



Related articles:

The joy of third things
(page 26)

Living Lutheran,
September 2021

Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to rcblezard@embarqmail.com

Study guide

The joy of third things

Build meaningful connections at worship, the ballpark & beyond

By Robert C. Blezard

Intimate conversation, where two people share the deep thoughts of their souls, rarely happens easily. Most people are guarded in disclosing their innermost selves. But when their conversation takes place in the context of a “third thing” activity or experience, it’s much easier for folks to open up. How about you?

EXERCISE 1: OUR DISCLOSURE

Some people readily share every detail of their lives with people they don’t know well. (You’ve probably met some of those!) But most of us have to feel comfortable before sharing personal information—comfortable with the people and comfortable with the context where the conversation takes place.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, with one being “I share everything with anybody” and 10 being “I keep my thoughts to myself,” where are you? Why did you place yourself where you did?
- With whom are you more likely to share personal information? What kind of relationship has to exist before you open up?
- Under what circumstances would you more readily share personal thoughts?
- Does sharing during an experience or activity—a “third thing”—enable you to open up more readily? Explain.
- How might you use “third thing” activities to deepen your relationships?

EXERCISE 2: CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Knowing that its men were notoriously reserved in deep sharing, a wise congregation organized them into a home fix-up crew for neighbors who needed help. In the course of painting and putting up drywall and siding, and installing roofing, the men began to talk and reveal themselves, becoming not only friends but brothers-in-Christ. In this way, the congregation used a “third thing” activity to bring them together. In fact, a church is an ideal organization to offer “third thing” events, activities and experiences to bring people together.

- How is your church doing in arranging “third way” activities? What, specifically, is going on?
- What more could your congregation do to encourage conversation and interaction?



Study guide: **The joy of third things**

continued

- As a study group, come up with a list of events, activities and experiences that could be “third thing” catalysts for specific target folks listed below. Start, of course, with what your congregation is already doing, but expand with other ideas:
 - Men
 - Women
 - Teenagers
 - Schoolchildren
 - Elderly
 - Parents
 - Married folks
 - Single people
 - Intergenerational
 - LGBTQIA+

When done, present the ideas as suggestions to your congregation council and pastor.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What kinds of personal details are you most likely to guard carefully? Triumphs? Challenges? Failures? Thoughts about God? Goals? Fears? Strengths? Weaknesses? Family history? Others? Explain.
- What reasons might we have for our reluctance to share personal information? What are potential consequences of sharing too much too early? By the same token, is it wise to never reveal anything, keeping it all inside? What are the consequences of that?
- Can you talk about a time when you felt comfortable sharing deep thoughts with someone you didn't know very well? What was the context? Who was the person? What made it easier to talk to them?
- When has a “third thing” experience relaxed you enough to share personal thoughts with others?
- Speaking hypothetically, if you were trying to get a friend or family member to open up to you about an issue in their life, what criteria would you use to select or design a “third thing” to ease the conversation?

Contact us:

Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the
magazine of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.



THE JOY OF THIRD THINGS

By Elise Scyfried

BUILD MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS AT WORSHIP, THE BALLPARK & BEYOND

If soul truth is to be spoken and heard, it must be approached “on the slant.” —Parker J. Palmer

In his book *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Quaker writer Parker J.

Palmer talks about “third things,” how people can make emotional connections while talking about something they’re experiencing together. This can happen when people attend a concert or play, view a painting or even watch a baseball game.

Palmer believes that the soul is shy and that asking another person to immediately share something very vulnerable can scare them off. Connecting while engaged in third things is a gentler way to communicate.

Many people have fond memories of special conversations that transpired while they were doing the dishes with a parent or going fishing with a friend. This third thing they do together makes it easy and comfortable for them to converse more deeply, often without even making eye contact.

SCRIPTURE TELLS OF MANY TIMES WHEN JESUS TURNED A SIMPLE CHAT INTO A LIFE-CHANGING ENCOUNTER—FROM HIS VISIT WITH THE WOMAN AT THE WELL TO HIS LATE-NIGHT CONVERSATION WITH NICODEMUS TO TALKS WITH HIS DISCIPLES OVER SHARED MEALS.

One of my third things involved my husband's parents, who were big television watchers—the set was usually on when we visited. Often we would watch a game show with them. At one point contestants were asked, “Would you rather be ignorant and happy, or brilliant and miserable?” At the exact same moment, we all answered aloud, but my response—brilliant and miserable—was the opposite of theirs. We ended up having a great conversation about the value of knowledge and the value of contentment.

I also remember the time one of my teenagers grew quiet and distant, showing little emotion (at least, around me). The more I pushed, the less he talked. Then, one night, we happened to watch the movie *The Elephant Man*. After it ended, I immediately flipped on the lights and started gabbing, “Oh, wasn't that amazing?” My son didn't answer. When I looked over at him, he was silently crying.

ANOTHER THIRD THING IS WORSHIPING AT CHURCH, WHEN WE SHARE A SACRED EXPERIENCE WITH OTHERS. I'VE LEARNED SO MUCH ABOUT PEOPLE IN CONVERSATIONS THAT BEGAN BY TALKING ABOUT THE SERVICE—A HYMN, OR THE GOSPEL, OR THE SERMON.

I have never forgotten that moment when the third thing brought out such deep feelings in my child. I felt closer to him than I had in years.

Third things can also happen in nature. Our family spends the summers at the Delaware shore. I love walking on the beach. Some of my very

best conversations with friends have occurred as we strolled along the water's edge. Triumphs and struggles, difficult decisions at work, faith questions with which we are wrestling—all are topics for discussion. The words come easily as we concentrate on our footsteps in the sand.

We may not solve the world's problems on these seaside walk-and-talks, but they do wonders for our relationships.

Another third thing is worshiping at church, when we share a sacred experience with others. I've learned so much about people in conversations that began by talking about the service—a hymn, or the Gospel, or the sermon.

Being physically together at church was something I missed very much during the last year and a half. To feel connected was a challenge, but we still made contact through online worship and Bible study opportunities, and I believe God was right there with us.

Now that our church has reopened for indoor worship, I enjoy being back, even amid new restrictions. I look forward to the day when we can hug, sing hymns, receive communion as a church family—and have more deep conversations.

I HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN THAT MOMENT WHEN THE THIRD THING BROUGHT OUT SUCH DEEP FEELINGS IN MY CHILD. I FELT CLOSER TO HIM THAN I HAD IN YEARS.

In our modern world, it's too easy to keep our conversations light and casual, to armor ourselves against the hurt and disappointment we risk by expressing our deepest feelings. Yet Scripture tells of many times when Jesus turned a simple chat into a life-changing encounter—from his visit with the woman at the well to his late-night conversation with Nicodemus to talks with his disciples over shared meals. As people of faith, we are called to be like Jesus, and to gently encourage one another to share our truest selves.

So the next time you face an impasse with one of your teenage children, or you and a friend have stopped communicating as well as you did in the past, find a third thing you can do side by side, whether it's chopping vegetables for soup or discussing a book. You may discover that you are suddenly sharing on a whole different level. While focusing on something else, we can renew our focus on, and connection with, each other.

There's magic in a simple shared experience, in a third thing. And couldn't we all use a little more magic in our lives? †

THIRD THINGS

Here are some suggestions for third things:

With children

- **Try drawing or sculpting with clay or play dough.**
As you work alongside each other, share how you're feeling about your creation, and ask your young companion some questions about theirs.
- **Take a nature walk.**
As you pass flowers, trees, birds and streams, discuss how you feel about God's beautiful world. Is there a season or type of weather that brings you joy or sorrow? What does your young companion think and feel about the natural world?

With older children and adults

- **Listen to a song together.**
Afterward, share a memory the music evoked in you. Is there a memory attached to this music for your companion? Invite the other person to share a piece of their favorite music with you.

- **Watch a sporting event live or on television.**
As you spectate, pose and answer these questions: Who are your sports heroes, and what about them do you find compelling? What in your own life has required sustained focus and commitment?
- **Garden, cook or do woodwork together.**
As you work side by side, share: Who taught you these things? How does doing them keep you connected to your past? What skills of value do you hope to pass along to the next generation?
- **Spread out a blanket outside and experience sunset and/or twinkling stars together.**
Don't be afraid of some silence as you observe the splendor of the sky—and don't be surprised if a wonderful conversation develops over time. †

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab.



An ELCA Gathering for Youth with Disabilities



JULY 21-24, 2022 • TWIN CITIES, MN

PRE-EVENTS TO THE 2022 ELCA YOUTH GATHERING

elca.org/thetAble

elca.org/MYLE



The Multicultural Youth Leadership Event of the ELCA

