

Answerizing

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [November 18, 1998](#) issue

A pastor calls the kids to the altar rail for yet another children's sermon and says: "I am thinking of something that is brown, has a bushy tail, and every fall gathers acorns to itself. What am I thinking of?" After a long silence, a young child pipes up: "I'm sure the right answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me."

This joke has made the rounds among preachers as a mocking critique of the triviality of many children's sermons. It can also serve to illustrate a tendency that is polarizing people and crippling our capacity for meaningful discourse: the belief that we know what the right answer is, regardless of the question that has been asked or the issue being addressed.

David James Duncan, the author of *The Brothers K*, characterizes this attitude as "answerizing." It grows out of the conviction that the only right way to handle any question is to offer The One Correct Answer. In a lecture titled, "Who Owns the West? Ten Wrong Answers," Duncan describes answerizing as "an activity that stands in relationship to truly Answering as the ability to memorize the phone book stands in relationship to the ability to love every preposterous flesh and blood person whose mere name the phone book happens to contain."

Duncan goes on to note: "Questions that tap into our mortality, our pain, our selfishness, our basic needs, questions that arise from the immeasurable darkness, lightness or mystery of our lives, require more than mere Answerization." Such questions require sustained conversation, a willingness to listen and speak with one another in ways that can acknowledge the complexity of our lives; Christians believe such complexity involves the God whom we worship.

Job's friends were experts at answerizing. They were unable to tolerate the inexplicable complexity and mystery of Job's suffering, and were sure there must obviously be One Correct Answer to his predicament. Job refuses their answers by insisting that his suffering remains a mystery. We know with whom God sides in that story.

Yet we have not absorbed God's critique of Job's friends or of our attempts to answerize. So we encounter fundamentalists on the ecclesial right and left. On one side people are convinced that the right answer is Jesus, even if the question sounds like the answer ought to be a squirrel. On the other side, people are convinced that the right answer is an "ism," or an appeal to privileged personal experience, regardless of whether the question or issue can be so neatly explained.

Answerizing also has become the dominant mode of political discourse. Tune into the Sunday morning talk shows and watch the politicians and "spin doctors" utter their predetermined statements regardless of the question that is actually asked.

These tendencies toward answerizing are threatening to debase our conversations and our communities. Rather than being reduced to verbal trench warfare, can we find common ground? Can we find ways of recognizing that we are sharply divided about deeply held beliefs, but do so in ways that nonetheless sustain us at a level deeper than a thin veneer of tolerance masking hostility?

Perhaps we ought to search for meaningful disagreements with one another. If we develop and articulate our convictions as clearly and coherently as possible, we will likely discover profound and potentially alienating disagreements among our friends, strangers and enemies. But if we patiently develop skills of attending and listening to others in all of their "preposterous flesh and blood" particularity, then those disagreements will more likely be meaningful. Communities are sustained both by painfully won consensus and by an ability to work through--and to live with--meaningful disagreements.

How do we discover common ground and sustain ourselves through meaningful disagreements? As Mark Schwehn has suggested in *Exiles from Eden*, three virtues are particularly important: humility, truthfulness and interpretive charity. Humility emphasizes that "we see but through a glass darkly." In some contexts, it is important to affirm that we do see, that we must make and defend claims to knowledge and truth. But it is also important to recognize what we do not know, and to recognize that we need others to deepen the mystery of our engagement with the world, particular objects of study, and God.

A commitment to truth and to truthfulness changes the horizons of inquiry, conversation and debate. No longer are opposing sides seeking victory through rhetorical giftedness or deployments of power. Rather, people are engaged in a joint

inquiry in which we are required to listen to, and learn from, one another. This joint inquiry may involve polemics and apologetics. However, it also leaves open the distinct possibility of intellectual conversion--of being persuaded by the other's views.

Interpretive charity requires us to interpret the other's views in the best light possible. Rather than having a predetermined One Correct Answer for our interlocutor, we are called to listen to the other in ways that open our minds to deeper understanding. Interpretive charity invites a hermeneutic of generosity, whether in our engagement with texts such as scripture or with particular people.

In the place of answerizing, we need to cultivate qualities of life that enable us faithfully to address those questions that "tap into our mortality, our pain, our selfishness, our basic needs, questions that arise from the immeasurable darkness, lightness, or mystery of our lives." Such questions, I would add, tap into our faithful worship of the triune God whose power is manifested in the powerlessness of the cross, whose wisdom is foolishness to the Greeks, whose kingdom we see but through a glass darkly.