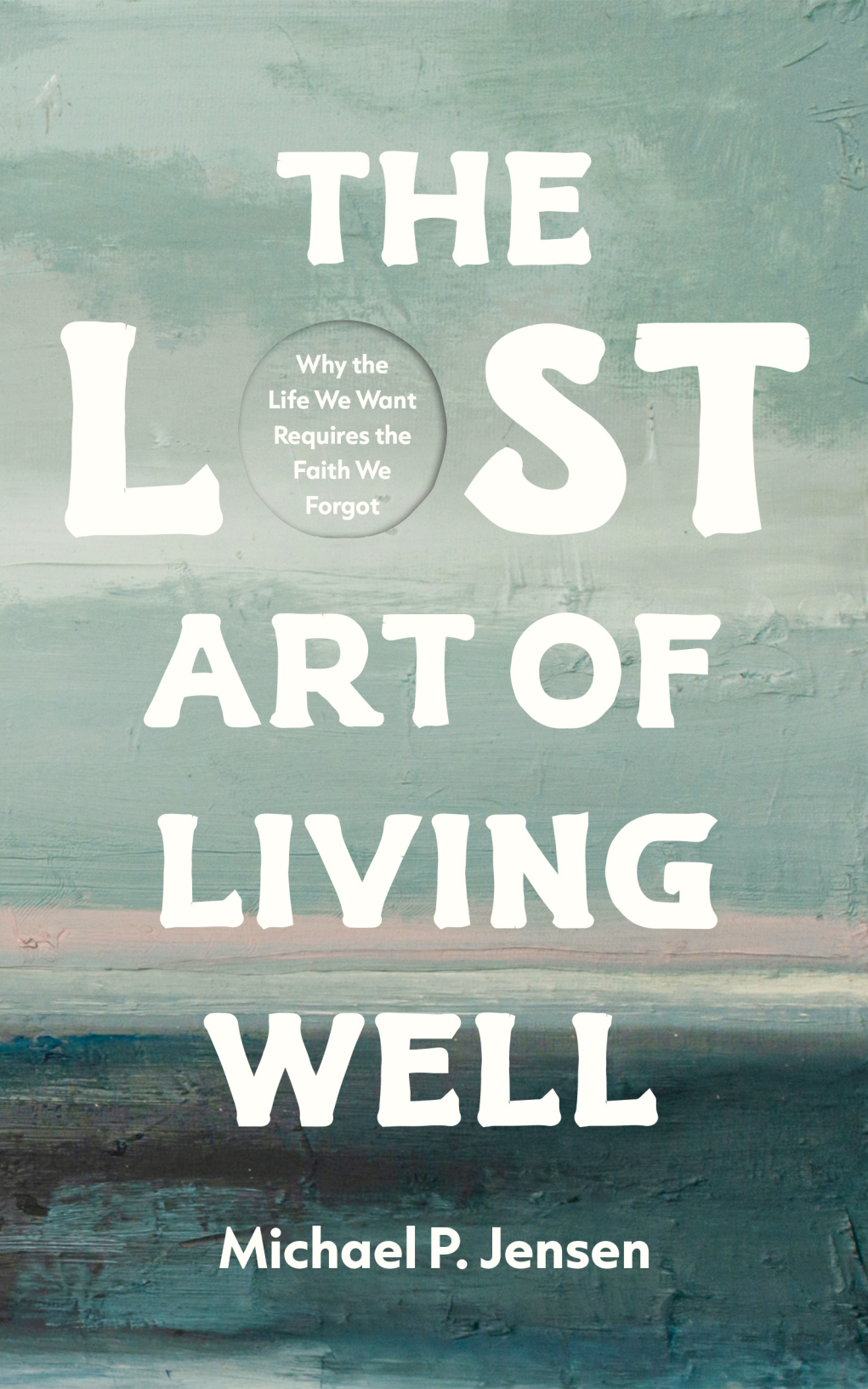




THE LOST ART OF LIVING WELL

Why the
Life We Want
Requires the
Faith We
Forgot

Michael P. Jensen

“Michael Jensen’s *The Lost Art of Living Well* carries a settled confidence in the power of the gospel and the beauty of the Christian faith. It’s an invitation to the good life—the life found only in the God who made us and, in Christ, redeemed us. Again and again, Jensen starts with the maladies of our culture and the ache of life in a fallen world, then lifts our eyes to something better, so we can finally see what we were made for.”

TREVIN WAX, Vice-President for Resources and Marketing,
North American Mission Board; Visiting Professor,
Cedarville University, Ohio, USA; Author, *Rethink Your Self*

“Michael Jensen doesn’t dress up Christian apologetics as self-help—he makes the case, openly, for something rarer: why the ‘arts’ we’ve lost, from conversation to presence to happiness, were never self-improvement projects to begin with. Rarer still, he writes like he enjoys the company of people who disagree with him.”

JAMES CARLETON, Host, ABC Radio National’s *God Forbid*

“The internet gurus would have us believe the good life is a few buy-now clicks or courses away. But, as Jensen writes in these pages, the life we’re looking for is not found by distilling and endlessly improving its disparate parts. Rather, it’s that longing for transcendence—for something more than what can be bought or taught—that leads us to the life we actually want, one that consists of genuine conversations, in-person connections, and maybe the sort of community that’s found in not-so-new places, like the church. Writing to a post-Christian Western culture, Jensen gives fresh insights to those of us looking to describe what we’ve found in Christ. And he has fresh hope for those feeling lost yet looking to find the old ways again. A compelling read.”

WHITNEY PIPKIN, Senior Editor, Common Good Magazine;
Author, *The Life I Live in the Body*

“There are many voices in Christian publishing that sound a lot alike and only a few that sound very different. Michael Jensen is one of those different voices, and that is exactly what I most appreciate about reading his words, whether in his excellent newsletter or this excellent book. What he does exceptionally well is interpreting contemporary cultural and sociological realities through a theological lens. His concern in this work is the crucial subject of cultivating virtue. Whether you are a Christian or not, you’ll find a lot to ponder and appreciate about the lost art of living well.”

TIM CHALLIES, Author; Blogger

“We’re wealthier, healthier, and living longer than previous generations. Yet somehow we’re lonelier, unhappier, and less content than ever before. What if there’s a better way to live? Michael Jensen’s *The Lost Art of Living Well* offers us a powerful and convincing counternarrative that shows us how to live not just a good life but a beautiful life.”

SAM CHAN, Speaker, City Bible Forum, Australia;
Author, *How to Be on the Right Side of History*

“Michael Jensen has written a delightful ‘old book,’ which is high praise. Once upon a time, thinkers as diverse as Plutarch in antiquity and Chesterton in the last century applied their considerable insight to mundane matters of great importance: friendship, virtue, education, and much more. *The Lost Art of Living Well* achieves something similar for our day. With a beautiful turn of phrase, keen observation and a light smattering of biblical wisdom, Dr Jensen guides us like a good friend, who also happens to be an expert, through the conundrums of our moment: the art of conversation, how to offer an apology, finding substance when everything seems virtual, and so on. Regardless of their views, readers of all kinds will discover here why ‘old books’ can be timeless.”

JOHN DICKSON, Author; Historian; Distinguished Professor,
Wheaton College, Illinois, USA

“Modernity keeps chipping away at the things that once made human life and community worthwhile: friendship, conversation, reading, grieving, presence. In this artful and insightful book, Michael Jensen provides a compelling case for the recovery of such practices. He deftly weaves the case for faith through his narrative, making it that rare kind of book you can read as (or give to) a believer or a sceptic, confident you will find it absorbing and useful.”

RORY SHINER, Senior Pastor of Providence City Church,
Perth, Australia; Author, *The World Next Door*

“Many of us know that our culture has lost something, but struggle to explain what. In this beautiful book, Michael Jensen helps us navigate our distracted and restless age. With wit and wisdom and a storyteller’s eye, Michael has written a book that helps us discover (or rediscover) what really matters. Whether you’re a Christian, a sceptic, a seeker, or simply somebody wondering, ‘What’s it really all about?’, *The Lost Art of Living Well* will help you on your spiritual journey.”

ANDY BANNISTER, Author, *Have You Ever Wondered?*;
Director, Solas Centre for Public Christianity

“If living well is a lost art, then Michael Jensen can help us find it again. Turns out the secret has been hiding in plain sight, with the God-man killed on the cross and raised on the third day. You don’t need to be an expert in the Bible, history, or culture in order to benefit from this excellent book. Just bring an open mind and a willing heart.”

COLLIN HANSEN, Editor in Chief, The Gospel Coalition;
Author, *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*

“A beautifully written book anchored in deep moral clarity. To borrow a phrase of Jensen’s, it’s a lesson in liveable wisdom in the age of information overload. Here is a book that shows how Christian faith remains deeply relevant to living well in an alienating and polarised world.”

PROFESSOR CATHARINE LUMBY,
Professor of Media, University of Sydney

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Life We Want
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Faith We
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the goodbook
COMPANY

The Lost Art of Living Well: Why the Life We Want
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*To the people of St Mark's Darling Point, with thanks.
These pages bear the marks of countless conversations,
sermons, prayers, and shared journeys.*

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INTRODUCTION

A Sense of Something Lost

How can we live well in the world? What is it that makes life not merely bearable but beautiful? What are the qualities—the virtues, we might call them—that we find ourselves wishing we saw more of “out there”: the qualities that, in our more honest moments, we know there could do with being more of “in here”, too?

Contemporary Western culture is a restless animal. There is, I think, a sense that something powerful and good has been lost, though we cannot quite name it or say where to find it. This book is an attempt to address that yearning—the human ways of going about life that give it its depth, its meaning, and its beauty.

I’m Sydney-born and have always lived in the city. But in 2023 I had the life-changing experience of being invited on a journey through the ancestral lands of the Aranda* people, an Indigenous nation of Australia. The journey took us several hundred kilometres to the east of Alice Springs, right in the heart of the country—what Australians call “the red centre” because of the ochre-coloured earth.

* Or “Arrernte”.

John, an Aranda elder, led us. For John, each range of hills, each waterhole, and each dry riverbed told a story. Everything was full of significance for him: whether as a place for men's rites of passage, a place for clean drinking water in the desert, a place of danger, a place of grief and sadness, or a place of bush medicine. In these stories, there was practical wisdom for survival in the wilderness, but also more than that: there was the identity of the people who have lived there for thousands of years. They told him who he was. They told him how to live well.

The tragedy is that the Aranda's ability to read the countryside is quickly disappearing, as the older generation passes and the stories are not handed on. Such is the social dislocation of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

John was a practitioner of what is not quite yet a lost art but possibly soon will be. And if it passes, there will be a real sense of something lost. The land is more than what miners and cattle farmers see in it. It can carry a meaning for people that is precious. That perspective speaks to the landscape's meaning and beauty, not just its functionality and profitability. It reveals the deep past of the land. And to encounter it humbles you.

What is unfolding among the Aranda is bound up with the pressures of a modern, technology-shaped world that no longer knows how to sit still long enough to listen to ancient stories—not even its own. Those stories are treated as awkward—as misfits within a Western culture that until a decade or so ago tended to assume the superiority of its own habits and horizons.

But in recent years a different sensation has begun to surface. People sense that something vital has slipped from our grasp. It is like a cultural recollection that hovers

at the edge of awareness—a memory whose outline remains even when we can no longer say exactly what it is we are meant to remember, or why it mattered. Not the “I can’t recall where I’ve put my keys” forgetfulness, but the “I know I was supposed to remember something, I know it mattered, but I’ve forgotten what it was” sort.

Perhaps John’s sense of cultural and even spiritual bereavement is something contemporary Westerners share with him. And that feeling of loss especially attaches to moments when we are looking to talk about meaning and about connectedness with each other and with the world. We struggle to find a common language to describe our feeling that all is not well in a way that the different tribal groups in society can hear—let alone to talk about what we might do about it.

A number of perceptive social commentators—from Alasdair MacIntyre to Charles Taylor to Robert N. Bellah—had the foresight to predict that in the 21st century we would no longer be able to agree on what it means to live the good life.¹ We disagree about how to even talk about it in the first place. What is the right category to use to even begin thinking this through? Should we think in terms of right and wrong? Or of mental wellbeing? Or justice and injustice? The reasons for this shift are numerous and complex, but the correlation between the burgeoning affluence of Western nations since 1945 and the waning influence of religion as a cohesive social force is surely not an accident. What need is there for the old stories when you have ready access to what you imagine is a beautiful life? But, as the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote:

When everything is available, every lifestyle on offer,
when all you have is freedom, but nothing to guide you

in that freedom, “it’s not so much that you lose the thread of the meaning of your life, you have trouble even staying focused on the question.”²

He’s describing a kind of cultural attention deficit disorder. Bombarded with news and information, we can barely scramble to get our heads around one complex problem before the next one comes in. Can anyone pretend that (say) immigration, Israel and Palestine, or abortion rights are straightforward, even if you have strong convictions either way?

Paradoxically, we are both less certain and more certain about things. Conservative, liberal and radical voices are louder than ever in their condemnation of views and actions that they abhor, amplified by social media. In the 21st century, we’ve become not less judgmental but more so, not less dogmatic but more so. We’re less inclined to see justice as something complex and more likely to think of it as decided already. Matters of right and wrong, we seem to think, should be obvious—and so we act as though they are.* Even as we’ve lost confidence that there is any kind of story that anchors us and makes sense of life, we’ve become more confident in the rightness of our views and positions.

This book contends that there are arts to living well—and that, like the stories of the land that John tells to

* A number of researchers support this claim. In her 2018 book, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), Lilian Mason argues that contemporary political disagreement has shifted from “I think you’re wrong” to “I think you are bad”. Meanwhile, psychologist Kurt Gray has noted what he calls “moralisation creep”, by which previously neutral matters like diet or speech norms have now become recoded as moral violations (see Elizabeth Kolbert, “Does One Emotion Rule All Our Ethical Judgments?” in *The New Yorker*, 20 January 2025).

fewer and fewer people, we've lost some of them along the way: the art of good conversation, for example, or of thankfulness, or of hope, or of happiness.

The Nostalgic Temptation

What I am *not* calling for, though, is a return to some golden age when everything was good and we all lived well—the 1950s, or the Victorian age, or whenever.

After all, a lost art could be a skill that is now completely redundant. In the 1970s, my father knew a woman whose job was typing out doctoral theses in mathematics on a special typewriter that was equipped with all the weird mathematical symbols. But with the advent of the personal computer in the 1980s, her job—and her typewriter—became completely redundant. Her art has become lost, but not (with the greatest of respect to the typist) *missed*.

Well, it could be missed—but we would call that feeling nostalgia. Nostalgia is a dreamy longing for an idealised past. It's a prejudice against the present. It's also pointless, since it tries to put the genie of history back in the bottle of time. You can sit in your armchair with your blanket over your knees dreaming about the 1950s or 1970s, but nothing is going to bring back that time.

Nostalgia is highly selective, too, because it adds a rosy tinge to the past without remembering how bad it was. My grandfather used to speak dreamily about eating tripe (which I believe is the lining of a sheep's stomach) and about going to see Aussie cricketing legend Donald Bradman bat at the Sydney Cricket Ground during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Then, on other days, he would recall feeling hungry and being out of work. There

were some good things about life in the 1930s that were later forgotten. But you wouldn't want to go back to then. (Not least because tripe is awful!)

Christian believers are among those who are apt to engage in nostalgia, because they feel as if the Christian faith no longer has the social influence it once had. (I know this because I am one.) But it is not only Christians: there is a growing movement of thinkers such as Jordan Peterson who are attracted to what Christianity once offered as a model for civilisation without ever quite embracing it as a faith. Even a militant atheist like Richard Dawkins has expressed his disappointment in the loss of what he calls a "cultural" Christianity.³

The crossing of the Rubicon was, for many Western countries, the 1960s. That was the period when the affluence and technology of the post-war years led to a complete reframing of the purpose and meaning of human life for many people. In the age of the Pill, Christian sexual ethics seemed irrelevant. In the age of individual self-expression (and the spare cash to pursue it), conformity to traditional Christianity seemed stifling and ponderous.

Depending on your character or belief system, it's tempting to look back to an imagined age of moral certainty and to yearn for a simpler time when churchgoing was more normal and when bishops and theologians were consulted about public issues because they were recognised community leaders. These were the days when Western societies saw themselves as "Christian", even when many of their citizens didn't themselves know and trust Jesus as a living person. There was (it seemed, at least) a moral consensus.

The problem with nostalgia is that it almost always plays us false. The good old days were seldom as good as we remember them, especially for those of us who weren't born then anyway. The era when "Christianity" was normal meant there was an awful lot of hypocrisy in the name of Christianity. It often became a Christianity of moral values and pride rather than a message of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Few people—even, I dare say, few Christians—would wish to return to an era when the law itself enshrined and enforced Christian (or very often pseudo-Christian) personal morality.

Throughout its centuries of cultural ascendancy, starting in the 4th century when it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity waxed and waned in influence; Christians behaved well and behaved badly. So-called Christian civilisations marketed human beings as slaves—and also put an end to the slave trade. They developed human rights and hospitals, but conquered the world with little regard for human life. Clergy sent young men to die in the trenches while other ministers called for peace. From the soil of Christian civilisation both Communism and Nazism sprouted, and so did the means to defeat both.

Arguably, Christian ethics cannot be called lost because they were never quite fully grasped.

The Lost Future

It may sound as if I have undermined my own argument. I'm arguing that we have lost some arts that enable us to live well, to find life beautiful. However, at the same time, I am cautioning against nostalgia, a yearning to return to

nonexistent good old days. So what have we actually lost that is worth rediscovering?

What we are missing is a commonly held sense that there is something greater than us—a bigger, more stable point that transcends us. As Australian cultural commentator Stan Grant writes, “People—particularly in the West—are untethered, alienated and atomised.”⁴ In the process of this great untethering, we have forgotten how to cultivate practices and habits of goodness—“virtues”. When we hear talk of virtue now, it is most often in the highly individualised context of self-help. In other words, we have lost the means by which to be wise about who we tell ourselves we are and how we can live well—not just as individuals, but as a society.

This is true even as we can name the terrible mistakes and injustices that we’ve inherited. How can we mend the past if we don’t have a story that tells us what is right and just?

Christianity is that story. It is an unnamed and unarticulated presence in many contemporary discussions about what is right and good. It explains why we find ourselves wanting to see politicians apologise properly, why we know that happiness is different from pleasure, and why we applaud gentleness. It also explains why, with all our wealth and technological know-how, we find these things elusive. It offers a way to be what we want to see—not just a motivation, but the fuel. And it offers a vision for the future that relies not on human triumph but, more humbling for us individualistic Westerners, on divine intervention.

This book addresses those of us who are the inheritors of what we know as “the West”. We live in a post-Christian culture: not yet non-Christian, but no longer dominated

by Christianity. If you are a Christian, then *The Lost Art of Living Well* will show you how what you believe is the fuel for a life lived well. If you aren't, then my hope is that this book will give you a sense of how this ancient story connects to the "arts" that make for a truly flourishing human life—not just because it's true but because it's beautiful.

Rediscovering Lost Arts

The virtues we'll look at in this book are not an exhaustive list. But they will show us what rediscovering lost arts offers us.

Sometimes they will give us the eyes to see the often-hidden goodness of the world right here and now—so that we can give thanks, find wisdom when there is so much to know, and be generous with what we have.

At other times, they will enable us to reckon with the brokenness of the world and ourselves. They give us the tools to craft a real apology, to be gentle in the face of an always-driven and sometimes aggressive culture, and to be present with other people when it is easier to remain at a distance. They can even remind us how to have a conversation.

And, because we are frail, we'll also need to learn the arts of living with hope and dying well. We cannot enjoy life if we cannot deal with the inevitability of death. And part of that condition is learning how to hope. What future is there for a creature who will die? Where can we find hope when there is so much despair?

The situations I describe are true of any human being, whether you would call yourself a Christian or not. The

question of how to live well comes to every one of us. The biblical story generates possibilities for living that are both realistic and hope-filled. It is worth trying them on for size. So let me begin by inviting you to join me in a coffee shop not far from where I live...

CHAPTER 1

The Art of Conversation in an Age of Loneliness

Michael: Hi, David! Hi, Olivia! Let me grab you each a chair, guys. What's your coffee order? Almond-milk flat white and double espresso as usual?*

He waves the waitress over.

Michael: Zara, could we have an almond flat white and two double espressos, please...?
Look, I wanted to both of you to give me your thoughts on a chapter I am writing for my book. It's about conversation as a "lost art".

Olivia: You want to have a chat about chatting... is that it?

David: Ha!

Michael: Bear with me here. I want to ask you two because we've been meeting at this café most mornings just to talk for... how long is it now?

* Just to be clear: the coffee shop is real. Olivia and David are composites of real people I chat with there. This conversation is fictional, but it is based on the conversations this group of us have.

David: Well, it was eight years ago that Olivia overheard us talking about politics and joined the conversation, wasn't it?

Olivia: Something like that. Then David called it the "Coffee Group of Wisdom" in about 2021, in between lockdowns.

Michael: I hate to get sentimental, but I think what we have is priceless.

David: Aw!

Michael: And I think it's rare, to be honest. People have forgotten how to talk to one another. Or, at least, they only want to talk to people who agree with them on the big stuff. Or they only chat about house prices or how hard it is to get a good cleaner these days. Where's the depth? Where's the curiosity about the world or about other people? It's not a skill that people have anymore, especially younger people.

David: Old-man rant alert! I know it goes against the spirit of the Coffee Group of Wisdom, but I am going to ask you for some facts here. Substantiate this proposition!

Michael: Challenge accepted. There was a study done in 2014 that found that the quality of in-person social interactions went down in the presence of a mobile device. Just in the presence of one! That is, if you put your phone on the table, you just don't have your attention 100% on the other person. People who chatted in the presence of a smartphone reported lower levels of empathy than those who chatted without one. Didn't matter what age, gender, or ethnicity. Look, I copied a quote from the article into my phone. Wait... here it is:

Even without active use, the presence of mobile technologies has the potential to divert individuals from face-to-face exchanges, thereby undermining the character and depth of these connections. Individuals are more likely to miss subtle cues, facial expressions, and changes in the tone of their conversation partner's voice, and have less eye contact.⁵

Olivia: Interesting.

Michael: I got that from Professor Sherry Turkle's book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. She's outlined heaps of research there that just shows that technology means we are less present with one another when we talk. And also that we so often replace talking with a text or an email. What I found fascinating was how she argued that we need conversation to produce thought. When we dialogue, we do trial and error with thinking. It's really hard to do that via email. We're supposed to have perfectly crafted thoughts rather than play with ideas.

Olivia: I like that. Conversation is about empathy but also about playing with ideas, isn't it? You'd have to say it's about hearing and being heard in the first place, but also, you use chat to try things out. You might laugh about them. But, you know, I've had lots of good ideas that started life as jokes. Or even better, you just get sparks—an idea from a person that sets off a mutual train of thought that leads to something that never would have happened otherwise.

David: To be honest, you two don't know the first thing about what I do, but I get more ideas for projects and papers here than anywhere.

Olivia: Really?

David: Sure! Don't get too full of yourselves, now. But conversation is really creative. I think one of the problems with the work-from-home or check-in-via-Zoom thing is that if you don't have that in-person chat, then you don't get the sparks.

Michael: So we'd say a decline in empathy and a decline in creativity come with the drop-off of face-to-face conversation. I think we'd have to add to this the rise in polarisation of opinion. What you certainly don't get in online comments is a reasonable exchange of ideas that leads to greater understanding.

Olivia: I don't think that's entirely true. I've got a great bunch of friends online that has come together because we all love 80s music. I've never met most of them! It's been a real connector.

Michael: Well, okay... I guess it can't be a blanket statement. But there's no doubt that the online world have led us to engage less often with views that we disagree with. We are trapped in circles of furious agreement, and we just "shout" at our opponents if we ever encounter them. X/Twitter is just one example of social media as a bloodsport—like a conversational Ultimate Fighting bout. It's about smashing the other person, not connecting with them. We don't meet face to face as much either. Conflict is just too scary when you are up close, right?

Olivia: It isn't always like that. I've really learnt a lot from online conversations over the years, and I've met people that I would never otherwise have met. But I get it. I'd add to this the fact that we've got a kind of fragmented attention. To have a good conversation, you need to pay attention. You need to listen at depth, to understand,

before you can have a proper dialogue that is worth something. You need to make it safe for the other person to say what they want to say without you crushing them, because you genuinely want to understand.

David: I think losing our ability to have good conversations is why we get so many conspiracy theories these days. The tin-foil-hat brigade. People just go down these rabbit holes, and it's impossible to talk to them. Have you ever tried to talk to someone who is 100% convinced of a conspiracy theory? Something has happened that has warped their brain, and you just can't reach them. It's weird and it's pointless.

Zara brings the coffees.

Zara: I couldn't help overhearing. You're talking about conversation and loneliness, and how phones are ruining everything?

Michael: That's about the size of it. But we'd love the youth representative to give her thoughts!

Zara: Well... I get what you're saying. Like, I'm the first to admit that being constantly online can make you feel isolated. It's weird how you can scroll for hours and not feel seen by anyone. But speaking for Gen Z, I think it's more complicated. We aren't worse at talking—we just do it differently. A lot of us are actually craving something more authentic. That's why things like mental health TikToks or podcasts, or long comment threads on Reddit, exist. We're looking for people who get us, even if it's not face-to-face. And when we do meet up in person, we want realness. No small talk—just get to the stuff that matters.

Olivia: So you do value conversation?

Zara: Totally. But the rules are shifting. Like, for us, being vulnerable online is kind of... normal? Posting about anxiety or being neurodivergent—it's not oversharing, it's connection. And, yeah, maybe sometimes it's too much, too soon. But it's also brave, and it's honest. I guess we're trying to find our own language for meaning, but the search is real. It's not that we don't want to talk. It's that the world we're in is noisy and fast, and we're just trying to make some kind of signal in the middle of it.

David: So is the loss of deep conversation not really about technology, then?

Zara: I think it's more about trust. Who's listening? Who's safe? Who actually cares? If those things aren't there, you can be in the same room or in the same group chat and still feel like you're shouting into the void.

Michael: That's insightful. So... you're saying that the hunger for conversation is still there. It's just... disoriented.

Zara: Exactly. We're fluent in memes and irony and quick-fire banter, but underneath that, we want to be known. We want space where we can speak and be heard—where we're not just content or profiles but people. Maybe what we're missing isn't the art of conversation—it's the culture of care that makes conversation possible.

Zara moves back to her work.

Michael: I want to go so far as to say that this is a *spiritual* crisis.

Olivia: Oh, you always say that!

Michael: Bear with me here. The loss of the ability to converse is the loss of something more profound than we imagine. Language itself emerges from conversation.

You can't talk unless you have someone to talk to. And it seems to me that without language, we aren't able to live out who we are. We need language to draw meaning out of the world and our experiences. And we can't have language without others, right?

David: Makes sense.

Michael: We're such individualists in the modern-world that we think we can be ourselves and know ourselves—and the world—entirely on our own. We imagine that meaning and significance, and a sense of right and wrong, come mysteriously from within ourselves. I think we sometimes imagine that words begin inside us because we have thoughts that we put into words. But that can't be so. So much of what we understand we inherit from others—from our families and our communities. So much of what we come to understand emerges from conversing *with* others. We are given words which we put into thoughts—not the other way around.

Olivia: And would you say we get this from God? Not that I am saying I believe in him, you understand! I'm still the card-carrying atheist here.

Michael: Well, I *would* say so. It's no accident that, from its first page, the Bible shows God *speaking*. Christians say that he talked the creation into being, because it is his idea. But also, they'd say that God is a community of three persons who converse *with one another*.

Look, we can come back to that thought, but my point for now is that if we've forgotten how to converse, then the problem becomes one of how we have meaning at all. And if we've forgotten how to converse and the creator of all things is inviting us into a conversation, then we're

going to find it hard to be open to him. *Alienation* is the word that the philosophers would use: from God, from each other and from ourselves. Even if you take out God and make it something like “meaning”, this makes it a “spiritual” crisis in my book.

Olivia: I wouldn’t disagree with that. I am not sure I would make grand statements about reality being relational because God is the Trinity and all that stuff. I don’t see how I can do that. It is a lonely and essentially meaningless universe, if you ask me. But talking together at least gives us the sense that we aren’t alone and that there are stories we might tell that make sense of it all, even if we don’t really know what they are.

Michael: You’re okay with it all being an illusion? An evolutionary trick to help us cling together for survival?

Olivia: It doesn’t matter whether I’m okay with it or not! We talk because our conversation generates meaning and purpose, which helps us to cling together against the wild animals of existence. These used to be literal wild animals when we humans were roaming the plains of Africa. Now there are other things... So call it a “spiritual” crisis, if you like.

Michael: I do like!

David: So, Michael, you’d say that conversation is a God thing, which we humans are just catching up with?

Michael: Something like that, yes...

David: So I’ve been reading a bit about Simone Weil, the philosopher, lately.

Michael: Yes?

David: And I reckon she's got a bit to add to this conversation about conversation. A really intriguing person. She was eccentric: you can see from photos of her that she used to dress in really strange clothes. But she was also extremely learned in Greek and Latin. She was a philosopher and surprised herself by becoming a mystic. She died very young—only 32—because, during the war, she insisted on eating what the people on rations were eating. Christianity haunted her, but she never got baptised because she didn't feel worthy of it.

Olivia: What's she got to do with conversation, though?

David: I don't think she would have been easy to talk to, for sure. But paying attention is one of the great themes of her work. She once said that "the capacity to give one's attention ... is ... almost a miracle".⁶ If conversation is to be more than just noise, it has to begin with listening. And she means by that the kind of deep listening that takes everything in. It has to be an active listening that seeks to understand the other person in their whole experience as far as possible.

Michael: Go on...

David: Yes. She said that "to say to someone, 'What are you going through?' is to love them."⁷ This is hard to do because you have to have a deep, selfless focus on others and the world. Paying attention to another person isn't just a cognitive process that takes concentration; it requires us to lay ourselves down. For Weil, this is exactly what God himself does. The God of all power empties himself to listen to his creatures. This is a thought that she gets from that Bible passage in Philippians chapter 2, where Jesus "empties himself" to live among us.

Michael: Interesting—because it is also true that in creating everything from nothing, God has made space for the things that aren't God from the beginning, so that they might exist. He didn't make creation to be an extension or part of himself, so to speak—he brought into being things that weren't divine.

David: Yes, that's what Weil thought was fascinating. If you think about it this way, before creation, existence was 100% God. After creation, it was less! He's made space for other beings. And then in Jesus Christ, he in a sense emptied himself, to live in and redeem the world.

Olivia: Okay, these are high and mighty thoughts, but so what?

David: So what? If we think about it this way, then we've got a great model for conversation. Because conversation is not about self-expression or agreement—it is about making space for someone, about being alongside someone, about *witnessing* the other person without invasion or agenda. That's why the loss of conversation is not just a cultural failure but a spiritual one. We have forgotten how to wait to listen and understand. And so we have forgotten how to love.

Michael: That's a lot to take in. You've talked about witnessing, waiting and love. That sounds difficult to do in practice. Doesn't this make conversation into a therapy session? If everyone's listening, then who is talking? There's no conversation at all. And everyone is just fulfilling a role rather than being genuinely human. And I mean... I just engage in conversation because it is enjoyable, to be honest. There's an exchange. I give attention, but I also receive it too. Or at least you guys are good at bluffing that you're paying attention...

David: Ha! Something like that. I think that witnessing and waiting can be done by talking, by the way. It's just that it needs to be talking to include rather than talking that excludes. Conversation doesn't work if the person talking just seems oblivious to the interests or needs of the other person. But if my talking is, in its turn, an invitation to respond or comment, then that, I think, is not simply the self-interested monologue that kills conversation.

Olivia: It's true that by talking in a certain way, you make yourself vulnerable, and you are offering trust to the other person, which means that they might offer it back. This takes a bit of skill, of course. You need to be attuned to what the right level of the relationship is so that you disclose in a way that isn't scary or too full on.

David: What do you mean?

Olivia: Say I am having a colonoscopy—which I am not, to be clear. Then say we've only met recently at the café and we're having a breezy chat about something in the news. That's a low-cost and playful conversation. But then I say, out of the blue, something like "Well, I've got to go to the hospital and have a colonoscopy today". What I've done is overestimate the level of trust that's present. I've made myself vulnerable, which is good, but I've made things potentially awkward for the person I haven't got to know. I've laid on them a burden when it isn't clear that they are ready to carry that disclosure.

Michael: Yes, I've seen people too impatient to get close to someone. They want to go 0-100 in a few seconds.

Olivia: Yeah, and that just scares the other person off. So we get a mix of wariness and over-eagerness, and it's just... it's just a disaster. True friendship is a slow burn.

Michael: Let me just note some of this down on my phone. Simone Weil, attentiveness, self-emptying. And God as the model of that, right?

David: Right.

Michael: Yeah, it reminds me a lot of what the 20th-century Christian thinker Dietrich Bonhoeffer said about community in his book *Life Together*. I've got the quote here on my phone:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to his word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his word but also lends us his ear.

David: More God, then...

Michael: Yes. I think that's so core to the way the Christian should think, from God down to things. We're used to seeing the Bible as a kind of monologue. You know, words come down from the mountain, set in stone.

David: To be fair, there is that scene on Mount Sinai with Moses!

Michael: Sure, but it isn't just that. It's not all or primarily commands. It's promises and prayers too. The weird thing about the Bible is how it is not simply divine words but human responses, all wrapped up together. In creating the world, God has made space—not just for matter and time but for response. For a partner in conversation. The world is not an echo chamber of God's power. He speaks to us but also gives language to our responses of confident faith and joy, and also to our

doubt, bewilderment and even anger. If God speaks to us, it isn't just at us. He also invites us to respond in the full freedom of the personhood that he's given us. He has made space for the conversation.

David: Maybe creation is itself the first word in a conversation. Like "What do you think about this?"

Olivia: I do wish it were true, you know. I don't think many people haven't tried out praying. You know that time when you've got that voice in your head that is your inner dialogue with yourself, and you just say to yourself, "What if this inner conversation is meant to be a conversation *with* someone else?" I've had that overpowering sense more than once.

David: And...?

Olivia: And it always feels like I am reaching out to what is, in the end, a fat zero. This other person never quite steps out into the light and becomes real for me. It just feels like gazing out into space or at the emptiness of the sea. That's it. Like talking to my mother after she died. I have to fill in the silences.

Michael: Hmm...

David: I get that. But maybe conversation with God isn't always about clarity—it's about presence. Silence doesn't mean no one is there. Sometimes it's just the kind of listening that is too deep for words.

Olivia: Well, maybe. I do pay attention, honestly, I do. But... nada. And I admit, it is a kind of grief—to long for that and not to have it. So the best we have, I reckon, is *this*.

Michael: What?

Olivia: The table. The Coffee Group of Wisdom. Say I'm having a colonoscopy...

David: Please, no! Too much information!

Michael: And there it is. The line between intimacy and oversharing, successfully obliterated...