

# On Becoming

A Collection of Meditations Curated by Art House Dallas



# Contents

FOREWORD BY ART HOUSE DALLAS

## CHAPTER 1 **BECOMING THROUGH CHRIST**

- 4 Through and in Jesus Christ  
by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- 8 Casey by Catherine Prescott
- 9 Ordinary Saints by Malcolm Guite

## CHAPTER 2 **ALL LIVING IS LOCAL**

- 14 Public Spaces and Incarnational Ministry  
by Eric O. Jacobsen
- 24 Mending Wall by Robert Frost
- 26 Gemeni by Kyle Steed

## CHAPTER 3 **NEIGHBORLINESS**

- 30 What does civility actually mean, and is it enough?  
from On Being with Krista Tippett
- 36 The Good Samaritan by Vincent Van Gogh
- 37 All My Friends Are Finding New Beliefs  
by Christian Wiman

## CHAPTER 4 **MAKING PEACE WITH CREATION**

- 42 Reconciliation With The Land  
by Norman Wirzba
- 46 Refraction by Phil Irish
- 47 The Peace of Wild Things by Wendell Berry

## CHAPTER 5 **BEAUTY & JUSTICE**

- 52 Why Care About Justice?  
by Nicholas Wolterstorff
- 66 If Perhaps by Chance, I Find Myself Encaged...  
by Sedrick Huckaby
- 67 Justice by Langston Hughes

## Foreword

*“For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it.”*

—Wendell Berry

Our places shape our loves and longings as well as our knowing and doing. Put simply, who we become is intimately related to how we imagine where we are. As the craftsmanship of God’s artistry, human beings are made for imaginative responsibility in community and creation. Though much is broken in the world and ourselves, the resurrection of Jesus Christ gives the transformed vision necessary to see the tangible facets of life woven into the fabric of becoming.

This collection of art is an invitation to the idea and reality of becoming, not individual self-actualization but a rich growth into the fullness of Christ. In Him, the particularities of life in creation become the raw materials for cultivation in community—this song, this painting, this meal, this prayer, this poem. The flesh and blood Word, who “moved into the neighborhood”, has called us to live with creative responsibility and become who we were always meant to be, God’s beloved children.

The anthology you hold before you is the loving creation of a community of friends in hope of transformation. Each chapter includes a text, poem, visual art, and scripture, along with questions for prayerful reflection to draw you further up and further in the journey of becoming. We hope you will find the authors, poets, and visual artists to be wise guides and friends as you enter into a companioned journey of becoming in Christ through the door of imagination and deeper to the heart. May this collection attune our senses to the sacred character of how we live and create in the particular place we find ourselves now. In all our searching for truth, justice, and beauty: to become fully, we must first be found in creation by the pursuing love of God, who asks, “Where are you?”

—Art House Dallas

## 2

# All Living is Local

*“And so it is necessary that a love of locale be recovered: this street, these trees, this humidity, these houses. Without reverence for the local, obedience floats on the clouds of abstraction. Every time a rock is named, a flower identified, a house number located, a street walked, the gospel is served. By observing texture and color, by insisting on immediate particularity, space is cleared and location provided for yet another spin-off of the Incarnation, most of which came to its definitive form in small towns and down country roads.”*

—Eugene Peterson  
*Take and Read*

# Public Spaces and Incarnational Ministry

by Eric O. Jacobsen

Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.

—Proverbs 1:20–21

In real life, only from the ordinary adults of the city sidewalks do children learn—if they learn it at all—the first fundamental of successful city life: People must take a modicum of public responsibility for each other even if they have no ties to each other.

—Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

## ■ Public Spaces

There is a fifty-foot sidewalk in front of my house that runs perpendicular to my walkway. The sidewalk belongs to the city, but it is my responsibility to keep it clear of debris. If there has been any snow overnight, I am responsible for shoveling the sidewalk—by 9:00 A.M., according to the municipal code. I'm glad to do it, because this law makes sense to me. The sidewalk in front of my house is heavily traveled from about 8:00 A.M. to 5:30 P.M., mostly by university students. As I observe my “clients” on the sidewalk, I've noticed that most of them wear pretty sturdy hiking boots during the winter months, but some of them are in dress shoes, and others are on crutches or in wheelchairs. I think about all of these pedestrians and their needs as I shovel the loose snow and try to decide my strategy for dealing with the ice that has formed.

• • •

In the afternoons when the weather is good, I like to take my daughter Kate to the park. It's about a three-block walk and provides a good chance for us to catch up on the events of the day. Kate's favorite activities at the park are the swings, the slide, and a climbing ladder that makes a 45 ° climb up to the play structure. There are six swings and two slides that Kate likes. Usually, Kate will

be able to use either a swing or a slide when she wants to; however, every once in a while we have to wait our turn while another child enjoys it.

The climbing ladder is a little more complicated because it is used pretty continually. There are the toddlers who slowly go up the ladder and sometimes go down. They have more enthusiasm than language skills or foresight and will start climbing without realizing that there is a child at the top starting to come down. And then there are the big kids who tear up and down the ladder in a game of tag. They usually have the sense to choose the side of the ladder that is not being used by another child as they flee their pursuer. And then there are the in-between-age kids, like Kate, who are trying to be fair and take turns but must make difficult judgment calls, depending on who else is on the ladder.

• • •

On Saturday mornings in the summer, our family likes to go to the Farmers' Market downtown. We can catch the trolley about five blocks from our house and take it straight to the market. On the way there, we are an efficient little family unit—two adults, three kids, and a stroller. On the way back, however, we've got fresh produce in the stroller basket and bedding plants in the seat. One of us is juggling an infant, a diaper bag, and a sapling tree, and the other is tending to a couple of tired and hungry preschoolers. Invariably, as the driver holds the back door open for us, it is a community project getting us on and off the trolley. People are generally very nice about helping us out, and there are usually some very sympathetic parents riding with us.

### ▪ Loneliness in the Suburbs

These are three snapshots of my current life in Missoula. They are not very remarkable, except when I compare them to the month that I spent in the suburbs. The house that I was staying in was a beautiful house that sat on about five acres of land. In the morning, I would leave from the front door and get into my car—which was parked in the driveway. As I drove into town, I would adjust the immediate environment to my liking through the climate control and the tape deck of my car. I would park in the church lot and would go through the back door straight into my office. At the end of the day, I would drive back to the house and park in the driveway. After dinner I might read in the backyard or relax in the hammock.

On my days off, I wanted to explore the area, but there was no place nearby where it was clear for the public to park, and every parcel of land seemed to belong to an individual. There was no town to visit, so I usually ended up at some restaurant or shopping center. My free evenings were usually spent watching a rented movie.

The main difference between the life that I lived then and the life that I now live is the presence or absence of public spaces. A public space can be defined as a domain that is not controlled by an individual or a corporation, but is open for everybody to use. Sidewalks are public spaces. Benches usually are public spaces, as are parks and plazas. Public transit is a kind of public space. Streets appear to be public spaces, but for the most part, we experience them from the private sphere of our cars, so they function as private spaces.

Public spaces provide the neutral territory that is necessary for the formation of informal relationships and for the building up of existing relationships. Without public spaces, it can be very difficult to develop new relationships or, in some cases, to encounter other people at all. I remember my stint in the suburbs as being a particularly lonely time of my life. I had recently graduated from college, and many of my friends had moved out of the area. I was working full-time for the first time in my life, and I didn't have lots of free time to meet my social needs. If I'd had a group of friends in the area, I could possibly have put together a rich and varied social life through the private spheres that each one of them would have occupied. But as it was, I was miserable—despite living in the nicest house I ever expect to live in—because of a lack of public space.

We seem to have forgotten the value of public space in this country. Until about fifty years ago, public space would have been the first priority in our building projects. The best spots in town would be reserved for plazas or parks adjacent to important, monumental buildings. And no self-respecting neighborhood would be without ample sidewalks. But most of the postwar building efforts have shoved public spaces to the fringes, if they are included at all. Sometimes an out-of-the-way, odd-shaped parcel of land will be used for a park, and many streets in residential neighborhoods are built without sidewalks. We have trained ourselves to notice only the buildings in our communities—their size, number of rooms, and square footage. We no longer see the spaces between the buildings and their relationship to each other as of any importance.

This is the result, largely, of our love affair with the car. Our current building takes into account the needs of the car much more than it does the needs of the pedestrian. Where once there were front porches and inviting entryways, now there are two- and three-car garages that take up most of the frontage of our houses. At one time we built roads with sidewalks that were



interesting and pleasant for the pedestrian; now we widen roads constantly, making it impractical and unsafe to even cross the street. Daniel Kemmis has observed that if the inhabitants of an alien spaceship were to view our cities from an aerial perspective, they would probably come to the conclusion that the sentient and relational beings in our culture are the cars, because everything is designed to facilitate the smooth operation of, and relationships between, our cars. Human beings, if noticed at all, would be thought of as the servants of these greater beings.<sup>[1]</sup>

We, as Americans, love our cars because the car represents much that is valuable to us as a culture. Our cars represent a high level of freedom and independence—we can go where we want when we want to in our cars. Our cars represent power—we are reminded of the triumph of technology over the limitations of nature when we turn the key in the ignition and hear the roar of the engine. And our cars provide a comfortable level of privacy—we don't have to talk to or be seen by anyone we don't want to as we fly by at sixty miles per hour.

As Christians, however, we need to acknowledge that none of these values—freedom, independence, power, or privacy—are held in very high regard in the Bible. Instead, the Bible encourages us to submit to one another in love, to serve one another in humility, and to value relationships—even with strangers—above all else. And in calling us to these values rather than to the values we have adopted as Americans in the twenty-first century, the Bible's writers really have our best interest in mind. Ultimately, independence, power, and privacy in their extreme forms lead us to a lonely and distorted version of human existence. It's time that we call into question the assumption that the needs of the automobile should be met above all else. We need to build cities and neighborhoods that allow us to get out of our cars and get to know one another by paying attention to the age-old conception of public space.

#### ▪ Sharing, Incarnational Ministry, and Discourse

As a social creature and as a citizen, I would care deeply about the creation and preservation of significant public spaces in our communities because of how they facilitate relationships among people. However, as a Christian, I find even more compelling reasons to be interested in the idea of public space. Public spaces require us to share with one another, they allow us to truly dwell among our neighbors, and they provide a context for a healthy exchange of ideas among a free citizenry.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Kemmis, *personal interview, April 2000*.



## ***Sharing***

One essential quality of public spaces that is relevant to Christians is the necessity of sharing when we are in a public space. Public spaces force us to think about and interact with people we don't necessarily know. My life in Missoula is linked with college students, young children, and other families through the public spaces we share. Public spaces mitigate class differences—they are neither my turf nor your turf. And so they force us to relate to each other as equals.

The necessity of sharing creates the opportunity for learning about and practicing love. I don't always want to leave the warmth of my house to shovel the sidewalk for these students who walk by my house each day. On the other hand, there is nothing to prevent the fellow passengers on the trolley from scowling and rolling their eyes as our family struggles to get ourselves and all of our stuff through the door. As our children watch these interactions that I have with my community and practice their own interactions at the park, what they are learning, hopefully, is love. And as we talk about the love that God has for us and his desire that we love one another, these minor interactions provide the flesh-and-blood examples for our theoretical conversations.

## ***Incarnation***

Another potentially important quality of public spaces is how they provide a context for incarnational ministry. I sit on the local Young Life committee here in Missoula. Young Life is a para-church ministry that has revolutionized the way that the church looks at youth ministry. In particular, Young Life has developed and advocated what they call an incarnational approach to youth ministry. By incarnational ministry they mean that we don't sit around the church and try to convince youth to come to us, but we go and “meet kids where they're at.”

Young Life workers do a lot of “contact work,” which means that they are at the high schools, at the sporting events, and at the malls, getting to know young people and building relationships with them. The Young Life leader then uses the relationship base that has been developed with youth as a comfortable context to share Jesus Christ with that person. This incarnational approach to ministry has been a highly successful approach to youth ministry, and the church is slowly learning to emulate this model.

Incarnational ministry was not invented by Young Life. It is, in fact, the strategy that our Lord himself used with us. The Gospel of John tells us that the “Word became flesh and lived among us.”<sup>[2]</sup> God was not content to remain far off and beckon us to come to him; he entered into our world and

became one of us as a way to communicate his love. He not only came to us, but he dwelt among us. He lived his life in our midst and shared everyday activities with ordinary people.

The public spaces of first-century Palestine were an integral part of Jesus' ministry on earth and facilitated his incarnational approach with people. Certainly, Jesus spent time in the private spaces of other people's homes. He also ministered in the semiprivate realm of temple and synagogue. But by and large, most of his ministry took place in public spaces, where he risked relationship with people he didn't know and interacted with them on neutral territory.

One problem with taking on the suburban mentality as Christians today is that we can make it very difficult for ourselves to practice incarnational ministry. Can we really say that we are dwelling among even our neighbors when there is no sidewalk connecting our homes to each other and no park or plaza for us to bump into one another during our free time? If our normal, everyday activities rarely coax us out of our private spheres of home, garage, automobile, and office, how can we build relationships with those whom we don't already know?

Now, of course, if one is committed to an incarnational approach to ministry, one can practice it in any setting. Young Life thrives in many suburban locations. If a person is bold enough or committed enough, he or she will find a way onto the high school campus, the social circles of the shopping mall, or the parking lots of the minimarts to hang out with students. However, incarnational ministry is much more natural and comfortable in settings that have good public spaces.

### ***Discourse***

A final benefit of public space is how it can facilitate communal discourse. Perhaps we can approach this topic best by considering the issue of the mall. In many ways shopping malls have become the most enduring public space in American culture. And in many ways they function well as public spaces. They attract a variety of people of a variety of different ages, and they have sufficient common space for people to informally interact with one another. Malls can enrich community life by encouraging seniors to walk the mall before the stores open, by sponsoring rose shows and promotions for the local children's theater, and by providing a safe place for kids to trick-or-treat. But what malls cannot do is provide sufficient forum for the exercise of free speech and communal discourse.

<sup>2</sup> *John 1:14.*

As much as a mall functions as a public space, it is fundamentally a private commercial venture. Rose shows and school band concerts are one thing, but an antiwar folk singer or a group of antiabortion Christians is quite another.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, if the use of the common area of the mall does not contribute toward the commercial goals of the management, it will not be allowed to persist. This is not to blame mall owners in the least. They are business people who are accountable to a board of directors or stockholders and are given a particular mandate. However, it does provide a very good reason for us not to sit idly by while the mall becomes our only public space in this country.

As citizens of a democratic country, we ought to be very concerned that there is sufficient public space for expressions of free speech. I've seen Christians wearing gospel sandwich-boards at freeway off-ramps and at busy intersections because there is no other place to interact with the public at large. We must retain the right not only to speak our minds but also to have a viable audience. All members of a free society should desire this even if they might disagree with the point of view of whoever might want to express his or her views. And as Christians we especially ought to be concerned that there are adequate public spaces for us to be able to share the good news of the gospel openly as well as productively.

Already we show the effects of a deplorable lack of public space for these kinds of purposes. Since true public space for discourse has virtually dried up in the past fifty years, we have seen the emergence of some very poor substitutes. It appears as if public debate in this country goes on through the venue of bumper stickers, trash radio, and daytime talk shows. None of these venues provides real dialogue; rather, they reduce us all to very narrow and extreme camps on any given issue. They certainly don't convince anyone to think differently about anything, and they tend to bring out some of the worst examples of human interaction.

#### ▪ Praying for Sidewalks

It's not entirely true that we have forgotten about public space in this country. One does hear every now and again an impassioned plea for more parks for our children to play in. Or for more open space for recreation.

<sup>3</sup> *There is an interesting legal case that is relevant to this issue. In 1979 the California Supreme Court decided in favor of Michael Robins against Pruneyard Shopping Center that an individual does have the right to use a privately owned shopping center to solicit signatures from a petition not directly related to commercial purposes. This is, of course, a contested ruling, and this kind of behavior continues to be prohibited in many malls.*

But as Jane Jacobs reminded us forty years ago, parks are one of the most overrated types of public space and sidewalks are among the most underrated.<sup>[4]</sup> Some parks are used by people only four hours per day if they are used at all, and many parks (if they are underused) can be downright dangerous. But good sidewalks get almost continual use and can increase the safety of an area, provide a setting for informal contact, and assimilate children into the community's life. Before we conclude our discussion of public spaces, we will take one last look at the lowly sidewalk.

There is an Ace Hardware about a half a mile from my home. Typically, I find myself there a couple of times a week (or even a couple of times a day) depending on what kind of project I'm working on. I few years ago, I tried to walk to Ace with my daughter—who had just been born. She was fighting sleep, and the stroller always seemed to work when nothing else would. It was a beautiful day and I wanted to be out enjoying it and seeing people. On the first four blocks of sidewalk in my neighborhood, we had a lovely time. We saw people who had seen the "It's a Girl!" sign in our yard but hadn't yet seen Kate, and we talked to neighbor kids who were out enjoying the spring weather.

Once we crossed Higgins Avenue and got onto Brooks, however, everything changed. There would be a sidewalk for a block, and then it would end and we would have to traverse a parking lot. Then we would have to detour three blocks because there wasn't a sidewalk or parking lot—only landscaping that our stroller couldn't navigate. Not only did I become exhausted and frustrated, we didn't encounter a single person on the last seven blocks to Ace Hardware. No one had intended for someone to walk in this area. The sidewalks, where they existed, were just an afterthought by an individual business owner and did not create any sort of continuous walking path. I found myself at Ace, frustrated and tense, and decided from then on to take my car when I had to travel on Brooks.

Over the last few months, there have been construction crews going block by block and putting a continuous sidewalk on Brooks. I don't know whose idea this is or who's paying for it, but every time I see them link one more block to the next I give a silent cheer. I've even found myself praying for this project in my daily devotional. I don't know if I'm the only person in Missoula who is excited about this public works project—I'm pretty sure I'm the only one praying for it. However, as a Christian, I can't help but see how this small extension of our public space will not only improve our quality of life, but also allow us to have a greater impact in our community.

<sup>4</sup> *Jacobs, Death and Life of Great American Cities.*

I feel blessed to be part of a community that seems to value its public spaces, not only by preserving them, but also by building new ones. I wonder about other communities that leave public spaces on the periphery of their municipal agendas, and other individuals who choose to live, work, and play in places devoid of public spaces. I know that in my life, even the most luxurious private sphere did not even begin to fill the void left by the absence of good public spaces that I now enjoy.

Certainly our lack of public space cannot be accounted for by a lack of resources. Many countries with significantly lower per capita income levels far surpass our achievements in terms of such spaces. Go anywhere else in the world and you are sure to see more beautiful and more accessible parks, plazas, and sidewalks. Is it that in this country we don't see the value of public spaces or that we lack the ability to create them anymore? Perhaps the necessity of communal consensus and individual compromise is beyond the scope of our current repository of civic energy. For our sake and for the sake of our children, I hope that it is not. Our lives will be poorer for having let this mainstay of human community pass us by in this country.

### Psalm 133

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is  
    when brothers dwell in unity!  
It is like the precious oil on the head,  
    running down on the beard,  
on the beard of Aaron,  
    running down on the collar of his robes!  
It is like the dew of Hermon,  
    which falls on the mountains of Zion!  
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,  
    life forevermore.”

## Mending Wall

by Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:



He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'



*Gemeni* by Kyle Steed  
Acrylic on wood pannel  
60" x 72"  
2019

## An Invitation to Respond: Prayer of Examen

- *Become aware of God's presence.* In the company of the Holy Spirit walk the area around where you live. Notice the landmarks and buildings. Ask God to help you slow down and notice.
- *Have gratitude.* As you walk through the streets by your home. Take notice of the small things—trees, birds, people, buildings—and their joys and delights. Give thanks to God for all that you live within and around.
- *Pay attention to your emotions.* We detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. Reflect on the feelings you experience as you walk.
- *Make note of shortcomings.* Could a feeling of frustration mean that God wants you to consider a new direction?
- *Choose one feature of your walk and pray from it.* Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart—whether intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.



Art House Dallas is a 501(c)(3) non-profit which works to cultivate creativity for the common good in order to inspire everyone to live more imaginative, meaningful lives. We accomplish our mission by fostering community amongst individuals, believing that their rich artistic expression will serve to bring a greater sense of belonging to our city. Our programming reaches individuals across many genres of the arts including music, writing, visual art, spiritual formation, and more.

Learn more at [www.arthousedallas.com](http://www.arthousedallas.com)

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William Forsell Kirby (1882)

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