

Don C. Richter's formative moments

by [Don C. Richter](#)

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At age 12 I decided (with lots of encouragement) to become a communicant member of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Alabama. The communicant's class met with our pastor six Saturday mornings for two-hour sessions. I don't recall specifics; by 1968 our congregation no longer required memorizing the Shorter Catechism. But I do remember how important and grown-up it felt having conversations about faith in our pastor's study—not his office—surrounded by stacks of well-worn commentaries and theology texts. A decade later I would attend the same seminary that trained my pastor, reading some of those same tomes I saw on his bookshelves.

It's one thing to admire texts; it's another to perform them. In 1972, two high school friends and I attended a performance of the off-Broadway musical *Godspell*. Enthralled, the three of us lobbied to produce the play with our youth group. Though the music score was widely available, royalties for the book were prohibitive.

"You could just sing the songs," youth advisers suggested. "But the songs won't make sense without the script," we argued. "Besides, we know where they got their material. We'll write our own script!"

In crafting an adaptation of *Godspell* we drew liberally on our memory of the professional cast's costume designs and theater techniques. We also drew liberally on scripture, immersing ourselves in the parables and passion stories of Jesus, reading our own lives into these ancient tales as we drafted dialogue, blocked scenes and assumed character roles.

Coached by caring adults, our acting troupe played these texts, improvised facial expressions, gestures and one-liners, and discovered that we were joining the story in ways we could not have imagined from the outset. One moment we were Jesus' eager, befuddled disciples. The next moment we became self-righteous ingrates, a herd of pigs, the very ones who would who betray and abandon Jesus on his way to Calvary. To this day I have a fondness for Pharisees because I played one on stage.

I don't recall my baptism as an infant, though by grace those waters marked me for the lifelong path of discipleship. I hardly recall the content of our communicant's class, though by grace those sessions stirred my budding theological imagination. But I will always remember how, by grace, Godspell ushered me into that "strange new world within the Bible" (Barth), prompted me to rehearse my role onstage and off in God's unfolding story, and directed me toward the company of others for whom "the chief end of humankind is to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

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