

OpenTheo

You Are What You Love | James K.A. Smith

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The Veritas Forum

What do you want? Our answer to this question, argues author and philosopher James K.A. Smith (Calvin), reveals the habits that shape our lives. Yet we often remain unaware of those habits and how they motivate us. In this talk, from a recent Veritas Forum at the University of Michigan, Smith helps us to recognize the structure of desire and reorient its place within the human person.

Transcript

To say that we are lovers, to say that we are these desiring creatures who hunger and thirst and crave and long, is really just another way of saying that to be human is to be the kind of creatures who give ourselves over to something. Every December, we get a rare opportunity to declare to the world, "This is what I want" in the form of our Christmas wish list. And whether getting those things will actually improve our lives in any meaningful way is yet to be determined, still waiting on that perfect Christmas gift, for author and philosopher James K. Smith, when we find out what we want, what we desire and long for, we find out what motivates us at the core of our identity.

In this talk, from a recent Veritas Forum at the University of Michigan, Smith helps us recognize the structure of desire and reorient its place within the human person.

[MUSIC] [APPLAUSE] Thank you very much for that kind introduction. Thanks for making the time to be here.

It's an honor to be at the University of Michigan as a Michigander. I am very grateful for the intellectual legacy and work of this place. It is in many ways an international beacon of rigorous pursuit of an understanding of our world.

So I'm glad to contribute to that. I did not get the same memo that Austin did about the tie, so I apologize in advance for that. If I really want to sort of get to know you, if I really want to understand who you are and what makes you tick, I'm not going to ask, what do you know? There's a million things that you know that don't tell me anything about who

you really are.

I'm not even probably, I'm not even going to ask just what do you believe? Because again, there are all kinds of things that you believe that don't really necessarily touch the very core of who you are. And that's because you're not just a thinking thing. You're not just a brain on a stick.

Your thoughts don't really disclose and animate and orient you. Now if I really want to sort of peer into who you are and understand what makes you tick, here's the question I want to ask you. What do you want? What do you want? What are your wants, your desires, your hungers, your cravings, your longings? What are your loves? Because that is the real animating center of your identity.

In a sense, every Instagram post where you said #wants tells me more about you than the petitions that you've signed and certainly more about you probably than the term papers that you've written. As that great theologian Bruce Springsteen once put it, everybody's got a hungry heart. And in a way, that's what I want to meditate on tonight and think with you about and try to unpack philosophically.

What does it mean that everybody's got a hungry heart? And that hungry heart is actually the engine that drives you. So here in fact is the really discomfoting reality I want us to run up against. What if I don't know what I want? What if I don't love what I think? This sort of discomfoting epiphany hit home for me when I was watching a film by the Russian filmmaker Andre Tarkovsky.

I need better hobbies, granted. But I don't know if any of you are Tarkovsky fans. Some of you might know other films, Andre Rublev.

Tarkovsky has this kind of neglected film called Stalker. And it's such a powerful articulation of our question tonight that I want to try to rehearse it with you just briefly. I'm not going to assume that you've seen it.

You have to imagine this film is it's kind of half Cormac McCarthy's The Road, and the other half is Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. So it's this weird blend of sort of sci-fi noir thriller, but set in an entirely post-apocalyptic wasteland that has been destroyed by some kind of catastrophe we know not what. And into this world we step and meet three key characters.

That's why it's so easy to get this film. The three key characters are the writer, the professor, hence I was a sucker for this movie, the writer, the professor, and then this guy called the Stalker, which is not as creepy as it sounds because really the Stalker is something like the guide, if you will. Okay, and the first part of this film is us following writer and professor on this arduous journey with the Stalker who is leading them through this post-apocalyptic wasteland that's imagined just this kind of bombed out

dark black and white world, but they are trying to get some place and the place they are trying to get to is called the zone, and really what they want to do is, and the picture of the zone now is this like bright, colorful, lush oasis of hope.

And then where they are really trying to get to is something like the inner sanctum, the almost kind of holy of holies within the zone that is simply called the room. All right, Tarkovsky, not super descriptive or creative with the titles, writer, professor, with Stalker trying to make their way to this room. Why? What's in the room? In this room, he tells them, they will achieve their heart's desires.

When you get to the room, all your dreams will come true. In the room, you get exactly what you want, which is why then, when they are in the very threshold of the room, professor and writer, interestingly, start to get cold feet. And one of our great essayists and critics of today, Jeff Dyer, you might see him in the New York Review of Books, he wrote a brilliant little book about this movie.

The book is called "Zonea" and I want you to just hear his description of this key moment in the film because he captures it perfectly. They are in a big, dark, derelict, abandoned damp room with what looked like the remains of an enormous chemistry set floating in the puddle in the middle, as if the zone resulted from an ill-conceived experiment that went horribly wrong. Off to the right, through a large hole in the wall, is a source of light that they all look towards.

For a long while, no one speaks. The air is full of the chirpy, chirpy, cheap, cheap of bird song. It's the opposite of those places where the sedge has withered from the lake and no bird sing.

Here, the birds are whistling and chirping and singing like mad, and so Stalker tells writer and professor in a way he tells us that we are now on the very threshold of the room. This is the most important moment in your life, he says. Your inner most wish will be made true here.

So it's like Stalker has led them to the threshold of this room. This is why we've been on this journey. This is why we've made this arduous pilgrimage.

They get to the place that they've been longing for. Stalker opens the door and basically says, who wants to go first? And writer and professor basically do one of these numbers. They both get cold feet.

Why? Isn't this why we're here? Isn't this everything you've been hoping for? Who doesn't want to step into the room where you're going to get exactly what you want? It dawns on them. What if I don't know what I want? Well, says Dyer, that's for the room to decide. The room reveals all.

What you get when you step into that room, what you get is not what you think you

want, but what you really wish for, what you most deeply wish for. And so now this disturbing epiphany is creeping up on writer and professor. What if they don't want what they think? What if the desires that they are conscious of, the ones in a sense that they've kind of consciously chosen, what if those actually aren't their innermost, deepest longings? What if in some sense their deepest longings are humming under their consciousness unawares? What if in effect they are not who they think they are? Well, how could that happen? What would make that plausible? How could it be that I don't know what I want? How could there be this gap and this disconnect between my conscious perception of myself and actually what I'm hungering and thirsting and craving for? Well, this is where I want to dive in tonight and try to explore why we might experience this tension and gap in our lives, and all of it revolves around an ancient philosophical notion of habit.

So think of it this way. Imagine your loves, your longings, your hungers, your wants, I'm going to use all those terms synonymously, right? Your desires and your cravings. Imagine that your loves like that are habits, right? That your loves are habits.

What's the significance of describing them as habits? Well, it's not, when we say habit here, we don't mean just these exterior routines that you go through. We tend to use the word habit for the kind of exterior rituals that we go through, so you might say, I have a habit of always putting on my left sock first, which turns out to be true. Well, that's the routine.

That's the ritual. That's actually not the habit in this sense. When we talk about habits, this is true, by the way, both in philosophy and it's an ancient tradition in philosophy.

Interestingly, we're going to see it's also the way to think about habit in contemporary social psychology, positive psychology, and even some accounts of cognitive science and neuroscience. Habit here is not just the exterior ritual and routine that you're going through. It is an acquired disposition.

It's a kind of default orientation that you have learned and acquired that has become woven into the fabric of your character, so that now a habit, something that is habitual, something that has become habit, is precisely the kind of thing that you do without thinking about it. Does that make sense? So that something that is habitual is something that has become automated for you in a sense? It's something that has become, and this is the way Aristotle talked about it 2,000 years ago, he said, a habit is something that has become for you second nature. Do we use that phrase? Sometimes you say, "Oh, that's second nature for her," which means what? She could not do that.

That's the kind of person she is. It's so built into the fabric of who she is that she couldn't not be that way. It's second nature.

Now, why call it second nature? Well, because in a sense it mimics first nature. What's

first nature? First nature is biology, right? So think of first nature. Biology are all the kinds of systems and aspects of who we are that are humming along, operating without our thinking about it, so that we can sort of live and move and make our way in the world.

So, for example, all of us have been in here tonight successfully breathing without thinking, as far as I can tell, without thinking about it. Right? I mean, now you're thinking about it, but you weren't thinking about it. So, what does that mean? Well, in a sense, nature, these biological dispositions that are wired into you, are taking care of a system so that you don't have to consciously... It's not like we've all been sitting here saying, "Inhale, exhale." You haven't been choosing to breathe.

You don't have to be conscious and deliberate about it because it's taken care of by nature. Okay, if you get that, now what we're calling habits are like that in the sense that they are ways of being in the world. They are ways of being oriented to the world.

They're ways of acting that become default for you so that you are that way in the same way without thinking about it. You don't have to choose. You're not deliberating about it.

The difference between first nature, biology, and second nature, these other habits is that they are acquired and learned over time. They're not instinctual and built into the hard wiring of our biological systems. Okay? How are we doing? All right? So, the first piece of the puzzle here is to realize that our loves, our longings, our desires, our cravings, are much more like habits than they are like choices.

Or at least on some significant register, our hungers and our longings and our cravings are a kind of heart habit, a disposition of who we are that is learned and acquired and then becomes so woven into the fabric of our character that we become the kinds of people who act in this direction or pursue those ends, those things that we want without thinking about it. It's automated. In fact, this is where the social psychology pieces is a really interesting kind of contemporary confirmation of ancient philosophical intuitions here.

Because people like John Bargh or Roy Baumeister will emphasize that in a way human consciousness is like this iceberg. And the tip of the iceberg is sort of what you think about and deliberate about and choose every day. And I think it's Baumeister who suggests that really probably in a given day, about 5 to 7% of what you do is the outcome of conscious deliberate choice.

So now think of what's going on under the iceberg, under the tip of the iceberg. What that means is over about 90% of what you do in a given day are actions you undertake without thinking about them. Why? Because they have become automated dispositions and behaviors that have become so woven into the fabric of who you are that now you do it without thinking about it.

And in fact, so overwhelmingly the majority of how we live, how we act, what we pursue, what we're chasing bubbles up from these habituated dispositions that we've acquired much, much more than us consciously thinking things. And we're consciously thinking through and deliberating and making choices. So if you can start to appreciate the significance of that, you'll start to realize, oh wait a second, my life, my living, my being in the world is governed in significant ways by habits that I have acquired, by these dispositions that have become woven into me that I have learned, and of which I am not thinking, and in fact in many ways I am not conscious.

Now that would be bad enough, but I want to add one more layer, not bad enough. That is significant enough. I want to add one more layer of significance, which is this.

It's not only that your habitual dispositions are unconscious and not something that you are deliberating about and thinking about, here's the kicker. The process of habituation, that is the process by which these habits are being inscribed into you is also often unconscious. Do you see what I mean? In other words, we are all learning, we are all acquiring, we're all being sort of immersed in rhythms and routines and practices that are subtly and covertly and unconsciously training our heart habits, our longings, our desires and cravings, and all of it is happening under the radar of our awareness.

So how could it be that I could get to the threshold of the room? And I think, oh, well this is the place where I'm going to finally get exactly what I want. Why would it be that I could come to this place and realize what if I don't want what I think? Well, because what if you've already all of a sudden had this realization that maybe there has been a formation of my dispositions of hungering and thirsting and longing that had been forming me and I didn't even realize it? And I think that I've been learning to love and want things and it weighs because I've actually been immersed in rhythms and rituals and routines that have been training my heart habits without my awareness. It's exactly why we need to be careful what we devote ourselves to.

And Dylan puts it this way, sorry, if Springsteen says everybody's got a hungry heart, then you have to couple that I'm always saying I sound very old because I'm quoting Springsteen and Dylan when it should be Kanye and Chance the Rapper, Chance the Rapper. I could probably do this, just give me my guys, okay? Dad Rock. So if Springsteen rightly emphasizes that everybody's got a hungry heart, I want to couple this now with Dylan's insight that you've got to serve somebody.

Everybody's going to serve somebody. To say that we are lovers, to say that we are these desiring creatures who hunger and thirst and crave and long is really just another way of saying that to be human is to be the kind of creatures who give ourselves over to something. It's just part of being human.

We are the kinds of beings who give ourselves over to something.

[music] The novelist and writer David Foster Wallace got at this so presciently in a famous Kenyan college commencement address in which he simply put it this way. "In the day to day trenches of adult life," he said, "there is actually no such thing as atheism." "There is no such thing now," and listen, why? "Because there is no such thing as not worshipping." "Everybody worships," he said, "the only choice you get is what to worship." "Everybody's going to serve somebody." Now, the habits of our heart then, what you love is what you worship, is the way to put this together.

In that sense, the habits of our hearts are shaped and aimed and acquired through the rituals and rhythms and routines that we now give ourselves over to. So even if you don't think of yourself as religious, I get that. That doesn't mean that you're not devoting yourself to something.

And what you devote yourself to isn't just something that you do, it's doing something to you. That's where the formation piece comes in that we often don't realize. What you devote yourself to isn't just something that you do, it's doing something to you.

So I want to call those kinds of loaded, heart-shaping, habit-forming, love-directing practices. I'm going to call those, it sounds like a churchy word, but I want to call them liturgies just to get at the kind of religious nature of these sorts of cultural practices that are shaping the habits of our hearts. Now, these liturgies, granted, won't look religious in a typical sense.

Rather, they'll look every day and they'll even seem kind of ho-hum. But what I'm suggesting is if you don't see them as these formative practices that they are, you'll miss the fact that they carry within them a story, a narrative about what the good life looks like, about what I should be chasing. So they're working on us unconsciously under the radar.

Think of it this way, look, nobody becomes a consumerist, right, and let's say for our purposes, let's just say tonight, consumerism would be a way of life that is devoted to the promise that stuff will make you ultimately happy. Nobody becomes a consumerist because somebody comes and meets them with an argument that convinces them that consumerism is true. When I just said that right now, that stuff will make you happy, you're like, that's ridiculous.

Doesn't mean that a lot of us aren't consumerists. So how does that happen? Well, it happens because it's not a dynamic by which somebody is trying to change our mind and convince us of the truth of that claim. It happens because we're immersed in rituals, liturgies that are subtly and covertly and unconsciously suckering me into acting as if stuff could make me happy.

You don't think you're a way to that as a conclusion, you practice your way to it by giving yourself over to the cathedrals of consumerism, by participating in its rights and rituals

and liturgies. So in a sense, what I'm inviting you to do is kind of put on a new set of glasses to look at your own kind of cultural immersion, what you give yourself over to, and just start to ask, what are these things that I'm doing, doing to me? Let me try one more example. Something that's so banal and close at hand as just a way of trying to make this kind of pop for us a little bit.

So this, I figured out while watching a beer commercial, so it's a really terrible beer called Michelob Ultra, which is this horrible, horrible beer. But this commercial in 30 seconds was one of the most powerful pieces of cultural analysis I've ever seen. It goes like this.

Oh, and one more proviso is you know every beer commercial is just brutally sexist, right? Like just terribly, the whole thing is always premised on that. So I'm not at for the second defending this, I'm just describing it. It's the end of the work day.

A bunch of bros come out of the office building. They somehow, I can't, I don't picture a bunch of bros carpooling to work, but these guys did. They carpool to work, it's the end of the work day, they come out of the office building, they come up to the curb, its buddies turn to drive home, they come out to the car.

It's a really lame car. Nobody wants to get into this car. And so one of them, magically just does this, all of a sudden, the car of their dreams is sitting there waiting for them, they get in, they're good to go.

Cut scene, magic. We're on the beach. Don't ask.

I don't know who goes to the beach at five o'clock, but anyway, they're on the beach. Often the distance are some young ladies. They're too far away to know whether they would be interested in them and whether they would be interested in the guys.

But you know, who knows what the possibilities are, what can we do, what can we do. Oh, and somebody simply does this. All of a sudden, young ladies are right there and they're drinking Michelobaltra too.

Who knew? And everybody's into each other, it's so copacetic. Brilliant. Cut scene, last time.

Now we're in the club. DJ's up on the stage playing some really, really lame music. Nobody wants to listen to this music.

Don't worry. I got this. Somebody playing exactly what everybody wants to hear.

The party's lit. So you see, now what I want you to recognize is you all recognize those little rituals. The little micro ritual, of course, is the ritual of this little desire machine that we call our smartphones.

And what I started to realize in watching this Michelobaltra commercial of all things is it's actually a brilliant analysis of why micro rituals in our lives can start to have macro implications. Because do you see what's actually happening in this commercial is all of the little micro rituals that I give myself over to and my interaction with this little machine are now being projected as my way of relating to the world as a whole. And so now, all of a sudden, I see that the very way that I'm hunched over and involved with this little device and the rituals and liturgies and invites me to, it's tacitly and subtly training me that I'm the center of the universe.

And the world should be available to me on my terms when I want it, how I want it. I should never have to be bored. I should never have to talk to somebody I don't want to.

Everything should be available to me on my terms because I am what matters. And you realize if I asked you, are you an egoist? Ninety-nine point four percent of you are going to say no. That doesn't mean that we aren't giving ourselves over to liturgies that are tacitly training us to be egoists and to imagine that we are the center of the world and that the world should come to us on our terms.

You see, what I want us to realize is we are all devoting ourselves to things. We are all giving ourselves over to things and we have to ask ourselves, what am I giving myself over to and what is it doing to me? What are the liturgies in your life? Now, David Foster Wallace, as I said, he says that we have a choice of what to worship. We have a choice of what to love, of what to devote ourselves to.

But you see, so many of the liturgies of our culture are actually bent on distracting us from this choice so that the default to loving me and loving stuff. And I think we need to appreciate that the dynamics of distraction are actually the dynamics that avoid choice and that keep propelling us into these defaults. And here's again, so this is like an advertisement for why you should all take philosophy.

Because here's another philosopher from the 1600s who has, I think, some of the most prescient insight into 21st century North America. His name is Blaise Pascal, who's also a great mathematician. And what Pascal pointed out in his work called the Poncez is that we actually like to distract and entertain ourselves rather than face the question, "What do I love?" I don't want to face that question.

I don't want to ask that question. And so what happens is, is I give myself over to all kinds of distracting practices, precisely so. I don't have to face that question.

In fact, Pascal famously said that humanity's unhappiness springs from one thing alone our incapacity to stay quietly in one room. Our incapacity, and you imagine how much was there to distract you in the 17th century? And now our incapacity to sit quietly in a room for five seconds. The incapacity to sit at a stoplight when your phone is right there.

It's an incredible power to be distracted because interestingly all of those distractions and diversions protect us from boredom. And Pascal says that boredom is actually a kind of gateway to existential. Because you start getting bored and all of a sudden you start asking yourself, "What am I doing? What do I want? What do I love?" We want our frantic pursuit.

We want our exhausting distraction. Precisely because it keeps us from facing the uncomfortable questions. Pascal puts it, "We prefer the hunt to the kill.

We want the chase. We want the gamble of the casino or the market. We don't actually want to win the money because we want to distract ourselves from the anxiety and in quietude that characterize our lives." Our society, friends, we all inhabit a society that offers us a myriad of liturgies to help you love distraction rather than reflection.

So if and when something punches through that self-medication of distraction, it might be tragedy or heartbreak, it might be a friend who seems to pierce your soul, it might be a grandma who just will not stop pestering you or let you off the hook, or it might be a kind of dark malaise that settles unexpectedly on a Saturday night where you're at a party and you're in the middle of this packed room but you feel entirely alone and everyone around you kind of fades into this unfocused haze and time seems to slow down to a standstill. And in this weird fog, you suddenly become aware of how really unhappy you are and how stupid this is and how exhausting it is to play this game and this needling question bubbles up for you right there and it says, "What do you want?" Friends, ask that question. Let that question interrogate you.

David Foster Wallace in that same address frames it this way. An outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual type thing to worship, be it JC or Allah, be it Yahweh or the wicked mother goddess or the four noble truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles, the reason to choose something like that is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough.

Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly and when time and age starts showing you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you.

On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's codified, he says, in myths and proverbs and cliches and bromides and epigrams and parables. It's the skeleton of every great story.

The trick, he says, is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness. Worship power and you will always feel weak and afraid. You will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay.

Worship your intellect, being a smart, seen a smart and you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. See friends, the real question we have to ask ourselves is, are these things satisfying, that hunger? If I'm constantly giving myself over to these liturgies, these cultural rituals, that train my heart to love myself and stuff, then the question I'm ultimately going to have to face is, am I enough for myself? Does stuff really satisfy that hunger? See, even devotion to good things can eat us alive. So we can end up actually being frantic activists in a way that's really also trying to squelch some deeper hunger in our soul.

So if I'm honest with myself, does sex or pleasure or power or domination or even service and activism and politics, are those really leaving me feeling content? The North African bishop St. Augustine in the fifth century put it this way, "You speaking of God, and he says, 'You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'" This claim, I think, forces us to ask an uncomfortable question. What if the love that makes us happy, content and fulfilled isn't up to us? If I'm faced with the choice of what to love, what to worship, what if there's a right choice? Now, I'm going to put my cards on the table here. I'm not just making a vague appeal for religion as some alternative to these cultural liturgies.

Unlike David Foster Wallace, I think it actually makes a difference which God you would choose to worship. But here's how I want to frame the question. If everybody's got a hungry heart, if we are bent on giving ourselves over to something, to someone, then the question I need to ask is, "Will they satisfy my longings?" What is this God going to ask of me? Is this a God who is going to eat me alive but never set a table? Here's why I'm a Christian.

This isn't a proof. It's a testimony. It's framing this, though, in terms of this kind of human hunger.

The reason I'm a Christian is because in Christianity, we give ourselves over to a God who gave himself. A God who doesn't just demand or command but who actually sacrifices himself. You see, the God of Jesus Christ isn't a God who demands our sacrifices in order for us to pay for the evil and brokenness of the world.

To the contrary, in Jesus Christ, God gives himself to take on the evil and brokenness of the world. So I know that when I give myself over to Jesus Christ, it's not just another jealous God like money or popularity or prestige that demands my submission, who demands that I worship at his altar, cowering in the hopes that maybe this will pay off. No.

I come to the altar of Jesus Christ and he gives himself. He says, "This is my body given for you." And interestingly, I know you might not get this listening to the pundits and talking heads on the news today who call themselves Christian. But what I would wish for you, if you don't know Christianity or if you have perceptions of Christianity, what I wish

you would know is that actually Christians are a people who every single week gather to confess that we don't love what we say we do.

That is honest about all of the ways that we fail to love what we think. The liturgy of confession is at the heart of this, not because we're sort of into some kind of spiritual sadomasochism, because it's actually the grace to name that gap in our lives. You see, grace is at the very heart of Christianity because this God is a giver all the way down.

So if Christianity were true, if someone like a customer were right, and again, I'm not pretending to prove this to you, I'm saying try this on as an account of why someone might entertain Christianity. If Christianity is true, then that actually might do some work explaining to phenomena that I think we keep running into in our secular age, and it might even explain something that you've bumped up against yourself. The first is this, if Christianity were true, if God is transcendent and offers himself to us in Jesus Christ, then it would actually help explain why our attempts to find rest and peace and contentment and fulfillment in a wide array of substitutes is so often frustrating, exhausting, and disappointing.

It would actually explain why when we frenetically chase and try out all kinds of other things to love that they never quite seem to work. It would actually go a long ways to explaining a lot of our own frustration. But secondly, I wonder if it might also help explain why some of us still feel haunted.

I wonder if it might help explain that behind these attempts to find ultimacy in things or experiences, we keep hearing this echo of something, of someone who keeps whispering an alternative. Maybe that would explain why we can't quite shake that. This dual experience of frustration and haunting, I think, is beautifully captured in one of my favorite poems, and I hope you'll indulge me and let me read this in closing.

It's a poem called *Staying Power* by Jeannie Murray Walker, poet at the University of Delaware. And there's an epigraph to the poem that says this, "In appreciation of Maxim Gorky at the International Convention of Atheists, 1929." The poem is called *Staying Power*. Like Gorky, I sometimes follow my doubts outside to the yard and question the sky, longing to have the fight settled, thinking, "I can't go on like this." And finally, I say, "All right, it is improbable.

All right, there is no God." And then, as if I'm focusing a magnifying glass on dry leaves, God blazes up. It's the attention, maybe, to what isn't there that makes the emptiness flare like a forest fire until I have to spend the afternoon dragging the hose to put the smoldering thing out. Even on an ordinary day, when a friend calls, tells me they found melanoma, complains that the hospital is cold, I say, "God, God, I say as my heart turns inside out." Pick up any language by the scruff of its neck, wipe its face, and set it down on the lawn.

I bet it will tautle right into the God fire again, which, though they say it doesn't exist, can send you straight to the burn unit. Oh, we have only so many words to think with. So say God's not fire.

Say anything. Say God's a phone, maybe. You know you didn't order a phone, but there it is.

It rings. You don't know who it could be. You don't want to talk.

So you pull out the plug. It rings. You smash it with a hammer till the bleed springs and coils and clobbery metal bits.

It rings again. You pick it up and a voice you love whispers. Hello.

Friends, what do you want? What are you long for? Could it be that in all our pursuits we're actually hoping for someone like that to say hello? What if you've been distracting yourself to try to ignore that ringing? What if you picked it up? What if you got to lose? What might you find? Might you be found? Thank you. [Applause]

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[Music]