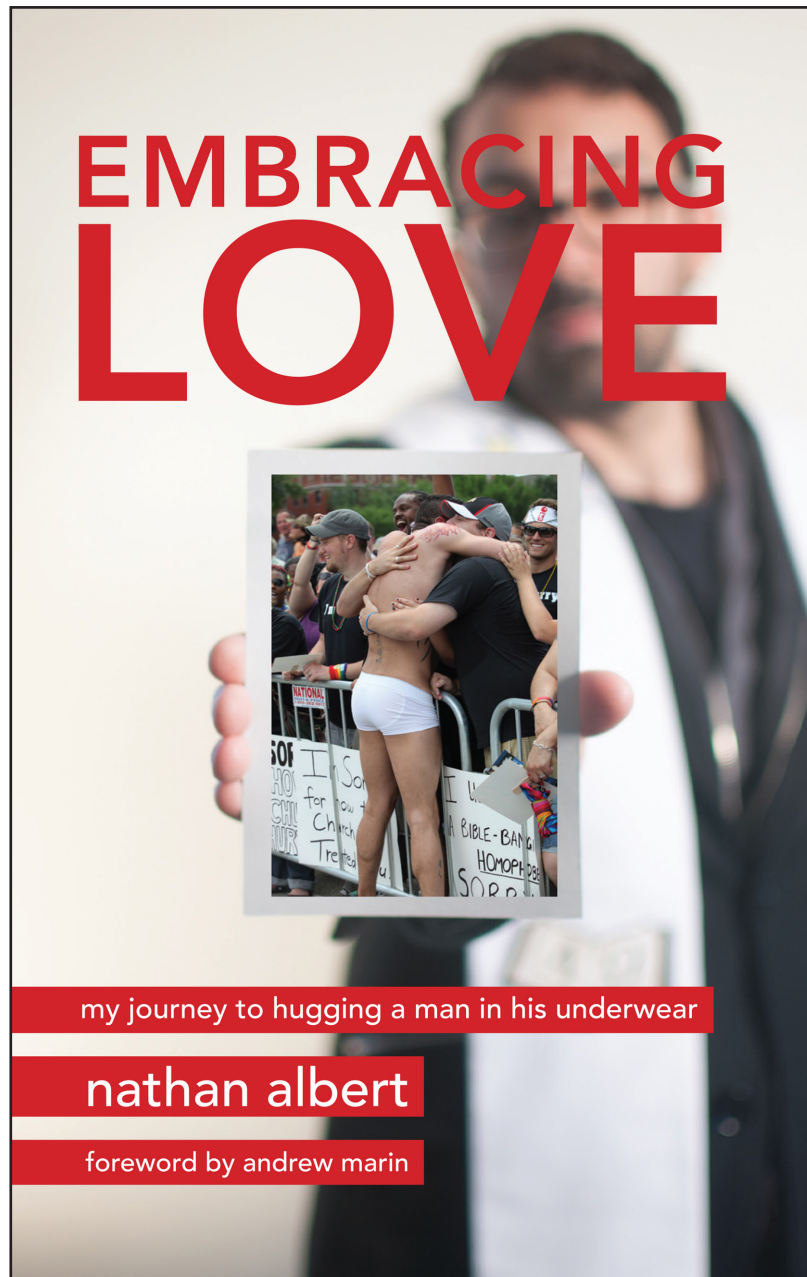


EMBRACING LOVE DISCUSSION GUIDE



NATHAN ALBERT

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EMBRACING LOVE DISCUSSION GUIDE

Why talk about this with Nathan Albert?

America ranks as one of the most religious nations on earth in global studies of religion, so faith plays a prominent role in this country in relationships and moral choices. That's why, right now, millions of American families and thousands of congregations are struggling with acceptance of LGBTQ family, friends, neighbors and co-workers.

Already, a significant majority of Americans accept same-sex marriage, which became legal across the U.S. in 2015—and the vast majority of us tell pollsters that all Americans should be treated equally regardless of gender or sexual preference. But that also means about 1 in 3 Americans are not as accepting, most citing religious concerns.

Nathan Albert's book is an inviting, personal story of how Nathan's deep Christian faith led him to acceptance, including one spiritual adventure that rocketed him into the global spotlight. Nathan is a compassionate, pastoral guide for your own reflections. Professionally trained in theater, Nathan felt called to ministry and earned a Master of Divinity. Today, he is a college chaplain, writer, teacher and speaker. You can invite friends to visit his website NathanAlbert.com to check out his columns and podcasts. On the front page of his website, you'll find a welcoming photo of Nathan in a chapel. If you're planning a major program or a community-wide read of his book, you can contact Nathan via his website. He travels and teaches widely.

What was that "spiritual adventure" mentioned above? Like millions of American Christians, Nathan grew up regularly attending church, participating in Bible study groups and praying with his family and his community. By 2010, as he explains in his book, his faith had convinced him that Christ calls all people into Christian communities, regardless of gender or preference. As a public act of welcoming, he attended the Chicago Pride festival with other Christian friends. He wore a T-shirt that said, "I'm sorry." Some of his friends held signs that said, "I'm sorry that Christians judge you."

This sparked spontaneous, emotional responses from some of the parade participants, including a man wearing only underwear who simply and honestly reached out to give Nathan a reconciling hug. That image, and Nathan's column about it, went viral and circled the planet! That's why Nathan is holding a copy of that photo on the cover of his book.

Nathan's message: This tough journey toward reconciliation across lines of gender and faith can be very emotional and also very rewarding when reconciliation leads to new friendships and a healthier, safer, more diverse community for everyone.

Who Says Americans Are Becoming More Accepting?

If you are planning a group discussion of Nathan's book, you're likely to hear this skeptical question, so we recommend your searching for the latest data in the highly respected Pew Research database. Here are just a few starting points:

Same-Sex Marriage Around the World: [In this Pew Research overview, you'll find recent data from many nations around the world.](#)¹ You will find that the U.S. is far from alone in accepting same-sex marriage. Others similarly accepting are Taiwan, Ecuador, Austria, Germany, Colombia and Ireland.

5 Facts About Same Sex Marriage: [This 2019 overview focuses on American attitudes.](#)²

United Methodist attitudes: This 2019 report has a lengthy headline: "[Rift over gay rights comes as United Methodists in U.S. have become more accepting of homosexuality.](#)"³ Right now, the United Methodist Church is the largest religious body in the U.S. actively debating whether congregations will agree to acceptance—or will drop out of the denomination.

NOTE: Pew Research welcomes your sharing their reports, as long as you include a proper citation to the Pew source. You can even sign up for free email updates, each week, as new data is reported on a wide range of global topics.

Nathan Albert Summarizes His Book and Invites Discussion

To spark discussion of this book, of course, your friends should read *Embracing Love*. However, you will first need to convince them to choose this book for an upcoming discussion. To warm them to this story, you can share Nathan's summary of his book. *Nathan writes:*

One of the most popular events in Chicago is the annual Pride Parade, which is so engaging and enjoyable that attendance has grown to over 1 million people. Every year, though, there is a group of Christian protestors standing behind a police barricade. They shout demeaning and sometimes outright vicious slogans.

That's why a few friends and I decided to attend this event to present an alternative Christian voice by wearing shirts with the words "I'm Sorry" on them and bearing signs of apology on behalf of Christians who had failed to represent the love of God to the LGBTQ community. We positioned ourselves halfway through the route and did our best to enjoy the parade. Little did we know a simple apology would be shared around the world and start a movement. The spark was a gentleman, who was dressed only in his underwear and decided to jump down off of his float and hug us. The moment was captured in an iconic photograph that was shared globally millions of times.

My book, *Embracing Love: My Journey to Hugging a Man in His Underwear*, is the story surrounding that photograph and my own Christian journey toward inclusion. As a conservative, heterosexual Christian pastor, I had a deep desire that those within the LGBTQ community might

1 <https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/gay-marriage-around-the-world/>

2 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/24/same-sex-marriage/>

3 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/26/rift-over-gay-rights-comes-as-united-methodists-in-us-have-become-more-accepting-of-homosexuality/>

know the Gospel, belong to a loving church community, and tangibly know the deep love of the Divine. Before choosing the path toward ministry, I had trained to be a professional actor and I was surprised by how warmly I was welcomed by LGBTQ friends. At the same time, I found that almost all of my LGBTQ friends had horrific experiences with either the church or a particular group of Christians. And, for most of them, giving up on Christianity, the church, and consequently God, seemed the safest and spiritually healthy option.

The book shares stories of my friendships with those within the LGBTQ community, describes pastoral encounters and the ways in which I pastor people through this heated conversation, a brief examination of the biblical texts on homosexuality, and ends with a fervent call to unity, not solely unanimity.

It is my hope that this study guide will help you to safely discuss this often-heated topic in a way that does not lead to angry debate or dehumanization but fosters dialogue, understanding and respect. As you discuss this personal topic in a group, I encourage you to set guidelines in place that allow each person a safe place to talk openly, not trying to convict or change someone's mind but to converse with each other. Listening to one another's story changes your own story, so listen well. Remember that within any congregation, members have loved ones who identify as LGBTQ—so this kind of conversation can encourage renewed, loving relationships throughout your community.

I hope that this resource can be utilized by small groups, Bible studies—as well as dialogues among parents, friends, pastors and family members of LGBTQ people. At this point, widespread acceptance has moved so far across America that you may be surprised at how many people will welcome your suggestion to organize a discussion. Millions of faithful Christians, now, believe that their churches can be a place for *all* people because God loves *all* people.

In the coming pages, I have provided suggestions and questions, organized by the chapters in the book. Can you discuss this book in a single session? Yes, that's possible. However, I recommend talking over a series of weeks—ideally taking one chapter per session. Some chapters (especially chapters 4-6) may warrant longer discussion, reflection or research. Giving this discussion some time also has the benefit of strengthening the trusting relationships within your group. You will find that people will enjoy the balanced, non-confrontational tone of a good discussion over time. Friendships will deepen. And, ultimately, friendships are the pathway toward wider acceptance and a healthier, stronger community.

Finally, I must express my gratitude to Joshua Danielson for his collaboration and partnership in creating this document—as well as David Crumm, Dmitri Barvinok and their team at Front Edge Publishing, which produces Read the Spirit Books, for making this resource widely available.

Chapter by Chapter Discussion Prompts

Foreword and Introduction: *What Truly Matters*

Nathan writes that a friend, Trevor, came out to him—and the news struck him to the core. Have you ever had someone come out to you? How did it impact you? How did it make you feel? Did it change your relationship with that person in an ongoing way?

Nathan describes “two loves: my friends and the church.” He describes the tension he felt between these two loves. His friends wanted nothing to do with the church, while his church wanted nothing to do with his friends. Have you experienced similar tensions? If so, share about how that has made you feel. What difficulty or confusion has this caused you?

Nathan writes: “*If Christian communities do not live as merciful and compassionate men and women who pursue unity and reconciliation, then our discord, division, and disunity will cause the LGBTQ individuals to give up entirely on God.*” Share your thoughts and reactions to this statement. Do you agree or disagree? How does it resonate with you?

Nathan shares that this passionate and emotional journey has brought him to feel anger, grief, sadness, exhaustion, fear, hope and love. What emotions have you felt as you have ventured into this discussion?

Nathan writes: “*When we sacrifice relationship in order to be right, we have forgotten what truly matters.*” How have you experienced this in your life?

After reading this introduction, what are your hopes for this book? What do you hope for your own journey in this ongoing discussion?

Chapter 1: *Hugging a Man in his Underwear*

The photo of Nathan hugging the man in his underwear is so striking that reactions are often visceral as we see two men in such an emotional embrace, one of them nearly nude. That’s why the image circled the globe via social media—and that’s why this opening chapter is a great opportunity to honestly share some of our own reactions. This discussion can set the tone for your series. We want participants to be honest as they speak, to be respectful as they listen and to react thoughtfully as the discussion unfolds. All of us can agree that it’s helpful to unpack the often-emotional responses we carry around with us, ready to emerge with a spark. No one is right or wrong in honestly sharing these thoughts.

One way to pose the question: Please, share your reaction to the viral blog post, *I Hugged a Man in his Underwear*, which appears in the book. What stands out to you? Why do you think that image and post went viral?

You could also pose the question this way: What images and reactions surface in your mind when you think about those who identify as LGBTQ and the broader LGBTQ community? What prompts these assumptions? Are they based on actual experience? Or are they stereotypes you are recalling from friends or social media?

Read about the response in the book from Dave, who compares Christians with Nazis. What type of pain must Dave have endured to compare a Christian, who is supposed to embody the God of love, with a Nazi, who is often seen as the embodiment of hatred?

Tristan shares a few words with the Christian community. At one point, he says, “*Please learn to love as much as you have been taught to love.*” What are your reactions to Tristan’s words and experiences?

Nathan advocates the use of apologies as the beginning of reconciliation and unity. He writes: “*At least, apologies can clear the air and calm what is often a heated debate. At best, I think they have the ability to bring healing, hope and reconciliation.*” In your experience, how has an apology—about anything—brought healing, hope, or reconciliation?

Find the passage in which Nathan argues that we should not use the term “issue.” We need to remember that we are talking about relationships with people, Nathan writes. Do you agree with that distinction? What do you think changes when a discussion is about people instead of an “issue”?

One last question that can surface additional responses and questions among your participants: What else stood out to you in this chapter?

Chapter 2: *Belong, Believe, Become*

We all have stories and experiences about our own search to belong. What is one story from your life where you were searching to belong?

Nathan lays out the idea that many congregations function on a “Behave, Believe, Belong” model. He argues that a true Gospel model is “Belong, Believe, Become.” What are your reactions to this idea? Have you been a part of a church that functioned with one of these models?

In the book, there is a story of a man who was looking for a place where he could simply be himself and breathe. Have you experienced a place like that—where it felt like you could finally be yourself and breathe? Share with the group about that experience and what it meant to you.

What would have to change in our homes, churches, families or among our friends to make them places that allow people to belong without conditions? What are the risks involved? What are the potential benefits?

Discuss the distinction between learning to be *with* the LGBTQ community before talking *at* or *about* the LGBTQ community. Reread that passage in the book. What are some ways you might try to be with the LGBTQ community?

One way we see God is through a diverse community of God’s people gathering together. But if certain people are not given the opportunity to belong, we miss the opportunity to see the Divine in everyone, to see the imprint of God on *all* humanity. How does this idea make you feel? Have you ever had an experience that made you feel like you saw less of God—or an experience where you glimpsed more of God?

What did you find most challenging in this chapter?

Chapter 3: Getting to Know People

This chapter begins with the quote: “*Life is all about relationships.*” Share your reactions.

Nathan states that everything changes when we form deep relationships with people who are different from us. How have you experienced this in your own life? Why do you think such relationships are important?

How would you feel if someone asked you, “What is it like to be you?” How can this question be an avenue for developing relationships, understanding and respect?

Learning about LGBTQ history can be helpful in building friendships and reconciliation. How much of the history of the gay rights movement did you know? As you read this section, did you think in new ways about your own assumptions?

The use of proper terminology is a sign of respect, and also a mark of hospitality. What terminology in this chapter was new for you? Which terminology was confusing? Spend some time discussing the “problematic phrases” that are pointed out in this chapter. Have you used such words and phrases? Why do you think language like this is harmful? How is it a barrier for building bridges between communities?

This chapter ends with an overview of labels, adjectives and our identity. Many Christians, especially evangelicals, tend to view our identity as sinners, rather than “*saints who happen to sin once in a while.*” What would happen if you identified more with being a saint than a sinner? How would your life, your relationships, and your actions change if you did?

What aspect of this chapter provided new insight for you?

Chapter 4: *How Do We Read the 6 Main Passages?*

In this chapter, a survey of the theological interpretations of the six main biblical passages pertaining to homosexuality is introduced from both a traditional and progressive understanding. The hope is that this allows readers to understand that there are multiple scholarly interpretations of these passages. Because this part of Nathan’s book touches on such complex issues, you may want to invite members of your group to explore materials from a variety of sources before your discussion. There are many other Christian Bible-study resources to consult. For progressive interpretations, search the websites of inclusive denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. All have Bible-study resources on inclusion. The most widely read book on this subject among progressive evangelicals is Dr. David Gushee’s *Changing Our Mind*.

How have you understood the majority of these passages? Has your understanding evolved over time? What has been most influential in your reflection on these passages? Have you ever thought about how our interpretations of scripture and our theological beliefs impact the lives of people?

Genesis 19 and two passages in the book of Leviticus seem to be the only Old Testament texts that address this topic. What insight did you gain from reading briefly about a traditional and progressive interpretation of these passages? What does this section teach you about the importance of context?

There is a lot of debate pertaining to how a couple of Greek words are translated in the New Testament passages. What does this tell you about the complexity of translating the Bible?

This chapter states that the Bible demands to be treated as more than simply a tool to be used to fight and debate about interpretations. Instead, it should be regarded as an avenue for us to discover God. What is your take on such a statement?

What section of this chapter was the most eye-opening for you?

Chapter 5: *Re-humanizing God's People*

Many people argue about the differing theological interpretations surrounding homosexuality, but those debates rarely change anyone's opinion on the topic. Do you think we can do better than simply debating and then dividing? Is there another way?

How do you respond to the idea of "spiritual dehumanization"? How have you been guilty of dehumanizing another person or group of people? Have you ever felt dehumanized by the words or actions of others?

Nathan shares that a friend once said to him, "*When we don't love 'them,' our love for God is a joke,*" which reminded him of Thomas Merton's quote "*Without love and compassion for others, our own apparent love for Christ is fiction.*" How do these quotations resonate with you? How do they challenge you?

What is the reputation of the Christian community in the broader culture? How do our long-running debates about sexuality shape that public impression of Christians?

What is your reaction to the question, "*Might it be possible that when people see Christians dividing, they cannot see God?*"

Why does God hate division? Why is unity so important to God? The Holy Spirit? The church?

Nathan states, "*Unity among Christians does not mean unanimity.*" What do you think that looks like? Do you agree that unity does not require unanimity? How do you think this plays out in Christian communities that are not unanimous? How might it play out in your community? Another helpful book on this issue is Ken Wilson's *A Letter to My Congregation* in which he proposes unity—even with varying attitudes among our members. You might invite a member of your group to read Ken's book to contribute that viewpoint to this discussion.

What part of this chapter did you find most helpful?

Chapter 6: *Holy Moments*

Has anyone come out to you? What was that experience like for you? Is there anything you regret saying or, thinking back, are there things you wish you had said or done?

In what ways do you think responding to a coming out moment with a pastoral presence rather than a theological opinion can allow such experiences to be “holy moments”?

If you are a parent/sibling/family member of an LGBTQ child, what was it like for you when your child/sibling/family came out? How does the section “A Word to Parents and Families” resonate with you?

Is it possible to stand with and affirm someone without having to voice your theological opinion? Share an example of a time you have done so. Has anyone ever done that for you?

If you are a member of the clergy, have you ever asked a congregant who has come out to you, “What type of gay person do you think God wants you to be?” If so, how did the conversation go? If not, what do you think might happen if you do?

This chapter points out that in some coming out situations, the parent and child seem to reverse roles; the parent may act like a child and the child must parent the parent. How have you seen such a situation unfold?

What part of this chapter was most impactful to you?

Conclusion: *Getting to Know People*

Nathan writes: *“It is time something changes. Our loving actions must trump our abstract passivity. Mercy must always triumph over judgment, and grace must abound more than our phobias. It is time we pursue reconciliation. We cannot avoid this topic any longer. It is long overdue to begin fruitful dialogue on what can often be a scary topic. We have to engage others because we are in relationship with others.”* What would it look like for you to live out these words in your community?

What would it take for you to lean on the side of being overly gracious, welcoming, and loving? What worries you about taking that approach? What do you find hopeful about that approach?

The perception of the Christian community as indifferent and exclusive—and even as cruel—has caused some in the LGBTQ community to give up completely on church and God. Would you be willing to be overly gracious and inclusive so that these people might feel welcomed back and embraced by the love of God? How might these people be better off with the Christian community than without it? How might the Christian community be better off with these people than without them?

Even if all our interpretations are wrong, can you trust that God is big enough to handle our mistakes?

Need Help Convincing Friends?

What Others Have Said About *Embracing Love*:

“Take time reading this book, treasuring it for the legitimate expression of love, hope, and unity that it is.”

—*Andrew Marin, Founder of The Marin Foundation and CEO of Venture Resolutions*

“Nathan is a significant contribution calling for an end to fruitless Christian arguments and division. Warmly recommended.”

—*David Gushee, Distinguished University Professor of Ethics, Mercer University*

“In the company of such faithful people as Pope Francis, Nathan reminds us that indeed the Spirit is able to do a new thing in our midst.”

—*Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, Professor of Theology and Ethics, North Park Theological Seminary*

“This book is an open and honest view of how to pursue unity between Christians and the LGBTQ community. This book offers both a big picture perspective and practical advice, ensuring a take-away for everyone who reads it with an open mind and an open heart.”

—*Verified Amazon Review*

“Embracing Love is a timely and needed book in the evangelical world. The message of the book remains the same regardless: that we as a Church, can and SHOULD be doing a better job to love and reflect Christ to the LGBTQ community. A must-read.”

—*Verified Amazon Review*

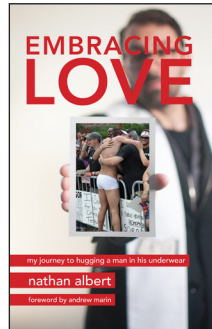
RELATED BOOKS

All books are available on Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com in print and e-edition.

Embracing Love
by Nathan Albert

Embracing Love is the story of a musical theatre actor turned pastor who shares personal and pastoral stories of the LGBTQ community. He invites readers past the intimidation of controversy for the sake of embracing people with the love of Jesus.

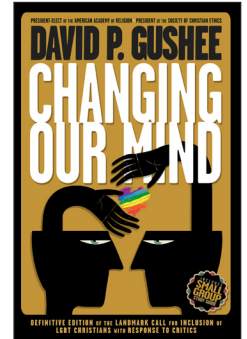
ISBN: 978-1942011293



Changing Our Mind
by David P. Gushee

In *Changing Our Mind*, Evangelical ethicist David P. Gushee takes the reader along his personal and theological journey as he changes his mind about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender inclusion in the Church.

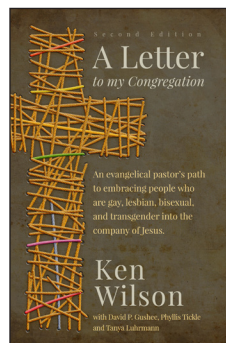
ISBN: 978-1942011842



A Letter to my Congregation
by Ken Wilson

“Wilson shows how God has led him on a journey toward a rethinking of what the fully authoritative and inspired Bible ought to be taken to mean in the life of the church today.”
—David P. Gushee

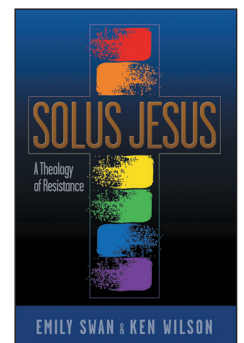
ISBN: 978-1942011415



Solus Jesus
by Emily Swan & Ken Wilson

As co-founders of Blue Ocean Faith, Swan and Wilson are pioneering what it means to be post-evangelical—post-Protestant, even—in a time when such re-imagining is desperately needed.

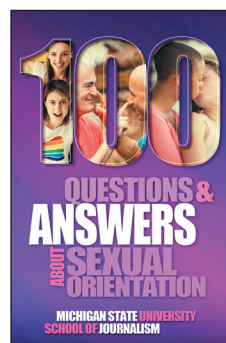
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100 Questions and Answers about Sexual Orientation

This simple, introductory guide from the Bias Busters cultural competency series answers 100 of the basic questions people ask about gay, lesbian, bisexual and other sexual orientations in everyday conversation.

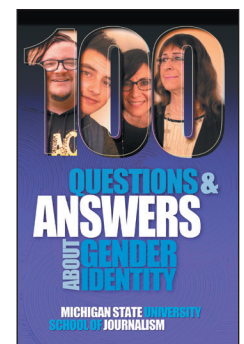
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100 Questions and Answers about Gender Identity

This simple, introductory guide from the Bias Busters cultural competency series answers 100 of the basic questions people ask about transgender people in everyday conversation.

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