



Challenge Our Fear

REGINA CATES

Chapter 2 of Regina Cates' soon to be published book,

The Conversation Jesus Wants Us To Have:

Challenge Our Fear

Advanced Praise for *The Conversation*

"This book touches your soul. Regina's perspective on the honest, vulnerable, and loving characteristics of Jesus show us how Christianity should foster a "what Jesus would do" approach to loving and respecting one another. I highly recommend *The Conversation*. It is a beautiful tribute to the heart of Jesus!"

Kristen Cannata

"*The Conversation* is so uplifting! Here is a reassuring book for those who have experienced the absence of love and inclusion in the institutional church. For all who are weak and heavy-laden, Regina Cates proclaims the good news that Christ loves every last one of us unconditionally. A beautiful and inspiring work, this book is a must-read, not only for those of us who have been wounded by organized religion, but for those of us who have been complicit in the wounding of others as well."

Reverend Britt Skarda, D. Div.

Senior Pastor, Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church, Little Rock, Arkansas

"As a Jewish woman and longtime Buddhist practitioner, I wondered if there was anything in Regina's book that I would relate to. And yet as I read, I kept pumping my fist in the air and shouting "Yes!" Every word resonated deeply and supported the beliefs I hold dear. Regina tells us why, right now, it's important to lead with our heart, and what actions we can take every day to accomplish that. In light of current issues from climate change to democracy, this book will be a milestone. I'm recommending it to everyone I know."

Tina Rubin

"This book touched every part of my being with its thoughtful and loving account of how Jesus would want us to navigate the modern world. For so many years, and like so many others who have felt discarded by modern religions' bias and at times its outright bigotry and hatred, I found *The Conversation* brought me back to the basics of what Jesus taught - love and acceptance of all. Regina does a magnificent job of breaking down how truly simple it is to return to Jesus's love within our hearts so we end our judgmental and divisive ways. She invites us to explore our hearts and the teachings of Jesus to not only better ourselves but ultimately better the world."

Dawn Wilson

"*The Conversation* raises vital questions for the Christian community and the nation at large. The health of the Church today is threatened by an unholy marriage of politics and compromised religious beliefs. The historic tenets of Christianity have been lost in the radical and often ruthless philosophy of today's political system. And yet, as Regina clearly points out with penetrating examples and solid facts, that errant philosophy is using Christian faith to promote a withering and dishonorable approach to both Christian belief and government policy. This book has profound and workable solutions to the spiritual and political crises of our day. I highly recommend it."

Reverend Timothy Moody, D. Div.

Retired Christian Minister, Writer, Blogger: The Unclad Soul, Dallas, Texas

"A definitive guide to the true teachings of Jesus Christ, and all-inclusive anatomy of the Golden Rule as it should be preached and practiced. Regina Cates has written a new, practical, modern bible and must-read for Christians and non-Christians, atheists and agnostics, multi-generational influencers, and especially all ordained and lay preachers, ministers and members of the clergy."

Joyce Leddel

Foreword

This is a dangerous book! It will make you question your beliefs and rethink your values.

And, it is enlightening at the same time!

It follows an exceptional personal journey from confusion, despair, and depression to a newer and fresher world of self-discovery and grace.

It is a journey of faith--one often replicated by others as life develops and we all grow and mature.

The Inipi Ceremony in the Lakota Sweat Lodge was pivotal for Regina and becomes something of a template for her growing sense of spiritual self-realization. Empathy and integrity are a large part of that journey.

Her sharing of the times of sexual abuse are searing . . . and instructive. Behavior such as she endured should be reported and ended. And her many cues about how to raise strong boys into fine men and strong girls into fine women are apt and needful.

Her use of “put together words” is provocative, and each contains a teaching moment:

- crazy making
- heart-connection
- Jesus-like-love
- Jesus-like-boundaries
- like-hearted people
- love yourself awake
- self-induced apathy

Her 9-1-1, “*Actions We Can Take to Let Jesus Know We Haven’t Abandoned Him*,” are a To-Do list for a modern person of faith.

Regina speaks of her “heart family,” of which I consider myself a part. I am grateful for this book and my friendship with Regina. She has become my teacher. My faith journey has been extended, as it always is, by being questioned a bit and nudged by a good friend.

Mike Harper, D.Div., Retired United Methodist Minister,
Fellow Struggler, Follower of Jesus

*"I'm a little pencil in the hand of a writing God,
who is sending a love letter to the world."*

~ Mother Teresa

Contents

Foreword

Prologue

Let's Ask Christ to Church

Challenge Our Fear

Remember, Jesus Didn't Write the Bible

Call Out Those Who Give Christianity a Bad Name

Admit That 'Holier-than-thou' Is Not

Be Responsible for Our Behavior

Confront Sexual Abuse, Gender Inequality, and Misogyny

Respect Our Bodies

Appreciate That Great Leaders Lead Us to Be Great

Value Unity

Make Amends for a Great Sin

Respect That We Are All Connected

Embrace Our Emotions

Love One Another Like Jesus Loved

Accept That Love is Not Blind

Care About the Legacy We Leave

Appendix – *To-Do List for a Modern Person of Faith*

Recommended Reading

Acknowledgments

Bibliography

Chapter 2: Challenge Our Fear

Jesus taught love, not fear. But for too many of us, fear is a huge part of our religious experience, permeating our lives in both known and unknown ways until the uncomfortable becomes comfortable. Yet Jesus did not live in fear of anything: failure, success, hell, death, unworthiness, standing out, immigrants, strangers, difference, or being criticized, banished, ostracized, or seen as argumentative and a troublemaker. Jesus certainly did not fear causing trouble for those who caused trouble for others.

To honor him, we must not live in fear either. We must challenge ourselves to overcome the fear of whatever we are fearful of. This demands self-love and respect, purposeful thought, and intentional effort. Often, overcoming fear requires having the safety of what is comfortable, what we think we know, to be completely ripped away. For me, this happened on a hot summer day in middle Tennessee.

I crawl into the Lakota lodge on my hands and knees and find a place to sit. It is almost completely dark inside. The only light enters from a still-open doorway. There is just enough illumination to see I am with eleven people.

We form a circle on the dirt floor. It is cramped. We are so close to one another our knees touch.

It is quiet. No one speaks. The only sounds come from the hisses and pops of the fire burning outside.

Soon our leader enters. He hangs an eagle talon over the door. He puts several objects close to him. One is a drum.

Offering a prayer in English, he breaks the silence. When finished, he speaks to someone outside. A moment later, the first red-hot rock appears in the doorway. Using two sets of deer antlers, he picks it up and places the sizzling stone into a pit in the center of the room. Instantly the air grows hot.

I began sweating when I first crawled in. Now with hot rocks inside, there will be no way to avoid the sweat-drenched flesh of my fellow lodgemates. As they will not be able to avoid mine.

When five large rocks, each about the size of my head, are safely inside the pit, thick blankets are pulled down over the door. It is now completely

dark inside. Our leader offers another prayer. Then he states the purpose of the Inipi ceremony. He assures us we can leave at any time, if we must. But he encourages us to stay, to face our fear and whatever discomfort that comes up.

He asks us to form an intention for the ceremony:

**What is it I want to gain
from the experience?**

As I try to come up with an answer, he begins chanting in rhythm to a single drumbeat. I close my eyes. It is so hot. I am sweating. I pretend I am in a sauna, but even the first round of an Inipi feels hotter than a sauna.

After a few minutes, his words and the drumbeat fade into the background of my consciousness. I drift away, completely focused on the heat. I feel panic growing inside me. I open my eyes. I cannot clearly see my hand in front of my face. I cannot see anything other than a faint glow of the rocks and the wisps of steam that rise each time he pours water over them.

I shut my eyes tight trying to block out the heat. It does not work. I begin to wrestle with fear. I badly want to escape. I need to feel cool. Fear tells me if I do not get out now I will never be cool again. Fear tells me I will die.

Fear creates endless reasons why I have to leave. When I do not crawl out, fear digs deep. In the darkness of the Inipi lodge, surrounded by sweaty strangers and a Native American leader, old religious dogma surfaces.

Hateful voices scream in my mind, *This isn't religious. It is sacrilege! It is pagan. It is the devil's work!*

I feel guilty, confused, afraid, and alone.

Then I hear someone crying. Fear briefly gives way to empathy. I cannot see who is crying, but I know we are both miserable and struggling.

The Inipi is designed to cause physical and emotional discomfort. In the lodge, you are asked to bravely face whatever comes up so it can be burned away, so to speak. Apparently the Inipi is very effective at bringing up what I need to face. While I am busy wrestling with fear and its need for

Chapter 2: Challenge Our Fear

me to get out of the lodge, bad memories begin to surface. First my sexual molestation by a babysitter and then a physician. Then I am back in elementary school being bullied by a girl in a bathroom. I was sent to the principal's office and later punished by my parents. Even though I protested my innocence, I was penalized for merely being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Memories of betrayal, heartbreak, and pain come pouring into my mind. Inside the blazingly hot Inipi, I return to abuse, persecution, and loneliness. And I wonder:

What if I can actually let go of resentment and blame?

I cry. I appreciate the tears of my fellow lodgemate. Maybe some long-buried pain has surfaced for them, too. The onslaught of distressing memories is a complete shock to my system, since I have not seriously thought of those experiences in years. When they had surfaced, it always seemed easier to ignore them, sweep them under the rug, refuse to face them head on.

What if I can truly be free of past pain?

Wading through hurtful memories, I am not aware how long we have been in the first round of the Inipi ceremony when the door opens. Intense light and cool air rush in. I feel weak, drained, baffled, and a bit dizzy. I am sad and angry at being asked to confront my painful past.

My eyes struggle to stay open against the brightness of the midsummer day. My head hurts from the heat. My heart hurts from the unexpected and unwanted emotional assault.

It is hard to admit I had not successfully forgiven or released the cruel treatment of my past. In the Inipi ceremony, I am forced to face the truth that closing our eyes to or intentionally suppressing fear and emotional trauma is not the same as facing it, which would lead to actual healing.

I wipe my eyes. I feel self-conscious, like a child. For a brief moment I want my mother. I question my ability to withstand any more physical and emotional discomfort.

Yet I had successfully battled fear and heat in round one. And I feel a deep curiosity growing inside.

In the dark and heat, I was totally vulnerable. I was not in control of what was happening around me. The intense experience forced me to face my past in a direct way. I was being offered the opportunity to release it. Part of me wanted to continue, since no counseling session, religious service, or confession to a friend had ever taken me so quickly down the path of confronting my fear and past abuse.

Do I have the courage to continue this spiritual awakening?

I decide to stay. Making it through round one gives me the resolution to push myself further, something I have learned we have to do in order to truly heal, change, and grow.

The second round of rocks enters. The door closes. The air becomes hotter than before. I focus on being more connected to the ceremony this time around.

I join the other people in prayer. I sing. I share deeply and honestly. I voice my intent to be free of fear. I ask God to release my anger and resentment, and rid me of the emotional pain of my past.

What if this experience helps me to vanquish anger over my past?

I cry more. I remember more hurt and disappointment. I feel deep compassion for who I was in the past and what I endured. I sweat intensely. There is no piece of my clothing that is not soaking wet. Another half hour or so passes.

When the door opens this time, I feel a bit lighter, a bit freer. I cannot explain how, but the physical and emotional suffering I am experiencing in the Inipi is replacing my fear and feelings of being victimized with courage, willpower, and strength.

What if fear can truly fall away?

During the break I sit in silence. I pray for forgiveness for those who wronged me. I also ask for forgiveness for all the wrongs I committed against people.

I pray to be free of self-importance. I ask to leave my ego, my wounded and unhealthy sense of self,

Chapter 2: Challenge Our Fear

inside the lodge. I ask to be filled with empathy and respect.

I ask God for guidance. I ask God to let me know beyond a doubt the difference between Divine direction and self-centered thinking.

I must have been inside the lodge for about an hour and a half, at this point. I do not know how long the next round will be. Again, fear briefly questions whether I can withstand another round. But I stay, determined to challenge myself and overcome fear.

More hot rocks are added to the center of the lodge. The third round begins. Stifling steam mixed with sage burns my lungs. It is uncomfortable but I breathe deeply. I focus on the rhythm of the drum.

What if this intense suffering allows me to attain enduring empathy?

I pray and share more. I am hotter than I have ever been in my life. I release more emotion. More painful memories pass through my consciousness. I drink water from a passed cup. I sweat. I feel something profound happening within me, as if I am being purified. This Inipi is cleansing away years of fear, regret, resentment, and anger. And another half hour passes.

The door opens a third time. Our leader says we can leave. We do not have to stay for the final round. There will be no shame or judgment.

A few people crawl out into the sunlight. I remain seated, as if rooted in place. As the door closes for the fourth and final round, the Inipi begins to feel reassuring, as though I have come home after a lifetime of wandering in search of a way to finally establish a loving and strong connection to God. It happens in a place I would not have dreamed possible. Something so outside my history. And I wondered:

Does our comfort zone keep us uncomfortable?

Isn't simply denying something, anything, a sure sign we know we need to honestly address it?

It took moving way beyond my comfort zone for me to cultivate a deep commitment to the continuous self-assessment necessary to maintain a personal relationship with Jesus. I had heard enough sermons in enough churches to know it takes no effort to have direction delivered to you by someone who claims to speak on behalf of God. It is much more difficult to do the day-to-day, moment-by-moment hard work of continuous personal inner reflection to determine if we are actually walking in the footsteps of empathy and integrity, like Jesus, or not.

Being uncomfortable is not something we naturally welcome. It took an enormous amount of inner strength and courage for me to remain in the lodge that day. But I did. And I learned a truth: God *does* help those who help themselves.

While I agree with the belief that God's grace for us is constant and non-judgmental no matter how far we stray from the integrity and goodness of our soul, I also believe God's grace does not release us from our soul's objective to continuously strive to live expressing as the best version of ourselves. God's grace asks us to honestly face the stress and chaos that arise from choosing not to be our best. God's grace comforts and encourages us when we realize the mistakes we make are lessons in order to make life better. God's grace is patient in our learning process. The grace of God gives us the courage to step outside our comfort zone to ask ourselves hard questions in order to expand the soul we are. God's grace desires we strive to live with integrity and empathy in order to create the most peaceful, respectful, and kind life. Because what is most important to God about us is the depth of determination we have to know ourselves as the soul we are; an eternal part of our loving creator.

God helped me tremendously, because I helped myself quite a bit that day. I confronted fear and exchanged it for courage. I stretched my willpower to the breaking point but did not break. I left the lodge with a new respect for the strength of my physical body. I made huge strides in gaining real emotional freedom from the buried pain I did not realize was still causing me to be less than my potential. I came away with a deeper reverence for all life, for myself, for God, and for people.

Chapter 2: Challenge Our Fear

What if I can truly live a life of Jesus-like empathy and integrity?

Through this experience of intense self-reflection, I began establishing a profound connection to God and the soul I am. My concept of God began to move from a suggestion imposed on me by other people to a living experience. It was my asking hard questions and facing tough fears that caused a deep devotion to expressing Jesus' kindness to take up permanent and welcomed residence in my heart. By jumping into the unknown of the Inipi ceremony, I gained the understanding it was my comfort zone that had actually been keeping me uncomfortable.

Everything I had done that was considered "religious" and supposed to connect me to a meaningful appreciation of myself, other people, and God, had been spoon-fed and unfulfilling. No baptism, retreat, revival, Sunday school class, lecture, book, hellfire-and-damnation sermon, reading of the Bible, or vacation Bible School ever enabled me to comprehend God as I began to that day. Not one religious experience I had came close to the profound spiritual awakening I began achieving inside a Native American sweat lodge.

The Lakota are a deeply spiritual, monotheistic people who dedicate much of their lives to religious devotion. The beliefs of Native peoples and their spiritual practices were never flawed or heathen, even though the Inipi ceremony is not the religion most of us are taught. The Inipi is a profoundly humbling and sacred experience. There is powerful purification within their holy ceremony. And it is an experience with the potential to open us to what we do not know that we do not know... until we do know, from gaining a different perspective as a result of getting outside our comfort zone.

Through the Inipi, I experienced the deep introspection necessary to realize we are all connected because God created all of us. This logical and loving awareness strengthened the position I had always held that to make one another wrong for how we choose to love and worship God, or for our differences, is actually disgracing God.

It is humbling to comprehend God was God long before human beings were human beings. God was God long before human beings created religions, labels, texts, fraudulent ideas, and beliefs about God and one another.

Retired American bishop of the Episcopal Church and best-selling author John Shelby Spong has written,

God is not a Christian, God is not a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Buddhist. All of those are human systems which human beings have created to try to help us walk into the mystery of God. I honor my tradition, I walk through my tradition, but I don't think my tradition defines God, I think it only points me to God!

If we take a drinking straw and look up into the night sky through it, we would see about 10,000 stars within the tiny circumference. Multiply the objects in that small space by the entire night sky and the number of stars, planets, and universes is beyond comprehension.

How can we know what God is?

We have been told what God is, but the truth is, we do not know. To me, God smells like a rainy day. God feels soft, like the fur of a kitten. God sounds like songbirds. God looks like spring, summer, winter, and fall. God's grace is each act of forgiveness, compassion, equality, responsibility, respect, and honesty. I believe the best way to view God is to see God in everything and everyone, because that view of God motivates us to treat all people and all life as we want to be treated.

What if we look for God in one another and in all life?

Wouldn't this view of God be the universal acceptance necessary for us to stop fighting one another over God, our differences, and religion?

You and I do not come to a place of expanded wisdom of God's Divine plan of the interconnectedness of all life by staying in a comfort zone where we are spoon-fed what someone else wants us to believe. Just as we do not receive a well-rounded education that serves us throughout our entire life by having limited experiences or by taking one course.

Achieving a high school diploma requires years of work and the study of many different subjects. To receive a bachelor's degree involves more years of commitment, challenge, and immersion

Chapter 2: Challenge Our Fear

in an even wider variety of subjects. Pursuing a master's degree demands additional years of even harder work. And to receive a Ph.D., M.D., J.D., or other terminal degree necessitates an unwavering commitment to many years of intense hard work and dedication.

With each level of education we achieve, the reward is a wider amount of knowledge. Our skill levels increase as do our deductive reasoning and critical thinking abilities. Our values and priorities change. We develop our inquisitive nature.

In all educational pursuits, beautiful things come from challenging ourselves to learn and grow. We also learn and grow from the vast opportunities we have to experience different societies, information, and people. The same is true of our spiritual development, because the more we question ourselves, our beliefs, and our religious and social practices and traditions, the more we learn, grow, and change.

Through personal experience and observance of our world, I believe it is time for all who say we love God to embark on a journey of honest inner reflection regarding the depth of our devotion to living like Jesus. To face our fears. To ask the hard questions necessary to move ourselves beyond the comfort zone of perpetuating too-often judgmental and egocentric religious practices.

What is it we want to gain from our relationship with Jesus?

What are we willing to confront, overcome, and learn to have the relationship with Jesus that he wants us to have with him?

By embarking on this journey of honest reflection, we can stand up and stand out as living examples of what Jesus would do. No matter what anyone else chooses to do or how they choose to behave, and no matter how big the reward we may receive for betraying ourselves and other people, we will stay aligned with our devotion to Jesus by behaving with his empathy and integrity.

All who say we love God need to realize Judgment Day is now, today, this moment. It is not sometime in the future. And if there is an "official" Judgment Day in the future, we certainly cannot pass the test

if we do not work hard each day we are alive to live like Jesus asks us to.

To honestly love Jesus, we need to admit there is a large to-do list in order to do right by him. At the top of the list is accepting this truth: A fierce dedication to continuous, honest self-reflection is necessary to mirror Jesus' logic and love, just as persistence, dedication, and the pursuit of excellence are important to anything positive we might accomplish in life.

We love God, and we love as God asks us to, by cherishing the model—for both ourselves and other people—of being people of empathy and integrity. It means we do whatever it takes to overcome our human ego in order to lead with the soul we are. Because only when we remain aligned with the integrity and empathy of our soul are we aligned with Jesus.

Isn't our devotion to Jesus reflected when we treat all people as he would?

To overcome fearful and self-centered ego, we need to willingly enter our own Inipi ceremony by truthfully asking ourselves challenging and uncomfortable questions about how we, and Christianity, have abandoned Jesus' empathy and integrity. We have to want to learn from the logical and loving answers we find within our honest heart. To truly honor Jesus, we push ourselves to be the best we can be. And that requires getting out of our comfort zone.



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The Conversation Jesus Wants Us To Have.

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