

## Interaction with a Gospel-Figure

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Creative writing can be a very useful tool for engaging the heart. At first you may feel awkward. You may resist. In your initial attempts the exercise may feel stiff, phony, forced, and staged. You may find yourself thinking: "This is fantasy. It is play-acting." Exactly! It is, after all, imaginative writing! It requires that you suspend your natural inhibitions, let go of control, go with the flow, and give yourself permission to play! The prayer of holy imagination opens up possibilities that remain hidden when the ego oversees a prayer-exercise.

Creative writing prayer-exercises are varied. They might include writing poetry; noticing ideas that "bubble up" in a poem, or a piece of prose, or a Gospel story, extracting them and then synthesizing them into a personal prayer; or responding to a piece of literature, etc. The three exercises suggested here all involve interacting with a character in the Gospel. Each exercise invites you to use literary license and an author's imagination (1) to **extend a Gospel story**, that is, to continue the story beyond what is read in the Bible, (2) to **write a letter to the Gospel figure**, or (3) to **script a dialogue between yourself and the Gospel figure**.

Once you complete a period of creative writing you then review the writing for "pop outs." What does that mean? Some words, ideas, feelings, or emotions will tug at you. They will seem to pop out of the writing sample. Sit with those thoughts. Talk about them with Jesus. A message will evolve. Your soul will recognize a need or issue that was hidden from your conscious controlling self. Take that information to prayer. See how Jesus touches your heart!

Note:

Each of the following three prayer-exercises utilize Transposition Style B of the Gospel of Mark 7:24-30, the story of the Syro-Phoenician/Cananite woman who dared to verbally spar with Jesus and won healing for her daughter. *[N.B. The Prayer of Transposition is explained at [www.ParentTeacherSupport.org](http://www.ParentTeacherSupport.org). . . Newsletters/ Religious Ed/Prayer of Transposition].*

For convenience, **Transposition Style B** of the Gospel follows:

From that place **you** went off to the territory of Tyre and Sidon and retired to a certain house wanting no one to recognize **you**; however, **you** could not escape notice. Soon **I** heard about **you**. My small daughter had an unclean spirit. **I** approached **you** and crouched at **your** feet. **I** who was Greek -- a Syro-Phoenician by birth -- began to beg **you** to expel the demon from **my** daughter. **You** told **me**: "Let the sons of the household satisfy themselves at table first. It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs. "Please, Lord," **I** replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the family's leavings." Then **you** said to **me**, "For such a reply, be off now! The demon has already left **your** daughter." When **I** got home, **I** found my child lying in bed and the demon gone.

## #1

### Extend the Story. Continue the Gospel Narrative.

Prayerfully, thoughtfully, reflectively read the Gospel of Mark 7: 24-30. Use Transposition Style B where you become the story-teller by changing the Jesus references from “third person – he/him” to “second person – you” and changing references to yourself from “third person – she, her” to “first person – I, me.” Using this form the Gospel story ends with the sentence: “When I got home I found my child lying in bed and the demon gone.”

Continue writing the story from that point on. Ofcourse in the Scripture there is nothing more to the story and so, what you write will be totally creative – a product of your imagination. Give yourself permission and freedom to be the Syro-Phoenician woman. Extend the story! What would she say next?

1. Continue writing the story. Limit yourself to ten minutes of “free writing.” Do not concern yourself about spelling, grammar, theology, accuracy, etc. Merely write the story as it comes to you.
2. When finished, go back and re-read what you wrote. Underline, highlight or circle any words or ideas that point to emotions.
3. Does a theme emerge? What resonates with your life? Speak with Jesus about these kinds of ideas. Use “I-you” language for your conversation with Jesus.

When we write to impress another person, or we expect that another will read what we write, or if we attempt to produce for ourselves a perfect project, we are self-conscious. We lead with the ego and we automatically, unintentionally, control or choreograph the results. That is the opposite of imaginative prayer writing. When we prayerfully “free write,” our unconscious, spontaneous, non-staged soul-material surfaces. It can lead to intimate conversation with Jesus, healing, and transformation.

One adult-retreatant wrote the following extension. She had the expectation that her eyes would be the only eyes that see it. At the conclusion of the retreat I asked if I could share it with others. She remains anonymous though her “free write” will serve the needs of others by illustrating the usefulness of this writing tool.

#### Sample Initial “Free Write”

“ . . . When I got home, I found my child lying in bed and the demon gone.” I was relieved to see my daughter restored to the condition of wholeness that she once knew – that I once knew! Life will now be different. Life can now reign. She can see the wonders of life, love, friendship, and accomplishment. I can see her grow happily. And with this constant pressure removed from me, my

life can continue. Friendships and involvements are once again possible. Oh how I swell with joy and gratitude and relief.

I am so grateful to you but I need to tell you that I felt insignificant and inferior, dismissed and unregarded by your initial comment. I now know concretely that you reverence me and my daughter but your words still stung. I felt compared to a dog and less valued than my Jewish counterparts. But I am not. It is your own grace that calls me to experience my dignity, worth, and equality. I was faithful to my call to claim my heritage and live in the image of God. Is that why you healed my little one?

**Taking a Second Look at the Free Write** – The retreatant focused on terms that connect to emotion. Note the terms in bold print.

“ . . . When I got home, I found my child lying in bed and the demon gone.” I was **relieved** to see my daughter **restored** to the condition of wholeness that she once knew – that I once knew! Life will now be different. **Life can now reign**. She can see the wonders of life, love, friendship, and accomplishment. I can see her grow happily. And with this constant pressure removed from me, **my life can continue**. Friendships and involvements are once again possible. Oh how I swell with **joy** and **gratitude** and **relief**.

I am so **grateful** to you but I need to tell you that I felt **insignificant** and **inferior**, **dismissed** and **un-regarded** by your initial comment. I now know concretely that you reverence me and my daughter but your words still stung. I felt compared to a dog and less valued than my Jewish counterparts. But I am not. It is your own grace that calls me to **experience my dignity, worth, and equality**. I was faithful to my call to claim my heritage and live in the **image of God**. Is that why you healed my little one?

A variety of emotional connections surfaced for the retreatant – both positive and negative in nature. Both pleasant emotions and wounded emotions have the potential to shape the soul and to enkindle intimacy with Jesus. On the positive side she identified: relief, a sense of restoration and healing for her daughter, acknowledgement that her own life had been “on hold,” recognition that she had neglected her own life-needs, a sense of consolation, joy, and gratitude. On the wounded side she identified that she felt insignificant, inferior, dismissed, and un-regarded. (I bet this is not the first time in her life that she had those feelings!!) She showed respectful assertiveness by putting the unpleasant topic on the table and actually telling Jesus “your words still stung!” She claimed her self-worth. She even wondered if Jesus gave her what she needed and asked for *precisely because* she claimed her heritage as a woman made in the image of God.

This prayer-experience unearthed so much within this woman. It provided soulful material for many a future prayer period. Questions emerged spontaneously; each one with the potential of keeping her prayerfully busy for a long while. For instance:

- In what ways has my life been “on hold”?
- What blocks life for me?
- How do I witness the image of God? What would it “look like” if I lived with conscious awareness that I am made in the image of God?
- What part of me (“my little one”) needs healing?

Continuing the Gospel Narrative is a useful prayer tool for many people. It brings to the surface issues that may lay hidden otherwise. This kind of exercise reveals to the pray-er insights into his/her true self and those intuitions spark intimate conversation with Jesus. The exercise becomes prayer when the person takes those issues into “I-you” conversation with Jesus. Little by little, in the gentlest of ways and words, Jesus speaks.

## #2 Letter Writing

Writing a letter to a Gospel figure is a creative way to identify character traits that support a relationship with Jesus and, in some stories, to recognize tendencies that block growth. This imaginative prayer employs “free writing” as did the prayer-style of extending the Gospel. The praying person expresses un-monitored thoughts to the Gospel character. By that I mean, the writer does not pain over what to say and how to say it. He/she lets thoughts flow freely without judgment or agenda. When the letter is finished, the writer re-reads it and notes words or phrases that “pop” as important; thoughts that resonate with the writer’s life experience. In a subsequent prayer session the praying person converses with Jesus about the issues or patterns that appeared within the letter.

An adult retreatant used letter-writing as a tool for praying with the Gospel of Mark 7: 24-30. Following is a portion of the letter that he/she wrote to the Cannanite mother. Bold print indicates the ideas that “popped” for the retreatant.

Dear Cannanite Woman,

You deserve the title: **FOCUSED MOTHER ON A MISSION!** You had one goal to accomplish – relief for your daughter! And nothing and no one was going to deter you from your mission. Your **single-minded mission** ignored boundaries of nationality, religious custom, and cultural biases. You heard about Jesus. You concluded that he had the power to heal. You connected that power with **God who is universal**. And you went **to claim** that healing for your daughter. If you thought at all about the stereotypes involved, you disregarded them as insignificant details. You, a Syro-Phoenician AND a woman, **initiated conversation** with a Jewish rabbi and you **refused to be put-off or put-down**. You did not beat around the bush. And despite an apparent verbal “put-down,”

you **stayed on task**. You **did not allow the ego to side-track you**. The result was that you got what you needed! I really admire you and I can take some lessons from you . . .

A re-read of the letter reveals a woman who was feisty, focused, and willing to initiate, to be proactive, and to dare to claim “equality”. I think she earned the “stick-to-it-tive-ness” award! All good qualities for us to emulate in our prayer. Obviously Jesus approved of her and her personality characteristics. Afterall, she did get what she wanted! And so, the praying person can easily conclude that these are qualities that Jesus invites him/her to emulate.

This letter evoked the following kinds of questions. Any one of them could provide a focus for prayer and lead to intimate sharing with Jesus.

- What in my life is in need of focus?
- Is there an issue (topic, person, or situation) that absorbs my energy and requires a solution or a resolve?
- Have I been waiting for someone else to feed my need? Do I need to take initiative? Am I willing to be persistent.
- Who am I? Whose am I? (What is my identity?)

### **#3 Scripting Dialogue**

Scripting a dialogue is another example of imaginative prayer. Quite possibly it is more stretching than other styles of imaginative prayer because it requires the praying person to assume two roles: his/her own part as well as the position of the Gospel character. That “ups the ante” on being creative and on living outside your comfort zone. That is precisely why the prayer style becomes an effective tool of transformation. Often when we are in our comfort zone we control and manipulate the activity. But when we are in unfamiliar territory, the Spirit has better chances of getting free reign. That is when growth occurs! The creativity brings to the surface deep issues of the soul. When those issues are then taken into conversation with Jesus, the pray-er experiences divine intimacy.

At their initial attempt to use scripting dialogue many retreatants voice resistance. “Staged, contrived, forced, artificial, and engineered” are some of the complaints heard over the years. It may feel like “play acting.” Encourage the adult participants to stick with it. No matter how phony it may feel to script the dialogue, the Spirit will work with the effort. Consider the following prayer-exercise of one adult retreatant.

**ME:** I can relate to how you must have felt . . . Your daughter – innocent and young – did not deserve this sorrow. She didn't invite it or contribute to its presence. She needed relief and was unable to do anything about it by herself. You must have felt inadequate.

**CANNANITE WOMAN:** I was at my wits end and desperate times lead to desperate means! My desperation made it easy to brush the opinions of others aside and dare to speak with Jesus.

**ME:** You certainly held your own with him. I think he respected you for knowing what you need and letting nothing interfere with your goal.

**CANNANITE WOMAN:** As I look back on it, I am grateful that he did not just wave a magic wand! The conversation helped me to clarify my beliefs and to claim my dignity as a child of God.

And so on . . .

Looking back at the completed script the praying person noticed the feeling of inadequacy; the inability to effect necessary changes; feeling desperate and grabbing at strings of hope. The Cannanite woman acknowledged that he/she was powerless. This emptiness prompted pro-active efforts. She identified a specific need as opposed to a generic plea. In other words, she was able to name and claim a need and then pursue a way to tame it. Persistence became a strength. She was willing to be a pest if that's what it took to move things along in her favor. Pride and ego had no place in this woman. Her child needed help and she was set to do whatever it took! She even came to be grateful that a "quick fix" was not bestowed because the struggle led her to clarify her faith and recognize her worth – two essential elements for growing in an adult relationship with Jesus.

From these insights the following kinds of questions surfaced for the retreatant:

- Am I feeling inadequate in some part of my life? Where? What have I tried thus far to resolve the issue?
- Is there an issue in my life (person, topic, or situation) that I need to name, claim and tame?
- Am I assuming proactive responsibility for feeding the needs of my truest self?
- What strengths are developing in me precisely because of my struggles?