



Curt Thompson ([00:02](#)):

Our stories are always collaboratively told. I never tell my story by myself. I think I tell my story by myself, and it is true that I am the final agent for my story, but I am always writing my story with collaborative co writers.

Speaker 2 ([00:24](#)):

You're listening to the Faith & Work podcast, where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor and society through our daily work.

Dustin Moody ([00:38](#)):

Thanks for listening to the Faith & Work podcast. I'm Dustin Moody, Director of Communications at Denver Institute for Faith & Work and I'm joined today by Joanna Meyer, our Director of Events and Sponsorships. Welcome back to the podcast Joanna.

Joanna Meyer ([00:48](#)):

Hi Dustin.

Dustin Moody ([00:49](#)):

So question for you. We're recording this in July. You and I both kind of navigated weirdness in this season separately, as well as collectively as an organization with the coronavirus pandemic. So my question to you, how are you doing right now?

Joanna Meyer ([01:02](#)):

It goes day by day, Dustin. I was talking to a good friend yesterday, he looked at me and said, "Should I be concerned?" Just because I was super sad and flat yesterday and I have a feeling that many of our listeners feel that way. Like some days you're like, all things considered, I'm doing okay and other days you're like, I cannot stand another day of living in the middle of this pandemic and what it means and the guests that we're talking to today, Dr. Curt Thompson is the bomb for your soul.

Y'all need to hear what he has to say. Curt Thompson's been a friend of Denver Institute for years. He's a nationally known psychologist, and we'll introduce him more formally in a moment, but one of the things I think is his greatest contribution to the faith community is that he helps bring together practical thinking and academically informed thinking about how our minds and our hearts intersect and are informed by our relationship with God.

It's life changing stuff and you will want to listen to the entirety of today's broadcast because at the end, he shares some very practical principles for how do you navigate this season of suspended animation that we're in, in this podcast and he offers some practical solutions. You know it's a good podcast when you're laughing and almost crying in the same 30 minute time span. So I'm excited for our listeners to get a chance to hear what Dr. Thompson has to say.

Dustin Moody ([02:17](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. So Dr. Curt Thompson he's been on Faith & Work podcast before. He's a psychiatrist and an author who weaves together interpersonal neurobiology and a Christian view of what it means to be human. Curt previously joined the podcast to talk about his book *The Soul of Shame*, and today

we'll start with a discussion on his other work *Anatomy of the Soul*. It's a lesson in both neuroscience and spiritual formation and Curt shows how psychiatry and the study of how our mind and brain works has direct correlations with Scripture and implications on connection integration and being known.

Through his workshops, speaking engagements, books, organizational consulting, private clinical practice and other platforms, he helps people process their longings, griefs, identity, purpose and perspective of God and inviting them to engage more authentically with their own stories and those relationships and as Joanna and I found in this interview, that is pertinent even in this season, as we're all trying to figure out what this pandemic looks like, and making sense of our work, making sense of our lives and making sense of our relationship. So thanks for listening.

Dr. Thompson, welcome back to the podcast.

Curt Thompson ([03:23](#)):

Thank you so much. It's great to be with you both.

Dustin Moody ([03:26](#)):

Yeah. Good to be with you. Good to see you virtually on Zoom, which we'll talk about a little bit later. We want to start out talking about *Anatomy of the Soul* your book. I think one of the things that struck me while reading through it was that this idea of neuroscience and the way that our brains work, doesn't always seem like the same discipline of spiritual formation. It seems like separate conversations a lot of the time. So I'm curious what led you to this work and what led you to write the book?

Curt Thompson ([03:50](#)):

Well, what led me to the work is it's become an extension of work as a psychiatrist, which that's a story in of itself. I tell people frequently that I don't think I found psychiatry. I think psychiatry found me. I think that that, in fact, we might say that God has been in the business of finding me over the course of my entire life in like, he just keeps finding me in different ways and psychiatry was one of those ways that he found me.

Then now about 16 years ago, I guess it would be, I wandered into a conversation at the American Psychiatric Association annual conference that Dan Siegel was leading. This is before Dan was Dan, and I came out of that conference and I knew that something was going to shift for me and the whole introduction to interpersonal neurobiology, which at the time was a discipline in its infancy, maybe even newborn state.

What I thought that it really did was to provide a more helpful way of articulating what we have come to know to be true about the biblical narrative, and we started to educate patients and train patients and use principles of interpersonal biology in our clinical work. This was back in the early 2000s and what we began to see were, I still remember the very first patient that I had that began to talk with me about how the way these principles that we were talking about, were renewing his experience of God, renewing his faith experience.

So, that really got my attention and really came to find out, when you pull the lens back, you come to find out that when you read Peter Berger's work, when you think about Lesslie Newbigin's work, this notion of living in a plausibility structure, fish swimming in water and don't know that they're doing that, this idea that we live in a world in which science is kind of like the authority on not just knowledge, but how we actually know things.

We've even kind of run faith through that particular grid now, so that so much of what we talk about when we talk about faith whether we know it or not, is really kind of coming to us through a dominantly, left hemispheric way of seeing the world. So a logical linear process. What I think interpersonal neurobiology has done has given us a language for talking about what our experience is.

It helps people make sense of what their experience is, but at the same time, and here's the really interesting and curious part. This is where I think, as a believer, people who are not believers, I mean, most folks who do this work wouldn't necessarily profess faith in Jesus, but as a believer, what's so interesting is that the science itself is pointing to a way of knowing that is not scientifically based.

That was what's so intriguing to me, and suddenly you start to see all of these ways in which the mechanics, what I tell people is that interpersonal neurobiology, it describes the mechanics of how the world works relationally and in the brain, and so forth. It doesn't give us why's, it doesn't give us purpose, it doesn't give us meaning, it doesn't tell stories. We think that it does, but it doesn't.

Science itself doesn't tell a story. Science just describes mechanics, but what's been so beautiful, I think has been giving people ways of understanding mechanics about what their experience is, that actually enables their experience to be rejuvenated and renewed and lived in a fresh way. One of the things we tell folks, if you go to the physical therapists, and physical therapists are always keen to give you like 30 exercises that you're supposed to do when you go home.

They don't care that you have a job that you have to do, you have to do all these exercises. If they tell you to do these exercises and then point to a mannequin or point to a skeleton and point out to you exactly how the exercise that you're going to do is going to change your shoulder, change your knee, you're far more likely to do it than if they just give you the exercise to do this at your home.

I think what we're discovering is that these kinds of conversations really enable folks to have a more robust, and as we would say, a more integrated sense of what it means to be a believer, what it means to be a God follower, because so much of people's experience has been disconnected from their bodies, disconnected from their awareness, so how the right brain functions and so forth. So that's kind of a long winded answer to that.

Dustin Moody ([08:24](#)):

That's a great lead into my next question. So I want to kind of talk about some of these macro themes from the book before we get into applying it to a work context. One of the areas that you write a lot about is this idea of emotions. You've already kind of talked about the left brain, the right brain, the right hemisphere and I have to admit, this was a convicting part of the book for me, because I tend to be more logical, linear, intellectual in how I approach things. You make a strong case that our emotions are as tied to hearing the voice of God as our thinking ain't theology is. Even in my own marriage, and we've talked a lot about how little I attend to my own emotions and how that comes out in big ways a few times a year.

Joanna Meyer ([09:03](#)):

I'm laughing. So for our listeners, you realize we have Dr. Thompson on Zoom. So we're watching, as Dustin just said that I'm watching Dr. Curt Thompson's face, as he has this knowing look like oh yeah, I know where you're going. I'm laughing because I know it does say, oh, that's so true.

Dustin Moody ([09:17](#)):



My goal is not to have my own personal counseling session here, but I do want to talk about a couple of things-

Curt Thompson ([09:22](#)):

You're still going to get one. I can tell.

Joanna Meyer ([09:25](#)):

He also said, I'm going to have to buy a second copy of Anatomy of the Soul, because the first copy I mugged so much I can no longer consider it the office copy.

Dustin Moody ([09:35](#)):

You're right, the more attentive you are to emotional states and the more you actively reflect on them and talk about them, the more you will literally integrate the neural circuitry of your brain. Later on, you say we would like to believe that our theology comes first shaping our stories and our emotions. The opposite is closer to the truth, at least from the standpoint of how the mind functions. So my question is, how can we have a more holistic view of faith and a more integrated approach to faith by attending to both sides of our brain, because I feel like, like you mentioned in the book, we default to one or the other.

Curt Thompson ([10:04](#)):

Well, I think and so a couple things. One is I think it's more like a rheostat not like a switch. So our default is not so much, so I'm either one or the other. I'm either in my left brain or my right brain. One thing I would say is that I tell people emotion is the fuel in the tank. It's the gas in your car. There's nothing that you do in your car that is not a function of fuel regulation. Nothing you do.

You back up, you go forward, you slow down, you speed up, you turn the thing on, everything has to do with fuel regulation, and you're really mindful about how much gas you have in your tank, like you watch that thing. This is what I mean by emotion in that the role that it plays, there's nothing that we do that is not emotionally significant.

It's also equally the case that we don't build cars just to have a place to put gasoline. It's not because emotion is the most important thing. It's not about that. It has more to do with the degree to which we pay attention to the things that we feel and here's another thing that's important about emotion. In our scientific attempt to talk about or describe anything, we have to package it, we have to make it discrete.

If I'm going to talk about hydrogen, I can't talk about hydrogen and a little bit of oxygen. I can't like, no, I got to talk about hydrogen. So we then tend to think that when we talk about emotion, we can talk about this kind of siloed homogenous thing that is called emotion. In many respects, we'd say there's really no such thing as emotion in that kind of a discrete way.

We're simply saying that there's nothing that we do otherwise. What we sense, what we image, what we feel, what we think and what we do with our bodies that is not a function of emotion. So when I ask the question, what do I feel and I say I feel sad or I feel angry or I feel joyful, I do feel those things but it's important to know that the way the mind works also is like it's happening so quickly that if somebody says something that hurts your feelings, and you say I feel hurt, the feeling hurt is something that you feel but in brain time, as the first moment that you're aware of anything that resembles feeling hurt, your thinking brain, your left brain, you are immediately, in nano two microseconds, you are

already telling yourself a story about what you're feeling and about the person who said it and about you in response to that, so forth and so on.

So what looks on the first glance like the feeling I feel hurt is actually kind of like this latticework of feeling and thinking and sensing and all those kinds of things together. My point in all this is that we live in a world that has become as Iain McGilchrist in *The Master and His Emissary* has so rightly said. We become so dominantly occupied and preoccupied with the function of the left brain, that we simply don't pay enough attention to what is happening in the right brain.

Because we don't pay attention to it, it doesn't mean it's not happening. Oh, it's happening and part of why I'm not going to be out of business anytime soon, is because people don't pay attention to that. People don't pay attention to how what they are feeling is now fueling the next thing that they say or do. They don't recognize that the role that shame plays, for instance, as an effect, as a neurophysiologic effect, they don't recognize that shame is going to be one of the if not the major player in preventing them in their vocational enterprises.

That's not a logical linear thing. That's not an algebra equation. That's about paying attention to my soul in ways that the Hebrews actually knew how to do. The Hebrews compiled this collection of things that we call the Psalms, and the Psalms are artistry. That poetry, that music that we find there captures our attention because it captures our right hemisphere.

Now, not because it captures our right hemisphere alone. It's not just a right hemisphere thing. There are words, there's meaning and so forth that we give to that, but if you don't have the right hemisphere's activity, you don't read those Psalms, you don't pay any attention to it. Like we like to say, first, we sense and then we make sense of what we sense. This is what we're doing 24/7.

So when it comes to how we are attuning to and paying attention to the work that we're doing to, especially now with COVID, there's so much that we are missing out on because so much of what we sense and that evokes a feeling for me that helps me feel comfortable, for instance, all that stuff is missing. So I find myself feeling things, and because I've been a person, if I'm a person who hasn't really practiced very much paying attention to and then engaging my emotional states, COVID finds me and really kind of knocks the stuffing out of it.

Joanna Meyer ([15:12](#)):

Oh, absolutely. I want to really reinforce that statement that you made with a quote from the book. It's so powerful. You say, the more we pay attention to these things, our feelings, our memories, our bodies are telling us, the more we are ultimately paying attention to God. That is so counter intuitive to I think what we hear in church. I'm from a more reformed theological tradition. So when we think about loving God with our mind, when we think of theology, we start quoting Calvin or Luther, and it's this rabbit hole of books and getting locked in your head and not getting connected to your emotions.

Yet, as you describe it, that's vital. That sense of being clued into our emotions. We won't know God fully if we don't. I want to know a little bit more about how that can tie into our life journey as a whole. You use a phrase in the book that loving God is autobiographical. It's about remembering our past and anticipating your future. In fact that connecting with our own story is part of how we will know God and how God will find us. Tell us more about what that looks like. How do we see God in the autobiography of our lives?

Curt Thompson ([16:21](#)):

Well, I think one of the things that I emphasized in the second book on *The Soul of Shame* is that we are storytelling creatures, like no other creatures that we are aware of on the planet. We find one word, two words, three words, we put them into sentences, we are telling things. Now, what's interesting is that the stories that we tell don't begin with us when whoever our parents were, were pregnant with us, they're already telling our story. They start to tell things about us and then we're born and then they tell more things about us.

They put us in clothes that we would never be caught dead in now. They would send us off to play dates with people that we can't really stand but because parents like their parents, we go to play. All these right there are parts of our story that our parents are telling that we then learn to tell, and this is an important piece is that our stories are always collaboratively told.

I never tell my story by myself. I think I tell my story by myself and it is true that I am the final agent for my story, but I am always writing my story with collaborative co writers. It's not a matter of like, will I have them or won't I have them? I have to have them because human beings depend upon the presence of other people telling stories along with us in order for us to survive, let alone to flourish.

So, we are storytellers and we would suggest that when you look at the biblical narrative, the biblical narrative is mostly a story. There's lots of instruction, but it is mostly a story. It's God's story about how God interacts with us and our story about how God interacts with us that we're collaboratively telling a story. It's what the Bible is about, right? This is the word of God, written by me like, we're going to do this together.

When then it comes to our experience of God, I don't just have this abstract thing called an experience of God, or my spirituality. There's no such abstract thing. I'm always thinking about it. I'm telling a story about it. I have thoughts about it, but here's the most important thing is that like, my spirituality, when it is going to be most robustly formed, if I'm going to live like God lives, when the Holy Trinity says, let Us make mankind in Our image.

If I'm going to bear the image of God, it means to tell the story of my own spiritual experience, means to tell it with somebody else. So when I'm having all these sensations, images, feelings, thoughts, whatever about God, my story is not just going to be told with Him, it's going to be told with you. With Joanna and Dustin. What my story becomes is inevitably going to be a function of how I'm trying to figure out my story with your help, and you're going to do the same thing with my help or with whoever the help is. Here's like, we're going to have help and sometimes that help is helpful, and sometimes that help is really unhelpful.

This is the thing. From the very beginning, I remember the book, *Genesis* the story we haven't told. Paul Borgman was at the time when he wrote this book 20 years ago or more, he was, I don't know if he's still there. He was a professor of literature at Gordon College and he taught *Genesis* every year as a literature course. It was popular enough that they wanted him to write a book. He wrote a book about it, and it's this book about *Genesis* but as a piece of literature.

He writes about the three primary characters of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph in this book, and one of the first things he suggests is the writer of *Genesis* wants to tell you, wants us to know that God is interested in partnership. This is how God operates. God does not operate unilaterally. God partnered with Abraham to go to Canaan. God partnered with Moses to go to Egypt and then Borgman asked this really interesting question.

He said, what would it be like? Like, what if God hadn't found a partner? Who knows? It's possible that God asked lots of people before he finally found a guy in Abraham who was willing to go. We don't know because there's no story there to be told. This notion that God is partnering with us, and



then as you get from partnering with God in the Old Testament to Jesus coming, the temple, and that we are the temple of God, and that God is partnering with us and for us to be the body of Jesus means, for us to partner with God necessarily means we partner with other people.

It's a function of what it means to be made in God's image. So my understanding of my spirituality is only ever in the context of asking the question, who are the other people in my life who are going to help me tell my story more truly on the way to creating goodness and beauty in the outposts that we occupy?

Joanna Meyer ([21:12](#)):

I have a question for you, thinking about how we look at Scripture. I think one thing we want to be careful of as we read Scriptures that we don't get extra biblical with our imagination, in the sense that we are making stuff up. That being said, I do think there is a place for letting us sit with the humaneness of biblical characters and the emotions that we would feel. If you think about how we read Scripture, what do you think is a healthy way to see the emotions of the characters that are on the pages?

Curt Thompson ([21:39](#)):

Well, I think Joanna you're absolutely right. One thing that we tell people is that you have to be really careful not to psychologize the Bible. In my field, it's easy to look at any character in the Bible and say, well, we're going to read them through the lens of psychoanalysis or through psychodynamic psychotherapy, or whatever. What really was going on in David's mind when walking on the roof looking at Bathsheba? Well, I'll tell you what was going on.

Who knows? Because that's not why they were writing the story, but if we don't allow ourselves to ask those questions, then the Bible doesn't have anything to say to us. Because the reality is we are people who are understanding ourselves psychologically now. What we would say would be that we have language and metaphor and motif now to talk about the reality of the world in ways that were different or maybe additional to the reality that they were writing about and talking about.

So, patients will frequently ask this question about like, well, where does the biblical narrative stop and my extra biblical narrative inclinations begin? I would say, we would love to know the answer to that question, wouldn't we? I'd like to know exactly where the line is, and why do I want to know where the line is? I want to know where it is so that I don't screw it up. So that I don't make a mistake and that I don't end up being ashamed and pissing God off for doing the wrong thing.

So even here, in the same way that interpersonal neurobiology is a field that is a collection of multiple disciplines. I'm always going to be wanting to ask the question about emotion, about Sensei, all those kind of neuroscience eat things, but never apart from a biblical anthropology. We don't begin with science, we begin with the story that we read.

Even the story that we read, the Bible is not scientific in its nature, in the sense that it does not self define where all of the lines are, where right reading of the Bible starts and stops. It does not declare these things and I wish it did.

Dustin Moody ([23:49](#)):

Amen.

Curt Thompson ([23:50](#)):



This is part of the issue. Part of the issue is that if it were to do so, it would be expecting me to behave just like a machine as well. Like the Bible then becomes a machine. It doesn't become a living, breathing organism that where its boundaries are not nice and neat. No. That very reality requires me to do the hard work of trusting the Bible where I don't have complete and utter answers to all the questions, and that means to trust other people.

Because how do I know what the Bible says? Well, I know because my parents told me, my pastor told me and you tell me and because I read Tom Wright and I read this and I read Lesslie Newbigin, all these. I come to the Bible, and there's lots about it that I don't know, but I'm going to read other people and all this boils down to trusting. That trust, I'm going to tell you, my brain is going to know when I'm in the room with people who are trustworthy.

The Holy Spirit is going to let me know. We might say, well, how can you trust that? Well, that's all that I can do. I can't know, like science would like you to know that you can know, that you can know. I can only Trust this in the same way that Elijah had to trust God when God said, what are you doing here, after he goes into the desert. Now he's afraid of Jezebel. What are you doing here? Let's go.

Is he going to trust God or not? Where's the rules? How do I know how this is going to work? This is where I would say, in the group work that we do, we call these groups confessional communities and we don't call them confessional because, the word confessional is not referring to confessing sin. It's about confessing the truth about our story. We are on a mission to help people tell their stories more truly.

Some of that means telling parts of our stories that we've never told anybody before. Some of that also includes if I'm going to tell my story truly, that may also include someone else saying something to me that invites me to set a limit on my behavior, set a limit on my choices, set a limit on all kinds of things. I don't want to set a limit. I don't want to set a limit on my irritability in my house when I'm pissed off at my wife. I'd rather just let it go, but somebody is going to invite me to say, well, is that what you really want?

Is that the person that you want to be? Well, no. So we're going to have to work at restraining. In the same way that I have to work to restrain my inclination to hyper psychologize things in the Bible, when it would be convenient for me to do so but I need other voices to help me do that. We are just kind of, I don't even know if we are even within the-

Joanna Meyer ([26:26](#)):

I think you humored my curiosity, because it was just something I've been thinking about lately. You know what has gotten me thinking and this will be a plug for some other Denver Institute programming coming up, where we have this conversation of women in work. Our summer book club is a book called Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women. It's just kind of an overview of where we see women in Scripture. I was amazed as I was reading through that, how much emotion I saw there.

I think sometimes in not telling women stories, we miss some of the emotion of Scripture of Hannah weeping over not being able to child or Leah's chain or the woman. A lot of them relate to fertility and women's health, but the woman that came to Jesus or the woman at the well. There's a lot of emotion in there and if we aren't willing to see those stories for what they are, we miss the fullness of how God interacts with people. That was what led to my rabbit trail.

Jeff Haanen ([27:17](#)):





Hi, this is Jeff Haanen, the founder of Denver Institute for Faith & Work. Hey, thanks for listening to the Faith & Work podcast and for letting me interrupt you briefly to share just a request. I want to ask you to consider becoming a financial contributor to Denver Institute. Each day, thousands of people listen to our podcasts, engage our short courses and grow spiritually as a result of generous donors like you. Each podcast episode is 100% funded by generous donors who believe that work is a way to love God, serve our neighbors and demonstrate the gospel to our world.

If you've enjoyed the Faith & Work podcast, would you consider paying it forward by giving right now? You can give by visiting [difw.org/donate](http://difw.org/donate) or by visiting the show notes page from this episode. Whether it be 50 dollars a month or \$25 a month or gift of any amount, we are so grateful for your support. Again, you can give by visiting [difw.org/donate](http://difw.org/donate), or by checking out this episode's show notes. Thanks again for your generosity towards God's people and toward the mission of Denver Institute. Now back to the Faith & Work podcast.

Dustin Moody ([28:22](#)):

Curt, I want to take the conversation a little more practically, as we're recording this in mid July. It'll come out around mid August, and I think it's fair to recognize that it seems like the context that everyone is working at has changed in some fashion. If you're a frontline worker, the stresses you have on going to work every day, checking out at the grocery store are different than they were in February and March. If you're a professional context, where you work looks different, if you're a healthcare provider that looks different.

So I want to take some of the things from the book and talk about actually the ways that we're all navigating work in this season. You open the book by talking about the importance of being known. You write that you cannot know God if you do not experience being known by Him. The degree to which you know God is directly reflected in your experiences of being known by Him and the degree that you are known by Him will be reflected in the way in which you are known by other people.

In other words, your relationship with God is a direct reflection of the depth of your relationship with others. I'm curious in the context of work, what is being known look like?

Curt Thompson ([29:21](#)):

So it's a great question. This gets to the heart of this idea that we are known for the purpose of creating beauty, that those two things are inseparable. I would say that at the time that I wrote *Anatomy of the Soul*, which oddly enough has been 10 years now, I don't think that I would have then said what I just said. That we were being known on the way to creating beauty, but I believe that with all my heart now.

I would say that, when you look at, I'll answer your question directly here in just a moment. When you look at the end of Genesis chapter two, you have the first couple where there are three features that at least to me stand out. One is that you have a couple that is naked. They are vulnerable. It's in our vulnerability. They are differentiated, they are husband and wife, they're male and female are differentiated and this doesn't mean it has to be with all with men and women, but it means that they are different, that we come together to create with others with whom we have difference.

There is the absence of shame. You have differentiation, you have vulnerability, and you have the absence of shame and it is that, that is the hard deck, this kind of like three part pie hard deck on which they stand on the precipice of great creativity. I would say that then part of what happens in Genesis chapter three is not just that sin enters the world.

All those things are true, all those theological things are true, but one of the things that doesn't get named explicitly but this is why Genesis is such a great piece of literature. They don't name and tell, they show, is that the capacity for us as humans to create robustly is diminished. It's not wiped out, but it's diminished.

So, shame plays the role of keeping us from being known and if I am not known, what I'm going to do is end up, I'm going to burn energy managing my shame, not telling you who I am, and that will then be energy that is not accessible to me to make the next new, beautiful thing I'm supposed to be making. We ask people this question. If you could not be ashamed, if it was not possible and by this I don't mean ashamed of things that we should be ashamed of.

I mean, if we could not be ashamed of the things for which God says you're not to be ashamed, what's the next thing that you would make? What's the next conversation you would have? What's the next repair of a ruptured relationship you would make? The list just goes on and on, because it would be unbelievable how much energy you would suddenly find that you have and confidence you have. When it comes to the workplace, being known in these confessional communities that we talked about that we run, we say that there is a model in these communities for any system that we have as human beings.

The model is that no matter what the system is around which we gather, if I run a software engineering company, if I run a law practice, if I'm a teacher, if I'm a sculptor, if I'm an artist. I'm a painter, whatever this is that I'm doing. If I'm a pastor, if I'm a stay at home mom, it doesn't matter what we're doing. We long to be known in the context of our profession. So there are things that I bring to the table.

If I'm a software engineer, I'm working at this company. There are things that I bring to the table that I'm being asked to do. We like to say, that evil does its best work in the middle of good work being done. So when beauty is about to be launched, about to be created, what happens? I want to start a new nonprofit and then I get anxious about all the things that are going to go wrong. So evil is at the ready to do what it can do to interfere, to sully, to shear off what it means for us to create beauty in the world.

If I'm in that software engineering company, and it's run by a group of people who are intent upon making sure that as it has anything to do with the work that we do here, I want to make sure that you are known as well as you possibly could be. I want to know what you want here in this practice, and I want to know what you're afraid of. I want to know when it comes to the deadline that you have, where is shame creeping up in the back of your head saying that if I don't do this right, my boss is going to throw me out of my ear.

One of the stories that you're being told, that you're telling yourself, about yourself, that get evoked by the very work that we're doing here. Because what we would want to say is that if we're really serious about it, we're on the way to creating beauty, that very endeavor, that very venture in and of itself becomes a spiritual formation enterprise. These things are not separate.

There is no such separate category in my mind, this is me. You can just say, look, he's a psychiatrist. He has no idea what he's talking about.

Joanna Meyer ([34:31](#)):

No, preach it. Bring it.

Curt Thompson ([34:33](#)):



I would say, there is no such dimension of thing that we call spiritual formation. We're being spiritually formed with every breath that we take. It doesn't mean that that look, it's a fine category, a necessary category. I know that you know what I mean. What I mean then is also is like, we don't imagine that when I go to have my faculty meeting with my group of teachers, that this is actually like, it's as good as going to a Bible study.

We might not be talking and we're not studying, we're going to talk about this new plan that we're going to have for how we as teachers are going to deal with COVID this fall. It is our limited imaginations that make it very difficult for us to sense that what we're about to do when we talk about what we as a faculty are going to do this fall with our kids, that God is in the room and He wants this conversation, not just to be an option, an opportunity to create new ways for students to be educated in the face of hard things.

Part of that's also then going to include, what's this like for everybody here in the room, and the moment that people start talking about how hard it is to figure out what they're doing. I mean, my wife, she's a social worker for the Arlington County Public Schools here in Arlington, Virginia.

The public school system has just been through a bit of a, they sent out a survey to parents and they got those back and then they made a decision two weeks ago about what they were going to do and then the teachers were describing about how anxious, so now they've made a different decision and not everybody's going to be happy. Parents especially because the kids are not going to school in the fall. It's all virtual.

It's going to be important for people to have opportunities in places for them even in hard places to answer the question, what's this like for you? How are you? Where are you? What do you want now? For people to continually talk about their grief, for people to continually talk about their longing. This is what lament is all about.

In that space in which we repeat it over and over again, we find that we are not alone and then here's one of the bigger things. This happens in our groups all the time, where someone has a particular thing that's going on in their life, a difficult marriage situation, a difficult work situation, a parent or a child that has a serious medical problem that's just draining the system of everything.

They tell you about the system on one Tuesday, they tell you about this problem. Of course, the next thing that they worry about is that if they come back the following Tuesday, let alone a month from now, and they still have the same problem, they feel bad for still taking up airtime to talk about the problem, because the problem hasn't changed.

So why should I be complaining about this now, despite the fact, because I already talked about a month ago, and we would say like, this is evil's playground. Evil does not want it. If I had to come and tell you repeatedly every day until I'm dead, about a particular thing that I wrestle with, I need to know that when we're on day 75 of me telling you this, that you're not going to leave the room, that shame is going to be part of this conversation to just to say, well, Curt, just because you don't have your crap together over the last three months, somehow, now, no more.

That whole process that I just described, that little microcosm of human interaction, these kinds of things are happening all the time in vocational settings that are specifically germane to each of those vocational settings, but that nobody talks about. For us to be known in that setting means that I'm going to hear from people what it's like for them to be them working for me and my practice.

My boss hear from me what it's like for me to be as this engineer in this particular institution. Answering the question, where am I and what do I want? What feels hard? What can we do to be helpful? All those kinds of things, including setting proper limits, having a conversation with some folks



about the whole notion of like, gosh, it's COVID. There's nothing like just sort of a pretty robust pandemic, to start to sift out workers in an organization that actually probably have not been doing their job very well, for some time. Only now, it really shows up.

Now that it really shows up, people feel really bad about letting people go during COVID and yet, we would say, no, you actually do need to let them go. Because what COVID is merely doing as I wrote about in the first article of the first essay that I wrote about, COVID is not just causing anxiety, it's revealing it. It's revealing stuff. It's revealing places where we haven't set good boundaries and proper limits for ourselves or for other people in the past.

Because we haven't done that, because we haven't done that discipline work, now that we're in a harder time, we don't know what to do.

Joanna Meyer ([39:12](#)):

Yeah, it's I'm going to yell at the grocery store, because someone's asking me to change my habits, or I'm going to stand on my front lawn with an automatic rifle because I've been quietly afraid of the systems and the relationships [inaudible 00:39:27] in my community, but now that they are blowing up, I have to protect myself to such degree that means a gun on my front lawn. So I have a less dramatic question for you. You had alluded to all of the emotions of grief and loss of I described as animated suspension that we're living in right now, that come with the pandemic, where it's like, nothing is normal and I'm trying to figure out how to be in the midst of it.

Give me wisdom on how to wisely leave lead ourselves and the people in our lives through this season. That may relate to work or it may relate to home. Actually, the reality is for most people, it's colliding work and home and education in the same little suburban home. What does it look like to lead ourselves and others well in this season?

Curt Thompson ([40:13](#)):

So I'll say at the risk of sounding shamelessly promotional, the essays that I wrote that are on my website, each essay has a number of just concrete, practical this what you do kind of things. I'll highlight some of those things that I think that are important and I would say this, I think we're getting an education in terms of how we're responding because now we're several months into this.

When it first hit their emotional response was one of kind of incredulity and shock and so forth, but everybody's kind of like they're going to buckle down and we're going to do we have to do, at least where we live here in Virginia. Then there's the hope of lifting restrictions and then we see the emergence of higher levels of infection rates and so forth.

So we find that we've moved from this place in February, March, April of clarity about where we are. I know that we're battened down that this is where we are, it's clear. I'm not going to think about like July or September yet, I just got to get through the next two days, I can do that. Then we get to the summer and we're looking at the fall, and the anxiety for many people is becoming even more difficult to regulate.

Because now we're really looking at a long term and like, we're not kidding that it's a long term thing. We could, back in March, say it might be a long term thing, hope that it's not going to be and just live in March and not think about July through March, of 2021. We can't do that anymore. So the things that I pointed out in the very first essay, I think, are even that much more necessary. So here's some practical things I think are really important.



I think it is important for people to be immersed in the scriptures and immersed in prayer. It's like, in the same way that when your body is under stress, it's really crucially important that you get good nutrition. We are under the kind of stress that we haven't seen in this country kind of corporately, since I've been alive. We need nourished and so that's one thing.

The reality is that there are a lot of people who go to church every Sunday who are not people who've ever really made a practice of immersing themselves in texts and in prayer. That's one thing I would say, it's crucially important. Second thing I would say is that it is important to do everything as Hippocrates once said, first we do no harm. So I would say there's some things that you can not do that will prevent harm. So like, don't read the news. I'm not really kidding. The news is not helpful.

Joanna Meyer ([42:59](#)):

Dustin told me that the other day. I was coming in hot to work and I was ranting about something. He said, "Joanna, you have got to trim down your Twitter use."

Curt Thompson ([43:09](#)):

So that's one thing. The news is unhelpful. So I was talking to a friend. This was in, I think, April. They were in a grocery line and of course, everybody's spaced out six feet, and they're waiting. The two people who were at the end of the line, and everybody was really kind of quiet, just waiting to get to check out with their groceries. Two people at the end of the line, they start to talk about what they're upset about, about the COVID thing.

Before you know it, they're talking about who's responsible and who didn't take responsibility and who's to blame and now you have a conversation, of course, because they're six feet apart, to hear each other through their masks. They have to talk really loudly. So now everybody in the store is listening to people who are elevated in their arguments about things and like three minutes ago, we were just quietly waiting to check out of the grocery store.

So here's another thing. It's really important that we be mindful about the kinds of things conversations that we have. There are conversations about this very thing that are actively, I would say, I don't mean to make [inaudible 00:44:18] but that are actually traumatizing to the brain. Because we know going into the conversation, that there's no answer to it. There's no resolution.

We're only going to become more anxious between now the next 90 seconds. So there's restraint there. There's also restraints, I tell people look, it's really important for you not to just scroll on your social media. You can check your social media, I would say, you can check it two, three times a day. You can be on it for like, five minutes and get off.

You're like, I live with Twitter. I'm just telling you what's going on in your brain. That's my job. If you want your brain to be quieter, if you want to be more centered, then we have to be paying attention to things that center us and not things that are actually going to disintegrate our mind, without actually giving us any more information that's going to help me to live my life more effectively by the end of the day.

Joanna Meyer ([45:16](#)):

Amen.

Curt Thompson ([45:16](#)):

Then I would say there are some other things that we need to do physically. So some physical stuff, like some people are able to do this, some people do this less. If you're able to take three, five minute walks a day, three, it's better than going for one 45 minute walk. Now, it doesn't mean that the 45 minute walk is bad and by all means, please go do that in addition, but what the three, five minute walks do is that A, it gives my mind something to look forward to, and B it gives my body a sense of urgency.

One of the things this pandemic does is it gives me a sense, like there's nothing I can do. I can't do anything. We first had any sense that we can do anything in the world through our body. I can move. I can move, I can go, I can manipulate things. Walking gives me a felt sense that I am doing something with intention and by this, I don't mean pacing back and forth. Pacing is not intentional movement.

Pacing is automatized anxiety that just like being coursing through my body while my feet move, but to go for a walk for five minutes to come back and reflect, so forth and so on. I would also say that it's important for us to have two or three people that we are on a regular basis, a couple times a week, that we are checking in with, with whom they are saying to us, and we are saying to them, we are telling the truth about where we are.

We don't just say, how are you doing? We can ask that question, but that question is pretty bland. You could ask me, how are you doing, Curt? I'm like, well, I'm actually fine at some level. Other kinds of questions such as, tell me one thing that's made you really sad today. Tell me one thing that's made you really angry today.

Tell me one thing that's happened today that as it turns out, you're really grateful for. Tell me something that you witnessed today and by witness, either you could have heard it, you could have seen it, you could have felt it, you could have tasted it, that really told you that beauty was still alive in the world.

So these are the kinds of questions that are not generalized, that just kind of like go into the fog with their answers. They ask us to actually turn our attention explicitly to certain things that we then, if I know that I'm going to be answering this kind of a question with my good friend or my two good friends a couple times a week, I'm then going to be looking for these things. I have to look for these things in order for me to answer them.

When I pay attention to looking for goodness and beauty, but also when I pay attention looking for sadness and grief, I'm looking for them because I want to be able to tell my story more truly. In a lot of respects, what we're doing is in engaging in a long standing lament. We name what we long for, we name what we want, we name what our grief is and we know that God lives with us in the middle in between these two things.

We are reminding each other that we are people of hope. Now how we generate hope in one respect is then is this. This is another exercise. I tell people look, find something that you can do to be creative. If you're going to like, I don't care if it's sidewalk chalk, make it be creative. I want to make sure that you're going to put, we like to say, put yourself in the path of oncoming beauty. Make sure that you practice putting yourself-

Joanna Meyer ([48:51](#)):

I love that-

Curt Thompson ([48:52](#)):



In the path of oncoming beauty and you look for it, and then you do some writing about it. So you write. What's an event of beauty that I encountered today, the end of your day? What are two or three things that I'm really grateful for? What are two or three things that I'm really grieving about? Lament journal. Part of that lament journal is, I'm drawing my attention to pay attention to things that are artifacts of beauty, even in the face of everything else.

Remember, the pandemic doesn't just happen to us. It happens, and then we have to decide how we are going to collaborate with it. Remember, we are collaborating storytellers. We are making this story up as we go. It's not just the thing that is happening independent of me. I send something, I read something, I read it on Twitter, I do this or do that and I tell a story about what this means.

If I'm not careful, I'm going to be telling a story about the meaning of the world in light of COVID that is not what you read about in the Bible. The Bible is a story of how God comes in the middle of the worst suffering you can imagine and is with us and says, I'm taking you someplace but before you even pay attention to where we're going, I just want you to pay attention to Me. I want you to pay attention to how delighted I am with you.

I know that you're having a hard time because you're at risk of being laid off from your job, and I want you to pay attention to Me. This isn't something that we can do in the abstract. I can read those pastoral chapters of Jesus, the high priestly chapters of Jesus in John's Gospel, but that's very different than sitting with my friend Bobby on my front porch and having him look at me and say, I'm never leaving the room.

I don't care how bad it gets. I want you to pay attention to me and that I'm not going to leave. We need people for whom we can be the person who's never leaving the room, but we can't give what we don't have. We equally need people, who on a regular basis, can be the people to whom I'm willing to say, as often as I need to say it, the truth about my story in this moment. How hard it is, how difficult it is for me because I can't predict.

I thought I could predict and now we can't predict. What are we going to do with school? I'm feeling overwhelmed. How am I going to do all this? We need people who can say to us, this is really hard. This is really, really hard. It reminds me of, if you don't mind, I'm going to go down, just a real small quick thing. There's a woman named Carol Dweck. You know Carol Dweck's work?

So she's a psychologist at Stanford, if she's still there and a number of years ago, she wrote a book called Mind Set. That's two words, Mind Set and it's now a program that is used all over the place in all kinds of, it's used for workplaces and education, so forth. It was run off of, some of the formative research studies were all based on this one model and the model was replicated dozens and dozens of times and it goes something like this.

You take two groups of middle school students, and one of those groups fits the category of the gifted and talented students. These are just really bright kids. The other kids are average, they're maybe even below average student. These are average students. In these two cohorts, you're going to give them a series of problems to solve in ascending order of difficulty and with each problem that they solve as a group individually and as a group, everything about the exercise is the same with one variable.

The variable is this, that with the gifted and talented group, the teacher who's helping to support them, when they solve a problem, the teacher will say, you did really well. You must be really smart. With this group, the average students, the teacher would say, you did really well on that problem. You must have worked really hard at that. Every single time. Once you get to about middle to a little above middle degree difficulty of these problems, the average students start to far and away, outpace the gifted and talented students and their capacity to solve the problems.



Joanna Meyer ([53:13](#)):

That's not what I expected.

Curt Thompson ([53:16](#)):

Here's what the data shows. That the moment one says to the GT students, you must be really smart. The moment that they start to have trouble with their problems, it sends the message that I must not be as smart as I thought I was. Because if I was smart then I would be able to solve this problem. They become more anxious, and the more anxious they become, the less capable they are to solve their problem. The other students, when they hear, you must have worked really hard at this.

When they find out that the problem is more difficult, they just work harder. The harder they work, the better they get. There's one additional thing that I would say this part of this that when the teacher says, you did well, you must have worked hard at that, eventually, you find that that's true for all of us. Life is difficult. Like my friend, Derek McNeil says, I'm a working man and I don't mean like I'm working to get through my day. I'm working to get through like dinner.

I'm working to get through homework, my kids. There's nothing quite like somebody walking in and saying, I see you. I see how hard you're working. I'm not just proud of you, because of the benchmarks. Because of how well you've done. I'm really, like I really get how hard this is. I'm just really impressed with how hard you're working. There is nothing like having somebody say that, and have the felt sense that you're not alone with your travail.

This brings us right back to Genesis two. It's not good for man to be alone, and the more able we are to be present and name the reality and the truth about our lives to someone who's able to hear it and say, I really get that. This is really hard. This is not hard because you're a pansy or because you're weak. This is hard, because you got a pulse, and we're in a pandemic and pandemics are never easy.

In this way, I would say like, this is what Good Friday is about. This is atonement. This is this sense of at one ment. This is this sense of God coming and crucifixion, and Jesus stripped naked right there in front of everybody and God saying like, there's nothing that is hard for you that where I'm not already there. I want you to know that I'm there and when I see it's hard, I know it's hard. When I'm not alone, just like this group of students who are average I can do anything. We like to say look, the brain can do a lot of hard work for a long period of time as long as it doesn't have to do it by itself. Now I'm just yapping.

Joanna Meyer ([56:14](#)):

Powerful, powerful.

Dustin Moody ([56:15](#)):

Thanks so much.

Joanna Meyer ([56:15](#)):

You know you're having a good conversation when you're on the verge of tears, and you're also laughing in the same conversation.

Dustin Moody ([56:21](#)):





Curt, as we wrap up, we'll link to all your essays and recent blog posts, but for those that may want more than what we'll put in the show notes, where can people find more about your work and your projects?

Curt Thompson ([56:31](#)):

It's [curtthompsonmd.com](#) is the website and it was launched in October last year, but it still feels pretty fresh and new to me after having an old one for quite a while. There's some interactive exercises on the website for people to do that they might find to be helpful. So I think that's...

Joanna Meyer ([56:51](#)):

Those resources are amazing, if I can put a plug in for it. It is interactive. It's kind of multimedia way of connecting with God and your feelings. I would recommend them for anyone. It's just lovely.

Curt Thompson ([57:02](#)):

Thanks. Well, I can say I'm really proud of it because I just tossed the people ideas and they, again, it's like this artifact of beauty that I'm really pleased with and I don't know how they did this, but the folks at Five by Five, the developers were just really lovely and lovely to work with. So anyway.

Joanna Meyer ([57:18](#)):

It's true. It's really beautiful.

Dustin Moody ([57:19](#)):

Curt, thanks so much for joining us on the Faith & Work podcast. Always a pleasure to talk with you.

Curt Thompson ([57:23](#)):

You're welcome. Pleasure to be here.

Speaker 2 ([57:29](#)):

If you've enjoyed this episode of the Faith & Work podcast, please subscribe, leave a review and share with a friend. The Faith & Work podcast is produced by Denver Institute for Faith & Work. We believe that work is a way to love God and serve our neighbors. To learn more or to make a financial contribution, visit [denverinstitute.org](#).