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Picture this: the monthly meeting of a faith-sharing group of a bunch of guys who got to know each other at the local Catholic parish and have been gathering, almost always in this living room on the second floor of a Chicago condo building, for the past five years.

The full group numbers about two dozen, but, on any given Thursday, there are usually 10 or 12 men, middle-aged and older, sitting in a circle around a table with popcorn, a bowl of almonds, some red wine and often a lighted candle.

We gather each month to talk about our individual and communal faith and how our beliefs shape the way we live our lives or try to live our lives. Everyone is on an equal footing. Every one of us has stuff to share about our own efforts to address the knotty questions of living a good life within a Catholic context.

On this particular evening, the question was this: What is the one thing in my faith of which I am absolutely sure? Think about that. It's a great question for any of us to try to answer, not once, but over and over throughout our lives.

It doesn't ask what the core of my faith is; that would involve a complex set of understandings, beliefs and choices. And it leaves the door open for this "one thing" to shift over time, depending on where I am in my life journey and what challenges I'm facing.

Each of the guys addressed the question in a heartfelt — and very personal — way, with responses including Jesus as a model, the call to social justice, feeling deeply loved by God, and so on.

I was both surprised and not surprised at what came into my mind very quickly after the question was asked. At other points in my life, I probably would have said something about death and rebirth, or about God as love and love as God.

This time, when I took my turn, I said, "The one thing I'm sure of is that we're called to show up, to be present."

What I meant by that, I told the guys, is that I've come to believe with all my heart that our greatest task as human beings is to live — to be as fully alive as possible, to be as fully alert to all of the wonder and pain and beauty and jaggedness of life.

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To really see, for instance, the sunlight on the tree leaves on the branch swaying in the wind, the shifting shades of green, the shifting shadows and light. To really see the ugly beauty of the dead bird in the backyard, mauled by a squirrel, its feathers strewn in a circle on the grass.

Much more, though, it means to really be present anytime I interact with another person, even in passing — to look the McDonald's clerk in the eye and see her, to talk with the homeless guy about the death of comic book genius Stan Lee.

But, even more, it means that, with people I see all the time, with people I work with, with people I love and who love me, I need to show up — to really listen to what they have to say, to listen, hear and understand what they say without trying to solve their problems or shut them up so they can hear what I want to say.

To listen and incorporate what I'm hearing so well that I am changed, that I grow, that I learn how to be a better person, as Jesus did.

My friend St. Joseph Sr. Wendy Cotter writes in her 2010 book *The Christ of the Miracle Stories* that Jesus listened so well that he learned from other people and changed his behavior, such as when the gentile mother asked him to cast a demon out of her daughter. At first, Jesus says that it's "not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," but after the mother wittily notes that even the dogs get table crumbs, Jesus changes his mind and cures the girl.

This is what it means to show up and be present — that and one other thing.

Being present means sharing who I am, being open about my thoughts and feelings, as Jesus was. Such as when he cried when he went to the tomb of his friend Lazarus. Such as when, on the cross, feeling abandoned, he called out to the Father.

Showing up, being present, may sound easy, but I find I fail at it all the time. I'm too preoccupied to look a receptionist in the eye, too shy (i.e., afraid) to strike up a conversation at a party, or too proud to let a friend see how blue I am.

As with everything that's good, I find it helpful to look at good men and women as models of how to do better, and that monthly meeting of the guys in that second-floor condo is a concentrated form of this.

These guys are open to hear about how each of us is feeling and thinking and responding to the bumps and delights of life, and they're open about their own feelings and thinking and bumps and delights.

I've come to realize that sharing faith — as we do in these two-hour gatherings — is a deeply rich way of living life. And a way that I can live during all the other hours of my life.

[Patrick T. Reardon is the author of eight books, including *Requiem for David*, a poetry collection about his brother's suicide.]

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