

TALKING THE WALK

Cycles of discipleship

Episode 34 | Major Gordon Cotterill

When I became a Christian at 19 I was keen to do as much as I could for Jesus.

I enthusiastically prepared Bible studies for our youth group at my corps. I volunteered to lead devotions at divisional youth band rehearsals so I could influence my friends to read the latest Christian book on evangelism, spiritual gifts or romantic relationships that I had read. I even performed a rap in the final festival of our divisional music school.

This was largely a natural by-product of me finding faith as I entered the energetic period of my 20s, but I can see now that part of my motivation was the desire to be noticed. I wanted my spiritual leaders to affirm me and my peers to look up to me. I wanted to feel like I was a person of significance, valued for making a difference.

If only I had known about the cycle of grace...

News cycles

Full disclosure: Major Gordon Cotterill, the guest on December 2022's episode of *The All Terrain Podcast*, is my corps officer at Sutton. I've had many great conversations with him, wrestled over theology with him. I've shared and received recommendations for books and films with him. I've even gone on the odd cycle ride with him.

But those of you who haven't met him can catch something of his open-mindedness, his ability to be challenged by ideas and to reflect deeply on them, in his choice of companions for the hypothetical hike that he and podcast host Jo Taylor are considering:



Laura Kuenssberg
British journalist and
political editor



Howard Thurman
American author,
theologian and a mentor
to Martin Luther King Jr



Toby Ziegler
Fictional White House
Communications Director
in *The West Wing*

Classic and emotional cycles

In the podcast, Gordon says our response to change depends on the kind of change it is.

Some things get thrown at you without you being able to anticipate them. Faced with those changes we often go through the classic cycle of change – shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. And it's natural that we do.

'I went to see a Catholic nun for spiritual direction when facing a particular change that was making me angry. She said, "Oh, you're right to be angry about that: that's good! That's the right thing to be angry about."

'But, she added: "You're wrong when you nurture it, when you nurse it, when you round up a posse to your opinion." She told Gordon to go outside, find a stone and put it in his pocket until he was ready throw that anger away.

So, it's natural to feel strong emotions when faced with unanticipated changes – but we need to make sure we're not getting stuck at a certain point of the cycle.

The 'emotional cycle of change' describes another approach people use when planning or pursuing intentional changes. The cycle starts with uninformed optimism – when our mood is high at the beginning of a new project, but we've not considered all the implications – and it continues into informed pessimism, when we realise the change we're trying to bring about is more complicated than we thought.

And then it can go two ways.

'If we're not careful our informed pessimism can lead to us checking out' – abandoning the project – 'then going back to uninformed optimism when the next new thing comes along. And it leads to a sense of tedium.

'Instead we need to push through to hopeful realism and then informed optimism to see the change through. So, I face change in a way that tries to get me as informed as possible.'

Vicious cycles

What about suffering?

'Someone helpfully shared an image last year at church of jam jars with marbles in, trying to argue against the idea that "over time, grief goes away". It doesn't. What happens instead is that over time the number of marbles, our grief, stays the same, but the jam jars, our capacity to hold that grief, get bigger.'

'I think Henri Nouwen can speak with authority about suffering, having lived in a culture where his orientation was not something he would want to share. So when he talks about being a wounded healer I think there's something there that that helps me when I think about suffering.'

'We're all wounded. We all carry stuff. But it's through those cracks that the light shines.'

'The word for healing comes from the same root as the words salvation and wholeness and peace. If you look up the word salvation in Welsh, it's a really long word! But it picks up on this idea that true healing takes place through our sharing of weakness.'

'And I'm not sure we do that great as humans, because we always want to shout out how well we've done with stuff, how much we've achieved or how much our kids have done, and look at the size of my TV and my double garage!'

'But there's something very profound in sharing our weakness, because something beautiful can come out of it. And how we deal with suffering can be a moment of defiance to this world.'

Cycles of works and grace

How do we receive joy?

'I think joy, deep joy, real joy – the kind of joy that is ours to experience – comes from a sense of belonging, that sense of oneness with each other. Belonging is the starting point of joy for me.'

Gordon introduces a model called the 'cycle of grace,' devised by Frank Lake and Emil Brunner in the 1960s when they were researching ministers of religion who were suffering burnout and were deeply unhappy.

They noticed that for these ministers, 'achievement was the thing they started with: "If I can achieve something, people will see that I'm significant. And if I'm being significant to people then that will sustain

me. I will feel sustained, because I'm getting all the plaudits. And that will bring me the belonging that I've been looking for all the time.'

In contrast, as Trevor Hudson and Jerry P. Haas explain, the cycle of grace starts with belonging, of finding your identity in God, and that is what sustains you. From that place of sustenance is where your significance comes from and that leads to true fruitfulness. The cycle of grace is modelled on Jesus' own pattern for ministry: he set aside time to spend in solitude with his Father, and out of that input of grace he was able to output in significant and fruitful ways.

'So there's two ways round the cycle. And I think the times when I feel joy seeping out or being squished out of me is when perhaps I am going around the cycle the wrong way, when I am wanting people to tell me, "Oh, that was great", or give me a little pat on the back. But actually that's a fool's errand, because it just leads to deep dissatisfaction with relationships and life if all you're ever doing is to try and impress other people.

'Whereas I go back to those times in my life where I've just known that oneness with God, and I've been overwhelmed with the presence of God – and sometimes it's as simple as being out in the garden, or the lyrics of a song which is written but has a real crossover and really means something, reminds you that actually you belong.

'So it's an awkward journey, but I know that that joy starts with belonging.'

Life cycle

How do you mature in service?

'I guess my understanding of mission has really matured. When I went into the training college, I just thought I'd just get a few good arguments together, get everyone who joined the church to sign on the dotted line of belonging to Jesus, and their sins would be forgiven, and that would be that.

'But my theology has deepened and broadened. Gospel – good news – doesn't just mean that if we do A, B and C we'll have our place in heaven. Gospel for Mark, Luke, Matthew and John was the declaration of something alternative. And the alternative they were declaring was the new reign of God. And this new reign was to be seen in Jesus as He embodied the kingdom of God, which was always the big plan. I'm not sure I understood that as I first went into training. I think training helped me with that. And the experience of ministry, on a pragmatic practical level, helped me with that.

'So how do I mature in service? I allow my thinking to be stretched by people by books and situations.

'A hospital chaplain said to me, "When you are journeying with someone who is suffering, you've got to remember: it's not your needs that are being met in this, and if you think you're helping you probably aren't. And when you think you're not helping, you probably are."

'We've been here now at Sutton for 10 years and are still loving ministry at the local level. Being an officer makes sense for us. Encouraging and being part of a journey of maturity in faith is what we try to do – not only with our worshipping community, but also with the people that are part of our crowd in Sutton – part of who we are as a church – who come along during the week and may do crosswords with us, drink coffee with us, come to parent and toddlers or come along to our mid-week community choir. They may engage with us in a whole host of different ways.

'But in one way or another, we're trying to journey in a way that brings life not only to them, but in a way that really impacts us too. As a Salvation Army corps it would be fair to say we've journeyed well in the past and continue to journey well. We've transitioned to try and create an environment, a culture, where anyone belongs: anyone can come and be part of who we are. So any barriers to that, any obstacles to that, we continue to try and smooth out so people can belong, and they can belong quickly.'

Prayer by Howard Thurman

The last thing Gordon shares in the episode is a prayer written by Howard Thurman, one of the people he chose to accompany Jo and him on their hypothetical hike.

Here's the full text:









I Need You

I need Your sense of time. Always I have an underlying anxiety about things. Sometimes I am in a hurry to achieve my ends and am completely without patience. It is hard for me to realize that some growth is slow, that not all processes are swift. I cannot discriminate between what takes time to develop and what can be rushed because my sense of time is dulled. O to understand the meaning of perspective that I may do all things with a profound sense of leisure of time.

I need Your sense of order. The confusion of the details of living is sometimes overwhelming. The little things keep getting in my way, providing ready-made excuses for failure to do and be what I know I ought to do and be. Much time is spent on things that are not very important while significant things are put in an insignificant place in my scheme of order. I must unscramble my affairs so that my life will become order. O God, I need Your sense of order.

I need Your sense of the future. Teach me to know that life is ever on the side of the future. Keep alive in me the future look, the high hope. Let me not be frozen either by the past or the present. Grant me, O Patient One, Your sense of the future without which all life would sicken and die.

Questions for reflection

-  *Gordon visits a Catholic nun for spiritual direction from time to time. Which other faith traditions are you open to learning from? What might be the benefits of seeking guidance from spiritual leaders outside of The Salvation Army?*
-  *Gordon was told to keep a stone in his pocket to symbolise the righteous anger he was carrying, and to let it go when he was ready. Is there anything that is making you angry that you could carry your own stone for, until you're ready to let it go?*
-  *When you are trying to make a positive change and discover how challenging it is to bring it about, what's your usual response: checking out or pushing through? Have you ever found yourself stuck in a cycle of tedium, constantly chasing after the next new thing but never landing it? How could you be as informed as possible and move into hopeful realism instead?*
-  *In what ways are you wounded, or do you identify with being a wounded healer? Do you believe that something beautiful can come out of suffering?*
-  *How vulnerable do you allow yourself to be? How might showing our vulnerability in dealing with suffering be a moment of defiance to the world?*
-  *Think of the moments you've felt the most joy in your life. Did you also feel a sense of belonging in those moments? Do you have that same sense of belonging in your life now? How could you increase your sense of belonging – to God, your church, your family, your community?*
-  *Can you think of a time in your life when you've travelled the cycle of grace in reverse, enthusiastically achieving in the hope you'll demonstrate your worth and experience a sense of belonging? Why is it better to go the other way round the cycle?*
-  *Picture yourself when you first came to faith. Do you think you've changed much in how you approach using your gifts for Jesus? If so, how? If not, why not?*

TALKING THE WALK is a blog series reflecting on episodes of [The All Terrain Podcast](#), written by Matt Little.

Join the conversation: whether that's getting together with a small group of friends to listen to and discuss each episode, joining [The All Terrain Conversations group on Facebook](#) to dive deeper into the insights and questions provoked by the podcast, or an even better idea we've not thought of yet!

New episodes of the podcast are released on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and PodBean on the final Friday of each month. You can also download the brilliant sketch notes from the [podcast page](#).