

# Opening Our Living Room

*By Denis & Margie Haack  
Co-Founders, Ransom Fellowship*

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*In November 2001 Covenant Seminary held a conference, led by the Youth in Ministry Institute, aimed at helping bridge the generation gap between teenagers and adults biblically. The conference, titled Two Worlds Under One Roof featured keynote speakers Denis and Margie Haack, co-founders of Ransom Fellowship, a speaking and writing ministry that helps Christians creatively and winsomely apply the truth of Scripture to their lives and culture.*

*Denis and Margie began the conference by saying that the underlying principles they wanted to stress in regard to reaching young adults with the Gospel can be easily summarized in these four points: be authentic, learn to listen, open your life and home with warm hospitality, and give the gift of unhurried time.*

*The following article by Denis and Margie shows how they have found creative means for reflecting these values as they reach out to postmodern young people with their own lives.*

Young adults in Christian circles often sense a chasm between themselves and the adult leadership of the church. Yet many have a deep desire to come to know an older believer as a mentor who will love them, listen to them, convey wisdom, and give the gift of time. Many people talk about covenant community, but precious few ever do it. It is too costly in our busy world.

Over the last 25 years Margie and I have tried, by God's grace, to make our home not only into a place where people will feel welcome, but a place where they will feel safe. Safe to raise questions, or doubts, or challenges— even questions about what we hold most dear. A place where the truth of Christianity is believed but never assumed. A place where people are listened to with care, regardless of what they have to say. A place where sin can be confessed because we expect not perfection but grace in this fallen world. A place where we don't just call people to repentance, but where we try, in an imperfect way, to first demonstrate a lifestyle of repentance. A place, in short, where even 'Babylonians' can feel free to bring their ideas, convictions, and art, knowing that we desire to understand what is going in their heart of hearts.

When our oldest daughter was in high school, for example, we encouraged her to invite her non-Christian friends to our home, and asked that when they come they bring their music. All we asked is that it be the music that spoke most deeply to them, that resonated within their souls. And so they came, eating huge quantities of our food and hanging out in our living room to listen to music. It was fascinating to watch their body language, as they wondered about our agenda. I would ask them what CD they wanted us all to listen to, and after some initial hesitation, there seemed to be no end to the music. I suspect some of the songs

were a test—but we simply took their music seriously, as something of importance to them, as the art of people who may not know or believe it, but who were made in the very image of God. And their music expressed so much.

Sometimes it expressed anger. The anger of Tori Amos, for example, who raises a fist against her Christian background. “God sometimes you just don’t come through,” she sings on her CD *Under the Pink*. “Do you need a woman to look after you? God sometimes you just don’t come through.” “Yes, I do have a mission,” she said in *Rolling Stone*, “To expose the dark side of Christianity.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the music expressed the loss of meaning and significance, as in the lyrics from the song “Zero,” by the Smashing Pumpkins: “emptiness is loneliness, and loneliness is cleanliness / and cleanliness is godliness, and god is empty just like me / intoxicated with the madness, i’m in love with my sadness.”

But most of all, the music expressed a deep yearning for relationship. Whether expressed in love songs or in U2’s amazing classic, “Numb” from their *Zooropa* CD, over and over again, we heard the same question expressed in so many ways. In the end, will someone be there for me?

“Will you be there for me?” is the central religious question for youth today. “At its most basic,” sociologist John Seel says, “it is a relational rather than a philosophical question. It is personal rather than abstract. It is a question born of broken relationships, laced with realism, poignant with need. It unmask the fear of abandonment as well as the loss of meaning. It is the cry for an embrace, the passion for intimacy, the longing for fidelity at the deepest levels of the heart. It is the longing for a love that will not leave in the morning light. Augustine, reflecting on his youth, admits in his *Confessions* that ‘The single desire that dominated my search for delight was simply to love and to be loved.’”<sup>2</sup>

“Will someone be there for me?” It is the question answered so powerfully by Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, the truth which he calls us to demonstrate to the next generation, even when it costs us to live out that truth. And how can we hope to demonstrate it unless we are willing to be authentic, to listen, to invite them into our lives and home, and to give the gift of unhurried time?

In any case they came, and we listened to the music. Never have I hosted discussions that were as simple to lead. We’d listen to the song, the volume turned up so that you could feel it, and not just hear it, and then I’d ask the first question that came to mind: Namely, what are the words? Maybe it’s my age or the fact that I grew up listening to Bob Dylan, but I need help here. And so they’d recite the lyrics, and the talking would begin as we tried to gently probe what they believed and thought and valued, and why. “What’s the message?” we’d ask. “What’s being said in this song?” “Why do you find it attractive or believable?” “And what difference does it make in your life?”

A simple set of questions designed to help us listen, and which so very often launched us into a surprising discussion about things that truly matter. Imagine what it would be like, a friend recently said, to sit in the chair of an angry dentist. Or one who is offended by your dental habits and decides that you need to be taught a good lesson in dental hygiene. Or one who accosts strangers with the sad state of their mouths, expects them to submit to treatment on the spot, and when they refuse issues dire warnings. Or one that uses the identical technique on every patient, time after time.

We are simply trying to treat young adults as created in God’s image. So, we are not dismissive of them, their ideas, their lifestyle, or their values. Even if they seem repugnant, or lacking in common sense. We work hard not to misrepresent what they think and believe and feel. We learn from them, realizing that they live

in God's world just as we do. We try to remember how painful it is to face up to our own mistaken ideas, so that our probing of their beliefs will be clothed in humility. In fact, our willingness to acknowledge personal failure and weakness in our spiritual pilgrimage has been met with grace by a generation which values authenticity. As we ask questions of them appropriate to the moment, we might indeed get to the big issues of life. We do not imagine, however, that only a conversation on that level is significant, for that too would treat them with disdain.

In our postmodern world popular culture is not just entertainment. It is where the doubts, hopes, and spiritual yearning of a generation are primarily expressed. Taking their music and films seriously opens a window of insight into their minds and hearts, and provides a point of contact for conversation.

Young adults are growing up in a fragmented, broken, and busy world. If we wish to be there for them, we need to listen, be authentic, welcome them into our lives and homes, and have time for them. Simple things. They are also, we believe, the most radical expression of Christian faithfulness that is possible in our postmodern world.

In reality these values for relating to young people sound simple. But so much in our culture and in our churches leans against them. On the deepest level they capture something of what is at the heart of our covenant calling before God. Best demonstrated by Jesus, they define something of what it means to be incarnational in a lost world. Perhaps if we are willing to enter their life and world, they'll take seriously our message. But even if they don't, we'll know we loved them as our Savior loved us.

*For more information about Ransom Fellowship, the ministry led by Denis and Margie Haack, please e-mail [Ransom\\_Fellowship@compuserve.com](mailto:Ransom_Fellowship@compuserve.com) or call 507-282-0564.*

1 "Tori Amos: Her Secret Garden" by Steven Daly in *Rolling Stone* (June 25, 1998) p. 103.

2 "Spirituality in Pop Music: From Tori Amos to Lauryn Hill" by David John Seel Jr., in *Critique* (#2-1999).

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