

A chat with the refiner's fire

“You’ve talked about a lot of things,” says your refiner’s fire. “Which is the one that really matters?”

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue



An Easter Vigil fire at St. Francis Monastery in Kraków, Poland. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Ricardo77](#).

You’ve moved across the country, and you’re a long way from the town you know best. Time flies, and it’s been a couple of years since you’ve been back. But something has come up, and it turns out you’re going to spend a day or two there. When you go back, you can’t not go and see that one person, the one who knows you so well and loves you despite it all, and from whom you tend to shy away because he’s like a refiner’s fire that burns away the dross and leaves you with no way to hide the truth. But you’ve been away a couple of years. You’re a lot more worldly-wise now, and you’re not going to be seen through as easily as in the old days.

The conversation starts simply. "What've you been up to?" There're lots of things to say to that. Then, "What're you working on?" That one's a bit harder, because you know it doesn't just mean, "What's keeping you busy?" but, "What's the part of you that's being tested, what are you learning, what's not working, and where are you having to grow through your mistakes?" You blunder on, offering up quite a few responses and hoping the number of different activities will prevent the conversation from settling on any single one of them. "That's a lot of things," says your refiner's fire. "Which is the one that really matters?"

Oh dear. You've dug yourself a hole. It's as if you've been buried in sand at the seaside. You can't avoid a question like that. It's too obvious. Your jokey manner and casual charm have failed. You admit that you could have avoided this conversation but that something drew you into it. Part of you wanted this. "Hmm?" says the refiner's fire, pointing out that you haven't answered the question. "Since you put it that way, none of the things I've mentioned is the one that really matters." You lower your eyes and look at the floor, because you feel shame. Shame that your life is so full of padding and that the real quality is buried inside. Shame that this person who knows you so well and understands life so acutely has gotten to the heart of it all in about five minutes. And then, surprising yourself, you say, "The one that really matters is . . ."

And you begin to regain a bit of composure because you've said something good and true. And it turns out, you suddenly realize, that you're actually perceptive and full of self-knowledge and even wisdom. You think maybe the refiner's fire isn't so scary. Maybe we're on a level. But the refiner isn't finished. "So, if that's what really matters, why aren't you filling your whole time with that?" And in an instant you know that any of your answers would be foolish and empty and cowardly and make everything even worse because they'd all illustrate what you don't want to say, that your life is an elaborate organized conspiracy to avoid the one thing that really matters. The refiner's fire can see that, which may be why you've stayed away, and why you feel so naked and embarrassed yet inspired and repentant now. You've just gotten a glimpse of what it's like to lose the whole world and gain your own soul.

In her novel *Saint Maybe*, Anne Tyler tells the story of three children who become orphans and of their 19-year-old Uncle Ian. Because he somehow holds himself responsible for their parents' deaths, Ian leaves college and sets aside the plans he had for his life in order to bring up his brother's children. It's not easy, but in losing the world he gains his own soul. When the children leave home, he finds himself

overwhelmed by the house's muddle and untidiness. At this moment in walks Rita, a strident, twentysomething, self-styled clutter counselor who throws out 90 percent of the contents of Ian's fridge, along with half the contents of the attic, basement, and almost every other room. With unerring perception, she recognizes the exhaustion of the lingering memories and unmade decisions represented by every item of clutter. To everyone's surprise, Ian falls in love with and marries Rita. Maybe it's because she returns him to the simplicity of the one thing that really matters—the simplicity that led him to do such a radical thing when he was an apparently carefree 19-year-old all those years before.

When God became a human being in Jesus Christ, God hired Rita the clutter counselor and cleared out all that didn't really matter. Jesus spent all his time on the one thing that really mattered: us. Maybe today is the right time to come before the refiner's fire and confront those two exasperating questions, "What's the one thing that really matters?" and "So why aren't you filling your whole time with that?" Maybe now is the time to call for Rita, clear out all that doesn't really matter, and humbly but seriously resolve to spend our time on the one thing that really does matter.