An Interview with Dr. C. John Weborg

Conducted by Rob Peterson with Paul Koptak

Dr. John Weborg has spent his academic career thinking about the intersection of theology and spiritual formation and was instrumental in encouraging the start of the spiritual direction training program at North Park Theological Seminary. Rob Peterson developed the following interview questions based upon Weborg's article "Living with God" (p. 3). This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Rob Peterson (RP): John, thank you so much for taking time to talk together about spiritual direction in light of your article "Living with God." You reflect on how seminarians are prepared for ministry by increasing their capacity to "experience experience." As you say, experience provides the material to work on the life task of living with God. I'd like to explore with you themes related to the ministry of spiritual direction that you highlight in this article. My first question is about your own experience of spiritual direction. How did these relationships of companionship support you in living with God, which is not always easy, as you say?

C. John Weborg (CJW): When I read that first question, I had to stop a bit because I never had a spiritual director, but I had an experience of it with my confirmation pastor. One morning I asked my mother how people knew they were Christian. She wasn't prepared to answer that before I left for country school that morning, so when I got home, she

told me she had made an appointment for me to talk with my pastor. He is the one who confirmed me, so she took me to see Pastor Carlson, and I told him about my question, how one knows that they are Christian. He looked at me. And this was his question: "Do you believe in Jesus?" And I said yes. Then he quoted Romans 10:9-10: "If you declare with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with your heart you believe and are justified, and with your mouth you profess your faith and are saved." That was his answer to me; he never asked, "Do you want to make sure?" or anything like that. It was this very simple direct quotation of Romans 10:9-10.

I thought about it later in life, because I read a piece by a German theologian whose name is Werner Elert. And this is the sentence that struck me: "The onset of faith is a pure mathematical point." Period. And I've meditated on that statement. "The onset of faith is a pure mathematical point" apparently means we can't really trace out causation and the steps of how things are refined. So that was one of the most important sentences I've ever read, because I don't know that it explains, but it certainly explored my question to the place of my satisfaction. Elert is a Lutheran and that quotation from Romans 10:9-10 comes as a promise. In Lutheran theology, promises are for the creation of faith. So that you make a promise, and it is the creation of faith. That conversation with Pastor Carlson was probably one of the most helpful, and one of the shortest I've ever had. That was a piece of spiritual direction that was very significant to me. I don't know if you could use the term "solve the problem," but it certainly brought strength and security to my life. And remember this, I was really quite young. He also said, "John, you don't trust your feelings. You trust the Word." Well, that was a big help.

I've also quoted the poet Rainer Maria Rilke who said (paraphrased): "Learn to love the questions. Someday you might live yourself into the answers." Open-ended listening is one way to love the questions. Listening is a form of giving language to the mute. Normally listening is taking the sounds from another or receiving it. We say, "I hear it." But listening as a form of giving has other nuances to it; to listen is to give the speaker space and time. Listening is a way that a listener gives himself or herself to the speaker. The more difficult the speech is, the self-giving of the listener is a gift of presence, especially when the speaker feels thwarted in some way. The listening of the listener conveys a presence not only to the speaker but for the speaker—sometimes in the face of embarrassing silence. It is a gift of friendship and companionship, even with silence.

It confers freedom to the speaker who may feel silenced, perhaps by fear that what is said would be offensive, or not understood. The listener gives language to the mute by inviting speech, even if that speech is troubled, inundated with pauses, or on the verge of retreat into silence. The listener by listening invites speech as a way to clarity and community, and thus offers a way to mitigate loneliness.

RP: In your article you highlight the complex and hazardous ways that God is imagined or portrayed by parents, school, or church. How might spiritual direction address the unhelpful or burdensome images of God that people carry in their hearts or lived experience?

CJW: I think we help people become students of the images of God. If you look up Isaiah 66:13 or Matthew 23:37, there are maternal references to God, that God nurtures us in our life. Another example is Isaiah 49:15: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you," says God. Just that one maternal reference of a mother holding a child, nursing, is a form of security. I think those maternal issues are very helpful because, for example in Matthew 23:37, Jesus says, "As a hen gathers her chicks, so I gather you." These maternal references speak of security and provision; just as the mother provides nurture for the child, so God provides nurture for us as well as protection and security.

RP: You've named the maternal images of God that are present in Scripture. But as you've interacted with students and others, so many images are not helpful, or that people cling to: a disappointed parent, or an angry parent, or a distant God. What reflections do you have about how spiritual directors might help people move away from unhelpful images toward more positive images?

CJW: My late wife, Lois, and I belonged to the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada because she was a musician. At one of the annual conferences we attended, a workshop conducted by a Scottish Presbyterian was on the Calvinistic tradition of singing the Psalms. The leader spoke about the Psalms engaging real life and introduced Psalm 88 that is pure lament. He spoke of another time when a member of his class, a Roman Catholic, said about Psalm 88: "If I would have known that I could talk to God that way, I could have gone back to mass long ago." I think we have to look at those texts that give us permission to

speak our mind to God—not as an act of unbelief, but as a matter of deeper trust, which is what happened to this person. If you've read Psalm 88 recently you know it's not a very pretty psalm.

RP: I like that you're inviting reflection on how we welcome or resist these images of God in Scripture. You say that in some ways education and spiritual formation are one long process of crisis stewardship. What crises have you had to steward? How did these experiences shape your life? And how did spiritual direction or spiritual companionship assist you in stewarding these experiences?

CJW: Well, the crisis I would refer to was when I was afflicted with polio when I was a junior in high school. It was a year before Jonas Salk developed the vaccine, and I was paralyzed totally from my hips on down and my abdominal muscles were also affected. I was hospitalized for ten weeks. I had to go through physical therapy, and I've never had pain equal to that in my life. We had to stretch loose all of the paralyzed muscles. The goal was to get my legs ninety degrees perpendicular to my body lying down, and that stretching was extremely painful. I don't know that I had anyone that I really talked to, except my parents who visited me almost every day. And when they came to the hospital, they couldn't come into the room. They had to visit at the door and because it was an epidemic, we were three patients to a room. So sometimes you had three parents trying to visit at the door. I mean, it was a lot to work with and to work through.

Now there's another part to this crisis. I don't think I used that word at the time, but when I was a student at North Park, I had to go to an orthopedic specialist because of scoliosis of the spine. And I had to take the elevated train downtown. Later, it came back to me—what an effect someone like me had on people who wanted to get on the el because I had to go up the steps to get on the elevated platform. But I could only go one step at a time and had to hold on to the railing, so I didn't fall, and I don't know how many people I blocked or slowed up. But that later became a real cause of reflection on the way we talk about people who are poor or people who are ill equipped, intellectually or physically, how they are said to become—and these are awful words—a drain on society. How they hold up progress, how they interfere. Just think of the controversy it was when towns had to tear out their curbs and put in wheelchair access. Of course that increased the cost, or maybe it raised taxes. I've replayed this memory of how the whole experience of polio

had a sociological dimension that I had no idea about at the time.

RP: In the article you invite us to see that the difficult hardships we face need to be stewarded well. Could you say more about what that stewardship looks like? And why would we steward hardships rather than just run from them?

CJW: Because you can't flee—I mean, I couldn't. And so you learn to live with them, but you also learn that they may not be in their final form when you first experience them so that you have a chance for growth, for healing, and for development, which takes time. It takes discipline, and it takes effort, but you don't make up your mind about that before the time. You leave that future open, because when you've seen yourself mature a bit and you've watched the development as I did, you see that you can make progress, although you do not know where it will end, or if it will. But at the same time, you are encouraged to keep at this work of healing and development.

RP: Were there moments in this journey with polio and your challenge with scoliosis that you would say that you had a sense of the closeness of God, a sense of God anywhere in this story for you?

CJW: I think at the time, I wasn't asking those questions. That's the most honest answer I can give you. But later in life, I could look back on it and see the work of God as the days went on. I think in spiritual direction we are helping people look back over their lives and see what derivatives they get out of that. They might be surprised at how much they find that God was with them at a particular time.

RP: Life, it seems, leads everyone to moments of mystery, paradox, or heartbreak. At these moments, casual talk about God is unhelpful, as you say in your article. What is needed, you write, is an invitation to talk with God—God as subject, not subject matter. What do you think are helpful postures and practices from our pietistic tradition that could help us in living with God during times of confusion or pain?

CJW: We have something like a conventicle in our church, but it's specialized as a grief recovery group. It's a place where people can openly discuss their grief and their experience of death. Then we have sermon discussion groups. We have a prayer chain where people can call a spe-

cial number and make known a special need that is personal or family based. Congregants can call that number and become intercessors for the need there. We have Bible study and work groups for men and women. What we have tried to do is to open up various spaces where people can engage their life with each other, using each other as a support. By making known the needs that are present then, the church starts to function as a support for people. We're more than just a passive listening group; we're an engaging group.

RP: You have been a student of Pietism and our pietistic history for many years. In your article you root so many of your observations in the text of Scripture. A pietistic habit, no doubt. But in addition to Scripture, your perspectives on Pietism's influence on the Evangelical Covenant Church has included deeper investigation into the mothers and fathers of our tradition. In the last few years, you've shared with spiritual direction students your interest in Lina Sandell. Can you say a little bit about her and why you think her life may be of relevance to Covenanters and to our topic?

CJW: Well, I don't know how much is known about her. Lina's father was a Lutheran pastor, so she grew up engaged with the church. At the age of twelve she had an illness that made her identify with the daughter of Jairus in the Gospels. She experienced healing and regained the ability to walk. And then, when she was twenty-six, her father was on a boat and swept off the deck by a massive wave and drowned. She married Carl Oskar Berg in 1867, and they had a child that died at birth. And so, she had many experiences of suffering.

Her dad, because of his education, had taught her three different languages: English, German, and French. She read an extensive amount of American literature and translated American gospel songs into Swedish. She was well equipped to engage life beyond her own self and her own suffering. If you study her hymnody, you'll find the theme of friendship with God that has become a major part of the theology of the early Mission Friends (who are the ancestors of today's Covenanters)—joy and eternity are often found in the last stanza of the hymns. She had a real sensitivity to nature. It's interesting how many of her hymns take on nature, as, for example, "In the Springtime Fair" (*The Covenant Hymnal*, #340).[1] Her husband was a businessman who went bankrupt, and there

[1] Hymn references in this interview are from *The Covenant Hymnal*: *A Worshipbook* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1996).

were accusations of mismanagement which were later cleared up. So, her experience was not only that of illness, but of the vicissitudes of married life—having to work with her husband so that they got themselves back on their feet. Lina went through an awful lot in her life that that found its way into our history.

RP: Several times in "Living with God" you make the case that Jesus was formed through the Psalms. Through them, he prayed his real experiences. You suggest the importance of knowing the faith of Jesus, not just having a belief in Jesus. Would you say more about that?

CJW: I think there are times in spiritual direction when people can actually encounter how human Jesus was, and how the Bible is not ashamed of that. Jesus said on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" How many times has that been asked by ordinary Christian people? And now we have Jesus praying it. That's one example. There's another in the book of Hebrews 2:11–15; 5:7–9, and 6:10. This is Hebrews 2:10: "In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered." Now I don't know that we really pay much attention to this statement that the pioneer of our salvation should be made perfect through what he suffered—that both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. Now here's Hebrews 5:7–9:

> During the days of Jesus's life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he had suffered, and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

There are more, but when you're working with people in spiritual direction, it's fitting to say that Jesus prayed and asked the same kinds of things that you are asking.

We read that he was made perfect through suffering. If my memory of the Greek text is right, the word for "perfect" there means complete. It is one way to show people that Jesus endured suffering the same way that we do. If the question comes up, "What does it mean to be made perfect through suffering?" we can get away from the moralistic understanding

of that to the idea of completion. I think you could explore the direct need of what people are going through; that it is the source of so much pain. But are other things happening too? Are they learning something new in terms of growth? I find it very interesting that these texts are in the Bible, but they are seldom if ever touched in church, so people are ill-equipped to know about Jesus going through exactly what we do. He identifies with us because he was enduring all of those tests.

RP: That is a beautiful way to frame how Christ is our model and can walk with us, no matter what's going on in our story. You end the article this way: "God can be lived with, but not easily." Would you say more about that statement and how the ministry of spiritual direction could be a rich resource for anyone who finds resonance with the hardship of relating to God?

CJW: If those texts we just finished reading are looked at carefully, we might ask if or when we have felt silenced, not only by our experience, but silenced by God, as though God is anti-human. Remembering the person who encountered Psalm 88 and said, "If I had known I could talk to God that way, I could have returned to mass much sooner," I think we need to arm—if that's a good word—people with some key texts so that when they encounter life at its worst, they're able to speak about how bad their life is and that God will not reject them. I think that's one of the key things that I've learned from listening to people and reading these texts—that we are able to speak honestly with God, because when you speak honestly, you're speaking in faith. Not in faithlessness, but you're speaking in faith because your honesty and integrity go together. That's what I would want to work on.

There's a hymn in *The Covenant Hymnal*, #86, "I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry." It speaks to God's presence with us. "In the middle ages of your life, not too old and not too young, I'll be there to guide you through the night, to complete what I've begun." This is a powerful hymn, and it speaks in contemporary language to people.

Speaking of contemporary concerns, I don't read a whole lot of magazines, but I do take *Time*. In the issue for March 11, 2024, there are three articles that could help spiritual directors understand the forces that are going on in the world: 1) "Why Are We More Exhausted Than Ever?" 2) "20-Somethings Lost Something in the Pandemic," a wonderful attempt to understand the youth culture, and 3) "The New Anti-Semitism." Spiritual directors need to keep their ears to the ground to know what

the people they talk with are coping with. It's important to be able to identify these cultural forces that are so powerful.

RP: I would love to give you the last word of this interview.

CJW: It might sound a little bit esoteric, but when I was writing my dissertation, I saw that these German Pietists had an uncanny way of speaking about the role of fear. Johann Albrecht Bengel wrote about two different kinds of fear. One of them could be translated "delicate fear." That is when the person has a due appreciation of the costliness of grace. We then live our lives carefully so that we don't take the grace of God for granted and think, well, God is gracious and I'm a sinner anyway, so I can just live, and I'll ask God for forgiveness. Then there's something he would refer to as "distressing fear." Fear becomes disconcerting and scrupulous when it roots itself in our unworthiness and uncertainty about God's gracious will. When delicate fear is present, one has taken seriously God's gracious will to redeem people as they are.

In "Amazing Grace," we sing, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear." I have no idea if church people have ever thought about what it is they're being taught about fear when it comes to grace, because the common image is something free and God just extends it to us. This whole discussion of fear is interesting and important. It teaches us not to take grace for granted. At the same time, it teaches us not to magnify our sin. That is a real act of humility, because we could do that as an excuse for not wanting to connect with God. We have a hymn by Lina Sandell, "Hide Not Your Face," #769, that incorporates fear. "Grant, then, O Lord, that I fear and adore you." Those two words, that I fear and adore, have a long history in Lutheran Pietism. I've always been struck by the measure of fear, not as something bad, but as having a very important role to play.

RP: Would you make the connection between this thoughtful articulation of two types of fear with those who sit with people as a director? How might this conceptualization of fear be a resource for a spiritual director?

CJW: If we take the word "fear," we can say that it asks us to take God seriously, that God promises forgiveness of sins. And if we start magnifying our sins, then we're getting into distressing fear, because we're putting off the promise of God and dwelling on ourselves and the way we perceive ourselves. Then that fear has done its work in an unhealthy

way because it has turned us away from God's promise.

RP: John, you have been a gift to so many and it's been a delight just to listen to you reflect on several of these themes. Thank you for your work and thank you for your ministry to so many people in the Covenant and beyond.

CJW: You are welcome.

We thank God for our brother John Weborg, for his faithful ministry over many years, and his clarity of thought. We are blessed by his positive contributions to the work of spiritual direction, pastoral care, and theological reflection. May God continue to bless him and watch over him as he navigates increasing challenges. May he experience joy, peace, and strength through Christ our Lord. Amen.