

Q&A: How can we cultivate a 'space' for God to move?

Anonymous asks:

In your experience, how can we cultivate a 'space' for God to move in a way that is natural & supernatural, expected & unexpected? How do we do this in different contexts? Church, work, school, family, relationships etc?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

What a great question. If we dived in deep we would have enough to write books and books. We can only skim over the surface here.



So let's begin by considering what it might mean for "God to move"...

It is partly, I think, an *experiential* question. It's the same sort of thing when we talk about God being "present"; the raw theological truth is that God is *omni*-present, he *is* everywhere, but that doesn't mean that we are talking nonsense. There are times when we have a greater *sense* of the presence of God than at other times. The psalms (e.g. Psalm 73:28) speak of the "nearness" of God as something to be experienced, he is a God who can be *found*. The implication is that sometimes we might "*grope for him*" like someone stumbling in the dark, and this is our *experience* even though, in reality, "*he is not far from each one of us.*".

Similarly, then, when we talk about God "moving," the raw

theological truth is that God is *always* active. What we are talking about is our *experience* of God's activity. Sometimes it is a vague sense of the *wind blowing*. Other times it is a clear sense of direction or even *divine frustration*.. Sometimes the Spirit is "*present to heal*", so to speak, and sometimes it is *otherwise*. In my own experience, there are seasons when I do not *experience* God's movement; prayer seems lifeless, life seems hard, sin looms, and all ambitions and pursuits seem to turn to dust.

In all this I am glad of the way you have phrased your question. You have said "cultivating *space* for God to move" and this is different to what we are usually tempted to do: to *cultivate* the movement of God itself. When God seems to be absent or static, we long to *experience* his presence and movement, and we try and mimic that experience. We resort to positive thinking, hype, self-determination, and even belligerence. A lot of the prosperity gospel "name it and claim it" manipulation happens in this space, and we need to be wary of it.

Not that there is anything innately wrong with a little bit of positive thinking, though. Deliberate choices to use our body positively have their place in raising our eyes and counting our blessings. Because the flip side of trying to generate the movement of God is to believe the lie that he *isn't* moving at all. Ezekiel's *depression*, after seeing God work wondrously on Mt. Carmel, is both understandable and instructive. He is locked into a narrative that almost assumes defeat: " I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

Taken to their end, these two responses of not experiencing God at work, close us to the truth that God is actually at work, whether we like it or not. The first presumes that his movement depends on our inflated experience. The second presumes that his movement can not overcome our deflated experience. Neither is what we are looking for.

The reality is, is that Jesus *is* building his kingdom; the prayer of his people, “thy kingdom come”, *is* being answered. All authority in heaven and earth *has* been given to him; his kingdom *is* inaugurated and will reach its end, and in the meantime he *is* with us always to the end of the age, empowering us to immerse this world in his name and his ways (Matthew 28:18-20). Theologically speaking, that makes me a missional inaugurated-eschatology man.

We cultivate our *experience* of this work of Jesus when we respond to it in faith, actively seeking to follow him on his terms. We diminish our experience of that movement, when we dictate our own terms. The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is control.

In practice, then, what does that look like? You ask for my experience, let me give you an overview:

It looks like plodding. I remember during our church planting days, when asked to reflect on our experience, I would say “It’s slog work for Jesus.” It looks like preaching week in and week out, in season and out of it. It looks like simply being *bothered* – bothering to care for people, to take time, to talk, to listen, to fix what can be fixed and to allow the rest of the serenity prayer to kick in as well. It looks like not avoiding responsibility but carrying whatever loads are given to us along the way. It looks like roads in the valley more than soaring above the mountain.

What we come to experience is that the movement of God can be incredibly ordinary, and awe-inspiring in that ordinariness if we care to look. We may want the hair-standing-on-end experience, but heaven cheers for the ordinary extraordinary life-bringing moment just as hard, probably more. e.g. I once returned to my church after a holiday to discover some of my brothers and sisters had taken it upon themselves to befriend and draw close to a survivor of child abuse who was taking a lonely stand in the witness box as she faced her abuser.

Some of the most profoundly applicable spiritual teaching I've heard has been from my wife... while she was talking to our children in the car, driving home from school, in a conversation that started with "How was your day?" We plod along, we seize the ordinary, we don't avoid the mess, we simply *bother*. And God moves.

The regular rhythm of spiritual disciplines is part of this. You may have heard how God has moved at the Ffald-y-Brenin retreat centre in Wales. Their experience rests on their regular rhythm of prayer that invades the landscape. They simply pray, and if God moves in someone, they simply entrust that person to God... and continue to pray. We have brought these sorts of rhythms into our family; morning prayer before school, thanking God around the table for something in the day. It is ordinary space, in which God can move.

It looks like waiting. This is similar to plodding, but has a slightly different direction. Plodding "gets on with the mission". Waiting is worship, when God seems absent. Waiting is the space of emptiness.

There are many things about the world, church, and life in general that can seem impressive. I have learned in my experience to be less impressed. These things are usually "achievements" – scores, marks, promotions, wealth, numbers, activities, tasks, and programmes. None of them are bad in themselves, many of them are blessings in their way. And we want them. We want them, so we grasp them. We use our strength and our power to pursue them. I count myself in this! God is gracious, and sometimes he uses us, but I have learned that they are not usually the stuff of a "move of God" in the sense that we are talking about. We can't seize God's plan, we are called to active waiting.

The right response to "unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain" (Psalm 127:1) is to *wait*. This does not mean passivity (we keep on plodding after all!), nor does

it mean a lack of expectancy in which we fail to seize opportunities. What it does mean is that we refuse to despise the fallow years. We refuse to fill our lives with busy self-justifying activities, a conglomeration of straws to cling to for the sake of self-worth. Rather, we offer ourselves, we put ourselves on the line for his sake by stopping and waiting.

In that waiting, God moves, sometimes more than ever. It is there that he brings about adaptive change in us – a change in who we are, not just in what we might do. The sense of his absence draws us deeper into him. As the level of our spiritual fervour recedes hidden sins are revealed, insecurities manifest, and we find how shallow we actually are... and he calls us deeper.

The movement of God is deep. And we may not even know it until after it is over. A current favourite story of mine is the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24. The two on the road are despondent and low, plodding along in their experience of everything falling apart. We know that Jesus is with them, but *they* don't. It is not until afterwards do they realise that during their journey of despondency, their hearts had actually been burning the whole time. God moves when we wait; he makes our hearts burn.

It looks like active, discerning, worship. This is one of the things I have appreciated in the Soul Survivor movement (which also has its roots in plodding and waiting). They have high production values and excellent musical skills, but they have done well (by and large) to keep these as means rather than ends. They keep their eyes open to discern how God is moving during the time of worship. When they sense an experience of God they often stop the music and allow the silence.

What they are doing is using worship – musical declarations of God's grace and other words – as a form of creating space, encouraging an openness to God, expressing faith. I have found

similar in other traditions: devout Anglo Catholics who find this space in ancient rites and the presence of God in the sacraments; reformed evangelicals who thirst for the spoken exposition which brings the Word alive.

There are some things in common to these worship experiences: 1) The focus is God, it is declarative rather than subjunctive (“Lord, you are” rather than “This is how I feel”); 2) The senses are entertained (it *is* an experience), but nothing is forced or coerced; 3) What is done is good in its own right – praises are sung, sacraments administered, the word is preached – and even if there is no significant experience, there’s a real sense in which good has been done, we have worshipped the Lord; 4) Time is taken as we diminish our control; whether it be 45 minutes of praise worship, bible teaching, or contemplative prayer, we give God the gift of time to do what he wants in us. You’d be surprised (or perhaps you wouldn’t) how easy it is for a worship leader to be driven by the demands of the clock and the expectations of the flock about style more than substance.

These things from corporate worship can be brought into “school, work, family etc.” Whatever we do, we take time to focus on God through something innately good (e.g. private or shared devotions), we allow him to move, we don’t try and generate it, and so we rest in him.

It looks like response. Some people talk about seeking a move of God through *expectancy*. We are to pray with *expectancy*, mustering a belief that our prayers not only *will* be answered, but *must* be. I get what is meant, but it’s hard to imagine it in practice: Somehow an attitude of “OK God, this is what I’m expecting” doesn’t exactly create space for God to move; and anything that does happen could easily be taken as self-justification of prayers well prayed.

Rather, I think that sense of expectancy is better described like this: when we seek a move of God, we do so with

a *readiness to respond*. If we ask God to “move in us” and he confronts us with our sin, our response should be to repent. If we feel called to pursue something, we should count the cost and act according to our faith. If we find someone or something laid on our hearts, we shouldn’t let that pass but should pursue it further.

For me, that is more helpful than some of the caricatured answers you see: e.g. “The Holy Spirit can’t work if you have sin in your life, a lack of expectancy, or if you don’t have enough faith.” Ouch. Rather, God *is* moving, and our experience of that movement simply doesn’t make sense if we don’t respond, so we get ready to respond.

To conclude: This is a big topic and a simple blog post can’t do it justice. But you ask for my experience, and this is where I’m coming from. Thank you for the question – I haven’t really had the opportunity to put words down on this topic before. You’ve stirred my thinking, and I’m sure my thoughts and words will develop.