

Dallas Willard: The Kind of Person You Could Go Deeper With about Spiritual Things

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At the Society of Biblical Literature conference in November, 2014, I gave a tribute to Dallas Willard regarding how he acted as an informal spiritual director to many of us. What made him the kind of person that people could go deeper with spiritually? What was it about him—and can be true of us as well—that somehow invites people to share their spiritual lives? Why could people talk with him easily about what I think is primary topic of spiritual direction: how they've been interacting with God lately or not?

First of all, Dallas was radically available to whomever wished to talk. He understood that a speaker or teacher is also a spiritual companion. In his Fuller Seminary class and other situations, he talked with all willing students in one-on-one 30 minute sessions. When asked for counsel or advice, he gave it. And he prayed for folks—prayers that people have repeated to me ten years later.

Even in a supposedly non-spiritual setting such as USC classes, Dallas was extraordinarily available to students. In the “Rate the Prof” website, a student said that talking with Dallas was the highlight of his college career.

Informal conversations in hallways became direction situations. This happened to me the first time I met him. After one of his talks, I was thanking him for writing *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, which I had reviewed for a magazine. In my earnestness to be authentic, I said something about not trying to ingratiate myself to him (because, I confessed, I had done that before; Dallas somehow got confessions out of me).

Then he made a ridiculous suggestion, saying, “Why don't you try not affirming anyone for a while, and see what happens?” I knew this had to be wrong because encouraging people is a good thing, so I thanked him, but dismissed the suggestion.

But as time passed, I found that each time I started to encourage someone, I paused and reflected. I listened to my motives, wondering: Is God leading me to do this? Or am I trying to get people to like me? Or admire me? Or look up to me? Sometimes I was truly selfless, but other times (ugh!) I secretly wanted to be loved and admired. Dallas's suggestion became one of many steps that helps me move away from impression management.

Why did Dallas make it easy—in fact, inevitable—for people to talk to him about their life with God? I think he had three things that many of us want.

1) An Interactive Life with God. He understood that “knowledge” in biblical language and tradition is never mere acquisition of facts. It is always interactive relationship (*Knowing Christ Today*, p. 52). This opposes the post-Enlightenment bifurcation of knowledge that separates academic/left-brain/linear thinking from experiential/right-brain/intuitive knowing. (*KCT*

exploded this “great divorce” of analytical and intuitive knowledge in its content as well as its structure.) In fact, in *KCT* Dallas went so far as to question someone’s knowledge of God if they did not love: “If you are not reconciled to living in love as the center of your life and you are not *actually living* that way, any knowledge you may have of Christ will be shallow and shaky at best” (p. 93).

So I, as a Bible teacher, don’t truly know God or have knowledge of God unless I love. Any teaching of Scripture or Christ or faith will be shallow and shaky if I am not living with love as the center of my life. So from Dallas I learned that all tasks are to be done with love: all emails sent and received with love (never just cleaning out the Inbox); all papers graded with love.

Dallas himself blended academic knowledge and experiential knowledge so that Scripture study and meditation were not separate disciplines. He practiced a blend of “meditative study” and described it to me this way: “You come to the Word and say, Let it speak to me, even if it contradicts anything I believe. You read a text with openness, repentance, and humility. “ The result is that he connected the dots between scriptural ideas and verses like no one else I knew.

2) Spiritual Life Is Caught as well as Taught. As a member of his advisory council, I pressed Dallas to stay home and write but as the years passed, I relented because I saw the dynamic effect of his in-person presence. For example one of my directees who is a former lawyer retooling as a pastor, heard Dallas interviewed for thirty minutes at a big conference. She commented to me: “He was the only one on the platform who wasn’t trying to prove anything.” She’d spent years of schooling and vocation trying to prove things and she recognized when someone wasn’t doing that.

Because life with God is caught as well as taught, Dallas knew that a teacher’s job was so much more than imparting information. In his “How to Live One Day with Jesus” workshop, he talked about this: “As you engage with people, *will* the peace and joy which you are experiencing to pass from you like living waters to those you are engaged with. It is in your body. You will it to enter others. Watch it happen. Sometimes by speaking, other times in complete silence.”

3) Contours of the Spiritual Life. People often get stuck on their spiritual journey because there’s no one to help them navigate it. But Dallas understood it. For example, he said that some people need extensive prayer and healing ministry before they attempt to do spiritual disciplines. A broken person who desperately needs to be well-loved often turns spiritual disciplines into legalisms or magic formulas. Then they then burn out. In other words, relationship with God is essential in spiritual disciplines.

Dallas also understood the corrosive nature of guilt and how it ruins people’s life with God. He said that guilt over not having a “quiet time” was the most frequent concern Christians talked with him about. All that guilt grieved him.

Dallas emphasized that the first freedom we have is where we put our mind. He lived this by knowing Scripture by heart. He didn't merely memorize it in a rote way. He took it into himself; it flowed from him in a natural way. It formed the way he thought and acted.

Finally, Dallas understood the role of the body in spiritual life. He wrote about this extensively in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, and then so practically in *Renovation of the Heart* where he included an annual releasing of our body to God (pp. 172-173). Arrogance "lives" in parts of our body and we need to address it directly—the way we hold our shoulders and cross arms and look at people. His own posture of walking with his hands behind his back was infectious in its peacefulness and humility. Many of us unconsciously copied him in this. One friend said that after he returned from the Fuller class he had begun doing it so much, that once when he got irritated his son said to him, "Dad, put your hands behind your back and you'll be OK." And he was.

In all of this, Dallas never directed people to himself but always to Jesus. That's why we trusted him implicitly.

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