: the first dedicated to establishing boundaries and a sense of self in one’s own group, the second to opening oneself to a more universal vision of the world.

You’ve said that spirituality is different in the two halves of life. What do you mean by that?

In a nutshell, the task in the first half of life is the development of identity and boundaries. One must develop a necessary concern for the self: “Am I special? Am I chosen? Am I beloved?” Unfortunately it often takes the form of “Am I right?” leading to either/or thinking.

The accounts for much of our contemporary confusion, it seems to me. The first half of life is concerned with the container; the second with the contents. But most people become preoccupied with the container.

Can you give an example of a first-half-of-life person?

Let’s look at a typical military school cadet. Who would not admire him? His pants are creased; his hair is cut; he’s clean; he’s polite; he’s on time; he loves God and country. If I need to hire an employee, give me a West Point cadet. He’ll do what he’s told. Great stuff, but don’t for a second call it the Gospel.

But unfortunately, I think we have. For many of us, that’s what it means to be a Christian, and that not only misses the point, it openly obstructs it. Remember when Jesus said: “Your virtue must surpass the virtue of the scribes and Pharisees.” It’s a virtue of sorts but not yet what he is talking about.

A mere concern for order, purity, identity, self-esteem, and self-image is necessary to get you started. You have to have an ego to let go of your ego. You
have to have a self to die to yourself, but the creation of a positive self-image is not the issue of the Gospel. Quite the contrary. That’s probably why Jesus did not start teaching until he was 30 and seems to have almost exclusively taught adults. Once you teach something like “love your enemies,” you’re not talking about tit-for-tat morality anymore. That kind of thinking is not understandable to people still involved in the tasks of the first stage of life. In fact, it appears dangerous and heretical to them.

How does someone move from the first half of life to the second?

The two stages are not primarily chronological, although they can be affected by chronology. Normally there has to be a precipitating event that leads to transformation. I call it the “stumbling stone,” using a biblical term. Your two-plus-two world has to fall apart, Business as usual doesn’t work. Usually that involves something very personal: suffering or failure or humiliation.

The fair-haired boy or girl who just dances from success to success will easily stay in the first half of life forever. I think that’s what Jesus means by saying that’s harder for a rich man to enter the reign of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. It’s a strong statement.

Thomas Merton wrote about new monks coming in. He recommended that monasteries not accept anyone who had not gone through a spiritual crisis. He argued that they weren’t ready for religious life. In fact, he thought the monastery’s job might be to facilitate a spiritual crisis for many of the monks.

If you are lucky, God will lead you to a situation you cannot control, you cannot fix, or you cannot even understand. At that point true spirituality begins. Up to that point is all just preparation.

Does suffering always lead to the second half of life?

Not always. Sometimes it just leads you to circle the wagons of your own little group. It depends on whether you deal with your suffering in secular space or sacred space.

The secular response to suffering is to fix it, control it, understand it, look for someone to blame. You learn nothing. Unless suffering pulls you into sacred space, it doesn’t transform you. It makes you bitter.

In sacred space, if you can somehow see God in it, suffering can lead you to the universal experience of human suffering, even identification with the suffering of God. At that point, you’re moving into the second half of life. The questions are now more mystical than merely moral.

Are you in danger of idealizing suffering?

Yes. But I’m not saying go out and search for it. Suffering is inevitable, and if you can be convinced that it is a teachable moment and not something to run from, you’re doing yourself a great favor.

There are really only two paths to transformation: prayer and suffering. But because few of us just walk into a wonderful journey of surrendered prayer, you can really say there is only one path, which is suffering.

That’s why Jesus talks about the Way of the Cross so much. Until your nice, coherent interpretation of reality has been beaten up a bit, why would you let go of it? Some form of suffering is the only thing strong enough to destabilize the ego, in my opinion.

What specific experiences can cause this to happen?

Loss of a job can be a big one, especially if you’re very invested in your work. Death, of course, is the biggest of all, especially the death of someone close or an unjust death. A major humiliation is another way. I know a lot of priests who have come to God through being accused-rightly or wrongly-of sexual abuse. The public persona isn’t there anymore, so who am I now?

Moral failure is a common biblical pattern that leads to the second half of life, as we see very clearly in both Peter and Paul. Somewhere along the way my own moral failures have the power to get me to finally fall into the mercy for a loving God. If I lied to that person or I used that woman, I have to ask myself, “What kind of person am I that I did that?”

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest of the New Mexico Province and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) in Albuquerque, New Mexico
“I think [God] wants us to love, and be loved. But we are like children, thinking our toys will make us happy and the whole world is our nursery. Something must drive us out of that nursery and into the lives of others, and that something is suffering.”
—C. S. Lewis

Summary
In this interview, which first appeared in U.S. Catholic, Father Richard Rohr explores the meaning of suffering. He claims that a person can live his or her life in one of two “halves,” either a state characterized by blind obedience and legalistic morality, or one that is more mystical and meaningful, having been broken open by suffering. In the face of painful moments or difficult circumstances, the Christian is invited to more perfectly understand the teachings of Jesus about carrying one’s cross and helping others to carry theirs.

Questions for Conversation
1. Do you agree with Rohr’s categories of the first and second halves of life? Why or why not? Which do you think you currently are in?
2. Rohr writes, “If you are lucky, God will lead you to a situation you cannot control, you cannot fix, or you cannot even understand. At that point true spirituality begins.” Have you had one of these pivotal, transformational moments or seen it in another person’s life? Describe that experience.
3. Rohr makes the claim that suffering with faith, or suffering in a sacred space, helps us to see God in difficult circumstances, helps us to have compassion for others, and helps us to understand God’s own suffering. Do you think he’s right that faith makes a difference when it comes to the question of suffering?
My beautiful, loving wife, Jessica, and I were blown up in the name of God. Our bodies were torn apart and our psyches shattered in the name of religion. We were casualties of a religious war. At least that’s what we were led to believe.

This may seem reductionist, but most of the great religions have three central tenets: love of God, love of self, and love of neighbor. This is true for Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and yes, Islam as well. Ultimately, religious faith is about love, as so well evidenced by the simple message of Jesus in the Gospels. We may all have different customs, languages, symbols, or stories, but ultimately we’re all talking about love. So if anyone conducts themselves in a nonloving manner, and certainly if they act with hatred and evil in the name of God, their actions are not authentically religious. Period. Regardless of how much they pray, speak God’s name, or subscribe to being a steward of God, they are nothing of the sort if they act with malice.

In fact, as I learned from my clinical psychology training, we may even describe someone who says that they act in the name of God, but does nothing of the sort, as having delusions of grandeur. Somehow their minds have been deceived into assuming that if they really believe that hatred for some others is God’s
will, then they will be granted salvation. If this view seems hypocritical, perverted, or disconnected from reality, it’s because it is. It is sacrilegious rather than religious. All truly religious leaders have attempted to unite people—bringing them together for a common good and to inspire hope through words and deeds. This particularly includes Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad. Their intent was to make peace rather than war and violence. We still speak of them and carry forward their message because of their everlasting example of love. As their religious followers, we too hope to be remembered for our love.

Terrorism is desperation. It is a desperate search for attention and legitimacy. But these terrorist attempts will never accomplish their end goal. Terrorists may colonize some people’s social conscience from time to time, but their message can never finally triumph. That is because terrorism seeks to pull us apart. It is the antithesis of unification and love, and of any religion that claims to promote peace.

We, as citizens of a divided world, must have the wisdom to know the difference between true religion and terrorism, love and hate. It is not an easy distinction to maintain, but once we possess this knowledge, we have an obligation to one another to be loving—to demonstrate for the world a love that is pure, genuine, and for the greater good of all.

I experienced this love firsthand after the Marathon bombings. While the world saw the attack through a lens of “radical Islamic terror,” and some were understandably overcome with anger and despair, all I could see and experience was love. In the time it took for me to regain consciousness, a city had coalesced with a communal determination to spread compassion, generosity, and unity. For me the message was clear: loving and peaceful societies and people will prevail over hate.

In my eight years of Jesuit education at Boston College High School and Boston College, and two years of working for Jesuit schools or service programs, I learned that my faith is only as good as how I put it into practice. And my practice was only as good as the love it conveys. My best mentors—Jesuit or layperson—practice way more than they preach, and spread love with every deed. And when they preach, they do so with the intent of practice of a living faith: serving as catalysts for goodness and love.

Scripture advises us that we should turn the other cheek to violence. However, my Jesuit training has taught me that in addition to nonviolent resistance we should hit back with love. Violence, in all of its forms, is meant to separate us and instill fear in our hearts. The most powerful antidote is love. It cannot just be about the absence of evil; it must be about the omnipresence of love.

Since that fateful April afternoon in 2013, Jessica and I have made it our mission to respond with love. We have attempted to sow compassion by advocating for people with disabilities and using our family’s experience to care for others who have been scarred by physical and psychological trauma. Caring for people has always been a part of our identities, but now it is essential to our daily existence and our way forward together. We choose to respond this way because that’s how we were raised and educated in our faith. It is also how we have seen the world at its best. We encounter life this way because it is how countless individuals responded to our tragedy—with love.

While hate took months to plan, and caused so much pain and suffering in the lives of those it sought to destroy, love responded in an instant. Complete strangers, fueled by human instinct, became our life lines and took responsibility for our welfare as if we were one of their own. If that is not a true indication of the power of the human spirit, then I do not know what is. No longer do we have to wonder what it means to be my brother’s and sister’s keeper.

Boston College taught me that love will always triumph over hate. I hope to live out the rest of my life honoring that lesson.

Patrick Downes is a graduate of the Lynch School of Education and recently received his doctorate in psychology. Patrick and his wife, Jessica Kensky, were severely injured in the Boston Marathon bombings and helped to raise over two hundred and fifty thousand to endow the BC Strong Scholarship to support a student with a physical disability.
“Suffering can refine us rather than destroy us because God himself walks with us in the fire.”
—Timothy Keller

Summary
In this deeply personal essay, BC alumnus Patrick Downes reflects on how he and his wife chose to respond to an act of terrorism: both were severely injured in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. In the wake of profound suffering and loss, Patrick and Jessica witnessed boundless compassion and decided to move forward in faith by spreading love in the face of hate. According to Patrick, “Violence, in all of its forms, is meant to separate us and instill fear in our hearts. The most powerful antidote is love.”

Questions for Conversation
1. What do you think about Patrick’s claim that because religion is ultimately about love, those who act in an unloving manner in the name of religion are “nothing of the sort?”
2. Do you think you would or could respond in a similar way to an experience like this? Have you chosen to love in the face of hatred or division, or have you seen inspiring examples of this?
3. How does the Christian faith help you to navigate the mystery of suffering, especially suffering that takes place at the hands of others?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For more information about Faith Feeds, visit bc.edu/c21faithfeeds

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