

MARS HILL REVIEW

Essays • Studies • Reminders of God



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Mars Hill Review attempts to articulate a refreshing theology of hope founded simply on the belief that God, through Christ, has not forsaken us to this fallen world. He is faithful to remind us of his presence, in a variety of ways, as we participate in stories of hope and redemption within relationships of integrity.

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E S S A Y S

“But go and learn what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice; for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’”

—Matthew 9:13, NASB

COMPASSION: THE MEMORY OF SPLENDOR

Grieving the Absence of Christ in Our Lives

By Janice Meyers

I adore weddings. There is a splendor to even the most simple of ceremonies, and little else can cause me to be caught up in the beauty of what this sacrament points toward—the betrothal and commitment of the Bridegroom to his bride.

But I've attended enough weddings to know I also dread them. There is no mistaking the strange feeling that gnaws at my heart when the wedding party has driven away: it's over. The splendor is gone. And now they—and we—must go about the dailiness of living. Was the splendor a farce? No—it was very real. Even the most cynical eyes or concerned relatives cannot dismiss it. This is why my “post-wedding angst” persists: I don't want the splendor to end. Especially the look of adoring pursuit in the bridegroom's eyes.

It may seem strange, but in a way this “missing the splendor” comes close to defining biblical compassion.

Clichéd Images

What comes to mind when the word *compassion* is heard? Images of the homeless and soup kitchens? Bosnian, Afghan, Mozambican refugee camps? Hospital wards and AIDS clinics? Struggling single mothers? Surely these realities draw upon the compassion within us. There is a certain poverty to these images that causes us to desire to see a wealth of warmth, nutrients, and care intrude into the picture.

Compassion is called out of us when we see situations where there is an obvious absence of something or someone *life-giving*. It calls us to ache, mostly because we are forced to long for whatever or whoever is absent to be restored. For those of us who have tasted the riches of Christ, compassion calls us to want to extend his heart into the situation, to be ministers of reconciliation and restoration. Of course we can choose to enter these situations with nothing more than a haughty, sacrificial stance in which we

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say to ourselves, “It sure is a good thing I am here helping out. And, now that I think about it, I’m an amazing and wonderful person for giving up my time and energy to be here.” This stance, this path of least resistance that I know so well, focuses only on what we have to give—not on what we desire to have restored.

We are told to “go and learn what this means. . . ,” that compassion is desired more than sacrifice. Jesus gives us these words in the context of showing us his heart for eating with tax gatherers and sinners—a context for exposing the hardheartedness of all of us who wish to fast in order to be seen by others. Any fast that matters, he says, involves mourning. And his followers, he says, won’t mourn until he is gone from their presence. When he, the bridegroom, is taken away, then they will mourn and fast.

Now, when the bride and bridegroom drive away from us—when our taste of splendor ends—we are left with the banal reality of our lives. We are left with the poverty of our own condition. We are left to live, nourished only by a memory of the splendor that once was. Sacrificial living requires nothing of our hearts because it has no sight, no memory, no vision. Compassion requires us to see what is gone, to remember what was, and to long for those things, for those people, to be restored. Compassion is being broken over how little we grieve the absence of Christ in our lives.

1. Internal Poverty

Never has my definition of compassion been challenged as much as during the years when I had the privilege of living and working in southern Africa. In an era when the vestiges of apartheid were crumbling, it was an electric place, an exhilarating time to walk the dark soil of that beautiful continent. A land of contrasts, yet a similar pulse beat through the most wealthy plantation owner and businesswoman, and through the stench-ridden, crowded slums of the townships.

It was in one of these townships, in a simple home of a displaced Mozambican family, that I met Musa. Musa looked about six when his piercing brown eyes caught mine. He had one of those grins that threatened to cause his entire jawline to bust. I found myself filled with delight at this little boy. What I didn’t realize as I played faces with Musa was that he was actually twelve years old, and had been mute for almost six years and could no longer walk, or even stand, on his own. A debilitating muscular disease, his mother told me as she pulled him from a small wash basin outside their stucco home. My heart was filled with what I thought was compassion.

Compelled by this family, I found myself spending quite a bit of time in their home. I looked on as Musa’s mother, Ketsiwe, discovered the love of Christ and, with a zeal I have rarely seen since,

soon began urgently knocking on little wooden doors to tell her neighbors what she had come to realize about the love of God. Pretty soon there was a humble living room filled with kerchief-laden African women (and occasionally a man) desiring to search the scriptures together. The Inyanga (witch doctor) next door curiously relented in her threats to destroy such meetings, and eventually joined the inquisitive seekers.

It was these seekers who decided, as they studied the gospels, that they needed to pray for Musa. And they did—fervently, constantly. Then one day, while we all watched in disbelief, Musa took his mother’s hand and stood up. He let go of her hand, took several shaky steps, and then collapsed. With his first words in six years, he mumbled, “Siabonga Jesu”—“Thank you, Jesus.” He again got up and feebly made his way around the small house.

An incredible wail came from my African friends. Musa was talking. Musa was walking. Prayer had been heard, and the answer was a scene of absolute wonder.

I held that day—and that little boy—in my heart as a picture of what is possible. The image of that big-grinned, twisted little boy gaining strength was one I drew upon whenever I felt the futility of life and faith creeping into my heart. I returned to the United States having had my heart captured by Musa and by the unlimited power of God. And sadly, I held it as a picture that no longer prompted compassion. After all, Musa’s “plight” was lessened now—right?

A year and a half later, I had the opportunity to return to southern Africa for several weeks. The first stop was predictable. I expectantly worked my way down the muddy slope to Musa’s home. There was no one in the house. As I turned the corner into the back garden, I felt the life drain out of me as I saw Ketsiwe washing Musa in a basin again. He was more emaciated and twisted than ever. He had taken a really bad turn for the worse in the past five months, Ketsiwe told me. Musa could speak, and he greeted me. His eyes embraced me as I wept and internally raged at God. What a cruel joke, I thought—to have a taste of life and freedom, and then to be subjected again to this miserable existence. The splendor I had witnessed was gone, and I was furious.

Then Musa and I spent the day together, and the little teenager completely silenced me. All he wanted to talk about, from his borrowed wheelchair, was me, Jesus, and his friends, whom he cared about. He occasionally sang out, thanking God that we were together. He wanted to pray with me. He was absolutely in love with Christ, and it permeated his every breath. He told me about the church that had started in his neighborhood—started because so many people had heard about him, he said.

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I had nothing to say. The “compassion” I thought I had for Musa was revealed as nothing more than a convenient way to avoid the utter sadness of his situation (and mine). But it was not his “condition” that drew me to true compassion. It was his heart—his glorious, splendor-filled heart. The petty complaints of my soul were exposed, and when I looked at this little boy I decided to learn all I could from him in our hours together. Through him I saw the poverty of my own arrogant, “sacrificial” love. I have never been the same.

2. Relational Poverty

We learn compassion by allowing our hearts to open up to receive the splendor and glory of another soul. Once we’ve done this, fools that we are, we are of course then left to ache when the person whom we love leaves our presence. There is a poverty to our condition the minute they leave; we are poorer folk at that instant. It is this poverty that calls our heart to long for our loved one’s return.

I have a handful of friends with whom I can collapse, easily share both laughter and tears. This comfortable resting place called a friendship is, in some ways, a mystery. But the larger truth is that these friendships are based on courage, not just utilitarianism. These are friends who have persistently and curiously pursued me. And they are friends whom I’ve allowed to see my frailties, allowed to be strong for me, allowed to hear not only my feeble attempts at good humor but also my fears and joys. They live in Europe, South Africa, Denver, Little Rock, Los Alamos, San Jose, Houston, North Carolina. These are the friends I miss. I am in Colorado Springs—and I’m poor. My poverty is a result of the splendor these friends have brought into my life. (Let me say, lest I offend my few friends in Colorado Springs—when splendor is present, I do not mourn as deeply.)

This has not always been the case. The sacrificial thread that kept me from responding to Musa with true compassion has been in place within my heart for a very long time. In my relationships it has shown itself in a “I will be here for you, be strong for you, take care of you” tenor that left the people in my life feeling condescended to. Those who wanted to know me felt they had no invitation to know me beyond my caretaking, my “ministry skills” and “gifts.” I had adopted a finely honed way of insuring (or so I thought) that people felt comfortable with me, yet I kept them far from my heart.

This “way” didn’t come out of a vacuum. When I was a young girl, this caretaking role was the only one I could find to buffer myself from the heartache of some circumstances within our home that were entirely beyond my control. Rather than face the sad reality going on around me (and in me), I threw myself into a fren-

zied commitment to “be there” for everyone else. Sadly, it was this refusal to have compassion—a refusal to see that much was absent in my home, to admit my heart’s longing for the suffering to cease, and to ache for all that was missing to be restored—that propelled me into a way of living that appeared loving, even compassionate. The internal reality was one of dry, sacrificial arrogance. I believed I had the power to make everything okay; at least, I lived that way.

And isn’t that how it goes? A lack of compassion within propagates a lack of compassion without. As I refused to allow anyone to have compassion on me (including God), I sacrificially “loved,” and therefore I never gave my friends a taste of true compassion. I couldn’t weep with them because I had never wept for myself.

But along the way some crafty, relentless, passionate, and patient souls showed up on the scene. They were not about to be taken in by my “way,” and they certainly weren’t going to allow me to keep them out. They didn’t pummel their way into my life and heart. They crept in, slowly, as I saw their tears for me. They were sad not only for my story, but for what I had done with my story. They wept because my sin was not allowing compassion to be mine, even though I made my living by “being compassionate.”

These loving, disturbing tears changed me. They were the tears through which I was invited to the heart of Christ, a man of sorrows and one acquainted with grief, a man of compassion for me and the ways I mistrusted his care for me.

And so I pay the price now. Fool. How much easier, how much less resistance there was in ignoring my desire for these loving, crafty friends. And now, when they are far away from me, I ache. Yet now, as I reach out to the people around me, a God-breathed sadness propels me—and there is not so much of a dry, sacrificial wind. My friends say they can trust the care I offer much more. The compassion I received is now mysteriously the compassion I offer. It is not to be “conjured up”; it is an outpouring of what I receive from the hand of God through other people. Compassion can never be truly found in isolation.

3. Corporate Poverty

On a recent radio program—one that has as its aim to call the church back to the anchors of orthodoxy from which the contemporary church is pulling up its moorings—the moderators emphasized that the trend in many evangelical services today is to focus on sacrifice as opposed to sacrament. Their concern was that most contemporary worship services are undergirded with a mood of “we are here worshipping you, Lord—so you are welcome here.” In short, such services tend to rest on the experiential satisfaction of the worshiper as the bottom line, rather than on the reality of a humble

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God providing his character and presence which, if received and welcomed, would prompt and require a response of worship.

The form and style of contemporary worship services became the key concern for the radio program's moderators. They said that to restore a proper sense of sacrament (i.e., that we get what God gives; that we are the receivers), a proper focus on the vehicles through which this giving-and-receiving mysteriously take place (the sacraments) must be restored.

As I listened, my heart both rejoiced and was saddened. I rejoiced because these moderators were putting words to something I have missed in worship for a very long time. I've missed the reverent mystery of God's ministrations to us through the vehicles he has established (the sacraments), with no emphasis on the ability or prowess of church leadership or members to somehow "make God's presence happen."

But I was also saddened because the moderators seemed to be implying that "if we could just get back to the good old days of proper form and reverence within our services, then we will be honoring God." The words of Isaiah quickly came to mind:

Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote, therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be concealed. (Isaiah 29:13-14, NASB)

The moderators were in no way recommending rote worship, but I found myself unable to wholeheartedly agree that a style of worship service would restore our sense of transcendent dependence, would keep us from "removing our hearts" from responding to God's heart toward us. I realized that, in and of itself, even the beauty of the sacraments ultimately has no power over a human heart. I wondered what God meant when he said he would deal marvelously with us. There was an allure and an alarm to these words.

Probably all of us have experienced coming to the Lord's table on some week with a deep sense of the cross and the horrifying reality that the blood shed there was for us. We all probably, too, have experienced coming to the same table being attuned to little more than the smell of the grape juice or wine. What is it that causes a deep sense of memory of Christ to capture us during communion? A summertime memory from my junior-high years comes to mind.

A warm breeze laden with the smell of pine and ponderosa often wafted through the open wood beams of the chapel at Camp

Stoney, an Episcopal church camp in northern New Mexico. I loved it most when that breeze hit my cheeks while the priest was reciting the Eucharist. Being a young Presbyterian girl, I was fascinated with the mystery and uniqueness of the liturgy; and having newly discovered the love of Christ, every word penetrated with life-giving richness. I felt as if I could touch his wounds with an intimacy that frightened and thrilled me.

The teenage kids standing beside me looked as if that gentle breeze would lull them to sleep. They were bored. They'd been through this a thousand times: wine and wafers . . . holy water . . . acolytes . . . yawn.

Looking back, the thirst with which I entered those communion times wasn't merely born out of experiencing liturgy for the first time. It wasn't merely the experience of the high desert's beauty making me drunk before entering the chapel. It was that this Eucharist came when I was first admitting my own poverty. It came when the first of those crafty, loving friends entered the scene and made me realize I was in a lot of pain. But the bottom line was this: Through relationship with other people, I had come to thirst for God. I wanted him, I needed him, and with new eyes I had realized how little I knew him or had sought him.

So, if that was my experience then, what explains my ambivalence at times during communion now? I guess that's the point. It is a mystery. God's table is available, and as I go to it I am called to remember—to acknowledge the bridegroom's presence. The extent of my remembering is often a barometer for me, as to how much I have been allowing others into my life. It is there that my sin is exposed. It is there that I am called to compassion.

As I listened to the radio program, I read Matthew 9. I wondered if, rather than avoiding experience, what is really needed is a focus on redemptive relationship. The sacraments are, after all, tangible reminders of relationship restored. The cross is a constant reminder of the extent to which God would go to draw near to those whose hearts are far from him.

Are the sacraments not, more than any other thing, reminders of God-pursuit and a call to compassion? The sacraments draw us to the most meaningful experience of all: receiving God's compassion for us; understanding and receiving that he sees our poverty, and that he reaches in to give his intimate presence where he has been all but forgotten.

The Poverty of the Bridegroom's Absence

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice. . . .’”

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Jesus was responding to those who were questioning why his fasting didn't look like the fasting of the Pharisees. The question could have just as easily sounded like the contemporary cry of, "Where is your commitment? What are you willing to give up for Jesus? How are you demonstrating your godly values?"

Jesus' reply was one that squelched the very essence of these arrogant questions, firmly but gently bringing the focus back to who he was and what he was desiring to give. The Pharisees' fast, in its public proclamation, had a harsh absence of mourning. Suddenly, the picture of a bridegroom at a wedding was the image Jesus used to describe what is worthy of mourning.

Do the guests at the wedding mourn while the bridegroom is present? Consider the last wedding you attended. I suppose some extended family members may have internally groaned over the choice that cousin Evelyn made in marrying a plebeian such as Frank; but surely there is, in the heart of Frank's dearest and most beloved friends, a sense of utter wonder at the love in Frank's eyes as Evelyn walks the aisle. There is no mourning here. There is only the jubilation of Psalm 45, the glory of being in the presence of one who loves so passionately.

The sadness sets in when the wedding is over, the wedding party has departed, and the guests are left with only the memory of the splendor of the bridegroom. Frank was transformed, and now he is gone. Hearts long for Frank's return.

How do we "go and learn this"? Those who do not know Frank have no need to long for his return, to hear tales of the honeymoon, to see again the glimmer in his eye. It is only those adoring him who then ache for his presence. Sacrifice can do nothing to appease the ache. The ache for a person missed propels us into the sorrow of compassion. We miss them, so we find ways of remembering their smile, their laughter, the nuances of their personality. We are reminded in missing their splendor of the poverty we are left in without them. And it is this poverty that is the birthplace of the compassion of Christ.

Denial of this poverty is common. It is easily ignored unless we have eyes to see splendor in the first place. My ache following a wedding is easily remedied: I simply need to shut off my heart from being captivated by the beauty of the ceremony or its participants. I'm caught, though, because this remedy leads to a deadening of my heart. Choosing not to see splendor ultimately leads to a loss of compassion.

The compassion we learn in relationship we then bring into the setting of worship. We learn we're incapable of conjuring up the presence of the bridegroom whom we miss—and yet he conde-

scends to come anyway. We learn the kind of compassion Jesus had on the hill above Jerusalem—a heart that aches for our bewildered and lost condition. We learn by understanding that it is the sick who need a physician. It is in the eating with tax gatherers and sinners (contemporary translation: homosexuals and liberal theologians) that we realize we are in the same crowd, have the same sickness. We learn that sacrifice only solidifies the hardness of our hearts; compassion melts the hardness until we wait, expectant and thirsty, for a God who intrudes into our lives to restore the missing splendor.

Suddenly, worship is not a dry proclamation of our intent to serve him well; it becomes a living and vital expression of the relationship with the heart of God. Catechism bearing life: we glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Dostoyevsky's Father Zossima, in *The Brothers Karamozov*, points to the lifelessness of sacrifice and the yearning of compassion when he proclaims:

Many things on earth are hidden from us, but in return for that we have been given a mysterious inward sense of our living bond with the other world, with the higher, heavenly world and the roots of our thoughts and feelings are not here but in other worlds. That is why philosophers say that it is impossible to comprehend the essential nature of things of earth. God took seeds from other worlds and sowed them on this earth and made his garden grow, and everything that could come up came up, but whatever grows is alive and lives only through the feeling of its contact with other mysterious worlds: if that feeling grows weak or is destroyed in you then what has grown up in you will also die. Then you will become indifferent to life and even grow to hate it.¹

How do we extend our hearts in a society that is enamored with therapeutic prowess and a church that is anemic to the nutrients of redemptive relationship soaked in the reality of the cross—a church too often separated from its “bond with the heavenly world”? And, as the reality of compassion doesn't shape and inform the heart I extend, then I am reduced to being only a “moral, sacrificial woman” rather than a helpless child clinging to the heart of her father, rather than a bride reflecting the radiance of a husband's pursuit and care. I am reduced to being lukewarm in my perceived lack of poverty. As the angel said to the church in Laodicea:

Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe your-

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1 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, 245.

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SPLENDOR.

self, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. (Revelation 3:17-18, NASB)

C.S. Lewis understood that the reality of our poverty is deepened as we open ourselves up to splendor. In his obscure and powerful sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” he states:

Glory, as Christianity teaches me to hope for it, turns out to satisfy my original desire and indeed to reveal an element in that desire which I had not noticed. We usually notice it just as the moment of vision dies away, as the music ends, or as the landscape loses the celestial light. What we feel then has been well described by Keats as “the journey homeward to habitual self.” You know what I mean. For a few minutes we have had the illusion of belonging to that world. Now we wake to find that is no such thing. We have been mere spectators. Beauty has smiled, but not to welcome us; her face was turned in our direction, but not to see us. We have not been accepted, welcomed, or taken into the dance.²

Compassion is allowing myself to be stunned by the absence of the “bond with the heavenly world” in *my* situation; to mourn the absence of an acknowledgment of God in my heart. It moves me to long for his presence to intrude into the most common of situations—a conversation with a friend that never gets beyond surface chatter; a relationship that has become content with maintaining a certain level of civility to avoid the deeper issues of the heart; a worship service that exalts the sacraments above the Lord of sacraments (or a worship service that exalts the worshiper above the one to be worshiped).

It is at this point that compassion and hope show their common heritage. I hope to enjoy the splendor of Musa’s heart. I hope to have the splendor of lingering with a good friend. I hope for the bridegroom’s return. And in so doing I open my heart to compassion. To not hope is to live compassionlessly. To not hope is to not “go and learn what this means.” Compassion comes whenever I’m called to ask, “The Bridegroom isn’t here. Where is he?”



2 C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 14.

THEOLOGY: SYSTEM OR NARRATIVE?

How Story Transforms the Soul

By Kirk Webb

I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

—Ecclesiastes 1:13-17, NIV

• • •

I recently heard the story of a man who was fishing alongside a fast-moving Colorado river. Although the river was running high and strong past a certain bend, it eddied out quite nicely on one side. The calmer waters were home to many beautiful trout. The fisherman's day had been relaxing and quite fruitful. Part of his enjoyment came from shouting greetings to the white-water rafters who periodically passed the bend. It gave him an opportunity to boast of the many fish he had landed.

The serenity of the day was shattered in the late afternoon when he heard a faint noise: someone was screaming and calling for help from up river. The fisherman leapt to a high rock and saw a capsized raft hurling down the river; to his horror, he couldn't see any of the rafters. They must have been lost in the waves and currents that had provided such a fun ride for many that day. Now the water was deadly.

The fisherman anxiously waited for a better view, hoping with everything within him that the rafters were safely on the shore and the raft was alone in its voyage down the river. Then, suddenly, adrenaline surged through him when the craft came closer: three people were clinging desperately to

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the raft—and a fourth woman was floating about thirty feet away, caught in the brisk currents. From high on the rock the fisherman could see she was moving, but her desperate attempts to swim were slow and obviously labored. She was going into shock and had to be pulled out soon, or death would be certain.

He ran to his truck, which was parked some one hundred yards away, and grabbed a rope. As he raced back to the river, he could see the woman was headed straight for a large outcropping of rocks. The current would surely slam her against the rocks at such a speed that she could not survive. If he didn't act now, the lone rafter would be killed. Time was horribly short. He would have time for one, maybe two throws with the rope.

His yell warned the woman of the rope. Then he tossed it with all his might. The rope freely soared for a few feet and then snapped back to his feet. The fisherman had forgotten to untie the knot, which bound the hundred-foot length in a well-constructed, figure-eight knot. Why had he not thought to untie it as he had run to the river from the truck?

A quick pull on the knot released the rope, and a strong underhand toss sailed the rope directly to the woman in need. She grasped the line and held tightly—but the current had carried her too close to the rocks. Even though the fisherman was able to pull her to the shore, he was unable to keep her from catching the edge of the rocks. The impact snapped her lower spine. She never walked again.

The woman would be walking today if only the fisherman had had the presence of mind to unbind the rope. Was he somehow to carry the cause of her suffering? What truths about God, faith, providence, or sovereignty would speak to the fisherman as he spent the rest of his life asking the agonizing question of why he hadn't untied the rope before the first throw?

Chasing After the Wind

God has ordered the creation in such a manner that we cannot find purpose, meaning, or satisfaction in anything other than him (Genesis 3:16-19, Ecclesiastes 1:13; 7:13, Romans 8:22-23). Our pursuits are nothing more than a "chasing after the wind." But how we strive to overcome the torment of meaninglessness! To walk in the tumult of existence without order or explanation seems too much to bear. How could God ask such a thing? The dark passions of the human heart seek to find order where there is none and meaning where it does not exist.

The church is not immune. For centuries the church with its theologians, decrees, confessions, and treatises has sought to turn back

the rising tide of confusion. Certainly, the presence and possibility of heresy has called for the church to define itself and its beliefs; however, the systematizing of God's word has not always been a righteous pursuit. As is true of everything else we do, this activity is often driven by our obsession to control and conquer. That which is confusing must be explained; where tension exists there must be relief.

This wont of the heart leaves us with a very unsettling question: Does the systematization of theological truths take us to the higher things of God and thus to God himself, or is it an image—an idol, if you will—to which we desperately cling? The answer to the question must be born from the contention that theology divorced from narrative will inevitably result in idolatry—the fashioning of our own god, which we can then control.

Systematic Theology: Good or Evil?

Should systematic theology be abandoned? By no means! It is a highly enlightening activity, one that God most certainly intend. Obviously, we are to use our reasoning faculties as we interpret the scriptures and strive to know God. God clearly means for us to ponder that which he has revealed. Minimally, we are to study and know the truth, and in addition we must stand firm against that which is not true.

Systematic theology, per se, is not the problem, however. The problem lies in what motivates the systematic enterprise and what we do with the doctrinal statements. Our motivation here is not unavoidably evil, but obviously questionable.

The discipline of systematic theology arises from two fundamental beliefs: The first is that God's word is wholly true. The second is that humans are created in the image of God with logical and orderly mental processes. It is assumed, therefore, that the truthful statements contained in scripture should be organized into clear and proper presentations concerning the Bible's many subjects and themes. Alone, this endeavor can be immensely beneficial.

However, misuse of this process occurs when interpreters attempt to make clear what is not clear in scripture—i.e., when we use doctrinal statements to explain God and his work in the world when mystery should be the governing principle; and when dry, dogmatic assertions take the place of knowing theology as dynamic truth. God is unchanging, and therefore theological truths are also unchanging; yet God is personal, and therefore theology must be living as well. What does it mean to exist within that paradox?

Given that theological propositions can be helpful, it would be tragically incomplete to ignore the question of whether systematic

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theology alone is sufficient to address the perils, celebrations, and common expressions of life. The answer is clear: Systematics alone do not touch the drama of our everyday life. The fact is, it couldn't be sufficient in itself, for it is not living.

A friend who is a counselor tells of an encounter with a couple who had recently lost a child to miscarriage. Their grief was deep and the demand for answers strong. Truths came to the counselor's mind, and he shared them: God is in control, his purposes are good, there is hope for another child, suffering builds character. Although not meaningless, the words felt lifeless to him. Moreover, he became acutely aware that these "truths," when spoken, pulled him away from the present sorrow.

The system could not hold the moment. It could inform, but it could not speak with power. Finally, an unrehearsed tear ran down the counselor's face. The couple wept. Half an hour passed without a word. Yet truth—biblical truth—took root in their souls.

The unmistakable tension here is that the lifeless propositions are meant to point to and describe our God who is full of life. Indeed, he is the author of all life. And for the author's sake, the story must be continued in the present moment, lived out through those who bear his image.

Remembering propositions will never carry us forward. It is recalling the story of what God has done and is doing that will bear us onward. We must reflect all that is God by choosing to read the story of any moment to his pleasure. Dogma alone will never sustain the moment; we must live believing that we are carried forward by God's vital story and as such are most closely reflecting him.

Created in the Image of God?

God, within himself, exists as a dynamic process. God is three in one—three persons eternally relating to one another. They communicate, plan, act, move, and love in an unceasingly united manner. All of life flows from this relationship. All of history is planned and executed from and by the three persons of the Trinity. He is forever telling the story of the Trinity and calling for worshipful response to that story from all that he has created. God does not create propositional statements to which we are to adhere—he creates the eternal drama, which itself speaks of his truths. The eternal story speaks of God, for it is all authored by him.

We are created in the image of the triune God. Our very essence is dynamic in nature. We are moved by story, drawn to it, and thus we are ultimately drawn to God. We do not live in a system; we live in a story. Is it no wonder that the human heart is moved by a

novel, movie, or glorious tale which is artfully constructed and speaks to the great themes of life. Dogma has never moved the heart in such a manner. It never will, for it does not have that power. Only story moves the soul, because it touches on the very fibers of our being. It is the building blocks upon which we are created.

Go to the biography section of any bookstore or library and peruse the volumes there. Will you find a systematic listing of all that the individuals believed or all that they were? Will you find a logical summary of what is or was ultimately true about the person? Of course not. If such a book existed, no one would ever read it—because it would be unacceptably dull and lifeless. Biographies are stories, and thus they excite, disgust, or otherwise move us because the lives of others interface with our own life. We are moved by story, not by proposition. The writing of biographies, or even glorious novels, would be a worthless enterprise if this were not so.

What we believe to be true or untrue is embedded in our own narrative. God moves us to faith through that narrative. Never was anyone moved to faith or away from faith by proposition alone.

Studying God's truths as if there were a blueprint or outline that hangs together at every point of tension is to miss God. Unquestionably, God is a God of order. One need only to look at the structure of a molecule or the stars at night to come to that conclusion. However, to assume that understanding the order is equivalent to knowing God is to compromise one's own life. Each person lives in narrative form, thus representing the person of God—and to assume that God can be known otherwise is to miss the possibility of knowing the core realities of who God is.

The Hebrews

The ancient Hebrew people knew this quite well. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses—people who represent a significant portion of history—had very little direct communication from God with which to order their theorems. Their God was one of command and invitation. In response to God's dictates, they lived out a story unequalled in its chaos and disorder.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. . . . So Abram left, as the LORD had told him. . . . Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. . . . they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. . . . Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. . . . From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent. . . . Then Abram

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set out and continued toward the Negev. . . . Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. (Genesis 12:1-10, NIV)

Thus began the great trials, failures, and triumphs of the Hebrew people who would later become the nation of Israel. Abraham was not asked to understand the ways of God. He was asked to take action and live out the story that God would unfold before him piece by piece. This man's faithfulness was not in his logical consideration of God. His faith was evidenced in his willingness to walk into the unknown. He believed God (Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, James 2:23) and thus joined him in revealing God's character to the world by becoming part of the drama of redemption played out in the drama of his own life.

Moses returned again and again from Mount Sinai with words from the Lord to the Hebrews. The laws, commands, and guidelines from God were not systematized, and the people did not treat them as such. God's decrees revealed much about his character, as well as cast the people into a particular way of worshiping, living, and relating with one another and the rest of the world. Both were intertwined: God's character was revealed as the people lived, not as they ordered his words into logical presentations so that they could then control the words and ultimately try to control God. On the contrary, each time the Hebrews tried to control God by defining him and demanding that he conform to their desires, he eluded their attempts by presenting himself in unexpected and often horrifying displays of power and personality.

For centuries, even millennia, the Hebrews moved in and out of God's favor, but it was always in the context of living out the story that God had laid upon them. They saw their history as progressing with and toward God and his coming messiah. Often the people would become complacent and demand that God reconsider the story according to their own terms. At these moments the prophets would call the people back to the belief that God was the author of the narrative, not the people. To live otherwise was to violate the very character of God.

The prophet Habakkuk put words to the war which raged within his own soul—the war between living out the story authored by God and demanding that God conform to his own understanding of who God is and how he works. Here was God's command to Habakkuk: "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told" (Habakkuk 1:5, NIV). Habakkuk's response: "LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known . . ." (Habakkuk 3:2, NIV).

The prophet Amos recorded God's harsh statements against those who found comfort in their well-thought-through analyses of "the day of the Lord." They found comfort, and thus control, in their own definition of God's character and plans. The people thought they could take that which is undefinable and define it for their own purposes.

Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light—pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness? (Amos 5:18-20, NIV)

God chose and is still choosing to display himself through the lives of individuals as well as communities. It is no accident that the vast majority of the scriptures are narratives of the faith. Furthermore, the texts that are not in narrative form are still born out of the particular cultural environment, and thus the cultural story, of their time. Our God speaks through narrative, for it most closely reflects who he is. Therefore, any attempt to explain or know God outside of our own narrative is to devote ourselves to a lesser god.

The Rest of the Story

Consider again the excruciating question of the fisherman: What truths about God, faith, providence, or sovereignty would speak to him as he spends the rest of his life asking the agonizing question of why he had not untied the rope before the first throw? The woman would be walking today if only he had had the presence of mind to unbind the rope. Is he somehow to carry the cause of her suffering?

We are quick to answer, "Of course not. God is sovereign, and thus if there is anyone to bear the cause, it is he." But this propositional statement is too quick, too neat. The fisherman was there; God was there. Both persons were present and both acted. Both were eternally involved in the narrative that unfolded and left the woman paralyzed.

If the fisherman is quick to dismiss his confusion and pain with a theological postulate, then he will do terrible harm to his soul. He was a crucial player in the story and will forever be most alive when he enters the reality of the drama. It should haunt him—not to death, however, but to life. This man will most closely represent God when he is willing to stay in the midst of the very hard questions of his participation in the event. He must claim vitality of his soul and not dismiss it with dogmatic statements concerning God's

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sovereignty which will only serve to anesthetize his soul. He must live the drama or kill his spirit. Systematic propositions will never touch that part of him that is in agony.

Nor will systematics speak meaningfully to any of us at the most poignant moments of our lives, whether those moments are tragic, boring, or celebratory. Certainly the propositions will inform what we believe to be true; but to live out that truth is a different matter altogether. To live as a believer is to live in an unordered story which speaks of God in a manner that will never be captured by logic. God will not allow it.

(Author's note: Conversations with Dan Allender and Andrew Olsen, as well as the teachings of Don Hudson and Al Andrews, encouraged my thoughts in the direction presented in this essay. I extend my appreciation to them.)



THE HIPNESS UNTO DEATH:

Søren Kierkegaard and David Letterman—
Ironic Apologists to Generation X

By Mark C. Miller

Copenhagen in the mid-1800s and late twentieth-century America would appear to have little in common. Separated by one hundred and fifty years, by language, an ocean, and inconceivable technological advances, it seems there would be precious few points of comparison. But people, irrespective of nationality, are people, and people comprise the forces that shape societies. Thus, these two cultures have had similar forces at work within them. I will describe the nature of these forces later, but for now I should note one thing: There was a nineteenth-century Dane who tried to address these forces, or issues, to his peers—but he may have been better understood had he spoken to 80 million pre-twenty-first century young Americans.

Søren Kierkegaard was, in the truest sense, a man ahead of his time. His approach to philosophy was dazzling and often confusing to his contemporaries. His first published work, *Either/Or*, was hailed not only as a new book but as a new *kind* of book. Frail, brilliant, and prolific, Kierkegaard used his sharp wit and considerable intellectual acumen to construct disarmingly persuasive arguments for the Christian faith. The manner in which he did this, however, was confounding to many. And while his roundabout style was not entirely elusive to his readers, it may well have been better grasped by another generation in another place.

Generation X is the name given by novelist Douglas Coupland to the Americans born between 1961 and 1981. A trillion-dollar debt is theirs to inherit, and Social Security is theirs to give but never receive. They feel alienated and disillusioned, and are disparaged by the baby boomers with whom they so often feel at war. Also known as baby busters, twentysomethings and thirteeners (they are the thirteenth generation raised under the U.S. flag), Xers will be the first generation in our history to not exceed their parents' standard of living. With more than half of them coming from divorced families, and with innumerable advertisements targeting their massive market demographic, they are cynical, wary, and apathetic. The American church, ensconced in its tried-and-true evangelism techniques, doesn't know what to do with them. Generation X, suspicious and indifferent, needs nothing.

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But Xers need the gospel like everyone else. And Søren Kierkegaard is the philosopher-evangelist to give it to them. I submit that if the church is to communicate meaningfully with Generation X, it must adopt the strategies employed and the convictions passionately held by Kierkegaard. This study will focus on the following issues: Kierkegaard's "aesthetic" and "ethical" categories, and their relationship to Xers' ambivalence; indirect communication, especially that which employs irony and paradox; the priority of doing over knowing; and true community through the appropriation of the true individual.

Commitment to Live Well

Kierkegaard committed himself to seeking out the best way to live. Ultimately, he found such a way in Christianity. But to communicate this discovery, which became his deepest desire, he needed first to show the bankruptcy of the two most prevailing modes of living in his native Copenhagen: the bourgeois life, which he eventually called the ethical, and the romantic life, or the aesthetic. He battled against these options and against the philosophy of Hegel, which, in Kierkegaard's eyes, systematized the bourgeois ethic: "He . . . came to see Hegelianism as an articulate codification of bourgeois ideals, as well as a powerful defense of those ideals. It had, therefore, to be penetrated and destroyed."¹

The bourgeois, ethical life—one of virtue, commitment to job, family, and society—was foisted upon Kierkegaard by his religious father. He knew this life experientially. Yet Kierkegaard also had tasted of the romantic life when he was freed from his family to study at the university. This too, proved unfulfilling, however: "In his own experience he discovered that the 'aesthetical' life, that is, a life lived for enjoyment, even though it were intellectual enjoyment, leads to despair, in fact is despair, even if the individual is not aware of it."²

For Kierkegaard, the choice is in fact no choice at all, because we lose our souls either way. Either we embrace the ethical life and lose ourselves in the crowd, ". . . not by evaporation in the infinite, but by being entirely finitized, by having become, instead of a self, a number, just one man more, one more repetition,"³ or we flee the crowd and pursue ourselves. This is the romantic life, and in it we lose our identity as we chase after enjoyable moments and events:

The point is that once concrete, passionate, and meaningful actions have been transformed, emptied of meaning, and remain only as caricatures of themselves. When this happens, life becomes theater. . . . What these [events] have in common is the expression of behavior which lacks the meaning of inwardness, form without content. . . . The effect can only be as Kierkegaard says, a dispirited cynicism and a vague longing for something genuine.⁴

- 1 Douglas Mullen, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy* (New York: Mentor, 1981), 24.
- 2 Walter Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1942), 92.
- 3 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 166.
- 4 Mullen, 88.

Cynicism and a longing for the genuine are precisely what are encountered in Generation X. Thirteeners are an audience for Kierkegaard because they have assumed a cynical posture in both their recreation and vocation. Furthermore, they experience tremendous ambivalence: They would not mind being a cog in the bourgeois wheel of life because, first, many of them have never experienced the familial stability that would have resulted from an “ethical” commitment; and second, there is not available to them the career opportunity that existed for their parents. On the other hand, they see the consumeristic legacy that bourgeois boomers have left for them, and they want no part in perpetuating it. They would rather, in the tradition of the romantics, drop out and do their own thing. In a sense, they want both options. Kierkegaard prescribes neither.

It is easy to see why Xers, like the Copenhagen bourgeois, would find their identity in their work. Often growing up with both parents working, they have been on their own, and work gives them a measure of independence. In fact, high school students of the 1980s and '90s are working longer hours for pay than any previous generation in American history.⁵ And with the way things are developing economically, they will be struggling to keep up for years to come: “When you marry, you and your spouse will both work—not for boomerish self-fulfillment but because you need to just to make ends meet.”⁶

While Generation X works hard, they have felt deeply the sting of their careerist elders’ absence and lack of involvement. So while they nibble at the hook of the bourgeois life style, they are not so famished that they will swallow it whole; thirteeners are more interested in relationships than careers. Janet Bernardi, a Christian Xer, says:

The truth of the matter is that we started in the direction the boomers pointed and quickly saw that it was pointless. We Xers are reluctant to embark on the same path as the generation before us. Career is a yuppie notion. Before careers came into vogue, people worked simply to support their families, not to gain their life’s fulfillment. They had more free time, and they raised their own children.⁷

Bernardi says elsewhere: “What we do need and want is a cohesive family unit!”⁸

X Hedonism

No, Xers more often lose themselves in hedonism more than responsibility. “As they shield their eyes with . . . sunglasses, today’s teens and twentysomethings present to boomer eyes a splintered image of brassy looks and smooth manner . . . of kids more comfortable shopping or playing than working or studying.”⁹

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5 Karen Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X* (New York: Lexington, 1995), 41.

6 Neil Howe and William Strauss, “The New Generation Gap,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 1992), 67-89.

7 William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi, *A Generation Alone* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 19.

8 Mahedy and Bernardi, 19.

9 Howe and Strauss, 74.

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This is an image of young people just getting by, living distractedly and disjointedly so that they only have to face the reality they choose. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard wags a finger at those who would refuse to become the people they were meant to be: “. . . he will seek forgetfulness in sensuality, perhaps in debauchery, in desperation he wants to return to immediacy, but constantly with consciousness of the self, which he does not want to have.”¹⁰

Kierkegaard wants to arouse a sense of self in the good, in God. But Xers, in their sensuality, forget who God is. What’s more, if they suspect you’re going to tell them about God or their need for him, they hear a sales pitch coming. They have been a target market for too long. They will not listen. If they are to hear the gospel, they must be told subversively, and not know what they are hearing until it is too late.

This is precisely the manner in which Kierkegaard communicated with his readers. In order to challenge Denmark’s concept of Christianity, he needed to maneuver around the wall rather than try to break his way through it. It was, after all, a “Christian” country populated with “Christian” citizens. He went about his task, particularly in his pseudonymous works, by employing indirect communication. He would engage his reader by speaking about things of interest to him or her, and would eventually steer the argument around to Christianity. Once arrived at this topic, however, he would speak quite directly. Kierkegaard considered himself a poet to the end of his days, and a poet uses language to entice, not to explain.

As a poet and subversive communicator, Kierkegaard jettisoned religious language so that he might more effectively talk about religious matters. This is what is needed among Thirteeners, because “what once worked in evangelism and discipleship is failing with large numbers of Xers. ‘In terms of evangelicalism, we have a generation coming up that doesn’t speak the same language . . . doesn’t have the same needs, and isn’t looking to Christianity to answer their spiritual concerns,’” says researcher George Barna.¹¹

Kierkegaard often addressed an issue that was of concern to his readers, the philosophical question: how is it possible for us to know the truth? In his discussions, he usually avoided the names of God or Christ. However, “in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* the pseudonymous author . . . states specifically that his topic is the nature of Christianity. Yet here, too, the problem is stated in philosophical terms with an almost complete absence of a ‘theological’ vocabulary.”¹²

Kierkegaard’s intention was, frankly, to deceive. He lured his audience into hearing what he wanted to talk about, the truth of the gospel. Kierkegaard deepened their engagement by assuming

10 Kierkegaard, 199.

11 Andres Tápia.

12 Kenneth Hamilton, *The Promise of Kierkegaard* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1969), 45.

points of view he did not hold, then dialoging with himself and his reader through his pseudonymous authors. His method of indirect communication serves as a powerful context in which to talk about Christianity with Generation X. “George Barna suggests that churches focus on Socratic teaching rather than the didactic style of preaching typical among evangelicals. ‘Don’t tell them what to believe but rather create a discussion with provocative questions that will engage them.’”¹³

Employing Irony

If churches focus on Socrates, they will be turning toward Kierkegaard’s mentor. It was from the Greek philosopher that Kierkegaard acquired one of his most powerful tools in indirect communication: irony. Irony was an object of substantial reflection in Kierkegaard’s mind before his conversion (he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the topic), but after he came to know God in a new way, he used it to keep off balance those who would observe Christianity from a distance.

To speak ironically is to intend something different from the words used. It is to be detached from the words’ meanings, while at the same time assuming your meaning is understood. Irony is a kind of hidden communication, because one can say so strenuously the opposite of what one intends to be heard. So Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, could in several hundred pages give himself over to speaking in the best possible light from two perspectives which he entirely repudiated.

There is not only ironic speech, however, but the ironic way of living, which was embraced by the romantics of Copenhagen:

Irony is the detachment, the removing of oneself, and thus the freedom which comes from being explicitly self-conscious, uncommitted, and uninvolved in ordinary human purposes. The “ironist” stands back, watches, comments upon, and evaluates situations, never truly participating or getting involved himself.¹⁴

It was this ironic posture that Kierkegaard tried to trip up. He used irony to disarm the ironic way of living.

Kierkegaard’s use of Socratic irony was complicated, but thorough. I mentioned earlier that his indirect way of communicating was confounding to many. One reason for this was that in order to defeat the ironist’s stance, he needed first to create in his reader an ironic posture. That is, it was necessary for the reader to be detached from his own life in order for him to hear Kierkegaard’s suggestion that it was unsatisfactory. More confusing still, Kierkegaard would then communicate ironically with the reader by detaching himself from his own words. He then was able to speak

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13 Tápia.

14 Mullen, 18.

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the language of his reader. "He will be more poetic than any Young German. He will be more Hegelian than any professor of philosophy. He will be more upright than any parson, more exploitive than any Don Juan."¹⁵

One is reminded of the apostle Paul's frenzy in making himself like a slave, a Jew, a person under the law, a person not under the law, all in an effort to win them to Christ. Kierkegaard had a similar mission. And in order to achieve his goal, he needed to obtain "mastered irony": ". . . the insight and courage to suspend or temporarily put aside your cherished commitments in order to objectively assess them as if they were not yours. . . . One must be able to be ironic and committed at the same time."¹⁶ If what an ironist enjoys most is his sense of superiority in life, then his irony may be fully developed, but unmastered. He can detach himself from life, but not from himself. He is a cynic. And irony and cynicism are blood brothers among Xers.

Irony has been around for centuries (recall Socrates' quip that he was not a teacher and had nothing to say), but Generation X has commandeered it and speaks it as their native tongue. Why do Xers find David Letterman (a boomer, granted) so funny? Not because he tells great jokes, but because he mocks his own jokes. He stands outside himself and says, in effect, that the whole idea of his show is inane, and his entire twentysomething audience agrees—and laughs.

Xers—at least older Xers—who find Beavis and Butthead funny do so not because they like vulgar humor, but because they can see these stupid kids in the same detached manner as the characters themselves do. But Xers' irony is unmastered. They are cynics. Their cynicism is betrayed by the fact that while they think they can glide through life as untouchables, they cannot view themselves in the same detached way they view their world. Speaking about Xers' favorite pastime, television, Johns Hopkins professor Mark Miller states:

Contrary to the assumption both of its highbrow detractors and its self-conscious devotees, TV is not an expression "of the people," not "vulgar" in any traditional sense, but an effective corporate instrument, whose sole purpose . . . is to sell you to the advertisers; and it does so, in part, precisely through the very irony which some now celebrate as the proof of mass immunity.¹⁷

Xers are not immune, although they think they are. It is their superior air of detachment from the world that betrays the second proof of their ironic cynicism: remaining lofty and attached to nothing, they can commit to nothing.

It is the supreme, unyielding commitment to God that Kierkegaard wants his audience to embrace. If he stopped with

15 Mullen, 39.

16 Mullen, 38.

17 Mark Miller, *Boxed In* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 24.

irony, he would be withholding water from the man to whom he had given a salted snack. We cannot be ironic with God. As Mullen says, “One cannot take a position of ironic detachment concerning that to which one is related absolutely.”¹⁸ This is where mastered irony is necessary: one views oneself objectively, while committing to God steadfastly. With Kierkegaard’s works of direct communication, such as *The Works of Love* and *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, he finished what he started with his “aesthetical” works. He compelled his reader to keep an open mind through irony, then told the rest of the story of the gospel directly. This is the kind of evangelism for which Generation X is desperate.

Clearly, Kierkegaard believes there is truth to be known. He writes, in *The Works of Love*: “. . . one can be deceived in believing what is untrue, but on the other hand, one is also deceived in not believing what is true.”¹⁹ But for Kierkegaard, there is something to be done with truth more than to be known about truth. He writes in his *Journals*:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know. . . . The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.²⁰

What is to be done is to live by faith. This has more to do with action than belief. But faith begins with resignation, and that is both difficult and necessary. Kierkegaard explains in *Fear and Trembling*: “The infinite resignation is the last stage prior to faith, so that one who has not made this movement has not faith; for only in . . . resignation . . . can there be any question of grasping existence by virtue of faith.”²¹

The Enigmatic Dane

Kierkegaard is an enigma. He penned thousands of pages to convince readers that one cannot be convinced intellectually about Christianity. One has reason to believe, but one cannot appeal to reason in order to believe. Thus one is thrown into paradox, forced to reckon with the reality of Christ as God and man simultaneously. We cannot control what we believe, and yet, paradoxically, there is an element of choice in what we believe. The question is: Will you choose to take the leap into resignation leading to faith, or will you not? Kierkegaard eviscerates any objection to Christianity on intellectual grounds. That is not the issue, he says; rather, “It is so difficult to believe . . . because it is so difficult to obey.”²²

Xers dislike this explanation because they, like the rest of us, are sinners. Yet their hearts resonate with Kierkegaard’s emphasis on doing over knowing. While modernism—and with it the assump-

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18 Mullen, 145.

19 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 23.

20 Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1938), 4-5.

21 Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart* . . . , 125.

22 Lowrie, 86.

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tion that knowledge is certain—has lost its footing in this past century, X is the first generation to be raised in the postmodern era. Modernism still has its foot in the door, however, especially in American churches. It is seen in preaching and apologetics that continue to give weighty importance to reason. “To know Generation X, it is important to understand two competing paradigms—one exemplified by the apologetic style of Josh McDowell’s book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, the other by MTV.”²³

It’s not that Xers prefer a hip presentation to a sound argument; they just want to know what changes lives. What kind of rational argument can convince one of the truth of a mystery? But show how the mystery has changed you, and Xers want to know what happened. They eschew the boomer churches’ six steps towards better living and agree with Kierkegaard: there are no precise steps to follow. There is only the action of following Christ.

Relationships

There is one final category to consider: the relationship between the individual and the neighbor, and what this means for community. Kierkegaard constantly addressed in his writings “that solitary individual.” He disparaged the crowd, the mass, the herd. His objective was to bring the individual before God, where he would stand naked and alone. To truly understand what it meant to be an individual, and to walk in the freedom of that understanding, was Kierkegaard’s desire for his reader.

What, then, of the community? Here I fear Kierkegaard has been often misunderstood. The community which is formed when individuals “will one thing”—the Good, God—is radically different from the mass mentality he railed against, for, “. . . all clannishness is the enemy of universal humanity.”²⁴

Kierkegaard believed that when one stood before God as an individual, he would love his neighbor, and they would be bound together. “But to will only one thing, genuinely to will the Good, as an individual, to will to hold fast to God, which things each person without exception is capable of doing, this is what unites.”²⁵ We are united when we seek God wholeheartedly. When we do not submit to one another, when we esteem ourselves, we do not “will the Good” and community suffers. But “Love seeks not its own. For the true lover does not love his own individuality. He rather loves each human being according to the other’s individuality.”²⁶

Generation X needs community desperately. They are a fragmented, isolated group. But not any collection of people will suffice; like Kierkegaard, they are wary of the herd, any herd: “Generation X sees the Church as an institution like all others, and Generation X does not trust institutions.”²⁷ The family is an institution, and

- 23 Tápiá.
- 24 Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart* . . . , 206.
- 25 *Purity of Heart* . . . , 206.
- 26 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 251-2.
- 27 Mahedy and Bernardi, 137.

most Xers' families were broken when someone loved himself or herself too much as an individual. What Xers desire are groups of people that love the individual in one another. "Restoration of community is the primary need for Generation X."²⁸

Conclusion

Xers may appear to be a distracted generation, but I believe they have a firmer grasp than did their parents of what they truly want: family, relationship, transcendence. They have seen the prosperity of the boomers, and while they would like a bigger piece of the pie, for the most part they recognize the bankruptcy of accumulation for its own sake. It is quite possible that the denial of the wealth they desire may be the very thing that focuses their eyes on God and relationships, and they will seek fulfillment outside materialism. They won't be able to look at their BMWs and say, "Maybe all there is to life is another car." If they choose to seek the Good and will one thing, they will realize that to do so is not as easy a prescription as it sounds: anything other than the God of the Bible, even if it looks good or impressive, is the wrong thing.

Kierkegaard has these words for Generation X:

For, as it is said, all ways lead to the Good, when a man in truth only wills one thing. . . . But there is danger that the lover . . . may swerve out of the true course and aim perhaps for the impressive instead of being led to the Good. . . . [O]ne can bid for a woman's favor by willing something when it is merely impressive. This can flatter the girl's pride and she can repay it with her adoration. But God in heaven is not as a young girl's folly. He does not reward the impressive with admiration. The reward of the good man is to be allowed to worship in truth.²⁹

May Generation X will one thing only, and may the church help it stay on the true course.

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28 Mahedy and Bernardi, 82.

29 Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart . . .*, 67.

S T U D I E S

If we are going to live well—if we are going to live sacred lives—then we must have sacred places that bid us come back again and again.

TO FIND A PLACE

Sacred Living in a Secular World

By Don Hudson

It is no secret that most of us live hectic, frenzied lives. One writer has said that we live lives of “quiet desperation.” But as people living in a postmodern culture, instead I would say that we live lives of frenzied desperation. As a culture, our complaints have become so commonplace that they have slipped into surrealistic clichés. “Life is so very complicated—I wish we could live more simply.” “My grandparents never lived with this kind of stress—I want to go back and live the way they did.” “I need to slow down but I just can’t.” If we took the time to think about it, most of us would have to admit that we live very differently from what we want or dream.

Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of our postmodern world is that we have more capacity for communication than at any other time in the history of humanity—and yet, there is a widespread feeling of disconnection. We are preoccupied with distractions while at the same time being imbued with a stark feeling of loneliness. We are surrounded with satellite television, radio, e-mail, computer networking, fax machines, and of course the mother of all beasts, the Internet. There is a profusion of data but very little knowledge that connects with people. There is a deluge of information but very little wisdom that helps us live skillfully.

Please don’t misunderstand: I am not a closet Luddite decrying the evils of the Information Age. We live in an exciting age, with technological developments that are improving our lives and that can carry the Christian message into phenomenal arenas. However, the Information Age appears to accelerate the world we live in—and we are in a dead heat to speed up our lives. We end up living similar to the way we buy computers and modems—the faster the better. Time has become one of the most dreaded enemies of the twentieth century. We waste it, we kill it, we endure it, we hasten it, we spend it. If you are in any way like me, then you too realize how rarely you *enjoy* time.

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A few weeks ago, I was standing in line at a bagel shop and saw a dear friend whom I rarely have the time to see. (Once again our schedules dictate our distance.) He and I were both talking about how busy and complicated our lives had become in the last few years. And not all of our conversation was postmodern whining. As we discussed the madness of our lives, we also thanked that we had vocations that we thoroughly enjoy. Then we moved to one of those questions that will never be answered: “How could we make our lives more simple?” I gave my usual response. “I hope my busyness is temporary. Once my dissertation is over, then . . .,” I yammered on. Somehow every time I say this I know I’m returning to one of my favorite countries, the land of wishful thinking.

My friend then piped up and said that his wife was reading a new best-selling book on living more simply. “Great book,” he said, “if you are independently wealthy, live in the country, don’t have kids, and don’t want to accomplish anything significant for other people.” Being a trained counselor I noted a touch of sarcasm. However, being a card-carrying cynic I joined in with him and burned the book in intellectual effigy right there in the bagel shop. I understand the book really is a good book, but to date I’ve been too busy to read it.

After my friend and I finished our conversation on the simple life, we parted. I drove to work thinking about sacred place—that’s right, sacred place. More specifically, I began to think of a particular sacred place in my own life. In my mind I went back to a stately willow tree standing at the corner of my grandparents’ farm in east Tennessee. As a young boy, I lived with my mother and sister on this farm for just a few years.

During my time there I would spend many days playing in the barn, fishing in the pond, or scavenging in the woods. On other days I would spend long moments under the willow tree looking out over the farm. I could sit under the tree, lean up against the huge, smooth trunk, and look out between the hanging willow branches. To this day I fondly recall an occasional summer breeze gently sweeping the branches aside as if God were parting the curtain of my personal tabernacle. That place beneath the tree became for me a sanctuary—a holy of holies where, even as a young boy, I found myself returning again and again to think about my life.

That tree was, and still is today, one of my sacred places—my *sanctum sanctorum*. Simply put, it was a sacred place for me because I met God there under that tree, and God met me. Though I have not been back to that tree in almost thirty years, I remembered my willow tree while I was driving to work in my car that day, and in so doing I returned to a sacred place. Remem-

bering my willow tree and thinking of that sacred place was an answer to my question, “How can I live a more simple life?”

Perhaps a better question would be, “How do I live a sacred life?” If we are going to live well—if we are going to live sacred lives—then we must have sacred places that bid us come back again and again.

Growing up in my church, I was taught that secular living was drinking alcohol, sporting long hair (over the ears), wearing jeans to church, or associating with someone who associated with someone else who had associated with Billy Graham thirty years ago. (I remember passionate sermons comprised entirely of these four points. Back then I would listen with great confusion because I knew this particular pastor consumed loads of soft drinks, sported a very angry crewcut, wore atrocious polyester suits, and ministered to a congregation where one-third of the members associated with the tobacco industry since they were tobacco farmers. Hypocrisy lurks behind every legalism.)

I have long gotten over my youthful agreement with such teachings and the later guilt over my disagreement. Yet even back then, I was troubled with this small definition of sacred living. Was there not more to the Christian life than an obsessive focus on subcultural trivialities? Was there not more to secular living and thus, in opposition, more to sacred living? I believe so. The purpose of this essay is to talk about one element of living well, or living sacredly—not all aspects. (A note of caution: though I believe that sacred place is an important, even necessary component of the Christian life, it is not the only or the most important component. I want to speak of sacred place because of what the scriptures say about it and because of what it can bring to our hectic, postmodern lives.)

In the beginning I confronted the idea of sacred place—or rather sacred place encountered me—in a class devoted to the study of ancient Israelite worship. From that moment on, the concept of sacred place has aroused my interest and captured my imagination. Something about sacred place seemed to me to be meaningful and therefore irresistibly compelling.

We will begin this study by exploring the theory of sacred place, relying heavily upon one of the most important books from this century, *The Sacred and the Profane* by Mircea Eliade.¹ In the first section, I will try to answer the question, “What is sacred place?” This invokes the question, “What does sacred place bring to my life?” In the next section, we will look at the concept of sacred space as it occurs in the book of Genesis. We will ask, in other words, “Does God say anything about sacred place—and if so, what does he say?” In the last major section of this essay we will look at sacred space in the worship of ancient Israel. In essence, the

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1 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).

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question here is, “Does sacred place have anything to do with our worship of God?” The conclusion will return us to a previous question: “What will sacred place bring to my secular world?”*

The Reality of Sacred Space

Mircea Eliade, in *The Sacred and Profane*, begins his discussion of sacred place as it relates to the idea of the “holy” in Rudolph Otto’s work, *Das Heilige (The Holy)*.² Eliade agrees with Otto that the sacred is not some ethereal abstraction that has very little to do with our everyday lives but is instead a personal “power” coming forth from God. This “awesome power” brings “mystery and majesty” to our secular lives, thus having the potential to make them sacred. The Holy One, that is, the infinite presence of the “wholly other,” encounters the finite human with the sacred and thus brings transcendence to the human world. In other words, when we think of the sacred, we cannot do so without thinking of God as one who is wholly other than we are; rather he chooses to break through to our mundane worlds—to the regular, everydayness of life, and to reveal himself to us.

In keeping with this thinking, sacred place is a place where God meets us. (I would guess that even now as you are reading this, you are thinking of places where God has broken through and met you. You most likely have a place or places in mind; these are your sacred places.) Furthermore, sacred place consists of three very different but important realities: it is a place that is set apart from all the other places in the world; it is a place where we meet God and he meets us; and it is place that evokes our communion and worship. In summary then, sacred place can be any disrupted, set-apart place that calls us to worship and provides a context where we can connect with God.

In his chapter on “Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred,” Eliade presents the three building blocks of every sacred place: disruption, orientation, and communication. I highlight these categories here not only because they are important for understanding sacred place, but also because they are categories we will see again in the book of Genesis and later as we study Israelite worship. Furthermore, these concepts proceed developmentally from one point to the other: the disruption of God leads to orient ourselves in a chaotic (profane) world and then to communicate with our God.

* Notice the method of study I am setting forth. First, I begin with a way of thinking—a methodology, categories, etc. from a great thinker. Second, I take his or her thinking to the scriptures and let the new way of thinking inform the text and the text inform the new way of thinking. In other words, in this case, I utilize Eliade’s insights (I see the text through his eyes) to read the biblical text. Then I attempt to gain new insights into the text while at the same time allowing the text to critique Eliade. Third, I bring my life to Eliade’s concepts and to the reading of scripture in an endeavor to answer the question, “Does sacred place have anything to say to me, to my life, and to my relationships with God, family, friends, and acquaintances?”

2 Eliade, *op. cit.*, 8-10.

Difference that Brings Disruption

Sacred space brings beauty and order to our lives, but it always begins with difference. Recall my memory of the willow tree. Most days I would play in the barn, or fish in the pond, or gallivant through the woods. But neither the barn, the pond, nor the woods ever became a sacred place for me. I recall them with great fondness, but there is no great “difference” between the three.

However, when I compare one of the three with the willow tree, it becomes immediately clear there is no comparison. The willow tree is sacred. I played in the barn, but I connected with God under the willow tree. There were a number of times I believe God met me there in one of the most confusing times in my life. Many days I thought of the willow branches as the wings of God, and the breeze to be the touch of his beguiling but elusive presence.

Sacred place then, in Eliade’s thinking, “breaks upon” a profane world—a world in which there is no difference. As opposed to so much of modern or new age thinking, a sacred place is a place of disruption and difference. (As we shall see later, it was the redemptive violence of God that broke into a chaotic, profane world in the beginning, and in this way he created the world.) Profane space or chaotic space would be a world where there are no differences, a world where all place is the same—where one place is no more significant than another. Creation without difference would be a creation without sacred place. The whole world then would be profane space, which of course is a world of chaos, confusion, and relativity.

Let me put it this way: Think of a world with no differences—no female to the male; no African-American to the Caucasian; no eastern way of thinking to challenge our western thinking; no Episcopalian to the Baptist, and so on. In fact, those who dream of a world of no differences are those who dream of a profane world: racists, fascists, nationalists, and sexists. Thus, throughout history, sameness without difference has been the destruction of national, social, and individual boundaries.

Throughout history, difference or differences have intrigued and terrified humanity. To be in the presence of something or someone different evokes awe and wonder. When we experience difference, we are stopped for a moment and we gaze or we think. I will never forget the first time I sat under the willow tree. But something more sinister happens at the same time: difference threatens my world, my life, my thinking. Difference makes me think of someone other than myself. What am I to do in the presence of the wholly other? That is why God is so terrifying: when he breaks through to us, he evokes awe and wonder—but he also evokes loss, the loss of a world defined merely by myself and for myself.

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Sacred place is a disruption of difference, a place set apart from other places, the intrusion of God into my mundane world. Out of the everyday sameness of life come a few moments where God meets us, and we call those places of meeting sacred. It is the disruption of chaos or sameness that brings sacred place into being.

Orientation that Brings Stability

Without sacred places in a world of relativity and sameness, we are left with no way of orienting ourselves. Another way of saying this is that in our postmodern culture individuals look to themselves to orient their worlds. Yet we need more than ourselves to bring meaning to our worlds; we are in need of a God who will meet us and guide us along the way.

Think of your own sacred places. Whenever I have taught on this topic, I have been amazed by the response to my question, “What are your sacred places?” I have heard everything from being alone in a car, to spending time in a certain place in the desert, a barn, or a field, to a particular table in a coffee shop. Countless women have said that one of their sacred places is the bathtub because that is the one place they can relax, get away, and meditate.

Now think of what your sacred places bring to your life. Do you not return either in memory or in reality to make sense of our world? To go there, reflect, and try to answer the good questions? To have a place where you can meet God and move on from there? There are many days when I cannot wait to get back to my sacred place, for it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted; it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation. “When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany (revelation of God), there is not only a break in the homogeneity (sameness) of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality. . . .”³

Eliade reminds us that we yearn for sacred place so we can find a fixed point in an otherwise relative world. Humanity in this unsafe world is continually in danger of becoming awash in a sea of chaotic relativity, which would once again mean the loss of the self because there exists no contradistinction between selves. Our sacred places function as a fixed reference point, a tangible north star to navigate our way through our secular worlds. And by giving us a fixed reference point, sacred place makes sense of our lives.

Communication that Brings Connection

Sacred places bring difference and orientation to our lives. In this final concept we need to understand the *goal* of orienting our lives around the sacred: communication with God. No doubt, sacred

3 Eliade, *op. cit.*, 21.

space exists for the primary purpose of placing us in communion with the sacred world. Because we live in a secular world, because we no longer live in the garden, we experience great alienation, and it is here that sacred place offers the potential avenue to bridge the gap between the secular and the sacred.

Differentiation affords the opportunity to define who we are in the presence of God and other people, to distinguish ourselves in the midst of sameness. Orientation provides a place to move out of and a north star to head for. To this day I draw encouragement by remembering the willow tree, because it was there that God met me. When God is most silent in my life, remembering the place beneath the tree gives me the hope that he will meet me again.

As a result of the fall we no longer live in a sacred world, and so we are disconnected from God and those with whom we are in relationship. One of the great sins of the secular world is alienation or disconnection. Sacred place can be an avenue to repair alienated relationship; it evokes speech and conversation where there once was only a deafening silence and confusion. This is the irony of sacred place. In the end, it is not about place but relationship. Difference, orientation, and communication are essential categories in sacred space to bring us into relationship with God and others. In the most basic terms, sacred place is the context for relationship. Our sacred places are places where we commune with God, where we connect with the sacred world.

Sacred Space in Genesis

Let's turn now to the book of Genesis to observe these three building blocks under the categories of sacred place.

In the first place, Genesis begins with God speaking into the chaos of the profane world—the formlessness, the meaninglessness, the darkness, the omnipresent profane space.* Creation does not begin with the god on his “princely throne” as in the Akkadian creation epic or the dismembering violence of the Babylonian creation account, *Enuma Elish*.⁴ God's spoken word encounters the wasteland of the world to disrupt chaos and bring beauty and order from that chaos. God speaking into the chaos was a fearsome intrusion of word into silence. There is a violent disruption of God's word, but it is a disruption for the sake of order and beauty. In the beginning was the word, and this word is a disruption; it creates a sacred world out of a profane world.

* This “speaking” of God in Genesis 1: 3, 5-6, 8-11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28-29 is the most radical element of the creation story, especially as we compare it to other ancient stories of creation. In most of the other creation stories, the god or gods war, destroy, dismember, rage, and masturbate the world into existence. Their frenzied, violent creation is radically different from the Genesis creation story.

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4 James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), vol. 1, 1-5 and vol. 2, 31-40.

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It is important to realize that the real problem of creation in the Genesis creation story is the contest between sacred and profane space. In other ancient creation stories, the obstacles are relational—the gods rage and war against one another. In Genesis, the Divine Warrior wars not against other gods but against the profane world that is “formless and void.” It is impossible to have relationship in a profane world. The intrusion of God into profane space is required before relationship can exist.

The creation account of Genesis 1 is a creation of disruption and difference. In Genesis 1:3-5 God speaks light into darkness. Then in verses 6-8, God speaks the “dome” into existence, which once again is an act of separation of the waters from the waters. In verses 9-10 the waters are again gathered together and divided by the new dry land. Verses 14-17 portray God as creating the “greater and the lesser” lights to separate the day from the night. In verses 20-21 the creatures created on the fifth day are classified separately according to their environments—the swarming creatures in the sea and the flying creatures in the sky. The creatures in verses 24-25 are to bring forth according to their kind, and they are divided into wild animals, domestic animals, and crawling creatures. The final division in this creation story, which is the pinnacle, tells us that humanity was created in God’s image, but that image is once again an image of difference. Humanity is made in the image of God, and that image is both male *and* female (verses 26-28).

We can observe disruption and difference in comparing and contrasting the differences between the two stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. In 1:1-2:4 God is distantly involved in the creative activity by merely speaking creation into existence. In the second creation story (2:4b-25), God is intimately involved in creating humanity: he fashioned man out of the earth (7), he breathed life into man (7), and he planted a garden in Eden (8).*

The creation of the world, the making of sacred place, proceeds by the disruption of God’s word, which begins with the difference between light and darkness and ends with the ultimate difference—the female and the male made in the image of God.

The competing ideas of sameness and difference are prevalent throughout the Genesis creation account. This can be seen most clearly in man’s first words affirming oneness or sameness: “This is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh” (2:23). But in the very next verse God requires that the man leave his mother and father (2:24) and cling to his wife so that they “become one flesh.” So which is

* This difference, of course, has been the source of contention for critics for generations. According to them, difference indicates disunity rather complementary prisms through which to view multitudinous dimensions of the Creator. U. Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis*, Vol.1 (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1961), 110-11.

true? Are male and female the same, and are God and humanity the same? Or are male and female, God and humanity, different?

Of course the answer to both is yes—but it is this contrast of difference and sameness that has been humanity’s dilemma since the beginning of time. Most of our social and psychological problems stem from this dilemma of sameness and difference. A few examples come to mind: codependency is the focus on sameness to the exclusion of difference; and schizophrenia is a radical focus on difference to the exclusion of sameness. Please don’t mistake my meaning: I’m not saying that this is the problem in its entirety, or that this will solve the problems in their entirety. But it is interesting to note that these universal concepts are lived out in many arenas.

I have noted how God spoke the word and in so doing established sacred space and banished the chaos of profane space. We see the absolute opposite of this redemptive speaking in Genesis 3. The first man, created in God’s very image, gloriously named all the animals (2:19) and his mate (2: 23). The poetry of Genesis 2:23 is particularly beautiful because it expresses in relational terms the intimate connectedness of the different sexes. However, in Genesis 3:1-7, the serpent tempts the woman not by explicitly lying to her but by enticing her to profane the tree which God had set apart “in the middle of the garden.”

I say the serpent is “not explicitly lying” because humanity did not die immediately, the man and woman did experience the knowledge of good and evil, and their eyes were opened just as the serpent had prophesied. Of course, I am fully aware of 2 Corinthians 11:3, “But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning. . . .” The question though must be asked as to how the serpent deceived Eve by his “cunning.” Is it not that the serpent representing primeval chaos used truth to entice humanity to profane that which the Lord God had set apart, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? The temptation then was more a seduction to cross the boundaries of the sacred, which would in turn imbue existence with profane space.

Profane space—that is, the fall of humanity—did not enter solely by the deception of Eve, as much as the church has taught this. Rather it also entered through the silence of Adam, with his refusal to speak into the chaos of that particular moment. In the ancient near east, a serpent typically represented deceit, confusion, and chaos. The serpent reintroduces chaos into the sacred world and

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THE MALE MADE
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* “The statement in verse 27 (Ch.1) is not an easy one. But it is worth noting that humankind is spoken of as *singular* (‘he created him’) and *plural* (‘he created them’). This peculiar formula makes an important affirmation. On the one hand, humankind is a single entity. But on the other hand, humankind is community, male and female.” Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 33-34.

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Adam, though he was there in the conversation (“and she gave the fruit to her husband, *who was with her*”), fails to speak. Therefore the fall began not with Eve’s deception but with the silence of the man which was the exact reversal of the Creator’s speaking into chaos to banish the profane space. At the point when the serpent interjected seduction and confusion, Adam had the opportunity to be “creative” in two ways, positive and negative. Adam could have been creative in the sense of speaking however he deemed necessary to counteract the serpent—to create *ex nihilo*—and to be creative, as his God was in speaking word as sacred space to expel the profane space incarnated by the serpent. The consequence of Adam’s determined lack of communication was the immediate loss of communion with his wife and his God. Silence ushered profane space back into the world.

Immediately after eating the fruit the eyes of the man and the woman were opened, and 3:7 states that “they knew they were naked.” Genesis 2:25 stipulates that before the fall the man and woman were naked but there was no shame in the difference of their nakedness. Now, as a result of this sin, difference leads to shame, which in turn leads to disorientation and silence. The man and woman hide their most private and unique anatomical distinctions with clothing (3:7), and they hide from the creator as he warmly seeks them (3:8-9). Shame as a result of profane space no longer allows the presence of relationship; silence is the consequence of silence. The human body and sexuality—which was the act of converging the otherness into oneness—was no longer viewed as sacred space. Humanity must then dismember and silence the bodies of others to remove difference.

No longer would the sacred exist in perfect form and without existential tension on this earth. And no longer would humanity have direct access to the world of the sacred. With the expulsion of humanity from the garden, from sacred space, came the loss of difference, orientation, and communication. Humanity thus lives within a world that co-mingles sacred and profane space. Thus, humanity is compelled to live in the midst of the ambiguity and the ambivalence it evokes. Sameness is worshiped, and difference as threat must be exterminated—hence, sexism, racism, and genocide. Orientation is stifling and something to be thrown off, or it is to be neurotically idolized in an attempt to refuse the chaos of life. And communication is both feared and championed: feared because humanity is not comfortable with presence or absence, so speech becomes silence or violence, and championed in such a way that leads wholly otherness exclusively toward the self.

And yet, humanity made in the image of God—humanity as sacred space—yearns for the recapturing of sacred place that once was theirs. Difference, orientation, and communication are divinely imparted truths that terrify humanity, but at the same time they

cannot be resisted. We yearn to bring sacredness to our hectic, alienated, secular lives.

Sacred Space in Ancient Israelite Worship

Israel as a community based the creation of the world on a profound understanding of sacred space as being foundational to the comprehension of themselves, their God, and their relationships. According to Genesis 3 and all subsequent narratives, humanity does not exist in perfect harmony with sacred space. God no longer “walks in the cool of the evening,” and so humanity must seek redemptive wholeness through other means than the direct presence that the garden afforded. Thus Israel’s writings and liturgies demonstrate the compelling need to return to the sacred space of bygone days.

The first category of worship relating to sacred space is that of the centralization of the worship. Centralization, or in other words, sacred space, was an ideal established in Deuteronomy 12 to establish the importance of the place where worship was to be practiced.⁵ Deuteronomy 12 was a forward-looking narrative that set down the conditions for establishing the place for worship. “These are the statutes and ordinances that you must diligently observe in the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you to occupy all the days that you live on the earth” (12:1).

Once the Israelites conquered the Canaanites and began to inhabit their land, they were initially, even before establishing their own particular sanctuary, to decimate and remove all the places the former inhabitants had set apart to worship their gods. These places of worship were on the mountains, on the hills, and under trees.⁶ The Israelites were to use extreme force in destroying these profane places from their very existence: “You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods. . . . Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out their name from their places.”

After the nation of Israel destroyed the profane places of worship they were then to establish their own place of worship. But this place was not just any place they would choose; the sacred place for worshiping their God would be one that he alone would choose. “But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there” (12:5).

Interestingly, as Israel has to seek the place of worship, God gives no indication as to where that place will be, or how they should determine the proper place. It is significant to note, though, that it must be a place that God will choose. This choosing of the sacred

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5 G. J. Wenham, “Deuteronomy and the Central Sanctuary,” *TB* 22 (1971), 103-18, and E. Nicholson, “The Centralization of the Cult in Deuteronomy,” *VT* 13 (1963), 380-89.

6 W. F. Albright, “The High Place in Ancient Palestine,” *VTS* 4, 242-58, and A. Biran, *Temples and High Places in Biblical Times* (Jerusalem: The Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology, 1981).

HUMANITY
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place by the deity was the norm in ancient history.* The Israelites must worship at the place where God's presence broke into the world to establish connection, communication, and relationship with his people. The sacred place was not an arbitrary decision left exclusively to humanity's understanding and discernment; this would not involve the role of God and hence could not be a place to reconnect to the sacred world.**

This fact, by the way, indicates that worship in the Israelites' conception was not mere symbolism; rather, God broke through in history. Furthermore, this sacred place was one where God would choose to place his name, indicating that his very presence would dwell among humanity but within severe limitations: his dwelling place on earth would be different from all places on the entire face of the earth. And as we know about the tabernacle and temple later on, God chooses to dwell in total separateness except for the day of atonement when the high priest entered his presence (Leviticus 16). "And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the LORD your God has blessed you" (12:7).

The sacred place is set apart by God for the purpose of Israel's worship and rejoicing. This picture is analogous to the garden when man and woman in perfect communion could enjoy the presence of God and thereby rejoice in it. "In all the undertakings" sounds strangely reminiscent of Genesis 1-2 when God promised blessing to all of humanity's endeavors. God will set apart a sacred place where the Israelites can relish their difference within community, orient themselves in worship and society, and communicate with their God as their parents did.

This establishing of the sacred place occurs only after God gives them rest: "When he gives you rest from your enemies all around you so that you live in safety, then you shall bring everything that I command you to the place that the LORD your God will choose" (12:10-11). Rest in the land, located around the centrality of the sacred place, is another essential motif that hearkens back to the creation account in Genesis. This concept of rest is symbolic and indicative of the harmony that only sacred space can offer east of Eden.

* "The choice of places where the cult might be practiced was not left to man's discretion. In such a place, the worshiper could meet his god; the place had to be indicated, therefore, by a manifestation of the god's presence or by his activity." Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, Vol. 2 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 276. See also Moshe Weinfeld, "Cult Centralization in Israel in the Light of a Neo-Babylonian Analogy," *JNES* 23 (1964), 202-12.

** Deuteronomy 12:8, "You shall not act as we are acting here today, all of us according to our own desires, for you have not come into the rest and the possession that the Lord your God is giving you," and "Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place you happen to see. But only at the place that the Lord will choose . . ." (12:13-14a).

The centralization of Deuteronomy 12 is replete with creation motifs which assume the prominence of sacred space. The Israelites immediately upon entering the land were to differentiate by obliterating the profane spaces and to centralize their worship oriented around the place that God would choose so that they might commune with the sacred world once again. God chose to confront the chaos of humanity by making a tangible, real place sacred so the community could orient themselves in order to have relationship and to repair broken relationships.

Sacrifice—A Second Component

Sacrifice is the second component that will illustrate the importance of sacred space in Israel's understanding and practice of the worship. The ancient practice of sacrifice is usually very odd to modern humanity, seeming bizarre and violent. To ancient humanity, though, the practice of sacrifice was central to their worship. Sacrifice was the "means of communication between the sacred and profane worlds through the mediation of a victim" and the "means of redressing equilibriums that have been upset."⁷ According to these statements, sacrifice was a reconnecting of the two worlds and a reorientation in a fragmented world through the act of dismembering a victim. With sacrifice there was communication through silencing, wholeness through dismembering, intactness through fragmentation, life through death.

To come to the tabernacle was a return to sacred space so that one could worship God through the forgiveness of sin. The worshiper's approach to the entrance of the tabernacle but exclusion from entering the tabernacle itself reminds us of humanity's inability to reenter the sacred garden. The worshiper continuously existed within the tension of sacred and profane space this side of the garden. Sacrifice expressed the many interconnections inherent in the act and objective of worship—God toward humanity, humanity toward God, humanity toward humanity, animal as mediator between humanity and God.

The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord; and Aaron's sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts (Deuteronomy 5-6).

This act of offering was a violent one indeed. We can imagine the blood being splattered against the altar and the entire offering being dismembered and then consumed in a funeral pyre that is "a pleasing odor to the Lord" (9). This dismembering of the sacred sacrifice was the symbolic but direct means for the reconnection of fragmented humanity.

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7 H. Hubert and M. Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, 1964. Note also Collins and Davies, *op. cit.*; N. B. Snaith, "Sacrifices in the Old Testament," *VT* 7 (1957), 308-17; W. O. E. Oesterley, *Sacrifices in Ancient Israel* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937); F. D. Kidner, "Sacrifice—Metaphors and Meaning," *TB* 33 (1982), 117-36.

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So it was for Israel, that if individuals entered a state incongruent with good relations with God, they had to undergo rites to restore them to a normative status; similarly, a person who wronged his neighbor or the nation itself needed to be subject to a ritual of restoration.⁸

The recovery of sacred space demanded an extremely high price; the creative order had to be fractured and segmented to provide for consummate intactness and redemption. Sacrifice as sacred space provided disruption and distinction indicating holiness and radical otherness, orientation as a tangible manner of forgiveness and existential guilt, and communication as a glorious reunion with the once distant God. Sacrifice symbolized the ambivalence of unity and disunity, wholeness and disorder, mercy and wrath, life and death.

Eliade has warned us of the modern tendency to live in a “desacrilized” world that thinks of sacred space as irrelevant or nonexistent. The results of profaning sacred space can be observed in both ancient and modern times. The nations outside of Israel and eventually Israel itself practiced the sacrifice of humans, which was a radical reversion of the overarching intention of sacred space.⁹ The very nadir of the Old Testament is the story of a Levite (set apart to render wholeness by sacrifice) dismembering his own wife in a grotesque ritual (Judges 19-20). The disembodiment of the concubine embodied the dissolution of society itself by an inward unraveling of a basic fiber of society—sacred space as protection of individual boundaries!

Searching for the Sacred

The profaning of sacred space by modern society is readily discerned on the news, in newspapers, in weekly news magazines, etc. Racism and sexism are typical embodiments of the melding of sacred space into profane space. Though modern man is radically different from his or her ancestors, we are nevertheless created in the image of the Sacred. To this day we are yet consumed with the eternal quest for the recovery of the sacred—for then and only then will there be difference *for* the other, orientation *for* stability, and communication *for* redemption, which is the essence of life itself.

What can make our lives more simple? What is it that can bring sacredness to our secular worlds? One of my answers is sacred place—that place that we set apart from other places, the place that brings order to our chaotic lives, the place where we meet God and he meets us. Like no other generation before us, we are compelled to find a place, a place that will be sacred.

8 Davies, *op. cit.*, 393.

9 Alberto R. W. Green, *The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975.)



THREE POETS “HAUNTED BY DREAMS OF ETERNITY”:

Gerard Manley Hopkins, R.S. Thomas, and
Rowan Williams

By Linda Mills Woolsey

Writing in the shadow of the Holocaust, Raissa Maritain called for poetry to “do penance . . . for it has no words for the reality of our time . . .”¹ (Suther 124). A quarter of a century later, R.S. Thomas declared, “. . . creatures of time and space as we all are, we are yet haunted by dreams of eternity and we have a conception of ourselves as arresting the flow of time”² (Anstey 112). Like Maritain, Thomas (born in 1913) is bitterly aware of human suffering, and, like her, seeks to reconcile dark realities with a personal sense of God’s presence. With Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), and Rowan Williams (born in 1950), Thomas creates a poetry in which attention to concrete moments catapults the reader into “dreams of eternity.”

Hopkins, Thomas, and Williams share not only a poetic, but also a priestly vocation—Hopkins was a Jesuit, Thomas and Williams, Anglicans. Their poetry is shaped by their experience of the landscape, people, and poetry of Wales, and is rooted in their shared Anglo-Catholic theological tradition. All three express the dogged persistence of faith in a secularized, industrialized, and fallen world. Their poetry captures the delight and agony of such a faith, wrestling with what Catherine of Siena called God’s “lover’s game” of hide and seek with the soul, and with the human tendency to create ruin in the midst of the world’s persistent beauty.

All three pay passionate attention to concrete experience and its metaphoric, incarnational possibilities. In “A Sort of a Song,” William Carlos Williams calls for a poetry of “No ideas / but in things” (lines 10-11) that works “through metaphor to reconcile / the people and the stones”

- 1 Judith D. Suther, *Raissa Maritain: Pilgrim, Poet, Exile* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 124.
- 2 R. S. Thomas, *R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, Ed. Sandra Anstey (Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press), 112.

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(lines 7-8). Such a reconciliation, Williams declares, “splits the rocks” (line 12) as the poet, paying close attention to “what is,” breaks through the surface of reality, discovering meaning or beauty. At the very least, this sort of poetry asks readers to be more fully conscious of their surroundings. But the poetry of the past two centuries has seldom stopped there.

Dreams of Eternity

In the nineteenth century, William Wordsworth, a nominal Anglican, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, a self-proclaimed atheist, both described experiences of spiritual presence. In “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth muses on the interaction between the landscape and human consciousness and its power to counteract the dulling forces of modern life. Wordsworth presents the possibility of seeing “into the life of things” (line 50) with an eye “made quiet” (line 48) by the harmony of the natural world and by a persistent inner joy. That quiet eye finds “presence” (line 95) at odds with the ordinary experience of the world as inanimate and mechanical. For Wordsworth, “a motion and a spirit” (line 101) moves through all things. In “A Defence of Poetry” Shelley defines the poet as one who “strips the veil of familiarity from the world”³ and declares that any true poet “participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one”⁴

Though neither Wordsworth nor Shelley expresses a particularly Christian or orthodox view of things, their “dreams of eternity” set the stage for Christian poets like Hopkins, Thomas, and Rowan Williams. Taking up where the Romantic “dream of eternity” leaves off, these poets explore the paradoxes of a world that both hides and reveals the “presence” and “eternity” they identify as God.

Poets—perhaps most particularly those poets, Christian or otherwise, who “see into the life of things”—remind us that we may experience the world as veil or icon. Material reality functions as a sort of veil when our habit of seeing its solid “thereness” precludes our seeing other possibilities in it. Yet, our physicists teach us that our perceptions are deceptive: solid stones are actually dancing configurations of sub-atomic particles. Thus, poets are not so crazy when they suggest that by truly paying attention to what is, we may see, even without the help of an electron microscope or computer imaging, the ordinary as extraordinary.

Then the veil becomes an icon—an image or picture that points to God’s presence. Poets show us that our world is much like one of those “magic eye” pictures—a multicolored page repeating designs composed of random-looking squiggles and splotches. Viewed in just the right way, the design we first see as mere pattern becomes a recognizable picture—a flower, a penguin, a mountain.

3 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 505.

4 Shelley, 483.

In a psychology project poster, one of my students gave directions for seeing the “hidden” design: “1. Stand close to the picture and focus [as if] you are viewing an object ‘behind’ the picture. 2. Slowly walk backwards, keeping your eye focused on a spot ‘behind’ the picture. 3. Don’t move your eyes until the hidden picture comes into focus.” As I read her directions, I was struck by how like the process of poetic seeing this is. To see truly, the writer (and reader) must first be open to the possibility of seeing the patterns of ordinary objects in new ways. Then, he or she must look intentionally and attentively at the object. The result—sometimes after a multitude of failures—is that breathtaking moment when seeing itself shifts, when the image imagined as “behind” the picture (but actually contained within it) suddenly appears.

In a recent essay, Douglas Burton-Christie sees the poet’s “undivided attention toward the shape and texture of our living world” as a reminder of incarnation, giving us a model for seeing God in the ordinary. “Too often,” Burton-Christie suggests, “. . . we assume that ‘seeing God’ requires us to pass entirely beyond the material world. Or that we must move into a space so radically interior that the living world disappears from view.” Christie reminds us that incarnation locates our “dream of eternity” *in* the reality before us. Thus, he suggests that “perhaps poetry is as necessary to our quest for God as prayer,” since “Seeing happens only when we risk relationship with the world.”⁵

The Risk of Relationship

Hopkins, Thomas, and Rowan Williams communicate “dreams of eternity” rooted in the risk of relationship rather than denying it. Like William Carlos Williams, they work to “reconcile the people and the stones” by transfiguring ordinary experience. Often, the result is what A.M. Allchin calls “a new attitude to this world, an attitude of contemplative and appreciative delight, rather than one of a compulsive desire to exploit and manipulate.”⁶ Hopkins, Thomas, and Rowan Williams embody this attitude as they seek to invoke what Hopkins called “the dearest freshness deep down things” (“God’s Grandeur,” line 10) in a poetry that is, in Thomas’s words, “eternity / wearing the green leaves of time” (“Prayer,” lines 9-10).

For them this must be done in the face of obstacles presented by Raissa Maritain’s “deathly shadow of our time.”⁷ Theirs is not a new problem. Even Wordsworth lamented “the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world” (“Tintern Abbey,” lines 40-41). For the Christian writer, the tension is increased by the apparent discrepancy between the inner experience of grace and the ruin that lies mixed with beauty all around us. In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, John Henry, Cardinal Newman wrote:

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5 Douglas Burton-Christie, “Learning to See: Epiphany in the Ordinary,” *Weavings* (November-December 1996), 6-16.

6 A.M. Allchin, *The Presence of the Past: The Dynamic of the Christian Tradition* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 124.

7 Suther, 125.

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The world seems simply to give the lie to that great truth, of which my whole being is so full; and its effect on me is . . . as confusing as if it denied that I am in existence myself. If I looked into a mirror, and did not see my face, I should have the sort of feeling which actually comes upon me, when I look into this living busy world and see no reflection of its Creator.⁸

Poets who share Newman's Christian faith often share this experience. In 1871, Gerard Manley Hopkins, writing to Robert Bridges about the plight of the working poor and the rise of communism said, "The more I look the more black and deservedly black the future looks . . ." Nearly a decade later he wrote to A.W. Baillie from Liverpool, "I am brought face to face with the deepest poverty and misery in my district. On this theme I could write much, but it would do no good."⁹

In "Welsh Landscape," R.S. Thomas declares, "To live in Wales is to be conscious / At dusk of the spilled blood / That went into the making of the wild sky . . ." (lines 1-3) and, in "The Island," Thomas shows God afflicting his people "with poverty and sickness / In return for centuries of hard work / and patience" and choosing "the best / Of them to be thrown back into the sea" (lines 12-13). "And that," the speaker declares, "was only on one island" (line 14).

Sometimes these poets confront the paradox of God's presence in the very places where humanity—and even the faithful—have apparently forsaken God. In a sermon entitled "Holy Ground," Rowan Williams reflects on a BBC documentary about the visions of children in Mejugorge, "a place where the church of God and the people of God have most singularly and dramatically betrayed Christ . . . in a place where God is not to be seen . . . [except] in the suffering and slaughtered victims of those who call themselves his people."¹⁰

Bergmanesque "Winter Light"

Hopkins, Thomas, and Rowan Williams begin with belief grounded in personal experience and in connection with Christian tradition. Assuming God's presence, they confront a world where that presence must often be glimpsed by a Bergmanesque sort of "winter light." How can a poet acknowledge this darkness without betraying the light? In the miracle of looking intently, these poets find their world splitting open to reveal eternity. In his 1974 essay, "Where do we go from here?," Thomas wrote:

With our greatest modern telescope we look out into the depths of space, but there is no heaven there. With our supersonic aircraft we annihilate time, but are no nearer eternity. May it not be that alongside us, made invisible by the thinnest

8 John Henry, Cardinal Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (New York: Random House, 1950), 239-40.

9 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Selected Poems and Prose*, Ed. W.H. Gardner (London: Penguin, 1953), 194.

10 Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1995), 113-114.

of veils, is the heaven we seek? The immortality we must put on? Some of us, like Francis Thompson, know moments when “those shaken mists a space unsettle.”¹¹

And in a sermon on “Loving God,” Rowan Williams writes of

. . . what, ultimately, God is doing with the whole of his universe: revealing fulfillment and joy and peace, in fragments and hints, suggesting where wholeness is to be found, suggesting some reality so full and final, so lovely and rich and all-embracing that we can only say that all things are there for its—or his—sake, that all things are to be valued in that light.¹²

Here, the poet and the mystic stand on common ground, finding the divine and the heavenly not “out there” somewhere, but hinted at in the very fabric of our material experience. In *Waiting for God*, Simone Weil wrote:

The beauty of the world gives us an intimation of its claim to a place in our heart. In the beauty of the world brute necessity becomes an object of love. What is more beautiful than the action of gravity on the fugitive folds of the sea waves, or on the almost eternal folds of the mountains?¹³

For Weil, who embraced the exhaustion, hunger, and poverty of the French proletariat, “a sense of beauty, although mutilated, distorted, and soiled, remains rooted in the heart of man as a powerful incentive,”¹⁴ drawing human creatures to their creator.

Moments of Darkness and Beauty

Poets “haunted by dreams of eternity” call us to glimpse those dreams with them through moments of darkness and of beauty—teaching us to interpret those moments in our own lives when a circling hawk, a sunlit field, or a painting takes on a life and radiance that stops us in our tracks.

Thus, Hopkins celebrates a world where God’s glory “will flame out, like shining from shook foil” (“God’s Grandeur,” lines 2) and where “Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men’s faces” (“As kingfishers catch fire. . . .,” lines 12-14). In “The Bright Field” Thomas celebrates “a brightness / that . . . is the eternity that awaits you” (lines 12-14) made visible in a field lit by ordinary sunlight. This field—barely noticed in passing—becomes, upon reflection “the pearl / of great price, the one field that had / the treasure in it” (lines 4-6).

With Williams, at least in his first book, *After Silent Centuries*, the celebration is more muted, the glories more consistently shadowed

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11 Anstey, 159-60.

12 Anstey, 132.

13 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, Trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 128-9.

14 Weil, 162.

SOMETIMES
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by suffering at the heart of things. For Williams, the world is an icon like that in "Rublev," colored by the "pains of flesh" and "scars of birth" but promising future reconciliation. Suffering man and the God who walks in from the "grey steppe" shall one day, like the trinity of angels in the icon, "sit and speak around / one table" (lines 7, 9, 1, 15). Yet, even in Williams's world, we can "read our home addresses" in a flock of "September Birds" (lines 14-15) or gaze at the Chalk Horse on the downs and recognize that "under the swell of dredging labour" "the white earth runs like water" ("The White Horse," lines 9, 12).

These poets also grapple directly with the absence and silence of God, who, as Hopkins puts it, "lives, alas! away" ("I wake and feel the fell of dark," line 8). In "Adjustments" Thomas declares: "Never known as anything / but an absence, / I dare not name him as God" (lines 1-3). Williams, meditating on an icon of Christ as ruler of all, declares, "He has forgotten us, this one / and sees a black invisible place / where from all ages to all ages he will die" ("Pantocrator: Daphni," lines 7-9). Yet, all three poets find clues to God's presence in their broken world.

For Hopkins, God's "smile" is "not wrung" or forced, but remains as possible as natural beauty, which we glimpse "unforeseen times" like bright sky between mountains ("My own heart let me more have pity on . . .," lines 12-14). Though this world is a far cry from Eden, for Hopkins our experience of it begins and ends with divine presence sustaining all nature through the Holy Ghost, brooding "over the bent / World . . ." "with ah! bright wings" (lines 13-14).

Thomas finds a quieter, more elusive grace in a world less charged with glory, but still offering minute clues confirming God's presence. Thomas's God is the unpredictable, unseen power "whose sphere is the cell / and electron" ("Adjustments," lines 5-6). Unlike Hopkins, Thomas "can never catch him at work" but "can only say, / coming suddenly upon an amendment, / that there he had been" (lines 6-7). Rowan Williams often discovers God's presence in a moment of paradox, as in the last lines of "Pantocrator: Daphni": "fire from fire, we know your cry / out of the dusty golden whirlwind, how you forget / us so that we can be."

Concrete Details

For these poets God's presence demands our attention to concrete and apparently insignificant details of ordinary experience. In "A Frame for Poetry," R.S. Thomas wrote: "Perhaps the two most diagnostic features of our own present age are its secularism and its abstractionism; they exact their toll, both spiritually and culturally."¹⁵ Thus, if a poet is to bear redemptive witness to "dreams of eternity," he or she must do so through a language of conviction and concrete detail.

15 Anstey, 92.

In Hopkins's "The Windhover," Thomas's "The White Tiger," and Williams's "September Birds," the poets attempt to capture the numinous and eternal possibility of the ordinary and finite. Each poet contemplates a creature whose concrete existence points to a divine presence. Hopkins and Thomas choose predators—a falcon and a tiger; Rowan Williams looks at a flock of crows, those carrion birds whose cousins once fed Elijah. In all three poems, a certain beauty and danger in nature suggest that there is more to this world than meets the eye. Hopkins and Thomas wrestle with tensions between the possibility of divine power and the human desire to capture that power in ways that limit it. In the Williams poem, power is elusive and scattered, the divine message faint and belated, but still compelling.

Hopkins's speaker in "The Windhover" is an active participant—the first two words of the poem are a dramatic "I caught." Hopkins believed in the human mind's power to discover and create design, to catch glimpses of the God who is. Donald McChesney describes Hopkins's visionary sense this way: "By contemplation of simple objects . . . Hopkins was at times raised to ecstasy, because he realized that the hidden energy (instress) moulding things into shapes, patterns, and colours (inscapes) was the very energy of God himself."¹⁶ As the body of the poem breaks into trinities of lines, the speaker finds through the windhover, "dauphin" of daylight's kingdom, another chevalier on whose presence all is predicated.

Finally, "The Windhover" reminds the reader that for this Lord, this bird, and the "I" of the poem, redemptive beauty is costly. This is brought home in a series of verbs with painful implications—"fall," "gall," and "gash." At the core of this joyful, breathtaking inscape is a species of violence, the sacrifice that breaks open the natural, allowing the fire of Christ's presence to color the "blue-bleak embers" of the speaker's world "gold-vermillion" (lines 13-14).

For Thomas, too, discovering God's presence involves coming to terms with violence. But the agony of "The White Tiger" is less assuredly redemptive, more open-ended, the speaker more aware of the pitfalls of attempting to capture the divine presence, whether in a theology or a poem. Thomas's predator is earthbound, pacing up and down in the cage of our definitions, rather than "striding" the air. While Hopkins's poem is packed with active verbs and verbal forms, Thomas's poem opens with being—past-tense being at that—and supposing: "It was beautiful as God / must be beautiful" (lines 1-2).

Hopkins delights in naming God, and experiences God's presence as liberating form, assured that whatever violence or breaking occurs—by flight or by "sheer plod"—has meaning. Both poets use images of brokenness—Hopkins's shattering fire-coals, the face of

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16 Donald McChesney, *A Hopkins Commentary* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 29.

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Thomas's tiger "like a crumpled flower" (line 11). But the "crumpled flower" has overtones of fragility—Thomas's tiger and his God suffer ongoing loss. Fearing that our need to name God into presence may be a trap, Thomas humbly acknowledges his own uncertainties as he dramatizes the difficulty of speaking about God.

Contemplating a flock of crows in "September Birds," Rowan Williams seems to be squarely in Thomas's world. Unlike Hopkins's dashing falcon, these birds are "vague as specks of stubble fire" (line 4). They move from "thinning flame" to "ashes" to "dust," scattered by the sun that claps a "hollow hand" (lines 5-7). They ride insubstantial "shallow slopes" (line 3) of air, and their sun is "thinning" (line 2), "moonlike," and "old with woodsmoke" (line 9). The crows, like Thomas's tiger, are trapped, "snared by the netted oaks" (line 10); their message is as ragged as they are—"scraps of paper," "yesterday's news," and "last week's envelopes" (lines 11-12).

In such a waning world, how can God be glimpsed? Just as the message appears to be dying out, the speaker discovers that "The words come back . . . / at sunrise, faintly traced. Sometimes we read / our home addresses" (lines 13-14). God's grandeur may not shine out here or even breathe powerfully, incarnate and close; and yet, eternity is here—in a whisper. After the night, a sunrise, with its possibilities of resurrection light. Even in a world "bleared and smeared," we still can read, however faintly traced, "our home addresses."

What is that home address? In "Oystermouth Cemetary" Rowan Williams turns back to the stones we resist. Here, the grass becomes a sea that "laps" at the "keels" of the gravestones (line 1). And gravestones are boats, their anchors now "very deep among the shells" (line 4) awaiting "the gusty day / when a last angel tramples down" (lines 5-6) to the bottom of the bay and "the cords snap / and all the little craft float stray / on unfamiliar tides" (lines 9-11). Then, these stone boats will "lay their freight / on new warm shores" and find their "Easter landfall" (lines 13-15).

Hopkins, too, sailed nature's "Heraclitean fire" in a material world where everything is passing away. There, Hopkins says, "across my foundering deck shone / A beacon, an eternal beam." ("That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire . . .," lines 18-19). Hopkins, like Rowan Williams, realizes his dream of eternity in the resurrection, when "I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am . . ." (line 22).

Thomas, too, bears witness to that resurrection, glimpsed in "The Answer": "after long on my knees / in a cold chancel" (lines 19-20). These poets—like the great mystics and like many ordinary believers—find their "dreams of eternity" realized in this world in

moments when, as Thomas puts it, “a stone has rolled from my mind” so that “the old questions lie / folded” “like the piled / grave-clothes of love’s risen body” (lines 14-25).



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T H E
M A R S H I L L
I N T E R V I E W



GIVING SHAPE TO TURMOIL

A Conversation with Chaim Potok

By Michael J. Cusick

It would strike some as odd that an ordained rabbi who served a chaplaincy in the Korean War, later earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from an Ivy League university, earned a reputation as a world-class Judaic scholar, and wrote several best-selling novels along the way, would be known for his mapmaking abilities. But Chaim Potok has spent the majority of his life doing just that—mapping out the terrain of his Jewish past in novels which have transported both Jew and non-Jew into fictional worlds that transcend religious boundaries.

Perhaps best known as the author of *The Chosen*—which in 1981 was made into a movie starring Robby Benson and Rod Steiger—Potok is the author of eleven novels, two children’s books, and several works of nonfiction including the critically acclaimed *Wanderings: Chaim Potok’s History of the Jews*. “Long ago, in *The Chosen*,” he writes, “I set out to draw a map of the New York world through which I once journeyed. It was to be a map not only of broken streets, menacing alleys, concrete-surfaced backyards, neighborhood schools and stores . . . a map not only of the physical elements of my early life, but of the spiritual ones as well.”¹

The result of such mapmaking has been an insider’s look into opposing world-views—conservative Jewish-American culture and twentieth-century secularism: clashing values, beliefs, ideas, and dreams. This has been the underlying tension in all of Potok’s writing. And it has also been the story of his life. Born in Brooklyn in 1929 to Polish immigrant parents, Chaim spent his early years in an Orthodox Jewish home and was educated at parochial schools. At sixteen, he encountered serious literature and his life was forever changed.

“Here was someone trying to give shape to turmoil I myself was experiencing,” he writes. “A growing sense of a world outside my own; pulsing sexuality; questions about God and the nature of my own self. Here was an author shaping his deepest thoughts and feelings with language, exploring an interior human terrain I had never thought possible to configure with words.”²

1 Chaim Potok, “The Invisible Map of Meaning: A Writer’s Confrontation,” *Triquarterly*, Spring 1992.

2 Potok, “The Invisible Map of Meaning.”

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Deeply touched, he began to read ravenously and to write. At eighteen, after having a story accepted by the Atlantic Monthly, he received a letter from the editor, who inquired if he was writing a novel. His father—who had planned on his son's becoming a teacher of Talmud—was less than enthusiastic about the younger Potok's new-found career choice. In their conservative Jewish world, writers of fiction were looked upon with suspicion. Thankfully, Chaim continued to write, and he has not stopped.

*My first encounter with Potok occurred at a used bookstore where I found a mint first-edition copy of *My Name is Asher Lev*. Our most recent encounter took place in Philadelphia, where he graciously invited me to his home. As we met in person for nearly two hours, I was struck by this man's kindness and his staggering depth of knowledge.*

In the room where we met, the author's own expressionist paintings hang in contrast to walls of scholarly books—illuminating once more the tensions of his life and work: creativity and canon, progress and tradition, faith and reason. As is evidenced by his writing, such tensions are not easily manageable, though for the person of faith they are an essential part of finding one's way in the world. As Potok himself might say, "Such tensions are an essential part of the mapmaking process."

Mars Hill Review: Tell me about the transforming encounter you had with literature at the age of sixteen.

Chaim Potok: My first major encounter with contemporary serious literature was Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. It happened in high school one term, when I was reading the established canon of literature—the classics, especially the nineteenth century. I was done with my exams, and I decided for a reason that is not clear to me to this day, to read a contemporary adult novel. I went to the public library and browsed around for a while and by sheer chance found *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh. I have no idea what attracted me to it. Maybe it was the fact that it was about upper-class English Catholics.

I took the book home and at first found it difficult to get into. But once I grew accustomed to the prose I became utterly enchanted by that world, and by the prose. It was really the first time in my life that I understood the importance of language in the writing of a story. Most of the time I wouldn't want the language to interfere with the story. I preferred language that was transparent and didn't call attention to itself. But reading that novel gave me a very vivid sense of the rhythms of the English language, its texture, its cadences, the way sentences can be constructed to obtain certain effects.

I remember that as I was reading it I found myself thinking about the characters during the times I was away from the book. I would try to anticipate what their thoughts and feelings might be when I

returned to the book. I was utterly taken by the character of the mother—her tenacity, her odd personality, her faith. I remember closing the book when I finished reading it and feeling bereaved because all the people I had read about were gone. I remember sitting there saying to myself, “What power there is in this kind of creativity.”

Very soon afterward I read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. Here was a picture of a middle-class Irish Catholic family. And Joyce was telling a story about ideas—confusions of the head and the heart—that I myself was experiencing and couldn’t put into words. I was only sixteen at the time, but here was a man mapping all that dark territory with the power of words and the imagination. Those two books did it for me.

MHR: And it was then that you knew you wanted to write stories?

CP: Yes. When I was done with Joyce, I said to myself, “This is what I want to spend my life doing—writing stories.” I was only a kid, so I had no idea whether I would succeed or fail. I didn’t even have an idea as to how to go about doing it. I just knew that I wanted to write stories. It unlocked something very deep inside of me and transformed me, no question about that. And writing stories is what I’ve done ever since that time.

MHR: As you began writing from your Orthodox Jewish background, you discovered that your culture collided with others. And you’ve described this as a “culture confrontation.”

CP: My first culture confrontation was with literature. Later on in my twenties it was with the core ideas of western culture, because I went ahead and got a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. I didn’t want a doctorate in literature because I was afraid it would make me too self-conscious about my writing. But I did want to know what western culture was all about at its core, so I chose philosophy. I thought western culture would be something I would want to write about, and I wanted to know it well.

MHR: You didn’t set out to confront cultures, but it naturally happened?

CP: My particular natural life experience has been that of cultures clashing in a certain way—confrontation of core elements. From my Jewish culture to literature, for example. I grew up at the heart, at the core, of one culture. And then I encountered an element from the core of the general culture in which I was living, and that element was modern secular literature.

That confrontation of cultures, from the heart of one culture to the heart of another culture, is what I have been calling a “core to

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core culture confrontation.” There are many ways in which we encounter other cultures. We can encounter the periphery of another culture—its noise, its passing fads, its pop culture, superstitious elements, and so on. Those are—without sounding too elitist—more or less peripheral elements of a culture in the sense that they are the easiest elements of a culture to acquire. They demand the least of the person acquiring them. They are interchangeable elements which come and go. They don’t effect the essential direction of a culture in any profound way.

All cultures have these elements. And yes, it is an elitist view of culture. But the fact of the matter is that cultures are really made by the more creative elements in their midst. Those creative elements drag everyone else along willy-nilly in their wake. Unless, of course, there is a cultural inundation from the periphery, which is what some people think we may be suffering from these days, especially in the United States.

Others had other kinds of culture confrontations. Friends of mine encountered the world of science that they found stunning, and to no small degree overwhelming. Others encountered Sigmund Freud. I remember one of my friends reading Darwin, and that was the end of his view of Genesis.

That was the world that I grew up in. And the subject of my writing then became this confrontation: What happens? How do you feel? What do you think? What are your dreams? How do you relate to human beings around you? What are the dimensions of this confrontation? How does it affect families? It’s my feeling that in the modern period we’re all going through this sort of confrontation one way or another.

MHR: And this is regardless of religious background—believer or unbeliever?

CP: Absolutely. And now in a major way the Islamic world is going through this kind of confrontation. But they are resisting it mightily, just as Judaism and Christendom did—and as many Christians and many Jews still do.

MHR: You wrote your first novel, *The Chosen*, to come to terms with your past. What elements of your religious upbringing did you need to come to terms with?

CP: The fundamentalism. The very structured way of seeing the world. The “givenness” of tradition. The inability to maneuver and question. The legacy of the past that you are expected to absorb, master, and give back to the coming generation untouched, unaltered.

That was pretty much my beginning. And the first crack in that wall was literature. Literature presents you with alternate mappings of the human experience. You see that the experiences of other people and other cultures are as rich, coherent, and troubled as your own experiences. They are as beset with suffering as yours. Literature is a kind of legitimate voyeurism through the keyhole of language where you really come to know other people's lives—their anguish, their loves, their passions. Often you discover that once you dive into those lives and get below the surface, the veneer, there is a real closeness.

MHR: Is this the idea that underneath the differing beliefs, religions, and cultures, there is a sense of underlying basic humanity?

CP: Right, and that was astonishing to me. It was astonishing because I had always been taught, and therefore believed, that Jews were different in kind. We had a very unique destiny. And yes, Jews are different. But, at the same time, what I was coming to learn was that we all are very much the same in our passions, in our lusts, in our loves, in our drives, in our fears. The differences are interesting because they lend texture and richness to the human experience, but it's the similarities that might just save us as a species.

MHR: Save us?

CP: We are in a race with our own worst selves. We've always been both a killer species and a cooperating species. There have always been these two sides to our being. And we now have the capacity to kill ourselves with consummate ease. It's touch and go as to whether we will survive as a species on this planet. So, my hope is that we can learn more and more about the similarities.

I think that this is one of the happy by-products of literature. I'm not sure that literature aims for that. I think that serious literature aims for good sentences, good writing, and more or less serious subject matter—not filled with frivolity. But a by-product of that is the effective making of maps—of other paths of life that I as a reader can then walk. That brings me closer to another world, and I then say, "That's interesting, I can relate to that."

MHR: Does that explain why your novels have such a broad appeal, though limited to Jewish culture?

CP: James Joyce was once asked why he only wrote about Dublin. Even though he wrote about other places, we know Joyce as the writer of Dublin in the same way we know Dostoyevsky as the writer of Saint Petersburg, and Kafka as the writer of Prague. So when he was asked why he only wrote about Dublin, Joyce

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responded by saying, “For myself I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities in the world. In the particular is contained the universal.”

The greatness of the novel is that you are taken into the specifics of other worlds by the mapmaking abilities and the language abilities of another human being. So that if I spell out my particularities and you’re reading them, and if the language is okay, and the story is interesting, what you end up doing inside yourself is taking those particularities and linking them to your own. And those two generate a universal. You as the reader can then function inside that universal.

MHR: That reminds me of a sentence from *The Gift of Asher Lev*. “Art happens when what is seen is mixed with what is on the inside of the artist.”

CP: That’s exactly right. It’s a relational experience. Art happens somewhere along a relational arc, between what you are and the object of creation. And that’s why art is very often a different experience for each and every person. I am convinced that the readers who come to my books experience them differently because they are not sitting back as passive individuals with this thing called a book being pumped into them, filling their empty reservoir. That’s not the way it works. They’re coming to a book with a whole life. And it’s the relationship between their life and the life inside the book that forms the experience of reading—the arc.

MHR: There’s something very mystical about that.

CP: Yes, but then there’s something very mystical about gravity too, which we can’t quite see [laughing]. True, you can do mathematics on gravity, and it’s harder to do mathematics on the relationship between a work of art and the person experiencing it. Both are invisible and both are very real.

MHR: Throughout your work there is a strong thread of autobiography. As a Jew, what has been the role of remembering?

CP: I think Judaism is a memory religion par excellence. We are told to remember. Americans generally don’t remember much beyond five years in the past. Who remembers the Persian Gulf War today?

MHR: I think Christians struggle with forgetting our past. Will you say more about the idea that Judaism is a memory religion?

CP: We have about four thousand years of history to remember. And what you are really bidden to do as an intelligent Jew is to

remember and incorporate that history into your essential being. The biblical images of Abraham and Jacob are real. The story of the binding of Isaac is real. The story of Joseph is real. The story of David and Solomon, that's a real story. It all becomes a part of the way you think about the world.

A cartographer doesn't make maps out of the imagination. He surveys, he looks at previous maps, he checks the roads, he gets information, he uses tools. An individual who makes maps of the human experience—and we all do that consciously or unconsciously—makes it with information, or with tools. What Judaism wants Jews to do is to map the world with certain kinds of information. And that information consists of the value systems, the tensions, the successes and the failures, the dreams and the terrors of the Jewish past.

Now, I have to be very careful with all of this, because you can be so freighted with history that you can become paralyzed. That's the tension that we all live under—how to use the history and not get weighted down to such a degree that you can't function.

MHR: You've talked about the past on the collective level, but what about on the individual level? Is it important to have a knowledge of your own story?

CP: I think that in one way or another all of us have a story. And people who don't know their story are devastated individuals. Narrative is what holds life together. But narrative ought to be flexible enough so that you can insert new sentences here and there. And sometimes we begin the serious process of rewriting at certain points of our lives. A person who doesn't have a narrative is a sorry person indeed.

MHR: Do you mean they don't know where they have come from or where they are going?

CP: They have no map. They are stumbling around, and they are terrified. And terror ultimately leads to rage—either rage at yourself with an inclination toward self-destruction, or rage at the outside world, and you hurt somebody.

MHR: We've touched on art somewhat. What are your views on the distinction between sacred and secular?

CP: Sacred art depicts meta-historical moments by and large. It is fixed. It is an expression of the core of the church, its doctrines, its transcendent history. Nothing much changes in this art through the centuries.

In the modern period anything is possible, even with a crucifixion. That's the nature of a modern secular world. The individual

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makes his or own paradigms. And my feeling is that the richer the individual's awareness of the tensions of the past, the richer the modern paradigm he or she is going to present to us.

MHR: So the more an individual is aware of the past, the richer the art?

CP: The deeper one's awareness of one's roots in the past, the richer will be the tensions of the present, and the way one presents any particular art.

For example, there is a texturing to Dostoyevsky that you just don't find in most modern writing—especially American writing, because Dostoyevsky has this enormous tension with the past of Russian religion and history. I might not care for his anti-Semitism, or his passion for Russian glory, or the sense he had that Russia was the greatest culture in the world and that he didn't need the west. But that's not the issue here, the issue is what it did for his work. It added to it immeasurably.

MHR: Dostoyevsky spent years in prison. Asher Lev, David Lurie, Danny Saunders, and several other characters of yours suffered and went on to enormous creativity. How does suffering affect one's output of creativity and art?

CP: Well, it will either mature you or destroy you. If it destroys you, we won't hear about you anymore. But if it matures you, then you might make a contribution. All of us, at one point or another in our lives, have suffered—if not in our own flesh, then in the flesh of those we love. We will experience suffering.

It's the task of the artist to take that experience and map it through her or his own way of seeing the world. That's what I tried to do with the individuals I was writing about.

MHR: What would you say about the idea of encountering the sacred in the midst of the secular?

CP: My sense of it is that the sacred is everywhere. And by that I mean we are surrounded by mystery, we are surrounded by beauty. A child is born and it's a mystery. A person dies and that's a mystery. What are we doing here? That's a mystery. I have to respond to that one way or another. And that's what I mean by the sacred—things that are given, yet oddly given. I have to respond to that and ask myself, "What map do I make of this? What relationship do I have to this?" I'm a writer, and I have to deal with such givens.

You might tell me that the smile of a child is biologically and genetically driven, and I will say, "Fine." But even that statement is in many ways a mystery. Man's propensity toward killing is a mys-

tery to me. Those aspects of ourselves that tend to drive us up and out of ourselves in a search for realms of being beyond our mere mortality—those are what I call the sacred. The constructive, the cooperative, the creative—those are the sacred.

The destructive—that is the demonic. As I said earlier, we are in a race with our own selves. And we have no guarantee as to which of those two elements of our selves is going to win. That’s why those of us concerned with the sacred have to work hard. We have to lobby for it, because we can be sure of one thing: those taken up by the demonic are very good at what they do.

MHR: When you talk about what could be, is there a sense of the original “image of God”?

CP: Yes, absolutely—there is a sense of an origin to things. And my feeling is that the biblical image is a magnificent metaphor of that feeling or sense that we have of the mysterious origin of things. That is the quintessential mapmaking. It’s so rich that it has forever changed the mindset of our species.

Is it ontologically true? Well, the fundamentalists will say yes. Someone who knows a great deal about the history of Jewish thought will probably say that it has profound value in the way it has set the human mind in a certain direction—that that is its truth. And for me that’s truth enough.

MHR: Whether or not the ontological reality is there?

CP: That’s right.

MHR: Are you saying that whether or not the existence of it all is real isn’t as important as the metaphor that guides your life?

CP: It’s the richness of it. That is an awesome reality. I can’t step beyond the richness of that and move to the other side. Do you know that in the Hebrew Bible there isn’t a single mention of God as he, or she, or it truly is? There is only the mention of the creator God who is constantly trying out new plans and failing. He creates the world and fails. He creates Adam and Eve and fails. He creates the Garden of Eden and that doesn’t work. He creates a human species and fails, so he brings the flood. He saves a human being whose first act is to get drunk. He chooses a people with whom He constantly quarrels. That’s the creator God.

The God utterly infinite, utterly unapproachable, utterly spiritual—we don’t hear of that God. That God won’t turn to us. It is inconceivable that he would ever turn to us. That God is all that ever was and is and will be, into infinity and eternity. How could that God conceivably relate to us? It is the God of the Bible that we relate to!

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So I can't make the step beyond creation to the infinite God. But I can certainly relate to the God of the Bible. I talk to him all the time and complain all the time.

MHR: What do you mean by "God failed" at these different steps?

CP: He creates the world and then he has to destroy it by flood. He gives Adam and Eve a garden to till, and they ruin things—and in many ways that's his failure too. He sends a flood and saves a family, but in the aftermath there is the horrible scene between the sons, the grandson, and the father. Then he chooses a people and they are constantly at odds with him.

That's the role of God in history—making plans and seeing plans foiled. There's constant tension between God and the human beings he has created. That's not a terribly glorious picture of a deity, is it? Well, that's the God that we relate to, the Jews anyway. Beyond that God, there's got to be some infinite being. The Bible doesn't talk about it, although Jewish mysticism does. Kabbalah—oh, yes.

MHR: In *The Book of Lights*, where you deal with Kabbalah, the mentor of the main character Gershon says, "You do not care to know of the great rabbis who were filled with poetry and contradictions." What kind of poetry and contradictions does he mean?

CP: The rabbis of the Talmud were filled with poetry and contradictions. They had a very open-eyed, hard-nosed way of looking at the world. They were not fundamentalists. They were open to all kinds of ideas. And they said things that would upset us today. One of the great things about learning the Jewish tradition is that you come to understand the notion of maximum flexibility inside a closed world. The daring of some of those rabbis is really astonishing.

The poetry has to do with flights of the imagination and how they interpreted the Bible in the broadest way conceivable. There is an enormous spectrum of thought in rabbinic literature, from absolutely literalist readings of the text to the most imaginative readings. It's a very rich system of ideas, filled with contradicting views, which is very exciting for a writer.

It all fell to pieces in the modern period when it faced secularism. And in the wake of Darwin and Nietzsche came Jewish fundamentalism, which didn't exist in the premodern period. Newton and Darwin did it to Judaism just as they did it to Christianity. Fundamentalism is a western religious reaction to Darwin. The text freezes, ideas freeze, because the alternative is a real terror, the terror that we are not the center of the universe and that it's all a series of odd accidents.

MHR: Because for it to be a series of odd accidents contradicts the entire history of Judaism.

CP: Absolutely . . . absolutely. Therefore, you have the development of Jewish fundamentalism. It comes along and says, “This isn’t a series of odd accidents. Just read the first chapter of Genesis.”

Then the modernist says, “The first chapter of Genesis is a metaphor.” And the Jewish fundamentalist answers, “It’s not a metaphor, it’s the word of God. A metaphor means that somebody else can come and write another metaphor, but the word of God you can’t change.”

This is one major discourse in contemporary Judaism.

MHR: Is that part of the reason you named your history of the Jews *Wanderings*?

CP: Yes, we have wandered a great deal and been in contact with most of the great cultures of the world in a variety of ways. I also wrote *Wanderings* before I wrote *The Book of Lights* because I wanted to know who I was when I got to Korea—that’s what *The Book of Lights* is all about. It’s my encounter with another culture—a nonwestern culture. It’s also my encounter with the horrible event that western culture dropped on eastern culture, the atomic bomb. I did all that exploring for *Wanderings* before I wrote *The Book of Lights* because I needed to know who I was.

MHR: How did your two years in Korea shape you?

CP: It transformed me totally. Totally. I’m still trying to figure out what that was all about.

I know when I went to Korea I was a very coherent human being in the sense that I had a model of what I was—I had a map. I knew who I was as a Jew. I had been through Jewish Theological Seminary and was ordained. I knew who I was as a member of western culture. And I knew who I was as an American. I had a passion for America; when I was in high school history I was one of the winners of the Hearst National American History Contest—about thirty thousand kids participating, with nine winners.

When I went to Asia—Japan, Korea, and the other parts of Asia I visited as an American soldier—it all came unglued. It all became relativized. Everything turned upside down. And that “upside down” is what I explored in *The Book of Lights*, which was written from an American point of view. The next book about Asia, *I Am the Clay*, was written from an Asian point of view. Those two books so far are my explorations of that world. My time in Asia

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utterly transformed me and left me with nothing but questions for which I'm still struggling to find answers.

MHR: What are some of the questions?

CP: Let me give you an example. I remember realizing one day in Japan, after just having gone through some of the temples in Kyoto, that I was in a world that didn't hate Jews. Even today with all the anti-Semitic books that are in bookstores, the Japanese don't hate Jews. It was a very exhilarating experience to find myself in a world where I wasn't being judged for what I was. I was only another white face. The irony was that this was a pagan world. It was a world that my scriptures told me to avoid, to condemn.

MHR: So, in one sense, the named enemy was the one who embraced you the most?

CP: Exactly. I remember a scene where I was visiting a temple and I saw an old Japanese man praying. He had a long white beard and a fedora hat, and a long brown coat. He was praying with such intensity that the first thing I recalled were the old men in the synagogue I grew up in. On the night of Yom Kippur, the most sacred night of the year they would pray this way with the same intensity. I remember saying to myself at the time, "What am I seeing here? Is this man praying to an idol? And what is the God that I pray to doing at this moment? Is he answering his prayers? If not, why not? When are you ever going to see greater devotion in prayer? And if the God I pray to is listening to this old pagan's prayer, then what are Judaism and Christianity all about?"

I had dozens of experiences like that every week—cultural encounters. The Koreans had lost over a million people during the war, which is staggering. I remember saying to myself, "Why did these people suffer? They were just in the way of empires." It's one thing to read about it in the newspapers, but it's another thing to actually stand there and see it.

I remember my father once saying, "Jews suffer because they decided they were different. You're going to be different, people are going to point at you, and they are going to make you pay the price for it." He believed we were different, and though he didn't like to pay the price, he said he would pay the price if he had to. That's the sort of thing that happened to me again and again for the sixteen months I was in Asia. I was totally transformed by it.

It not only relativized my Jewishness, it relativized my Americanness and my westernness simultaneously. It set everything into specific culture contexts and at the same time taught me that my culture could be viewed from outside its perimeters by another culture, and be seen in an altogether different way. What happened

was that I began to see my culture from the outside. When that happens to your head, you are never the same again.

MHR: Once you were outside your culture with a different perspective, what did you learn?

CP: You have to get outside of your culture for a significant period of time and get inside the culture that has brought you outside of your own culture. I did just that. I read, I talked to Asians, I befriended them, I listened to them. Once you cut through the veneer of the politeness, and their own hesitations, you get close to them and see the sameness, even though it's another world.

MHR: You spoke of complaining to God, and in your writings there are characters who shout at God. It seems to be more acceptable for Jews to do this than for non-Jews.

CP: The tone is set immediately in the Bible with Abraham. He has a long talk with God and tries to change God's mind regarding Sodom and Gomorrah. "Suppose there are some decent people there. What are you going to do—kill them all?" Well that's pretty audacious, I think. After all, it's God he's bargaining with. It may be the creator God who doesn't get his or her way all the time, but it's still God.

Of course, the first grave lament—the one that sets the tone for all the laments in Jewish history—is the book of Job. Now, the book of Job is about one thousand years into Israelite history. That's quite a note to strike, the book of Job. It was struck because there was a sense that the covenant relationship wasn't working. At least it certainly wasn't working in this world.

MHR: Not working in terms of reciprocity?

CP: That's what covenantal relationships are all about. I do something, you do something. If I do something and you don't, you've broken the covenant. It's as blunt as that. It's a treaty—I keep my end, you keep your end. If you don't, the treaty is broken.

By the time of the book of Job, there was a sense that the covenant was not working. Much of it had to do with the Maccabean Wars and the awful suffering that Jews went through. But for whatever the reason, the writer of the book of Job said, "The covenant isn't working."

It is one long complaint. It amounts to Job taking God to court. In the Jewish worldview, the metaphor for complaint to God is the idea of taking God to court because Judaism is a legal system. "Now I know I'm going to lose this case, because you're God and I'm a simple human being. But I'm going to take you to court

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anyway, and I'm going to let the judges know how I feel and what the charges are. I'll lose, but it's what I'm going to do anyway."

Remember, the book was canonized, which already tells you that this attitude is acceptable to the rabbis of the Talmud. To canonize a book in the ancient world was to guarantee its permanent existence. Not to have it canonized was to virtually guarantee its oblivion. We've had complaints like this all through Jewish history. Books of complaint were written in the wake of the Crusades, the massacres in the 1600s in eastern Europe and the Ukraine. This is now part of the Jewish tradition, complaining against God.

I once talked about this to Norwegian clergy. They invited me to a conference, and I told them about this tradition of Jewish complaint. Some of them were aghast over it. But then they said, "I wish we had done this a year or so ago." They had an awfully tragic ferry accident where hundreds of Norwegians perished, and when their parishioners came to them, they didn't quite know how to handle it. My response, and the Jewish response, is to yell at God.

There used to be a tradition, which may still be in existence in some Jewish communities, where if you had a complaint against God you stopped the service on Saturday. You went up to the ark, you opened the ark, and you stood there shouting at God until the rabbi finally led you away.

MHR: The thing that's so fascinating about this is that it happens inside a system of faith. If you're going to rage against the master of the universe, you had better have some kind of faith as to what he is essentially like.

CP: You shout out of faith, not because you don't have any faith. If you don't have faith, you don't have anyone to shout at.

MHR: There's so much richness to the Jewish traditions. I'm fascinated by it.

CP: Yes, well, remember how old it is!

MHR: As you think about the big picture of the book of Job, is there anything else you glean from it, other than the court-docket concept?

CP: The Book of Job is a metaphor par excellence of the Jewish tradition of complaint against God. A poet—a great poet—must have suffered terribly. And he took one of the oldest stories known to him and used it for his own purposes.

The story was about a man who was tested by the gods. The author of the book of Job made that ancient story the framing

device for his poem. Here's a man a faith. God destroys his family, and virtually destroys him, but the man of faith doesn't lose his faith. He is restored by God, lives on, enjoys a new family and new wealth. That's the epic.

Between those two elements of the story the poet inserts what we call the book of Job. Job is sitting in torment, comforted by his friends, lamenting his sorry state, hoping to die. He pours his heart out. And the response of the poet was, "You're right, the covenant isn't working—not visibly, and not on this earth. But it's working in some cosmic fashion, and we don't fully understand it."

That was not the biblical view. The biblical view was that the covenant was working visibly. In the time of David, in the time of Solomon, in the time of the kings, if you disobeyed you were punished, and if you obeyed you expected to be rewarded. The book of Job insists that covenant was not working anymore, that it was no longer effective for some reason on the earthly scheme of things, though it was working in some cosmic fashion.

First of all, that's not terribly satisfying to the earthling. And second of all, it's very intellectual; it satisfies the head but not the heart. That's the answer of the writer of the book of Job. That's one answer to the breakdown of the covenant.

The second answer was the rabbinic one. And that is, "The covenant may not be working, but it's going to work again in the future, and we have to live our lives in the meantime in accordance with God's laws."

MHR: That's the idea of the messiah?

CP: Yes, redemption was deferred to some future time. The third answer was an apocalyptic one. That is, "It's not working, but it's going to work next week, because God is sending somebody to get it to work right." That's what I call "hot messianism." The rabbinic version is cooled down messianism, deferred messianism. Hot messianism became Christianity. There is no such idea as loss of faith because you complain against God.

MHR: What do you mean that there's no such thing as a loss of faith?

CP: As far as I can recall, there's only one instance in all of Talmudic literature of a rabbi who lost faith in God. That's seven hundred years of Talmudic literature! The rabbi was Elisha Ben-Abuyah. He once saw a man send his son up a ladder to chase away a mother bird so he could get the fledglings. He did this because the biblical law is that you are not allowed to catch both the fledglings and the mother bird at the same time. As the boy did this, he fell and broke his head and died.

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Now, the problem in this particular instance is that in the biblical verse you are promised that if you do this you will have long life. Elisha Ben-Abuyah was with another rabbi when he saw this. The other rabbi was aghast, but said nothing and ran away crying. Elisha Ben-Abuyah shouted out, "There is no judge, and there is no justice"—which was his way of saying God doesn't work the way he claims. He maintained that attitude, and he was excommunicated. But even so, some of his students still followed him.

There is no such thing in the ancient world as not believing in God, or the gods, unless you were a member of one of the Greek intellectual societies. Even Socrates believed in some form of a deity. He didn't believe in the statuary of Athens, but he had his own notion of what a deity was and how it functioned. To believe that there isn't any deity is a modern idea.

MHR: I read the Old Testament and there are images of sacrifice, ritual, slaughter, law-keeping to the minutiae. Then through the centuries, the most conservative branches of Judaism tried to follow that. What do you do with the idea of sacrifice and the law-keeping?

CP: Mamoneides was a twelfth-century rabbi and philosopher who was born in Spain and lived in Egypt. He was very uncomfortable with all the rules of the sacrificial system. He said it was just a stage in Israelite development. The fact of the matter is that Mamoneides probably didn't grasp the notion that there was no other way to worship God in the ancient world. You worshiped God through giving gifts, and the gift was something precious to you. One of the most precious of possessions was the cattle you owned. If you felt you had sinned, you offered God a gift by way of propitiation.

That was the notion behind the sacrificial system. Blood in the ancient world was considered a cleansing liquid because it was the liquid of life. They saw that if you lost blood, you died. Therefore, it was the blood of life, and it was used to purify.

As far as we can gather, that was the notion behind the sacrificial system. It was part of the way Jews worshiped until the destruction of the second temple. I know Jews who are sophisticated scholars and very religious, who want to see the sacrificial system reestablished. I don't.

MHR: What does it mean, then, for you to worship?

CP: To ask, to remember, to lament, to complain, to seek one's own self and that which is beyond the self. Prayer is the trajectory and the perspective, enabling you to locate your own sense of self in this trajectory. If you don't have a sense of where you are from,

you don't know where you are at! And if you don't know where you are at, you have no sense of self. And if you have no sense of self, you are a very frightened human being.

MHR: For you, worship involves prayer and Jewish tradition. But is worship bigger than that? Is it part of your everyday living—your writing, for example?

CP: Yes! Absolutely. Writing is an act of worship too. And learning. For some Jews, learning is more of an act of worship than worship itself. There is an issue in Jewish law as to whether or not you may interrupt someone for prayers when they are learning. Some rabbis say yes, some say no.

MHR: You said writing is an act of worship. You have also written that nothing is sacred to the writer save the act of writing. Is that a paradox?

CP: Well, there is a difference between worship and sanctity. In worship you enter into a relationship with somebody or something. The worship is in the relationship. I don't think there is something objectively sacred about anything that I write, but the act of creating has an aura of sanctity to me. The moments when I lose myself—that's what I dream of, to get lost in the writing—those relational moments, that arc of relationship between my being and the writing, the thing being created, is as close as I can get to the essence of worship. I feel the same way, for example, when I'm in a synagogue and I'm lost in prayer. I don't think there is any intrinsic sanctity to the particular words, because if circumstances dictate, I would have no objection to changing the words.

There is a major discussion going on in my synagogue right now as to whether to change the words in a prayer that is 2,000 years old. That prayer only mentions the patriarchs. Well, what about the matriarchs? The discussion is whether to include not only Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. Now that's a major change. But there is no frozen sanctity for me in that old formula; the sanctity lies in the relationship between myself as a human being and the text in the act of worship. That arc, again, that trajectory—that is the sacred moment.

The same thing occurs to the writer. That is the mystery. That's the lone moment of awe. That's where we somehow come out of our mortal self. That's the moment of the transcendent.

MHR: In *Davita's Harp*, Jacob Daw says to Davita, "A writer is a strange instrument of our species, a harp of sorts, fine tuned to the dark contradictions of life. . . ."

CP: That's what I'm talking about. A harp is a bunch of strings, and it is nothing unless someone is playing it. It is the melody of

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the harp that is the mystery. Sometimes if you leave a harp out in a strong wind, the wind will make the melody.

In Los Angeles somewhere, there is a harp that is a sculpture which reacts to winds. The harp is physical, the wind is physical, even though we can't see it. The music—what's the music? The music is the relationship between the harp and the wind. The writing is the relationship between the writer and the piece of paper. Worship is the relationship between the worshiper and the text.

MHR: Can a writer such as yourself ever retire?

CP: I don't know how writers retire. You see, I don't know how writers are made. Somebody who is in a profession and transfers at a certain point and climbs the ladder, gets to the top. The profession dictates the time frame.

Writing doesn't dictate a time frame. There can be long periods of time when you are not writing at all and you are sitting there looking out a window and thinking. It's as mysterious to me now as it was when I was sixteen, seventeen years old.

I don't know what retirement means, because there is no time frame for a writer. I may decide I don't want to write anymore—so, okay, I'm finished writing. But that doesn't mean it's going to turn off. All it means is I'm going to lie there and toss and turn, and sentences are going to go through my head as they always do, and sooner or later I'm going to pick up the pen and write.

I have no illusions about writing. It's not something I do, it's something I'm driven to do. I don't understand it.

MHR: Writing seems to be more than just writing on a pad of paper, or typing at a keyboard. When you are looking out the window and imagining, that's part of writing too.

CP: Yes, and it's the fact that anytime you encounter anything, you are always looking to see if you can use it or rephrase it or restructure it. The head works constantly in terms of structure, creating form. I don't know that anyone who is a writer can get out of that. If you wake up one day and you don't have that anymore—that's the time that you retire.

MHR: What do you see on the horizon for humanity as we approach the end of the twentieth century?

CP: Well, it's generally our fate as human beings that as we approach the end of a century, we go collectively mad. And as we approach the end of a millennium, we grow collectively even madder. That is what is happening to us today: More fundamentalism.

More visions, more insecurities, more madness. And you can see it all over the planet.

We just have to get over this hurdle of the next few years. What's interesting to me is that these calendrical cycles are entirely artificial. Nature knows no calendar. Nature simply hums along. We are the ones who have created the calendar, and we react to it. So we think some enormous event is about to occur, because of some map we've imposed on it.

In all candor, what I'm hoping is that we make it to the end of the century and turn the corner. The last century has been the most awful century in the history of the millennium. I hope and I pray that we are at the beginning of the end of that awfulness as we turn into the next millennium.

(Note: For information on Chain Potok, visit the Potok web site sponsored by La Sierra University, at: www.lasierra.edu/~ballen/potok.)

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R E M I N D E R S
O F G O D

ECLIPSE

By Leif Peterson

Although I am mostly against it, my wife insists we find a church. Every Sunday now we get up early, shower, put on nice clothes and drive to a new church which, she says, "We'll see if we feel at home at." After the service we go to the coffee hour and my wife rates the congregation on how friendly they are. I have been secretly rating the coffee and snacks, but so far they've all fallen into the not-worth-mentioning category, with the exception of the Lutherans where we had impressively strong coffee and some sort of Scandinavian pastry that I went back for again and again until Lisa flashed me that You're-embarrassing-me look and I reluctantly called it quits.

This whole church-finding mission came about shortly after we discovered that Lisa was pregnant, which came about almost immediately after we were married. Having children was not something we had planned to do anytime in the near future and from the moment we found out we both boarded the emotional roller coaster, although we seemed to be on different tracks. Whenever I was on my way up, Lisa was on her way down. When I was down, Lisa was suddenly cheerful and optimistic. In this way we balanced each other out nicely. But as our due date approached we found that our emotions about the reality of what was about to happen to us began manifesting themselves in strange, physical ways. I found myself cleaning the house in what can only be described as an obsessive manner. Lisa, who was mostly in a state of shock for the first six months during which she did nothing but cry and eat Reese's Peanut Butter cups, suddenly quit the Reese's and announced that we needed to start going to church.

Our neighbors Gil and Kathy, whom we eat dinner with every Sunday night and who are due with their first baby a few weeks before us, have had a completely different experience. Gil has been mowing and fertilizing the lawn twice a week and expanding it to places where previously there was no lawn, and both of them spend the entire weekend at the big stores like Wal-Mart and Shopko buying cartfuls of baby items.

When we have dinner with them we discuss our obsessions, and we discover that at the root of it all is our need to have things "in order" before our babies arrive. Gil wants the lawn in order, I want the house in order, Kathy wants all the baby stuff in order, and Lisa wants our spiritual lives to be in order.

When Gil cooks dinner for us he always does it on the grill. “Anything you can cook, you can cook better on a grill,” he’s fond of saying. Gil makes me a drink and we step onto the deck to check the meat. As he raises the lid a billow of smoke rises into the night air. I look at the sky and try to identify Neptune and Jupiter, which I learned from my mother this morning are now visible in the night sky. Ever since my father died, my mother has become interested in the stars. She reads books, subscribes to astronomy magazines, listens to the “Star Report” every morning on Public Radio, and calls me from her home in Canada any time there is going to be something interesting visible in the sky. This morning, after telling me where to locate Neptune and Jupiter, she told me that a full lunar eclipse would be visible next Sunday night. Set your alarm or stay up late, she said. There won’t be another opportunity like this for years. The meat sizzles on the grill as Gil flips it. I can hear the voices of the girls from inside. I ask Gil how the Orioles are doing in the wild card race.

I met Gil when I first asked him for money. I work for a nonprofit organization as a fundraiser and he works for the Baltimore Orioles. Part of his job is deciding who they give money to and how much. I took him out to lunch at Danny’s to butter him up and on the way into the restaurant I twisted my ankle on the curb and it swelled up like a balloon. Gil took me back to the stadium and had one of the trainers work on my foot. As the trainer taped a bag of ice to my ankle Gil talked about the Orioles’ chances of making it to the playoffs this year. He didn’t bother to find out if I was a sports fan. Either he assumed everyone was, or he believed the speculations he was providing would be interesting to anyone, sports fan or not. I couldn’t drive my car, so he ended up giving me a ride home. He helped me inside and I introduced him to Lisa. As I filled her in on what had happened, Gil stood at the window and commented on what a nice neighborhood we lived in. Lisa made coffee and Gil ended up staying for a couple of hours. He seemed reluctant to leave and very comfortable staying. Later I asked Lisa if she had found the afternoon strange. “He was completely comfortable here,” she said. “And I was completely comfortable having him here. Yes, it was strange. It was as if some other force was at work.” Before Gil left that day we had a verbal agreement that his organization would write my organization a check. Later we learned that it was during this visit to our house that Gil had noticed that the house next to ours was for sale. We learned this the day they moved in. Maybe some unknown force was at work that day, because the four of us became friends almost instantly, and it was a friendship that Lisa and I both felt had years of history behind it.

When the meat is done we take it inside and sit down at the table. Although Gil and Kathy have no desire to go to church, they’re always interested in how our search is going. Gil calls it our search for God.

“How goes the search for God?” he asks as we dish up our salads.

“Dismal,” I say.

“Fine,” says Lisa.

I look at her and shove a forkful of salad into my mouth.

“Well, it’s not easy,” she says. “We don’t really even know what we’re looking for.”

We don’t know what we’re looking for, so we’ve been open to just about anything. We’re new at this, but we have learned that Catholics have “Mass” and Protestants have “services.” Lisa always feigns annoyance with me when I refer to them as “sessions.”

I get up and go to the kitchen to put coffee on. I’m as comfortable in their kitchen as I am in my own by now.

“This morning’s session was dismal,” I say.

Gil and Kathy wait for Lisa to object, but she only smiles sadly.

“It really was,” she says.

Gil and Kathy look to Lisa for an explanation, but Lisa isn’t up to offering it.

“Well?” they chorus.

“Someone took my wallet,” I say, bringing the coffee to the table.

“What?” says Kathy. “Is that true, Lisa?”

“I’m pretty sure it is,” Lisa says.

“It’s absolutely true,” I say. “I had my wallet when I went in. I even put money in the offering plate. Then on the way home, we stopped to pick up a paper, and no wallet.”

“That almost seems unbelievable,” says Gil.

As I pour coffee the chatter that is characteristic of our evenings together diffuses. There is a sudden seriousness that I don’t think we’ve shared before. I wonder if we were not both expecting babies if we wouldn’t be making jokes right now. Our anticipation of bringing children into the world has added a seriousness to almost everything. I have been especially struck by these emotions lately. There are a thousand wrongs in this world that you could commit against me that I would quietly endure, but commit them against my child and I will hunt you down and kill you. The power of these feelings scares me.

We say goodnight to Gil and Kathy at the front door and walk across the yard to our house. On the way we resume our conversation from earlier in the day.

“Let’s give it up,” I say. “We’re not churchgoers.”

“I’m not ready to give up yet,” says Lisa. “We just had a bad experience.”

“We’ve had more than one,” I say.

We go inside and up to our room. When Lisa is finished in the bathroom she turns off the light and sits on my side of the bed. A beam of moonlight comes in the window and lights up her face. She strokes my hair and places my hand on her stomach. The baby there is moving, pushing, and kicking against the tight skin. Lisa smiles at me and says, “That really was a bad session.”

The next day at the office I’m reading the paper and waiting for a phone call from Starbucks saying that they’re going to give my organization fifteen thousand dollars. I look at the clock and suddenly have the urge to leave early and take champagne home to my wife. I want to drink champagne with my wife. I haven’t had a glass of wine with her for over six months. I’ve had drinks with Gil, with people from work, alone, but not with her. I want to share a nice bottle of wine with her and stay up late talking. These days we are always in bed by ten.

The phone rings and I find a frantic Kathy on the other end. It’s several seconds before I can figure out what’s going on.

“I’m in labor,” she yells.

“You can’t be,” I say. “You aren’t due for a month.”

“I’m in labor,” she says. “I can’t get hold of Gil and Lisa’s not home. You have to come and get me.”

Suddenly I picture Kathy in their living room, sitting on the carpet in a puddle of water. I hang up the phone without saying good-bye and race downstairs to my car.

Once I’ve got her safely situated at the hospital I call Gil and get hold of him. My voice sounds strangely calm in my ears, almost as if I’m trying to be funny.

“Your wife’s in labor,” I say.

When I call home, Lisa’s there and says she’s on her way. Before long we are all crowded into the hospital room as Kathy goes through wave after wave of contractions. For hours Gil comforts and encourages her, feeds her ice chips and strokes her hair. When the contractions hit Kathy closes her eyes and moans. We walk her through the halls, she sits in the jacuzzi, she rocks in a rocking chair. The moans come from deep within her, as if from another body she’s got hidden inside. Sometimes I don’t think she can handle another one. Then it subsides and she’s fine. Between some of them she even falls asleep.

When it gets dark outside Lisa and I decide to go home. Kathy’s cervix is dilating steadily, but her doctor doesn’t think she’ll give birth until morn-

ing. We promise to come back first thing to give Gil a break if he needs it. We get in the car and drive in silence. Lisa leans her head back and looks at the stars through the sunroof. I take my eyes from the road occasionally and try to locate Neptune and Jupiter, but I can't remember where they're supposed to be. Kathy's moaning is still ringing in my ears. I look at Lisa. I want to tell her I don't want to do this. I'm not ready to have a baby. I'm not ready to see her go through that kind of pain. I'm not looking forward to being that helpless, not being able to do anything to help her. I want to tell her that I'd rather it was me that had to do it, not her. I'd rather have the pain myself. I don't want to watch her go through it. I put my hand on her knee and give it a squeeze. Lisa looks at me and smiles weakly.

"My mother said there's going to be an eclipse on Sunday night," I say.

I had been planning to suggest an eclipse party at our house with Kathy and Gil, but in light of what we've just experienced the actions of the planets and moon suddenly seem trivial. I want to take Lisa away. I want to live on a remote farm somewhere. I want our child to be eight years old tomorrow.

Lisa suddenly pokes my arm and points out the window.

"Look at that church," she says. "That one looks nice."

We are near our house, but neither of us has ever seen this church. It's a rather small building made of stone. The entire front, or back, I can't tell which, is made of plate- and stained-glass windows. It has a large lawn and borders a thick wood of oaks and maples. The thought of trying another church depresses me, but I don't want to raise feathers.

"It looks nice," I say. "Let's try it on Sunday."

The next morning I call the office and tell them I won't be in for a while. I find out from my secretary that Starbucks hasn't called back. We go to the hospital and enter Kathy's room. Gil tells us that she's approaching ten centimeters. Within an hour Gil and Kathy have a beautiful baby boy. He has a tuft of black hair in the middle of his head.

Lisa decides to stay for awhile, so I head in to work. When I get there my secretary smiles at me nervously.

"Well?" I ask.

"He called," she says. "I transferred him to your voice mail. I have a feeling it's not good news."

I close my office door behind me, sit down at my desk and listen to my messages. She was right, it's not good news. Starbucks has decided not to give my organization any money. The Starbucks executive's message is short and to the point. "After reviewing your organization's record, we have decided against a donation."

My job is to ask people for money and I'm good at it, but even so, I get told no all the time. I'm used to it. It doesn't get to me. But this time it does. There's something in the Starbucks executive's voice that gets under my skin. I feel like he is judging my organization, and not just my organization, but me.

"It's not your job to judge," I say to the phone.

Of course I'm being childish. That's exactly what his job is.

I go home early and sit on the porch with a beer. Lisa's not home, probably still at the hospital, so I put on Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, which she hates. I don't like it much either, but there are times when it feels good to play it loud.

When I go inside to get another beer I pick up the phone book and look for the church we'd seen the night before. I don't remember the name, but I think if I see it I'll remember it. I find the one I think is right and call. After two rings an answering machine picks up and a woman's voice comes on.

"Greetings from Holy Family. Our Sunday worship is at 9:30. If you would like to meet with the pastor, please leave your name and number and he will call back as soon as possible. We hope to see you at worship on Sunday. Thanks for calling."

The machine beeps and on an impulse I leave a message saying that my wife and I would like to meet with the pastor. The next morning he calls while Lisa and I are both still home, and we arrange to meet with him at the only time we all seem to be free—Saturday night at eight o'clock.

The air is starting to have some crispness to it. There is a fall freshness in the air that I love. When I come home from work one day I find Lisa sitting on the porch with a blanket wrapped around her. I kiss her forehead and sit down next to her. Our birdfeeder is almost empty and as tired as I am I feel the sudden urge to go out and buy birdseed to fill it. I'm afraid that if it doesn't get done before Lisa goes into labor, then it won't get done and the birds will starve. The leaves of our maples are just starting to turn. I feel like the next time I look at them they will be completely bare. Life is moving too fast for me, but I can't seem to make it slow down.

"How're Kathy and the baby?" I say.

"Good," says Lisa. "Beautiful."

She squeezes my hand.

"We're going to have one of those, you know."

"A baby? I sure hope so. I've had puppies before and they always chew on my slippers."

Lisa smiles and punches me in the arm. She looks up at the sky, then closes her eyes.

“Do you think we’re ready for this?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe it doesn’t matter. Once that baby’s born we’ll just do it.”

“You’re going to be a good father,” she says.

As it turns out, the eclipse party is on. When I mention it to Gil and Kathy, they’re all for it. I tell them that we’ll have to stay up late and they say, “Not a problem. We’re up most of the night anyway these days.”

On Saturday evening we drive to Holy Family. It’s been a beautiful, sunny day, but now there are dark, threatening clouds on the horizon as dusk approaches.

“I hope it stays clear for the party,” I say.

“Me too,” says Lisa. “But I think we should have the party even if it’s cloudy. The eclipse is going to happen whether we can see it or not.”

She says things like that sometimes. It reminds me of how much I love her.

“I have a good feeling about this church,” I say.

“You do?”

“I think this is going to be the one.”

“I’m glad,” she says. “That makes me feel good.”

When we get to the church the parking lot is empty and the building is dark. I check my watch. We’re on time, it’s eight o’clock.

“I hope he doesn’t stand us up,” I say. “That would be a bad sign.”

We sit in the car and wait. I turn the radio on to WBAL and we listen to the Orioles game so that I can do more than just nod dumbly tomorrow night when Gil tells me about it. After fifteen minutes we start wondering what we should do. I go to the front doors just to be sure, but they’re locked.

“Well,” says Lisa, “should we stay or go?”

Before we can make a decision we see a large buck walk out of the woods and onto the church lawn. He is magnificent, large and muscular, with a huge rack. He walks across the grass and nibbles the leaves from a small tree. Periodically he lifts his huge head and looks around, sniffing the air. He looks right at us, but I don’t think he knows we’re here. Suddenly we see the muscles in his sides ripple and he begins to paw at the ground.

“What’s he doing?” asks Lisa.

“I don’t know,” I say.

Then we realize that the buck is seeing his reflection in one of the plate-glass windows and thinks it’s another buck. He begins to snort, shaking his head and pawing at the ground aggressively. Then he dips his head, begins to charge, and crashes through the window into the church.

Lisa sucks air through her teeth, something she does when she’s attempting not to scream bloody murder. She grabs my leg and her fingernails pierce my jeans.

“What do we do?”

There is only one thing to do, and we both know it. We get out of the car and carefully approach the broken window. I make Lisa stand to one side and I stick my head in. At first all I see is glass and blood. Then I see the buck standing on the far side of the sanctuary, eyes fiery and wild as if he’s still looking for the other buck. Lisa steps up beside me. It’s hard for us to believe the havoc he has wreaked in just a couple minutes. There is blood everywhere. It looks as though the buck made two or three circles through the church before stopping where he is now. There is blood on the carpet, on the pews, even on the altar. There is a huge gash in the side of the buck’s neck and a large flap of skin hangs down like a torn piece of canvas. A steady stream of blood still flows to the carpet at his feet.

“What do we do?” whispers Lisa.

I’m considering that when the front doors of the church swing open and the pastor walks in and throws on all the lights.

The buck, Lisa, and I all look to him for guidance, but he just looks around at the carnage and says, “What is this?”

Then, perhaps frightened by the pastor’s voice, the buck stumbles to the front of the church, as far from the pastor as he can get, and falls to the ground beneath the cross. Lisa and I both breath a sigh of relief. We are not concerned that this buck will rise again.

Again the pastor says, “What is this?”

With the lights on the destruction looks even worse. The deep red, almost purple blood seems to have been splattered on almost everything, as if it had been sprayed by a runaway fire hose. The only thing I can think to say is:

“We’re the Bennetts. We had an appointment.”

Eventually we get the pastor filled in on the events that led up to his arrival. As we tell the story, he becomes very businesslike and begins saying

things like, “Yes, I see,” and “Okay, very well.” When things are sorted out we all agree that the best course of action is to simply get things cleaned up. The pastor seems thrilled that Lisa and I are willing to help.

“Very good,” he says, “no need to alarm anyone else in the congregation. We’ll clean it up ourselves.”

And that’s what we do. We drag the buck outside and stash it at the edge of the woods. Then Lisa and I begin on the pews with soapy rags as the pastor drives off to find more cleaning products and a carpet shampooer. We work almost all night scrubbing and shampooing. As we work, the wind outside picks up and it begins to rain. We can almost feel the dark clouds pushing down from above. For the first several hours the pastor seems frantic, working up a sweat as he wipes the blood from his church. At some point, however, when it becomes apparent that we’re making progress and that we’ll be able to finish by morning, he begins to calm.

“Good, good,” he says. “We’re getting this mess cleaned up. Besides the broken window, I don’t think anyone will be able to notice anything happened. I can’t thank you folks enough for your help.”

By six o’clock we’ve got the job done. We’ve even cleaned up the window area and taped plastic over the opening. We sit together on one of the front pews and breathe relief. We look around and a deep, satisfying fatigue washes over us.

“Let’s go home and get some sleep,” the pastor says. “I hope you folks will still come back for church.”

Lisa says we will.

“We wouldn’t miss it,” I say.

The next night we have a late dinner with Gil and Kathy at their house. Gil cooks huge Mahi Mahi steaks on the grill smothered in pesto. We drink a bottle of wine and toast their new son. After dinner we take our coffee and blankets out into the backyard and sit in lawn chairs to watch the eclipse. Kathy breastfeeds the baby and then he sleeps. I notice that we are all watching the baby, are fascinated by him, still can’t really fathom what this child means for us. The sky has cleared and the moon is brilliant and full. It is so bright out I can see the individual blades of grass. Steam rises from our coffees and dissipates in the crisp air.

I think of my mother in Canada, waking up to her alarm, pulling on her bathrobe, and sitting on her porch in the darkness under a blanket, alone. Lisa sometimes jokes, because I eat so poorly, that I’m going to be the first to die. I don’t like to think about it, because there’s no easy answer. I cannot imagine living without her. I can’t imagine leaving her to live out her last years alone. We feel so lucky to have found each other in this world, but are we prepared for what’s ahead?

As we sit and wait, Gil asks how our search for God is going.

I look at Lisa and brush a strand of hair from her beautiful face. I can tell from looking at her that she's not ready to tell our secret.

"It's going fine," she says.

"Is that true?" he asks me.

I take a long sip from my coffee before answering.

"That's true," I say. "I think we're making progress."

Neither of us offers more. We sit in silence as the moon begins to darken. In only minutes the night has turned completely black.

That morning we overslept and got to church late. As we took seats in the back, the pastor was already into his sermon. Neither Lisa nor I remember what he preached on, we were both too tired to listen, but he seemed cheerful and exuberant. I spent the whole service searching the church with my eyes, inch by inch, to see if I could find any blood that we might have missed. I searched the strange faces of the congregation and marveled that they could be ignorant of the previous evening's events. They had no idea what had gone on there. They had no idea how blood-soaked their church had been only hours before. Halfway through the service I became satisfied that we'd done our job well. Besides the broken window, which we were sure the pastor had somehow explained, there was no sign that blood had been spilled in this church. Our secret was safe. But, I've never been good at keeping secrets. Once I was sure our secret was secure, I felt the sudden urge to share it. And I didn't want Lisa or the pastor to get to it first. I wanted to be the one to share our adventure with the congregation. I wanted to be the one to let them in on what had happened.

On the drive home a sadness filled the car. We passed several other churches as they were letting out, and each time I felt the urge to stop and tell our story.

The earth continues its path across the moon and again the lawn lightens. So quickly, it's completely over and the moon is full and bright again.

"That was nice," says Kathy. "Thank you for doing this with us."

I look at the baby fast asleep in her arms, its mouth slightly open.

"You have a good baby," I say. "I don't think I've heard him cry once."

Kathy strokes the baby's head and smiles.

"He cries all the time," she says. "You've just been lucky so far." 

THE ADMIRAL COMES HOME:

The Joys and Trials of a Three-Dollar Phonograph

By James Vescovi

The little bald man with a graying goatee got a glum look on his face. He took a deep breath and said, haltingly, “Well . . . I’ll have to ask three for it.”

My wife and I gave each other a look of befuddlement. Three what? we wondered. He couldn’t have meant three hundred dollars—not in the midst of his other merchandise: paperbacks selling two for a dollar, children’s blouses for a quarter each, and sleeper sofas made from the same material as Ed Norton’s sport jacket.

We had set our sights on an Admiral phonograph from the 1960s. It was in mint condition, covered in snazzy gray-and-white vinyl, and had two speakers, one of which could be unlatched and unwound across the room for “stereophonic” sound. It had faux ivory handles and heavy knobs that turned as if they were mounted in butter. Best of all, the phonograph purred like the engine of a pre-Embargo Chrysler New Yorker and was just about as large, to boot.

Three what? I asked myself again. We live in Manhattan, where any price is possible. In the Big Apple, people lay out \$8.50 for a postage-stamp portion of polenta, a cornmeal gruel eaten by my peasant grandparents—baked for breakfast, cold for lunch, and sprinkled with cheese for supper.

Finally, my wife cleared her throat and asked, “You mean . . . three . . . dollars?”

“Fraid so,” said the man. He turned away to busy himself with a stack of yellow sales receipts.

“We’ll take it,” I said and, a nanosecond later, out the door we went with three young children and a phonograph that weighed as much as all of them combined. We sped off in our rental car, mulling over ideas on how to get the thing home from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where we

were summering. When Christ comes to claim the world, he will not touch the U.P.'s thrift shops. Instead, they will be taken to heaven as is, with the same items, prices, and proprietors.

By the time we'd arrived back at my mother-in-law's house, where we were staying, we had decided to dismantle the Admiral, take the turntable and tubes with us on the plane, and ship the case back home. While my wife carefully packed the delicate components in her carry-on bag, I wedged the case into a well-padded box, wrapped it with a mummy's worth of tape, and hurried off to the U.P.S. office, located in the back of the town's lawnmower repair shop.

"Oversized!" said a heavy-set woman behind the counter, a Pall Mall wagging in her mouth. "I can tell you right now there'll be a surcharge on a box that big."

"Weigh it," I said.

She grabbed the box in a bear hug and tossed it on the scale. She did her calculations, the cigarette not leaving her lips, and finally said, with a shake of her head, "Seventeen dollars and fifty cents even."

And so, for \$20.50, the Admiral got a new home in New York.

Our home has no TV, no CDs, and is not connected to the web. We are not Luddites; we despise 99 percent of what appears on the tube, have e-mail at work, and see no reason to buy CDs when we have decades' worth of cassette tapes and beloved LPs. A Mahler symphony is not spoiled for me by an occasional crackle.

The phonograph case arrived a week after we did, without a scratch or dent. We reinstalled the tubes and turntable and plugged the unit in. For a minute, we held our breath. Gradually, the Admiral's hum filled the room, as if the machine itself were breathing. We hooted and howled, but not for long: There was an important decision to make. What record would christen the phonograph?

I began thumbing through our albums, but the choice soon became clear. A few moments later, Louis Armstrong was singing "Mack the Knife." When his trumpet came in, the Admiral made Louie sound as if he were perched happily on the arm of an easy chair in our living room.

It had been too long since we'd last played our records. Our previous turntable had bit the dust four years earlier, dropped during a move to a larger apartment. We had made one attempt to replace it with an all-in-one stereo unit bought from a Columbia graduate student for \$40. When we brought the thing home, everything worked but the turntable. There was no use buying something new from the hi-fi store—not with utility bills at \$95 per month and baby formula at \$3.09 per can.

But, with the Admiral, our ship had come in. The weeks after his arrival were nothing less than a musical celebration, as we flung album after album onto the turntable without bothering to return them to their jackets. We danced and sang and listened attentively to our old favorites: Aaron Copland's *Clarinet Concerto*, Edith Piaf with Robert Chauvigny, Nick Drake's *Pink Moon*, and *Jonathan Winters Live*.

And, then, lo and behold, our cup runneth over again. Friends who had heard about the Admiral showed up with their own LPs, which they no longer played but couldn't bear to part with. They said, "You guys want these?" And so the records are on permanent loan: Ella Fitzgerald, Danny Kaye, Glen Campbell, and plenty of Walt Disney for the kids, all booming off the Admiral.

He was with us for six months when his hum turned into a groan. My wife thought it was due to the fact that we'd left him on all day a few times; I suspect it was the 78s, which spun out supper-club music late into the night. Whatever the reason, the machine needed help, and off we went to Tubesville, a cash-only repair shop on the ground floor of a Lower East Side tenement. The repairman, a fortyish fellow with a tattoo peeking out from the collar of his shirt, who went by the name of "Blackie," diagnosed the problem. The Admiral needed a major overhaul: new tubes and electrolytic capacitors, all buried deep inside him. Very labor-intensive work, Blackie said. The estimate was \$150.

My wife and I argued about the repair.

For me, the kick of paying \$3 was suddenly lost.

"No way," said my wife, "he's one of us now. We have to salvage him."

So, we scraped together a few bucks left over from Christmas cash, took chicken off the dinner menu, and made a pact to get after the kids to shut off lights not in use.

"It's a go," I told Blackie.

A few days later, Blackie called to tell me the phonograph was ready. He said it sounded so good that he wondered if he could play his doo-wop records on it until we came to pick it up. 🏠

IN RESPONSE TO AN UGLY WOMAN

By Julie Kluth

I sought comfort in the established schedule of opening my flower shop located near the center of the mall. After spending a weekend entertaining a household of noisy teenagers, I didn't care to interact with anyone. The routine of taking an inventory, watering plants, and restocking shelves required little response from my soul. I recognized the regular mall walkers, senior citizens dressed in nylon jogging suits seeking to improve their cardiovascular systems. By avoiding eye contact with the continuous stream of individuals, I eluded returning courteous smiles and senseless small talk about the weather. My morning progressed uneventfully, until I noticed a woman walking against the flow of pedestrian traffic toward my store.

She was ugly.

Her thin frame functioned like a hanger upon which the worn fabric of her wrinkled skin was draped. Her shoulders drooped and the outline of her knees threatened to poke through the cheap polyester material of her plaid pants. Her matted hair looked as if she tried to cut the worst of it off with dull scissors. She entered the shop and looked at me with eyes diseased by cataracts. I nodded and she smiled back with scummy yellow teeth. She smelled awful.

I offered no verbal greeting and immediately busied myself with cleaning the glass doors behind which I stocked hundreds of perfect, red, All-American Beauty roses. I snubbed my unwelcome visitor but watched her reflection in the mirrored backs of the coolers, suspecting she might steal something of mine.

Yet, while observing this wretched creature I noticed the reverence with which she caressed a leaf or touched a blossom. She delighted in the full coral blooms of an azalea plant and giggled when the tips of a hanging ivy tickled the top of her head. The deep purple violets charmed her and she knelt, as if in worship, to inhale the fragrance of the white gardenias.

My heart softened toward her for an instant. Putting my cleaning supplies aside, I turned and asked, "Are you looking for something special?" I hoped it wasn't the case but felt obligated to ask.

"They are all so beautiful," she whispered, as if she were in church.

"Yeah," I mumbled, stepping back from her and thinking she might have lice when she started scratching her head. She reached into the frayed pocket of her coat and pulled out a handful of change.

"I would like to buy a flower—but this is all I have." Transferring the coins to my hand, I counted fifty-seven cents: two dimes and thirty-seven pennies. She nervously chewed her bottom lip as she waited in anticipation to hear my verdict.

"You have enough for a carnation. Will that do?" Her shoulders straightened momentarily and her eyes seemed to brighten behind the partially opaque lenses. Taking her response as a yes, I said, "They're on the other side of the store if you want to pick one out."

"Oh yes—may I?"

"Sure."

I led her over to an open cooler full of red, yellow, pink, and white full-sized carnations. "When you find what you want, bring it to the counter and I'll ring it up for you."

Standing behind the safety of the cash register, I watched as the woman savored the joy of selecting a fifty-cent flower. She didn't paw through the buckets like so many of my customers. Rather, she treated each stem as a fragile treasure. I enjoyed sharing this woman's excitement over selecting a flower, but I could not imagine what she would do with something so pretty when she was so ugly.

She turned just then as if hearing my inner thoughts. I felt ashamed for thinking poorly of her. She gazed at the flowers once more, then grinned as she settled on a beautiful pink carnation and held it up for my approval.

"You made a wonderful choice. Would you like me to wrap it for you?" Her countenance dropped. "There's no extra charge." With joy renewed she nodded and shuffled from foot to foot, much like a child waiting for a treat. "Are you buying this for a special occasion?" My question startled her, and she stared at the floor as a blush crept into her cheeks.

"You would laugh at me if I told you why I am buying it."

Captured by her sincerity I gently and honestly responded, "No—I wouldn't laugh, I—I really would like to know."

Her cloudy eyes seemed to search my face for traces of indifference. I waited apprehensively, afraid she might not find me worthy of her response. As if sensing my fear of rejection, she reached out an arthritically gnarled finger and briefly touched my arm to comfort me.

“I am buying this flower so I can thank the God who made it.”

Speechless, I carefully handed her the wrapped flower and watched as she left the store. Then, wanting to thank her for her gift to me, I scrambled from behind the counter that separated us and hurried into the mall. Looking up and down its length, I saw no one but experienced a fragrance I have yet to identify. 🏰

DENOMINATIONAL

By Mary M. Brown

What separates
us
is the distance
between the
ear and the sound of
the sea:
it is perfect.

It is the round
moving space
between a
dreamer and
the straight
white ceiling that
underlines
the rain.

Falling firmly between
us
are the footsteps
of a thousand
ancient pilgrims
who have yearned
inside years
for the only
sacred city.

I am grateful
for what is between
us.

I could bear you
no closer
than this.

FOR A CUP TO CATCH THE DROPS

By Tim Pompey

Curved moon bowl glows
with the last trace of creaminess
before the clock strikes midnight
and the world rewinds to black.

Firefly liquid spills from its lips
and trickles over thin roads
underneath tires tracking
through wet fluorescence.

Small drops splash on shoes
and cling tenaciously
their tiny flares an omen
of the narrow gap between

insight and oblivion.

MY SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER KNOWS TOO MUCH

By Daniel Gallick

He gets tired of talking Luke.
He bows his head. His face reddens
as he looks up at us third graders
and whispers words from his gut,

“You don’t understand, but . . .
I . . . I . . . do not worry over death.
I look forward to my day of death.
Father will greet me. I will smile.

Kids, the glory that is heaven
can never be put into stupid words.
English dies when it speaks of God.
I grasp the perfect time of beyond.”

The elderly man bows his head again,
says something below his breath, and
then, looks up beyond the ceiling.
This, the first time I listen to him.

I forget his name, his face,
but not his simple revelation.
His wife sits near him as he stands.
She stares up at him and smiles.

Yet, his quiet words mean nothing.
I do not have the profundity
to understand one who is so deep
he has nothing earthly to gaze at.

I feel shame. I do not learn,
but I do listen from that moment on.
A few weeks later, after I collect
from my teacher a free Bible

for coming ten Sundays in a row,
he dies. The soft tempest he echoed
fell to an earth that swallows ideals.
His whispers dug him a fond grave.

BABEL II

By Bryan D. Dietrich

Imagine Prometheus tripping down
a sky of stony thunderhead, his torch
exploding in his hand, flesh, like shrapnel,
hissing itself to sleep in the naked
Atlantic. A heart, titanic, flaming

and fused to two crossed ribs, slams into sand
on a beach the fog's forgotten. Later,
imaginary natives worship there,
under this strange crucifix from the stars,
reading charms by the light of burning bone . . .

It would be so nice to tell it that way,
to pretend the Challenger's bright, brief spark
spoke to me with visions of martyred gods,
but really now, they were only human—
a schoolteacher, a jazz saxaphonist.

Their hearts, their ribs, the light their death kindled,
brought no real worship, no curse from he who whets
the lightning. These seven, they knew but one
daring moment of life without weight,
shadow without the strain of certain breath.

More like Icarus then. But they didn't see
the sun. Not even close. I saw it
six times on TV, closed-captioned, slow-mo,
and each time refined my sense of the size
and shape of Babel. If their falling blood,

mingling now with seafoam, bought anything
at all, if that flash of a few loose pounds
of carbon shed light on anyone down
here, it taught us, maybe, for a short while
anyway, to remember our first ship,

this cankered, orbiting mother all hunched
and swollen from far too many monkeys
on her back. It taught us to look again
at her skin, to see it growing slack. Taught
something about birth, children, getting old

and tired of lugging babies on your hip.
And maybe she looked up with us at that
moment, shrugged, and didn't see anything
grand—no gods or goddess, no chariots
racing down the sun. Just kids, hers, playing

hell with Roman candles. No, probably
not that either. We just built the tower
too damn high. And afterwards, the trees,
they smacked more sweetly of coelacanth skin.
This is how you teach evolution. For days,

every time I saw steel or pulleys, cogs
or girders, I recognized the bronzed smell
of cancer—iron sweating in my blood.
Still, we've tried so hard to escape the clay—
the way I ran from Oklahoma once,

its rusted dirt, the way Adam stumbled,
running from that imprint in the mud—
we've tried so very hard that we deify
containment. And call it reaching. We need
the pressure of what we breathe to explode.

THE CENACLE

By Marlene Muller

Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional.

You are embarked. —Pascal

If she arrives at the house of prayer,
if she decides to trust her sense of direction
and cross another unfamiliar border,

silence will greet her. The quiet sisters
will lead her through rooms wide with ideas
and leave all the doors open behind her.

Again she will ache for a closing ritual.
She will beg the sisters with her eyes
how to let go. In her room, the single bed

and the simple desk will repeat her prayers,
and like a small plane lost over water, she will
circle. She will alert herself to time, to her chance

of survival. It will depend on the current,
she will think, on how far it can carry her,
and whether she is alone, or pilot, or passenger.

MUSTANG SALLY FORTH

By Judith Terry McCune

Hoping to purchase a pretty white Mazda, she's
haggling with men clasped in gold chains and smiles, then
huffing out into the night all self-righteous she's
hauling that self through the passenger side
of her Mustang: door crushed, glass crunched by the oncoming
Honda which kept on coming. No room now
for harboring anger or guilt, no time to be
heaping up coals. Hit the gas, girl
and hold up your head as the unsullied
hulls of Mercedes float by. You are
hailing the world with your windows wide open,
hollering love songs to suburb and mountain.
And hung in your mangled side mirror the Moon
howls a song wilder yet and you think *if I let go*
this hobbling hunk altogether will I keep flying?

GETTING SAVED

By Peggy Whiteneck

The hell of it is if God were to judge the sum of you
by all the should-haves with which you'd ever
tortured your restless life—

all the good things you ever meant to do—if God laid them
all end to end for your viewing, your ruing
would embrace the world.

The hell of it is if you were any sort of collector at all,
you'd have gathered only what's cracked and flawed,
because that's all God finds comely.

The hell of it is if you were any kind of true believer,
you'd have said to hell with a retirement account
and lived off the Word

that bristles like the spines of cacti
you have to brave to get to the sweet
heartmeat and milk.

The hell of it is your prickly mistrust of a love
so simple, so ample it palls your paltry
multitude of sins.

MAKING LIGHT OF IT

A Conversation With Pierce Pettis

By Stuart C. Hancock

We are crammed into the gothic basement of St. Paul's Chapel on the campus of Columbia University in New York City. There are about eighty others in the tiny, shoebox-shaped room, and it is hot. I am drinking a Rolling Rock—not out of choice, but because it is the only beer available—and I am worried that my friends, Gina and Matt, will not like the concert. We have already endured two mediocre singer-songwriters, it is going on ten o'clock, and the crowd is getting restless.

A lanky man, dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans, strolls up on stage. He seems bemused by the absence of a microphone, but after a somewhat sheepish “hello” to the audience, he finger-picks the opening notes of “Nod Over Coffee,” by Mark Heard. As his rich baritone fills the room, I glance over at my friends and know that my fears were unjustified. They—and the rest of the audience—are already caught up in the passion and intensity that Pierce Pettis is bringing into this small, crowded basement.

I first heard Pierce Pettis in 1990 on a Windham Hill folk compilation, Legacy, on which he performed the title track, a meditation on racial discrimination in the South:

Sundays we congregate
 Praise Jesus, pass the plate
 Sitting in our Sunday best
 Singing hymns and mopping sweat
 We learned the golden rule in separate Sunday
 schools
 In a house long divided against itself
 And it is a legacy passed down to you and me
 What we choose to believe
 We dare not question these things
 It is a legacy, a wild and bitter seed
 Scattered on these fertile fields
 Where the roots run deep

I was taken with the rightness of the lyrics and his powerful, but spare delivery. Soon after, I heard Tinseltown,





and was struck by the integrity and unswerving pursuit of truth—in all its beauty and tragedy—that was manifest in the songs. One example is found in the last verse of “Grandmother’s Song”:

Now my grandmother lies in a crumpled bed
And at night she hears voices in her head
And the family worries in the whispering dark
If she’s got her religion right
It’s a hardening of the arteries
It’s a softening of the mind
And I mean to go and see her, but I
Cannot ever seem to find the time

I recently spoke with Pettis by telephone from New York. He lives near Atlanta, but was in Nashville at the time, where he is a staff songwriter for Polygram Records. His current album, released in late 1996, is Making Light of It, distributed by Compass Records.

Mars Hill Review: What goes through your mind as you get up on stage? What do you want to give your audience?

Pierce Pettis: Well, lately my emphasis has changed more to wanting to focus on them rather than myself. In the past I would think, “What can I do to win them over?” Now I wonder, “What can I give them; how can I share this with them?” I don’t crave attention like I used to, and it frees me to enjoy my work. If I have a slow night, it no longer kills me. Now, I find that my audience’s reaction is a lot better, because what I’m doing is to place myself out in the audience—to relate to it as if I were relating to an individual. I try to have a conversational approach in my rapport with the audience. In so doing, I am able to get deeply into the songs, because I love the songs, and I love playing them.

MHR: You have said that you began playing the guitar when you were ten years old. What led you to the guitar, first of all?

PP: The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Who. I was growing up in the sixties, that was what was on the radio, and I wanted to play it. I wanted to be like them. But also, from the moment I first picked up the guitar, I started writing songs. There was always this thing inside of me, this desire to express *something*, and I think that songwriting gave it an escape valve. From the time I was a little kid, I was creative, but I didn’t have an outlet for it.

MHR: Do you remember your first song?

PP: It was pretty bad.

MHR: Would you care to sing it?

PP: Um, no. I don't remember it like I could play it, I remember the title, maybe. It was really terrible . . .

MHR: Okay, we'll skip it. Which musicians and songwriters influenced you?

PP: At that time, there were two tracks going through my head, corresponding with my two older sisters. One was in high school and the other in college, and I grew up on their discarded records. The sister who was in college was leaving all sorts of folk things to me—Dylan, Peter, Paul and Mary, Tom Paxton, and so on. My other sister was listening more to rock and roll, and I was getting her records, too. On the one hand, I'd hear a terrific folk album, and on the other hand, I'd hear Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl." The folk and the rock have been sort of mixed together in my head, and I feel like I can move pretty easily between the two. They're all roots, anyway. I can put on Pearl Jam one minute, and Norman Blake the next, and see where they're interconnected. Norman Blake is more obviously Appalachian folk, but when you put on Pearl Jam you can hear traces of what they were listening to when they were growing up.

MHR: You know, Bruce Cockburn's last couple of albums have sounded a lot like what you're doing. Do you think you've had a big influence on him?

PP: [Laughs] I doubt it, but I'll tell you what, I think Mark Heard had a big influence on both of us. I would consider it the greatest achievement of my life if I had any influence at all on Bruce Cockburn. He's one of those people that I admire beyond words.

MHR: Is there a particular song you wish you'd written?

PP: There are a million songs I wish I'd written. I wish I'd written "Raven in the Storm," by John Gorka and Jeff Hartley. I wish I'd written "Achy Breaky Heart," because I could really use the cash.

MHR: Can you describe the artistic vision with which you write songs? Hilaire Belloc discusses the songwriter's vision and purpose in his essay, "On Songs." Have you seen it?

PP: No, but I know he was a friend of G.K. Chesterton's, a very interesting guy. I've read about him, but never actually read his work. He's bound up with my interest in Chesterton. Lewis, if I recall, had some tremendous things to say about the artist's so-called vision, in a little essay he wrote in the twenties or thirties. He was more of a traditionalist; one of the things I really loved was his idea that, in the twentieth century, as we abandoned any unifying principle outside of ourselves, people quit talking about having *the* vision, and it became *my* vision. It suddenly became very selfish, whereas his point was that artists of a previous generation would have wanted to tap into the great beauty, truth and goodness—to tap into God, in a sense. They wanted to connect with something outside of themselves. Twentieth century artists, according to the essay, have been completely

self-absorbed and obsessed with their own personal vision. It gets boring and self-serving, and I think he's right.

MHR: In *The Abolition of Man*, he makes the distinction between the “sublime” and the “pretty.” In other words, there is no difference between the sublime, that beauty could be a category which could be universally held, and that which is personally, sensually pleasing to one person.

PP: Or at least something that could be universally “humbling.”

MHR: Yes, that's a good distinction. For you, besides making a living, and the fact that you're good at it, what would you say is the purpose of song-writing apart from the obvious, “songs are art and art is inherently valid?”

PP: Sometimes it is like a groaning. A song is a good groan—in the process of writing, you get something out of yourself. It is a vehicle for emotions, for conceptualizing something for which mere facts and conventional language is inadequate—it has to be in lyric form. I feel that I can convey mystery through song, in the same way that a good fairy tale can contain more truth than the straight facts. I don't know if there's any one purpose for song. The greatest purpose of all—this is going to sound corny, like Miss America's acceptance speech—is to gladden the heart. It sheds light and heat.

MHR: This seems off the subject, but trust me, it is going somewhere: Have you read *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O'Connor?

PP: Yes I have. I have a friend who's in that book, a fellow in Atlanta named Bill Sessions, a wonderful man.

MHR: There's a fine anecdote in there about her friends, the Deans from St. Augustine, who tell her, “We've got this friend in Mississippi who's a writer; his name's Bill Faulkner. Is he any good?” And Flannery replies, “Yessir, I reckon he's right good.”

PP: I remember that her opinions of other writers were pretty up-front. I remember she had something to say about Graham Greene. It seemed to her that through his fiction he apologized for his faith, and she found that offensive.

MHR: One of the things O'Connor talks about in the book—one of my preoccupations—is the difference between art and propaganda.

PP: To me, the difference is, propaganda is manipulative. Art should never be manipulative. Art should make an impact, but it is not outcome-based. It is not, “You put it in one end and it is always going to come out the same way every time on the other end.” Art is very much into the individual and how he receives it as an individual. It comes from an individual to other individuals, but is never directed to a homogeneous mass.

I am really suspicious, frankly, of criticism—literary criticism, film criticism, whatever—because it implies there is only one way to interpret anything, and any other way is wrong. I know there are some basic rules by which one judges good and bad work, but it becomes reductionist, too simplistic, removing the prerogative of the individual to filter a work through his own experiences and what has meaning to him. Propaganda treats us all as robots, and assumes that we will just march in lockstep. It is also trying to persuade us—art can be very persuasive, no doubt, but that’s not its purpose, that’s its byproduct. Propaganda has only one purpose, and that is to change us in some way. It may be a good way, of course. The word comes from the church, and means “propagation of the faith.” Most definitely, the church wants to change people, and in my opinion, we’re all the better for it. But it is not the purpose of art. When propaganda tries to disguise itself as art, it gets confusing, at best, and dishonest, at worst.

MHR: I think of this dichotomy when I think of some of your songs. The three that come to mind are “Legacy,” “Mickey Leland,” and “Stickman.” They are, in fact, persuasive, and have “messages,” so to speak. But I think of these songs as art, the reason being, that I could try to sum up “Stickman” in a few words—“it is about a man who is dying of AIDS”—but it is much more than that. It can only exist on its own, can only say what it is saying through the medium of the song itself. With propaganda, I think, you can describe the message in a paragraph, and not even need the thing itself to convey the message.

PP: To me, it is the manipulative nature of propaganda that I resent, as well as its condescension. Some propaganda can be so clever that you’d swear it was art, but to me, it all comes down to the purpose. It takes time to sort it all out. A few years ago, when you were wrapped up in politics of one kind or another, you may have heard a protest song and thought that it was the most brilliant song ever written. However, when you go back four or five years later and listen to the very same song, it is *boring*. Wait a few years—it is a good way to find out what is art and what is propaganda.

There are fine topical songs that have stood the test of time. For example, there’s a wonderful Australian song, written during World War I, that makes one want to pick up arms and join the nearest skirmish. But this song is a song first, and that song still lives, is just as powerful, just as poignant today as when it was written, because it rises above mere propaganda. Think of all the English folk songs that were practically news reports; that was their purpose then. The minstrels would go around and sing about the battle in France or the latest intrigue in the royal court. But the songs were so beautifully done and stood so well on their own that they rose above the pedestrian subject matter, and we still listen to them.

MHR: I keep coming back to “Stickman,” because it is one of my favorite of your songs—it is one song that I can scarcely listen to without crying. What does it feel like to know there is a power in the songs to move another so deeply?

PP: Whatever that power is, it doesn't come from me. I would never assume that I have any kind of power. When I'm handling a song like that, I feel like I'm handling dynamite and have to be very, very careful. "Stickman" is a song that I haven't done that much lately; maybe I've gotten a little lazy. It is a bit of a chore—in the one sense, it is good to sing the song well, and to play it, to hit home with it. At the same time, it is draining, because the emotions are just too raw and naked. It is a song that I want to be careful with—I don't want to be frivolous with it.

There's a song on my new album, "Hold On to that Heart," that is really naked. In a song like that, you can't hide your own emotions, and you can't withdraw into a cynical distance. You have to be there in the song itself.

MHR: I think the new album, *Making Light of It*, overall, is more unguarded than what you've written before.

PP: From my perspective, it seems a lot happier. There are more love songs, there is a lot more joy on this record, which is the direction I want to pursue.

MHR: I have the album lyrics in front of me. Let's see, "This Ain't Love," that wouldn't be one of the lighter ones.

PP: Actually, in a way, it is a funny song. I would like a lot of people in divorce recovery to hear it. The guy is kicking himself all through the song: "I know this isn't happening, I know this isn't love." "I could be your fool/given half the chance." It's just a lighthearted song.

MHR: You know, it didn't strike me that way.

PP: Well, there's a frustration in it. If I try to describe it, I'll mess it up. To me, it is not a sad song. A line like, "her hair was tossed/like Spanish moss," has an allure to it, a kind of hopefulness. Maybe she ain't the one, but the idea that you could still feel something feels pretty good all by itself.

MHR: How about, "My Life of Crime"?

PP: That one's fun, I love doing that song. It says a lot of things about being a musician that I always wanted to say. When you travel by yourself as a musician around the country in a sea of men carrying attaché cases, you stand out—you do tend to feel like a criminal. On the one hand, you feel like you're getting away with something—you've been missing on the payroll for years. On the other hand, whether it is real or perceived, you get the sense that maybe you're being treated just a little bit different from other folks, that you're just slightly above the criminal element. I've talked to a lot of musicians who feel that way. They feel like the airlines handle their guitars a lot more roughly than they would golf clubs. One of the questions I hate the most when I'm at a party among people who don't know me is, "What do you do?" I hate having to explain it in a minute. There's no way that it could sound good. "I'm a songwriter," which in their minds means, "I'm an unemployed sparmaker."

MHR: All I can say is, you are hanging out at the wrong parties.

PP: But, real or perceived, it feels like that. A long time ago I got tired of trying to explain to people what I do for a living. Very often the follow-up question is, “Yeah, but what do you do for a *living*?” They assume that I do this as a hobby.

MHR: Just tell them, “I’m in plastics.” You know, one song that came to my mind when I heard “My Life of Crime” was T-Bone Burnett’s “Criminal Under My Own Hat.” For Burnett, criminality isn’t just the result of what I’ve done, but is inextricably bound up in who I am. He has one of my favorite scraps of advice for Christian writers: “You can either write about the light, or you can write about what you see by the light.”

PP: That’s so true. And what you see by the light, to me, has more of a ring of maturity than constantly studying the light. Once you become a believer, you are expected to shoulder your pack and go do something. The Bible says, “Go out into the world and make disciples.” A disciple is an active person, an agent of influence. For me, being an agent of influence is describing what I see by the light through the particular facets of experience I have been given. It isn’t just saying the same thing over and over, repeating the basics of the gospel in every song.

MHR: Speaking of biblical themes, I think the song, “Absalom, Absalom” is a masterful exegesis. Where did it come from?

PP: Obviously, it is the story of Absalom and David. When David says, “My son, my son, if only it had been me and not you,” it has some of the most heartbreaking lines in all of literature. The idea that this is a true story, and these lines were spoken about a man 3,000 years ago, is stunning. It is incredible drama, and more so, because it is true. Who cannot relate to that story who has children?

MHR: I think the final verse, where David sees himself as the source of Absalom’s evil, is a keen observation.

PP: It starts out with the hyssop in Psalm 51, “smear this blood on me, so that I will be clean,” which seems like a contradiction. David can only become clean by owning up to what he has done. I don’t know if he had Absalom in mind when he wrote the psalm. Absalom would have been a young man in his father’s court observing how David dealt with Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite. I think I wrote the song partly as an attempt to express my feelings for my own sons.

MHR: Another of my favorite songs of yours is “Swimming.”

PP: It is a very Catholic song.

MHR: Yes, but it is really very hard to pigeonhole. “Swimming” is about a priest, but it is also about a kind of transcendent spirituality that anyone

who knows God can understand. It is about the desperate struggle of faith—“Swimming toward the light/deep down in this darkness we are fighting for our lives.”

PP: It is a struggle—everything is required of you. Christianity is not an excuse to coast the rest of your life. You had better start swimming like you’ve never done before, now that you know what the stakes really are. It may not be necessary for you to swim for your life, but who knows? You just might have to. 卐

Pierce Pettis Discography

Moments (Independent), 1984. Out of print.

While the Serpent Lies Sleeping (Windham Hill), 1989.

Pettis’s first commercial album is uneven, but has several very fine tracks which remain among his most accomplished songs, including “Legacy,” “The Longing,” and “Come Home.”

Tinseltown (Windham Hill/High Street), 1991.

This is his finest album to date. Produced by the late Mark Heard, it captures some of Heard’s genius for understated instrumentation. *Tinseltown* is suffused with an urgency that is missing from his latest effort. Tracks include “Moments,” “Swimming,” and “Grandmother’s Song.”

Chase the Buffalo (Windham Hill/High Street), 1993.

Another fine effort, nearly on a par with *Tinseltown*. Includes Heard’s signature song, “Nod Over Coffee,” as well as Pettis’s “Stickman,” “Family,” and “Trying to Stand in a Fallen World.”

Making Light of It (Compass), 1996.

Pettis changed record labels in 1996 after BMG took over Windham Hill and fired many of the artists. High points here include “Miriam,” an ode to Mary, and “Absalom, Absalom.” Pettis collaborates on a number of tracks here, with spotty results. The songs are, in many instances, more clever than on his other albums, but seem less heartfelt and inventive.

Answers on the Other Side of the Questions

A Reflection on *The Wall*. Pink Floyd.
Columbia.

In 1990, my seminary professors and fellow students were strongly suggesting to me what was and was not acceptable thought and belief. Perhaps as you read this statement, you assume I attended a very conservative seminary. I actually studied at what would be considered by most to be a moderate to liberal theological institution.

No philosophy is immune. Conservative, moderate, liberal—the proponents of each (which includes us all) are guilty of looking past the human struggle to find comfort in knowing what is right and wrong, good and evil, acceptable and unacceptable. That experience is not confined to seminary alone. It is the way of the world. Each theological position claims to have the answers, but fails to ask the questions that come from any honest human struggle. The mood is akin to the bumper stickers that claim that “Jesus Is the Answer.” Yes, he is the answer—but what are the questions that are worth asking to which he is the answer?

During my seminary years, my heart was aching for someone to put words to meaning-filled questions that reflected my own life experience. I did not need any more answers. I yearned for an articulation of the human struggle into which I could relax. The answers could only have meaning on the other side of the questions.

That year, a friend introduced me to Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*. At first I had the typical response to the CD—something along the lines of, “It’s too depressing,” or, “Someone would have to be on a drug trip to get it.” Yet I could not dismiss the fact that something in me relaxed as I listened. Roger Waters, the writer, was speaking about life in images and metaphors that captured me. He offered no quick answers. The questions were articulated quite well. They emerged from agony—but isn’t that how it must be? Our questions do not have meaningful answers until a life hangs in the balance.

The Wall is a life hanging in balance. It is a life carried to the edge of despair and suicide and then pulled back. The story that unfolds through the CD is one of a man’s desperate search for meaning and relationship. From this search, glorious and banal images emerge, telling the story of the battle that is fought again and again in every human soul.

The Wall is set, musically, on three stages. Pink Floyd, the work’s main character (as much as a musical work can have a main character), moves in



and out of these three settings. Pink Floyd is a rock star whose fame has taken him to dizzying heights. He is performing before huge stadiums of fans who lift him high as their idol, waiting anxiously to hear truths from their god. Being their god has left Pink's own soul in decay.

The first stage is Pink's mind. He reflects upon all that has brought him to this place of decay. He knows he has walled himself off from the disappointments of life. Now he recalls each piece of the wall and how it was carefully placed in the barricade surrounding his heart. Pink remembers the pain of hearing of his father's death in a war (paralleling the death of Roger Waters's own father in World War II). His memories accuse his overprotective mother, his fascistic teachers from his youth, and the horrors of living in a war-torn society. Each memory serves as the context for Pink's construction of the wall. The barrier keeps the world out and Pink in. The isolation is complete, and the lonely ache, unbearable.

The second stage is a hotel room in which Pink waits to be called to perform at a stadium concert. The room is the setting for the journey into Pink's memories and thoughts; however, it serves as the venue for an important piece of the story as well. Pink has all the amenities of a rock star. Whatever he wants is presented to him for his use, symbolized in the hotel room by a "dirty woman." Yet the void in his soul can't sustain the illusion of pleasure, and Pink chooses to finish building the wall by taking his own life. The silence at the end of the song "Goodbye Cruel World" is deafening. If the scene closed there, the critics of Waters's work who claim it is too depressing would be right and the entire work should be discarded.

The third stage is the actual concert stage. A doctor revives Pink and gives him a drug to get him through the performance. As the god the fans have made him, Pink stands before the worshipers preaching a message from a decayed soul. Hatred and violence seem to have won. The parallel here cannot be overlooked between the rock star and the dictatorships of the Cold War era. Roger Waters has done brilliant work aligning the psychological with the sociological and political.

Following the concert, the injected drugs have worn off and the listener is moved back into Pink's mind. In a final attempt to cope with his loneliness, Pink places his "feelings" on trial. They are, after all, what is tormenting him. To condemn his feelings, his desires, his hopes would be to cut himself off completely from the world and seemingly soothe the anguish. The judgment is leveled against Pink's feelings; the sentence is to tear down the wall.

This is the point at which *The Wall* is commonly misinterpreted. Many drug trips have been traveled using *The Wall* as a musical journey of despair. Many critics claim that the musical drama is only a vehicle for depression. This could not be the case, because as the sentence to tear down the wall is given to Pink, the listener is almost deafened by the sound of the enormous wall disintegrating. Carrying a very artistic message of hope, the wall is left in a glorious ruin.

Roger Waters has done the gut-wrenching work of asking the hard questions. He has not run from what is true of his own heart. He has struggled well, even to the edge of insanity in the character of Pink. Is it no wonder that the CD has sold millions of copies over the last two decades? Waters had the courage to state what, in moments of raw honesty, we all know to be the inner battle of life.

Meaningful answers can only come after the formidable task of putting words to the trauma of being known by others. Waters has accomplished the task, and thus his message of hope carries great weight. The wall comes down, Pink is exposed, and, in the end, I can only imagine that he is relieved. 🏰

—Kirk Webb

Alive in the World

Looking East. Jackson Browne.
Elektra.

Jackson Browne was one of the finest among the plethora of singer-songwriters who emerged in the early 1970s. His early material (*For Everyman* and *The Pretender*, among others) focused on very personal issues, including the public working out of his grief over the suicide of his first wife in the 1970s.

In the late 1970s through the 1980s, Browne's attention turned outward as he became consumed with social and political issues (*No Nukes*, *Lives in the Balance*, *World in Motion*). Much of his energy was also spent on the concert trail, working to raise money for causes he deemed worthy of his time.

With the release of *Looking East*, Browne has returned to the introspection of his early years. And what he seems to have found is a "God-sized hunger underneath all the laughing and the rage," as he sings in the title song. He continues, "How long have I left my mind to the powers that be? / How long will it take to find the higher power moving in me?"

The next two songs describe Browne's spiritual environments, the ones in which he grew and the ones he currently inhabits. In "Barricades of Heaven" Browne reflects on his youth and how the very things he did kept him from finding the redemption he sought: "Pages turning / Pages we were years from learning / Straight into the night our hearts were flung." In "Some Bridges," Browne laments the falling of some of the bridges that could lead out from the "Barricades of Heaven," and is yet hopeful, for he still sees there are bridges left for him to take on his redemptive trip.



“Culver Moon” speaks to the unreal environment in which Browne physically finds himself these days. Full of cultural references, it is clear there is little about the place he lives that nurtures his soul, in spite of his longing for that nurture. In “Baby How Long,” Browne laments the inadequacy of relationships to fulfill his spiritual longings. He then looks into the world of “Nino,” who lives in the same city as Browne but faces a completely different reality.

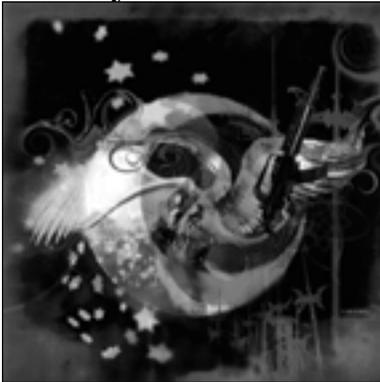
The album closes with Browne’s cry for spiritual aliveness in “Alive in the World.” “I want to live in the world, I want to stand and be counted / with the hopeful and the willing / with the open and the strong.” In the final song Browne seems to acquiesce, out of desperation for an answer, to the values of that community as the answer for this God-shaped hunger: “One world spinning round the sun . . . one—all of creation, one—you and me.”

Looking East finds Jackson Browne back making his own distinctive brand of rock and roll. We’ve missed that focus at least since *Lawyers in Love*, if not before. He is also back asking the questions of meaning, purpose, and destiny. While he railed against the materialistic eighties by giving of his music and career for others, he almost lost himself. Now that he is asking the right questions again, perhaps he will find that bridge that he longs for. 🏠

—Devlin Donaldson

Devlin Donaldson and his family live in Colorado Springs, where he works with Compassion International.

At Home in the Darkness



Charity of Night. Bruce Cockburn.
Rykodisc.

In the twenty-seven years I’ve attended concerts, only a handful stand out as memorable, in a positive sense. (Oliver’s 1970 performance of “Jean” at Branscomb Auditorium in my hometown of Lakeland, Florida comes to mind, but the memory is accompanied by involuntary cringing.) The finest concerts I have been privileged to attend would include Segovia’s 1984 Avery Fisher Hall performance in New York City, Sarah Vaughn’s other-worldly vocals in 1985 at Carnegie Hall, Cat Stevens’s 1973 concert with orchestra in Tampa, and U2’s Joshua Tree appearance at New Jersey’s Meadowlands in 1986. Finally, I would add to the list Bruce Cockburn’s 1984 concert with his ten-piece band at the Berklee School of Music Auditorium in Boston.

For nearly thirty years, Canadian performer Bruce Cockburn has been writing and performing ambitious, thought-provoking music. His songs

have explored spiritual, political, and psychological themes in a variety of genres, including folk, rock, reggae, jazz, and African. He has garnered ten Juno awards (the Canadian equivalent of the Grammy) and has sold millions of albums in his native country. Cockburn has been described by theologian J. Richard Middleton as “quite likely the most learned, intelligent songwriter in North America today.”

Despite the considerable renown he enjoys north of the border, and the quality and quantity of songs he has created, Cockburn, a professing Christian, remains well outside the mainstream of American popular music. His audience is mostly limited to evangelical Christians—drawn by the spiritual reflections found in songs such as “Lord of the Starfields” and “Wondering Where the Lions Are”—and political liberals, who have been captivated by the passionate intensity of such songs as “If I Had a Rocket Launcher” and “Nicaragua.” Songwriting makes for strange bedfellows.

My appreciation of Cockburn’s music began in 1979 when I heard the song, “No Footprints,” from *Dancing in the Dragon’s Jaws* on an early-morning Christian radio show: “Crossed sticks lie on earth / Between crossed sticks-pile of ash / Something rises on the wisp of smoke / Dog’s feet move by fast.” Many of the Christian songs I was listening to at the time were pedestrian in their execution, but in Cockburn’s words I detected genuine poetry. Instead of self-referential lyrics and endlessly repeating choruses, Cockburn was employing metaphor and allegory, and creating imaginative links among seemingly disparate symbols.

Dancing in the Dragon’s Jaws, like three of Cockburn’s previous albums—*Sun, Salt and Time*, *Joy Will Find a Way*, and *In the Falling Dark*—was filled with musings upon the Christian life, and suffused with sacramental and mystical imagery. His next album, *Humans*, which many consider his finest work, denoted a departure into a somewhat darker vision. Written shortly after the dissolution of his marriage, *Humans* fused Cockburn’s mysticism with rage and sadness, captured in the dichotomies of “Grim Travellers” and “Rumours of Glory,” or “Guerilla Betrayed” and “The Rose Above the Sky.” *Humans* and *Dancing in the Dragon’s Jaws* would be the high standard by which all subsequent recordings would be judged.

During the 1980s, Cockburn began to visit strife-torn Third World countries, volunteering with agencies such as Oxfam and Amnesty International. He spent time in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Nepal, in each case chronicling, with a journalist’s eye, the atrocities he found there. Songs from the period, such as “Rocket Launcher,” “Santiago Dawn,” and “Dust and Diesel,” spoke with impassioned eloquence about the casualties inflicted by greedy leaders upon their poverty-stricken subjects. However, at this time, Cockburn lost much of his Christian audience; compassion is one thing, but some of Cockburn’s sentiments, such as that (in the song, “Nicaragua”) the Sandinistas were “the best of what we are,” were hard to swallow.

Yet, in his best songs, Cockburn has always acknowledged his own complicity with the sin and guilt of the world, as well as the frailty to which we

are all too susceptible. In the song "Broken Wheel," which is a lyrical explanation of the effects of the fall, he writes, "You and me—we are the break in the broken wheel / Bleeding wound that will not heal." In this and many of his later songs, Cockburn reveals his own uncertainties about faith and life. He is no longer as quick to point a finger; his recent albums, from *Big Circumstance* onward, reveal an increasingly complex moral sensibility that reveals he is, as often as not, bewildered by much of what he sees around him. But, rather than claiming to have arrived, Cockburn invites his listeners to join with him in the quest for truth, and a dark and dangerous journey it is indeed.

Charity of Night, Cockburn's twenty-third album, is his darkest offering to date—he calls it his "film noir" album. In his 1984 song, "Lovers in a Dangerous Time," he admonishes the listener to "Kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight." On the current album, darkness has become his refuge, a merciful covering for "the damage and the dying done," as he sings in the title track. The cimmerian explorations in this collection are reminiscent of Joni Mitchell's lines in the song, "Blue": "Everybody's saying that Hell's the hippest way to go / Well, I don't think so / But I'm going to take a look around it, though."

The album is more impressionistic than Cockburn's previous efforts. Individual verses seem, at first, to be haphazardly tossed together, but then begin to weave themselves into associations of images and symbols that grow larger the longer they are contemplated. The lyrics are less obviously structured than in most of Cockburn's past songs. He is not as dependent upon rhyme as he used to be—in fact, several of the songs are almost entirely in free verse.

On *Charity of Night*, Cockburn, as he has for most of his career, continues to struggle with the outworking of his faith in a world that is heartbreakingly beautiful, yet alienating. In a number of songs, he expresses profound dislocation, as in "Birmingham Shadows": "Head full of horrors / Heart full of night / At home in the darkness but hungry for dawn / I can only remember scenes, never the stories I live." Spiritual impoverishment is the theme of "The Whole Night Sky": "Derailed and desperate / How did I get here? / Hanging from this high wire / By the tatters of my faith."

The musicianship on the album is of a high order. Cockburn thrashes out discordant solos on "Night Train" and "Strange Waters," and fingerpicks lovely melodies on "Pacing the Cage" and an instrumental, "Mistress of Storms." He is accompanied by such notables as Bonnie Raitt, who contributes her accomplished slide guitar style on "The Whole Night Sky," and Bob Weir, Jonatha Brooke, Maria Muldaur, and Rob Wasserman. There is liberal use of Cockburn's jangling National Resophonic guitar and Gary Burton's vibraphone in musical styles that encompass jazz, blues, rock, and folk.

There are no apparent "hits" on *Charity of Night*. Most of the songs are not given to standard verse-chorus-bridge arrangements, and the rhythms

aren't likely to incite mosh-pit hysteria. However, there is a level of invention, in both the lyrics and musical arrangements, that Cockburn has not demonstrated since his 1986 album, *World of Wonders*. *Charity of Night* stands alongside *Humans* as one of Bruce Cockburn's most mature explorations of faith and unbelief in this heartrending yet beautiful world. 🏰

—*Stuart C. Hancock*

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Music Also Reviewed

Night Song, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan & Michael (Real World Records). For some listeners this record might be a stretch, but in the end it is worth the effort. A world music artist, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is the rage among other musicians. This album, although sung in another language, has a deeply spiritual sense. And the titles of the songs (“My Heart, My Life,” “Lament,” and “My Comfort Remains”) seem to reinforce the feeling that something more than simple love songs is being sung here. Put it on late at night, sit back, relax, and be transported to a completely foreign world.

Dilate, Ani DiFranco (Righteous Babe Music). Before the huge success of Alanis Morissette, Ani DiFranco was making angry, angst-ridden rock. When her music failed to reach the commercial levels anticipated, DiFranco was summarily run off from the larger record labels, so she started her own label, Righteous Babe. On *Dilate*, DiFranco runs the gamut of emotions—from the rage of “Untouchable Face,” which deals with an unobtainable love, to the verve of “Joyful Girl,” the album’s closer. She exhibits a deep spiritual yearning, which is reflected in a wonderful version of “Amazing Grace.” Alanis may be rich, but Ani DiFranco is truly authentic.

Speech, Speech (Chrysalis/EMI). As a founding member of Arrested Development, Speech (a.k.a. Todd Thomas) was instrumental in the unique light-folksy rap sound that propelled that group’s song “Tennessee” into the Top Ten. Speech and DJ Headliner rejected the negativity of gangsta rap, however, and infused their philosophical and political songs with Christian values. On his first solo record, Speech continues to deliver a kinder, gentler brand of rap music. His songs are often a rapid-fire flow of ideas, not following a more traditional song form. His take on our society—especially racial, economic, and spiritual issues—is engaging and challenging, as well as quite enjoyable.

—Devlin Donaldson

Billy Breathes, Phish (Elektra). Over the past few years, Vermont-based Phish has attracted legions of fans with its overlong concerts, meandering instrumentals, incoherent lyrics, and savvy merchandising—in short, all the components that made the Grateful Dead grate. The group’s latest album has been promoted as a departure from the old Phish, with more attention paid to song structure and lyrics. It sounded promising, and the inclusion of a track entitled “Prince Caspian” at least raised the possibility of Phish’s literary renaissance. Alas, it is not to be. “Prince Caspian” repeats the lines, “O, to be Prince Caspian and float upon the waves”—and virtually nothing else—for five minutes, eighteen seconds. On a brighter note, with *Billy Breathes* the CD buyer gets her money’s worth: The album runs over forty-seven minutes, but seems much longer.

—Stuart C. Hancock

SACRAMENTAL UNDERSTANDING

An Interview with Kathleen Norris

By Scott Sawyer

An award-winning poet, Kathleen Norris is the author of four books of poetry, including her most recent volume, *Little Girls in Church*. She has become better known in recent years for her two best-selling books, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993), and *The Cloister Walk* (Riverhead, 1996). The former is a memoir detailing her move—along with her husband, the poet David Dwyer—back to her native South Dakota from New York City, where they had lived most of their adult lives. She wrote about that experience in an anthology she edited, *Leaving New York: Writers Look Back*, which collects pieces by writers ranging from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Bob Dylan to Toni Morrison.

A recipient of grants from the Bush and Guggenheim foundations, Norris has been in residence twice at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. *The Cloister Walk*, which is more specifically religious than her previous work, details the author's nine-month stay in the abbey, experiencing the monastic life. Undoubtedly this was an unusual experience for contemporary readers, yet Norris writes of her time at St. John's in a matter-of-fact fashion, albeit always with a sense of wonder and discovery.

Apparently she speaks the same way she writes, because those traits were evident in the lively, humorous hour we spent together for this interview. She speaks equally with intellectual clarity and simple forthrightness about such noneveryday issues as the importance of metaphor—almost as if she were carrying on a daily conversation with a postal clerk.

We met last year, while Norris was in Denver during her book tour for *The Cloister Walk*.



Mars Hill Review: Here's your opportunity to demystify the creative process.

Kathleen Norris: *[in a high, affected voice]* Well, I sit down with a piece of paper, and I look at it for a while, and I scratch my head, and yawn . . .

MHR: *[Laughing.]* In *The Cloister Walk*, you talk with some others in the monastic community about the subject of work. A sister says, "Our way of work should be different from the world's, in that we can start by nurturing the biblical imagination. Look at Genesis—when God works, God creates."

KN: When God *speaks*, God creates. That sister may have been using the word "work," but of course in God's case it is simply speaking—words that literally have life in ways we can hardly imagine.

The poet is a pale imitation, as a "creator." As any writer who's ever tried to create a character knows, creating a real person is something that's beyond us. We can create characters who aren't real—which is again a poor substitute for the real creation that God made.

Maybe poets do have a kind of sacramental understanding of words and the world itself. We find that our way to God is through the ordinary, everyday things, and through writing about these things. And we use fairly ordinary words to do that.

That seems to be very incarnational. I mean, Jesus was a human being. So it's not much of a stretch to say that through ordinary human beings and ordinary language, we too might approach the divine and the transcendent—and *find* the transcendent in our daily lives.

I suppose that's what I'm doing as a writer—or trying to do—when I sit down to work. And it's not terribly mystical. Maybe it is, but that word—"mystical"—gets used as if it means something very special that only a few people can do. And I don't think that's true.

MHR: You write that it was hard to leave Minnesota, hard to leave the monastery. How true is Milosz's quote, that "language is the only homeland"?

KN: I don't know exactly. But I love that quote. I think it means a lot of things.

At St. John's I was immersed in monastic language, but I was also immersed in the language of the academic world. That's why I make a little joke in the book about deconstruction—because I've never heard anyone in the western Dakotas use the word "deconstruction" in a sentence. It just doesn't come up—which is probably one of the reasons I live there.

[Scott laughs.]

Really—I mean, the people there are fairly plainspoken. Which I like.

I'm not sure what Milosz means by that quote. But I know I felt like I was home when I heard country people talking. I knew I was away from the academic world. That was kind of what I meant in that passage of the book.

It was hard to leave the monastic liturgy. And it was hard to leave the incredible variety of nature—the birds, especially. We have a lot of wonderful birds in the western Dakotas, but we don't have a lot of the water birds. We don't have nearly enough water to have blue herons and all the others.

So, again, I don't know what Milosz meant. But I'll continue exploring it, because I love the quote.

MHR: Is it maybe what you meant when you said that leaving New York and moving to Dakota made you more human?

KN: [*Grinning.*] I don't know what I meant by that, either. Looks like you really ran into some things.

MHR: I think of the story you tell in *Dakota* about the photographer who was visiting there, saw the broad expanse of sky, and called a woman back on the east coast and proposed to her.

KN: He was from Boston. He was used to being surrounded by trees, hills, and buildings. He just could not handle all that open space. We see that a lot with people—that kind of “plains fever.” The landscape panics them.

By saying “more human,” I probably meant “more down-to-earth.” My writing was very cerebral—I was very cerebral—when I lived in New York. You can get caught up in living in what I call the “literary hothouse” world of New York. Almost all of my friends were other writers. It was a very artificial world. So when I went back home to Dakota I rediscovered my family roots, where people have all kinds of interests besides writing.

I think my story is not uncommon. Larry Woiwode has talked about his early years in New York and writing in a more cerebral vein. So, in a sense it's more human just because it's broader. In a small town, for instance, I know the lawyers and the police and the garbage men and the supermarket checkout clerk, and they're all real people. They're not just jobs or abstractions. In a sense, that's a broader picture to live in.

And maybe it's more human, in that it's not [*in a clipped, affected voice*] an “ar-ti-fi-cial lit-er-ar-y world.” Yes, those are real people too, but they're often pretending not to be. There's a lot of artifice there that you don't find in a small town.

MHR: You can't put on too many airs in a small town.

KN: No, you can't pretend. And it's that way in the monastery too. It's a humbling thing, because if you put on airs, people will tell you so.

But you if put on airs in New York, no one will even notice, because they're doing it too.

[Scott laughs.]

Not always, but it's certainly true. I was in my twenties then, so what did I know? It was great fun, but I'm glad I left when I did. And became more human.

Of course, Thomas Aquinas would probably say something totally different. He wrote all of that work on what it means to be human—fascinating stuff. I'm certainly no scholar of Thomas Aquinas—I'm anything but that—but I believe he meant that when we become more human, we also become more in touch with the divine. He was a very incarnational thinker in that sense. For us to be more completely human and less pretentious would be to be more in touch with our divine nature also.

I can't believe I brought this around to a discussion of Thomistics. My Dominican friends would be so happy!

MHR: Has your poetry always reflected some kind of faith, at least in a questioning sense?

KN: For a long time I think I was basically a secular poet—if there is any such thing. I certainly wasn't conscious of religious themes in my work. I was not interested in religion. I was educated in the sort of classical liberal arts tradition, which doesn't pay a lot of attention to religion, or at least doesn't take it very seriously.

Bennington College is a very secular environment in that way. They're a radical school, because they've always treated the arts with the equal weight of all the academic disciplines. They have a great respect for the arts, which is, in a sense, a spiritual observance. I mean, the arts really do have a great spiritual component. But going to school there, I just never thought about religion and church.

When I finally started writing, I had some poems published in literary presses. Then I began working on poems and articles that were more specifically religious. Often I saw I'd written something that wasn't religious enough for conventional religious magazines, but was too religious for literary magazines.

MHR: There is a big chasm.

KN: There is—although, actually, I think literary magazines are doing much better now at being open to religious pieces than mainstream Christian magazines are. They've opened up—and you can find some very good religious poetry even in places like *The New Yorker*. Yet I don't think that's true in a lot of the Christian periodicals I see.

[Picks up a copy of Mars Hill Review and begins thumbing through it.] Now, this magazine looks very interesting.

MHR: My wife knew your work from before *Dakota*. She has a copy of your poetry collection, *Little Girls in Church*.

KN: You never think books of poems will get noticed, but they do. There is an audience for them—somewhere out there! It's just cleverly hidden. There's a *New Yorker* cartoon that says, "Poetry is a tough dollar." And I think it is, increasingly so. It certainly hasn't gotten any better since I became a poet.

MHR: Let's talk about the calling of the poet—a subject you address in *The Cloister Walk*. You quote Walter Brueggemann as saying, "A sense of calling in our time is profoundly countercultural." He says this in the context of service.

KN: He said that in a book he wrote about the prophets. It's a lovely book, very interesting. I like him as a writer, and I've learned a lot from him. He's one of those scholars and interpreters who can write in plain English. I like a lot of what he says about the prophets especially, and about the Psalms.

MHR: How should this idea of service to community move you as an artist?

KN: I'm not sure. I think privatization is one of the real problems in our culture. You see people doing it especially with religion. They have an attitude of, "I've got mine."

When you hear people talk about a "personal spirituality," often what they seem to mean is "private spirituality." I think a lot of the rejection of institutional churches seems to come from that. People just don't want to trust other people with their spiritual lives. And sometimes for good reason—maybe they had bad experiences as kids.

But both the Jewish and Christian religions are extremely communal. They are people, not an individual. Pentecost is a group experience. The individual is important, but not the whole picture.

I think that's important for me in terms of religion. It was one of the reasons it was necessary for me to join a church congregation and not just take the monastery as my community. It couldn't be my community fully, because I didn't make lifelong vows there.

As a poet, though, I think when people are genuinely called to the arts, there really isn't anything else they can do. And it is a powerful calling when it manifests itself. But again, I don't like to talk about that too much, because it tends to mystify it. And that's not the point at all.

I think art is truly a calling. And writing mirrors the Christian tradition because you do it alone—you write by yourself, with the TV off, and you're

really quite alone. It's a very individual discipline. You write in solitude, and words come out of silence.

At the same time, the writing is always a dialogue with the reader. There's always another party—at least, in my mind there is—and in some sense the reader completes the work. Often the reader will say, "I found this here, and this is what it meant to me." That may not be what I intended, but it could be a wonderful use of my work. All sorts of things happen once the reader enters the picture. So it is a communal activity.

I'm not sure how that translates in terms of responsibility toward my subject matter. Of course, I tend not to have a lot of shoot-'em-ups in my work. The sex-and-violence stuff is not a major theme for me. But it does come up. For instance, sometimes I have to decide whether or not to use a certain swear word.

I figure if I'm quoting a truck driver, he's not going to say, "Oh, dastardly deed"—he's going to say something else. So if I'm quoting someone like that in, say, an interview, or in a piece of fiction where I think a vulgar word is effective, I'll use it. Otherwise, I'll find ways around it. I try to write for a fairly general audience, and not do things that are simply going to alienate people, whether they're Christians or not.

MHR: You discovered the "communal role" of the poet when you moved back to South Dakota and started doing poetry readings.

KN: I went into public schools as a, quote, secular poet. Occasionally I went into parochial schools, where I would use the Psalms. But in the public schools I used nothing but basic secular poetry—everything from Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman to Denise Levertov, sometimes Galway Kinnell, Shakespeare—whatever worked with kids, kindergarten through twelfth grade. I'd read some of the classic things, some of my own things, even some of the kids' things as they began to write. It was all a wonderful playing with words and poetry.

And I very quickly realized there was a terrific spiritual dimension in all of this. Whenever I gave the kids an assignment—such as, "Write something and compare it to this or that"—they would pour out their heart and soul. I got back some incredible revelations of who these kids were and what their lives were like. Sometimes it was painful. And sometimes it was just glorious.

My favorite paper was by one little girl. I have no idea what the assignment was. It wasn't to write about the sky, and it wasn't to write about God. It may have been to write about color or nature, I don't know—I tended to give very open-ended assignments. Well, she wrote down, "The sky is full of blue and full of the mind of God." When I looked down at that paper, I said to myself, "Ah, I think it's going to be a good week." Under my breath, I said, "Whoa!"

I think she was in fourth grade. She was a black girl, and her family was stationed at Minot Air Force Base. I think she was in awe of the North Dakota sky, because her family had been transferred fairly recently from a base in someplace like Louisiana. She must have been in shock at the sight of the sky and the expanse of North Dakota. She looked out the window and saw this big blue sky, and it really fascinated her. So that's what she wrote.

I read that line to the class and told everyone how beautiful I thought it was. I didn't talk about God to the kids, because it was a public school. But she wrote it, and we read it, and we celebrated that she had written this beautiful line. There were some incredible outpourings like that one.

I did that kind of work for about ten or twelve years, and in some ways it was a form of ministry. At least, I began to think of it that way. I was evangelizing for poetry, if you will, and the human imagination.

MHR: Here's something interesting. You talk about the secret sort of bond that exists between clergy and poets.

KN: We live in a town so small that the poets and ministers have to hang out together—which probably has been one of our greatest gifts.

When I lived in New York City I was surrounded by churches. In fact, I lived half a block from Union Theological Seminary. But I never went across the street—both literally and in other ways. I just wasn't interested. It was very easy to keep those worlds separate then.

But my brother is a minister, and my grandfather and great-grandfather were ministers. So I always have had some appreciation for what ministers do, and for how hard they work, especially in these small towns where people rely on them for so much.

We discovered in this little town that, for the most part, they were the only people who had big collections of books we might want to read, besides the public library. When I got interested in religion, I could find all sorts of wonderful theological works and reference books in these ministers' libraries. And they would be interested in our collections of poetry. My husband studied classical Greek, so we've got a lot of the classics, a lot of poetry, a lot of history. We have a pretty good-sized library.

We started out simply getting together with clergy for warm lunches and saying, "Oh, have you read Rebecca West's book about Yugoslavia?" "No, I haven't. I'll borrow that one from you, and you can take this book on the Psalms from me." It began that way, really—as a mutual survival thing, in this isolated little town. Then obviously, it developed into something much more. I ended up joining a church! I still can't believe it.

MHR: Here's where the tension comes in. You write: "Historically there's a wariness, but there's also a trust. We both believe in the power of words to change the human heart." You also write that "poets believe in metaphor—

and that alone sets them apart from many Christians, particularly those who are educated to be pastors and church workers.”

KN: In *Dakota* I’m telling a very personal story, talking about a particular town. And I certainly know a lot of clergy who appreciate metaphor and deal with it beautifully.

But that one little chapter in *The Cloister Walk* is about something else. I’d gotten so sick of the liberal wing of the Christian church deciding that certain metaphors were politically incorrect, or theologically incorrect, or liturgically incorrect, or whatever. As a poet, I don’t really care who it is that’s saying I can’t use a metaphor, whether they’re conservative or liberal. I’m interested in using as many metaphors as possible.

I don’t know what the problem is. I think it’s a certain clergyperson or professional church worker who somehow has been educated with almost no sense of language. A recent example is the *Oxford Book of Psalms*, where the editors actually think they can substitute the word “night” for “darkness.” As a poet I find that almost incomprehensible. It’s one of the dumbest things I’ve ever heard. I don’t care what the reasons are. Those two words are simply not a good translation for each other. And yet all these highly educated people were thinking they could do that.

I find this very sad, because it means that the Christian tradition has turned away from its own poetic roots, its own poetic language. Now we have people coming at language with other agendas that just don’t work.

So, that chapter was my little blast of steam. But to be a defender of metaphor in this day and age is always risky business. We’ve lost so much of our sense of what metaphor is. Of course, the image of darkness simply comes from nature. And what I’m saying in that chapter is, if we pretend we can’t use the word or image of darkness, then we’re trying to live in our head and not the natural world.

I think it’s unfortunate that a lot of clergy are educated to live in their heads and not in the natural world. The natural world is where all the good metaphors come from. Jesus himself uses so many of them—the mustard seed, yeast, all of these things that were a part of everyday, ordinary creation. When you start turning away from that, and finding all sorts of intellectual reasons why you can’t use this word or that word, you’re really in big trouble.

MHR: Somebody in Portland hooked up with my wife on the Internet and told her about your workshop on the Psalms.

KN: That was Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. They have the Collins Lecture Series—which apparently is quite popular in the Portland area—and they invited me to come do a program.

I was lecturing and reading from my book at night, but they also had a program in the day. Our group was made up of about fifty to eighty people.

We met in the church's meeting room, which had wooden floors and good acoustics.

We sang some Psalms out of the Episcopal hymnal, and I recited some Psalms and talked about them. Then I read portions of my essays on the Psalms, and we had some discussion. It was a wonderful afternoon—partly, I think, because we were doing nothing but talking about poetry. To just step off the street and spend the afternoon doing that was obviously a relief to the people there. And it was fun for me.

The new Presbyterian hymnal has some great settings for a lot of Psalms. I discovered that at Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian camp in New Mexico, because we don't sing them much in our congregation. At Ghost Ranch—where we had another group of about fifty people—a woman volunteered to play the piano. We started and ended every session with a hymn-sing—just singing different Psalms from the versions in the Presbyterian hymnal. If we could have done only that for the whole session, we would have been happy. We simply didn't want to quit.

MHR: At the beginning of *The Cloister Walk*, you bring up the practice of *lectio divina*. When did you recognize your need for “spiritual reading”?

KN: One of my monk friends says he thinks I've probably always done spiritual reading. I've always gotten so much out of reading that, in a sense, it probably has always been one of my deeper spiritual disciplines.

When I was with the Benedictines I discovered a way of reading the Bible so that the whole day became a dialogue with scripture. In some ways that was a remarkably Protestant experience. We would go to morning prayer, and we'd sing or recite three Psalms, then have a minute of silence after each one. You really absorb the words when you do it that way. Then we'd have a reading, almost always from scripture, followed by two minutes of silence.

After that, we all went about our business. I usually did another form of *lectio*. I'd read some other scripture book after morning prayer, which was another experience of meditative reading. With *lectio*, you don't read for content or information. You just read until words kind of surface within you—words that make you say, “I want to think about that for a while.” Then you sit back and think about it. It's a very odd kind of reading, because it's not the kind we're trained to do. Actually, it amounts to a form of meditation.

Often, I would read as my *lectio* the passage we had just heard at morning prayer. Maybe something about it had struck me, and I wanted to see it in its context. So I would do a longer reading of it.

Then I would go about my work in the morning—writing, mostly—until it was time to go back to noon prayer. At that point we would have a hymn and maybe three or four Psalms and a very brief reading. Then we'd go about our business again. In the afternoons I usually ran errands and took care of necessities.

Later we came back for mass and heard more readings of the scripture. Then we went to have supper, and came back at seven o'clock for vespers, with more readings—again the psalms and biblical passages.

If you keep doing that—and I was there for a nine-month stretch—pretty soon *lectio* becomes not just sitting down and reading. It becomes the Bible verses that come to your mind as you're walking back and forth between your apartment, as you're doing the dishes, whatever. And that is a very ancient, monastic goal. It seems to be what those early monks meant when they said, after Paul, "Pray without ceasing."

They basically memorize the psalter. There's a Psalm that reads, "My soul will sing psalms unceasingly." I think a lot of monks and nuns know the psalter by heart, just because they go through it every three or four weeks.

And, you know, those words do appear when you need them. Yet it is all considered a form of reading. It's really wonderful—a kind of whole-body experience with the Bible that I had never anticipated. Being able to immerse myself in that for nine months was a powerful experience.

Of course, that's the experience that *The Cloister Walk* comes out of. I talk a lot in the book about Jeremiah and Revelation, because those were two of the many books we heard read straight through. I couldn't find a whole lot to say about the book of Romans, which we also listened to straight through, as well as the book of Hebrews. I didn't write about the more intellectual ones, although they were very interesting. After you hear Paul's letters read out loud, you realize they truly were letters and were meant to be read to churches.

So, there were discoveries even with good old Paul. [*Grins mischievously.*]

Hearing much of Jeremiah read out loud was probably the most powerful of those experiences. He's such a grieving prophet. I knew that all the prophets were sort of angry a lot, that that was their stereotype, anyway. But when you look at Jeremiah closely, you realize he's suffering real grief for his community. And that was very powerful.

MHR: You make quite an apology up front in *The Cloister Walk*—although it's an appealing one—that you're going to be quoting a lot from the Bible.

KN: I still live in many worlds. I have a lot of writer friends, some of whom call me "Sister Strange" very affectionately.

[*Scott laughs.*]

Writing still substitutes for religion in their lives. Some are former seminarians who won't go near a church.

Many of them gave me little litmus tests, to find out if I had become a Bible-thumping fundamentalist who was going to start preaching at them. They were all quite relieved when that didn't happen. And I was relieved

when the litmus tests ended. For the most part, my experience has been mysterious to them. But the people who are my real friends hang in there, even though they're a little mystified. Maybe this book will clarify some things for some people.

I included that passage about the Bible because I spent so long outside the church myself—something like twenty years—and it's really not that easy to jump back in. I'm well aware of just how strange the Christian world can look to people who perhaps had a share in it as children and have an ambivalent attitude now—or to people who maybe aren't quite sure what they believe.

Sometimes they reject what they learned as children—and often rightfully so, because a lot of things kids learn about Christianity are vile. They're just not solid theology. A friend of mine calls this “warm body theology.” Whoever has a warm body gets to teach Sunday school. That's not too good for the propagation of the faith, as it were. It's had some pretty disastrous consequences.

So I put that passage in there just to relieve people, in a way. Some of my writer friends have said, “You're quoting the Bible all the time.” They can't understand that I'm not trying to thump them over the head with it, or to use it to prove a point, or to preach at them—all those negative things. I'm using it because, having experienced it deeply in the monastic world, the Bible has become a part of me. It's just *there*.

Yet I'm very careful how I quote the Bible. I was talking to a woman in New York who I know is very interested in Buddhist meditation. I quoted her a line from one of the Psalms—and I did it very consciously and deliberately, so she would know I wasn't proselytizing. The verse was, “Do not set your heart on riches, even when they increase.” She was very pleased when she heard it, and said, “Oh, that's wonderful.” I said, “Well, you can use it as a mantra. It's from the Psalms.”

I did get a tough question from someone once, which I'll probably write about in my next book. I gave a reading at a Catholic college, and toward the end of the evening a woman raised her hand. I could tell she had waited a long time to ask me this question. And what she said was amazing: “I don't want to be offensive, but—I don't understand how you can get so much comfort out of a religion that does so much harm.”

There it was. And I was so grateful. I told her, “That is a wonderful question. And I'm not offended, because ten or fifteen years ago I might have asked that question. It's a real one.” I don't know that I answered it very well for her, but I tried.

Those questions are out there, and they're serious questions that people have. I'm hoping my books will open up this kind of stuff—the world of religion, that is, for people who might be very uneasy about it. But I'm not sure how much those people are reading my books.

I do get letters from people, though. Some are quite funny. They say, “Your book kind of makes sense to me. You talk about religion so it doesn’t sound too bad.” Others are very serious. A lot of people obviously have been through some intense soul-searching, and they want to get back in touch with their religious tradition but they don’t quite know how.

MHR: You quote a wonderful definition of the scriptures by Paul Philibert, from his book, *Seeing and Believing*. He says the scriptures are a “demanding ecology of thought, imagination, decision, and action, words that are awake during our rest and our silences.”

KN: That’s a beautiful quote. And it’s from a lovely book that just came out from Liturgical Press. Basically he’s doing a kind of catechism on the symbols of Christian faith. He’s Roman Catholic—a Dominican priest—but I think a lot of what he writes is applicable to either tradition.

That quote struck me as one of the best things I’d ever seen for modern people. It’s a quick look at what the Bible is, for people who meditate with it, who use it every day, whose lives are somehow grounded in it, but not in the stereotypical way.

MHR: It struck me as being a good definition even for a fundamentalist: “. . . effective in our actions, active in our reflection . . .” He just might say it differently—calling it “good old-fashioned conviction.”

KN: Hey, I could tell Paul Philibert, “Now, if we could just get Jimmy Swaggart to say that, with the piano rolling in the background—” He’d love it.

That’s the wonderful thing about the Christian religion. If you hang in there long enough and don’t polarize yourself and get divided, you can see all kinds of connections between, say, the Protestant, evangelical side of things, and what the Roman Catholic priests say about the Bible. It’s a nice world that way. I like to find similarities rather than distinctions. I think that’s part of the poet’s calling.

The Ecumenical Institute—this place at St. John’s, which is a very good place for scholars and writers to go—is mostly made up of people on sabbatical from academic jobs. My husband and I made friends there with an Assemblies of God pastor who teaches at Fuller Seminary.

Now, my husband describes himself as a pagan. He was raised a Catholic, but he won’t go near churches. And here I was, a Presbyterian Benedictine—obviously not quite sure what I was, either. And here was this Assemblies of God guy—Russ Spittler—and he turned out to be our best friend that semester at the Institute.

We figured out why. I learned all sorts of things about that tradition that I didn’t know—for instance, that it’s primarily an oral tradition. You don’t write a lot down, you value the oral aspect of it. Poetry, of course, is an oral

tradition too. So it turned out that we had a lot in common that was really good ground to build on. Yet that was the last thing in the world I expected when I saw an Assemblies of God pastor was going to be there.

It was such a treat to find a tradition I really didn't know much about and—from my stereotypes—I didn't think I had much in common with. But then Russ started talking about the orality. He's very sharp, just wonderful, a remarkably ecumenical fellow. It turned out he had a long history in the charismatic-Roman Catholic dialogue, and he knew some of the monks who were at St. John's.

There are a lot of things in the evangelical tradition that poets value. The orality is probably the primary thing. And there's a kind of spontaneity—the idea that you don't write things down right away, maybe; you hold off, because with the next line an inspiration might come. Poets work with inspiration.

I don't know that I'd ever want to say I'm "in the Spirit," or that I "have the Spirit," because that seems really presumptuous to me. [*Laughs.*] Now that I say that, I'll probably get a letter from someone.

Yet I know people for whom that's something very important. They feel strongly about it. I don't want to put them down. But I hesitate to talk about poetic inspiration, because often that's been used to simply mystify the process of poetry. As a result, I end up not talking much about inspiration at all.

But when Russ started talking about Assemblies of God worship services, I thought, "Yeah! It sounds like one big poem is being made." I saw a lot of connections that I never knew were there.

MHR: That connection on orality is profound, isn't it?

KN: Yes, I'm still thinking about it. I haven't written anything about it yet. Of course, the monastic tradition is primarily oral. And the great stories from, say, the fourth to the sixth centuries were completely oral literature. It had to be, because a lot of those people were almost completely illiterate. Then a few people got together and started writing things down, but that came much later.

Even now monastic people love to tell stories, but they don't tend to write them down that much. At monastic funerals you might hear things people have written in letters. But the storytelling is spontaneous. It just happens, like at the funeral dinner after the funeral. People sit and tell stories, and nobody writes them down. Occasionally I'll remember something and write it down. But I respect the fact that it's an oral tradition.

MHR: You talk a lot about the Psalms' emotional honesty. Your words here are, "The Psalter is psychic, not theology."

KN: Well, I don't know—that word *psychic* . . . Now they have a Psychic Network. *[Laughs.]*

The sounds in the Psalms are so emotionally honest. I think in a way they're emotionally complete. They represent every single human emotion for good or ill. The desire for vengeance, anger, awe, sheer delight in God's beauty, the beauty of the world and in God—everything is there. Take jealousy. There's a wonderful Psalm that says, "I'm not going to complain, God, when my neighbor has more than I do. But I'm really mad!" Then, *boom*—this whole Psalm just sort of erupts from that. "I resolve not to say a word when all these nice things happen to my enemies. *But . . .*"

[Both laugh.]

It's very human. And I guess I love it because it is the Bible's book of praises. It's very religious. Some of the Psalms have been used as religious poetry for five thousand years. But it's totally human also. It is the honest human standing before God—not pretending to be holy or better, but simply saying, "Here I am, and this is what I'm saying." It's a remarkable book in that way.

MHR: There's something else this Internet person brought up about your Psalms workshop. He quoted you as saying, "Depression is when you wake up and realize that the mirror you've been using to see your own face is gone. The need for God then transcends arguments about Father God or Mother God . . ."

KN: I'm not sure I said all that *[laughs]*. That sounds rather complete for me. I mean, it sounds very theological *[laughs again]*.

I think it had to do with a line from Psalm 27. That's one of my favorite Psalms, and I use it a lot. It says, "Though my mother and father forsake me, the Lord will receive me."

Of course, even if we have wonderful, loving parents, they do forsake us in the sense that they leave us when they die. But I think this image of God, if we've had good parental love from a mother or a father, is a pretty good one for us to hold onto. And if we haven't—if we've been abused as children by our mother or father—then maybe that image of God is harder to come by, harder to grasp. But it is still there for the finding.

MHR: In *The Cloister Walk* you write, "The daily praying of the Psalms helps the monastic people to live in a balanced and realistic way." How is that true?

KN: There are all kinds of play that go on between the Psalms and yourself during the course of the day. You can be angry with somebody over something, and you might come across a Psalm that speaks pretty harshly about judging others or being angry. Or, the Psalm might even let you indulge in your anger for a minute. You might say, "Yeah! His tongue *was* like a wide-

open grave, all honey his speech.” But then you catch yourself and think, “Wait a minute—I can’t really say that about him. He’s not really that bad.”

One of the most touching things a monk ever said to me—and I think it’s in *Dakota*, not *The Cloister Walk*—was how important the Lord’s prayer is to them. In the monasteries they say it three times a day—at morning prayer, at the Eucharist, and at evening prayer. Many Benedictines say it is a wonderful corrective to all the little insults and bigger problems that happen during the day. Three times a day you’re talking to God, asking God to forgive you as you forgive others. That is a constant reminder of how to live in community.

MHR: Here’s another quote from you, on the “discipline of poetry.” You write: “The discipline of poetry teaches poets, at least, that they often have to say things they can’t pretend to understand.” That seems to be a problem with evangelical Christianity.

KN: Really? I know it’s a problem with biblical scholars. With scholarship you’re supposed to have footnotes, to be able to defend your ideas, and so on. That’s one of the problems I sometimes have with academics. They can treat poetry in the same way. For instance, they’ll ask me to defend an idea in a poem I’ve written. I just look at them and say, “Huh? Did I say that? And is that an idea that I have? And is it mine? I dunno.” I sound like a total airhead hippie around scholars, because it’s a whole different approach.

But I wasn’t aware of this problem you mentioned. What do you mean by “This is a problem for evangelical Christians”?

MHR: There’s a quote by T.S. Eliot my wife likes to use. I’ll try to paraphrase it: “The problem with writing by Christians is that we’re always talking about how things should be as opposed to how they are.”

KN: That’s very interesting.

MHR: It seems like the act or craft of poetry imposes on you some form of truth-telling discipline, as opposed to truth-forming or truth-arriving as a goal. In other words, it would require you not necessarily to come to some kind of conclusion. It’s sort of like the Psalms.

KN: Yes. The lamenting Psalms mostly end with the doxology, but there are some that don’t. There’s one that simply says, “My one companion is darkness.” That’s how it ends—which is not exactly a cheerful thing. But I love it when I come upon that Psalm in the office, because if I’m feeling really depressed, it helps. And if I’m not feeling depressed, I can pray it for somebody who is. It’s a wonderful thing.

But let’s get back to that Eliot quote. I can talk about my own experience along those lines.

I have a poem that was published in a chapbook but never in one of my major collections. It's basically a poem about temptation. It revolves around a woman who sounds as if she's being tempted into an adulterous situation. She's bringing comfort to a man—just common neighborliness, in the form of coffee or tea. And, if I remember correctly, she has been through a divorce or some sort of crisis. There's a sexual tension between them, with a clear attraction. The poem simply ends with this line: "God, or something, wants the heart."

That's the line that apparently offended one of the readers of *The Other Side*, which published the poem in their magazine. They got an angry letter that said, "How can you say that—'God or something'?" They acted as if I were putting down God by even writing such a thing.

The editor asked me if I wanted to comment, and I said I didn't. The whole thing struck me as funny. I'd been reading the early monastic writers, who take temptation very seriously. They think about the forms it takes, and about what to do when it appears. It's a very practical approach, but it's also very good psychologically. Their material on the different forms of temptation is simply incredible.

I thought, "These writers knew to take temptation seriously." But it looked to me that this woman who wrote the letter—who I assumed to be a Christian—simply denied that temptation exists. It was as if temptation wasn't biblical, wasn't anything. Which is kind of crazy. I think you could get yourself into a lot of trouble if you actually lived that way. Basically, it's saying, "I'm a Christian, therefore I'm not going to be tempted." It's very strange.

It's pretty clear in the poem that the woman is going to decide not to enter into the relationship. She's sort of drawing back, because God is coming to her in her heart. He's there in her mind, and she's thinking, "There's a choice here."

That's all the poem is saying. But this woman who wrote the angry letter apparently thought that if I was a Christian writer, then my poem had to come to a cheerful conclusion, that everything had to have a happy ending. As a poet I think, "Not necessarily."

My favorite reaction I ever got was from a conservative. It was in response to a story I told about an image of God that appeared in a dream. Actually, it was interpreted as an image of God by a minister who was helping me enter the church.

I talked about it in a very religious way in *The Cloister Walk*, and an excerpt had been printed in a Lutheran magazine. A woman wrote a very scornful letter, saying, "Her dreams do not correspond to Lutheran doctrine."

[Brief pause. Both break into hysterical laughter.]

Again, the editor asked me if I wanted to comment. I said, “The only thing I can think of to say is, ‘Thank God for small mercies.’ But I’m not sure I want to say that in print.”

Of course my dreams don’t correspond to Lutheran doctrine! I’ve never suggested that they ever could! God didn’t make us that way—to make our dreams correspond to any doctrine. But there it was.

I remember telling that to Denise Levertov. She said, “You mean, there *are* such people in the world?” She marveled at that. I said, “Yeah, they’re out there. And if you write anything that has to do with religion, you’ll probably find them.”

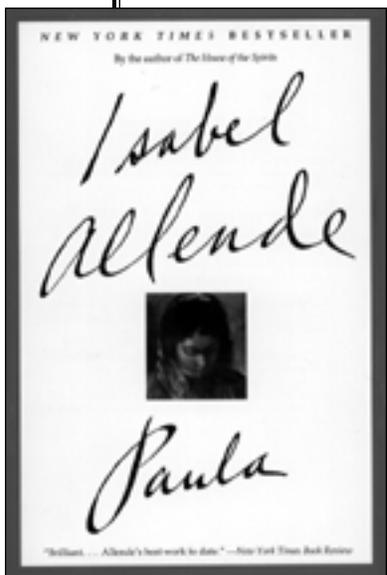
[Scott laughs.]

Now, with *The Cloister Walk*, which is so much more specifically religious, I get an odd feeling. I think you take your life in your hands when you talk about religion in this country. I suppose I’ll get some negative responses both from some very conservative people and from some very liberal people. I think both ends from the politicized spectrum can jump on me, and probably will. But it will be interesting to see what they say.

[Looks pensive. Then grins mischievously.] 🏰

*Abundance Within Reach***Paula.** By Isabel Allende.

HarperCollins (1994), translated from Spanish by Margaret Sayers Peden (translation copyright 1995), paper, 330 pages. \$12.50



Isabel Allende's autobiography, *Paula*, is a marvelous and haunting book. As I contemplate its myriad wealth of stories, I keep returning to one in particular: that of thirteen-year-old Omaira Sanchez, killed in a massive mudslide in Colombia. Before she died, she lay trapped under debris for three days as rescue workers attempted to free her, and TV cameras recorded her plight.

While Omaira's story alone is tragically powerful, in *Paula* it leads to a poignant anecdote about the writer herself. Allende tells of her obsession with this "dogged angel," and her unsuccessful attempts to write a story, first from the child's perspective, and second from the eyes of a man who stayed by the girl's side throughout those three days. In the end, the author writes her own story—the story of "the feelings

and inevitable changes experienced" by a woman who watches the televised agony of a man accompanying a dying girl. In pondering this anecdote, I realize an unexpected parallel: my attempt to review this book must ultimately be about my experience of reading it—an experience that was both wrenching and profoundly rich.

Make no mistake, there is much that can be said about the book itself—its characters and stories, Allende's poetic manipulation of words, and her elegant descriptions and impassioned storytelling. *Paula* begins as an actual letter from the author to her adult daughter, who lies comatose in a hospital bed. Building upon the letter's foundation, it tells the story of the young woman's illness and the devoted vigilance of her family members. It relates her family's passages through hope and despair, cynicism and faith. The book contains captivating tales of Allende's family and its unique personalities throughout several generations. It describes the drama of political upheaval and social turmoil in their Chilean homeland during the 1970s, and the family's years of political exile. And, as the anecdote of Omaira Sanchez portends, it tells of the author's personal evolution as a writer.

The author's purpose in this marvelous weaving of stories is to impart identity to her daughter—"so that when you wake up you will not feel so lost." In Allende's world, one's identity is inherently shaped by three vital planks: a rootedness in time and place, ties to loved ones both living and dead, and memories. All three planks are in question for the unconscious Paula and therefore an element of urgency pervades Allende's writing. Yet,

though it begins as an endeavor for her daughter, along the way the letter becomes Allende's journey in search of her own identity and meaning.

Paula's coma strikingly parallels Allende's experience of exile, a time when she suffered her own dramatic loss of life planks. She describes the experience as one in which "the past is erased with a single stroke and no one cares where you're from or what you did before." Yet through the profound identity loss, she "cured [her]self of some ancient wounds . . . shed old skin and met the world with nerves laid bare until [she] grew another, tougher hide." In exile, she crossed a threshold of identity: writing her first novel and beginning to call herself a writer. Similarly, Paula's illness is a transformative threshold for both mother and daughter.

For Allende, the process of writing is both part of her identity and a vehicle for identity-shaping. She describes it as "an ineradicable vice," and a compulsion to preserve family memories and legends, so that "nothing [is] lost of the treasury of anecdotes." At times, it is an act of translation, creating inner space for stories, like creatures, to "enter, sink in . . . and grow until they are ready to emerge transformed into language." Writing is also her instrument of self-discovery: "a long process of introspection . . . a voyage toward the darkest caverns of my consciousness, a long slow meditation . . . along the way discover particles of truth, small crystals that fit in the palm of one hand and justify my passage through this world."

During the long days of Paula's coma, writing is Allende's response to the tragedy, a means of communicating with her child and wrestling with her own darkest fears. It is also her search for hope. In the midst of overwhelming angst, hope is richly sprinkled throughout Allende's stories and reflections. This seeming contradiction is marvelously illustrated by her childhood memory of relishing fresh-picked apricots, spurred on by her stepfather Ramon's pure invitation to enjoyment:

That day, for the first time ever, I realized that life can be generous . . . Ramon was poor as a churchmouse, but I didn't know that either, because he always showed us how to enjoy the little we had. At the most difficult times of my life, when it has seemed that every door was closed to me, the taste of those apricots comes back to comfort me with the notion that abundance is always within reach, if only one knows how to find it.

For me, the juxtaposition of light and darkness in *Paula* is particularly engrossing and personally impacting. I imagine the "surge of strength" Allende experiences at the nadir of her daughter's illness. I identify with her fear that her inspiration—and therefore writing—has died. My confidence in the triumph of inspiration and the persistence of her voice gives hope to my own writer's struggle with self-doubt.

Like the woman changed by the observance of little Omaira's suffering, I am haunted and changed by my reading of this book. Invited by Allende's vulnerability, I immerse myself in her journey and her loving anguish,

celebratory growth, and passionate embrace of life. Through Paula, I feel the fullness of my empathy. I journey to the place within myself where utter pain and utter joy merge, and the emotions of one are indistinguishable from those of the other. It is this piece of soul that drives my loving even with the absolute certainty of pain. I believe it drives Allende when she says, "If I write something, I fear it will happen, and if I love too much, I fear I will lose that person; nevertheless, I cannot stop writing or loving."

Paula leaves me wanting to write, to tell stories, to care for and embrace my loved ones, to know my ancestors, and to have hope. And it leaves me with a clarity about life's contrasts and complexities and a renewed peace to live in that midst. Turning the final page, I claim for myself Allende's conviction that "at moments of greatest success, I do not lose sight of the pain awaiting me down the road, and when I am sunk in despair, I wait for the sun I know will rise further along." 🏠

—Emily Green

Emily Green is a writer, a teller of stories, a traveler, and a program coordinator for an environmental nonprofit organization in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

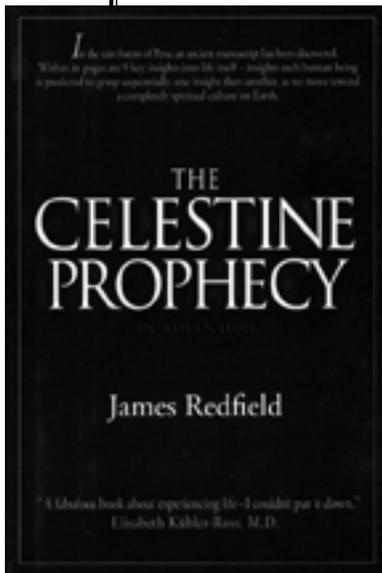
Culture Talk

The Celestine Prophecy. By James Redfield.
Warner Books (1994), hardcover, 246 pages. \$17.95.

The huge furor in the wake of publication of *The Celestine Prophecy* initially drew me to read this first novel by James Redfield. Spending two years on best-seller lists, the book has attracted thousands of readers—and, according to sales numbers, thousands of their friends—to local Barnes & Noble stores, frantic to claim their copy. In literary circles, however, critics bashed the book in review columns with equally passionate labels such as "mysticism for the mindless." I couldn't comprehend why a book so hugely popular with the masses of reading society would be so disdained by reviewers.

From the opening pages until its abrupt ending, *The Celestine Prophecy* follows the journey of a nameless American as he flies to Peru to search for a lost manuscript. Written in Aramaic, the manuscript supposedly contains ten insights that will transform the

world into a new era of spirituality. With both the Catholic Church and the Peruvian army afraid of the manuscript's power—and wanting to silence everyone interested in it—the American flees the capital city of Lima to the remains of ancient Machu Picchu as he continues to search for the manuscript.



Although plot and character development are lacking in this tale, I found myself turning the pages quickly, hungering for more, though not knowing why. As I reviewed the book after finishing it, however, I discovered several sources of *The Celestine Prophecy's* magic.

James Redfield's writing style is attractive. Throughout the novel, his characters walk a tightrope of ambiguity and vagueness, falling neither on the side of utter clarity nor into the opposite realm of complete obscurity. In the first chapter, the main character speaks with a friend named Charlene about the inner restlessness he feels. Although he doesn't expound on what he means by his "inner restlessness," Charlene replies, "It's in the manuscript." Immediately the man reacts—as any person would in today's culture—by asking if the manuscript represents some type of religion. Charlene responds with the perfect answer: "It's not religious in nature, but it's spiritual." The man relaxes, as does the reader. Indeed, modern culture is tired of religion, yet we hunger more for spirituality now than at any other time in the past. In addition, the "inner restlessness" remains purposefully unexplained, which allows us to connect whatever tension we have with the main character's restlessness.

And so in the first chapter alone, Redfield touches on two hot buttons of modern culture: a desire for a nonreligious spirituality and the fear of unexplainable anxiety. The author continues in the following chapters to touch on, ever so gently, more topics that we ruminate on daily even if we don't discuss them. Charlene tells the main character that the "First Insight" of the manuscript states that this restlessness in people is seen in their broken relationships. Pondering her words, the man reflects on several of his own failed relationships. He begins to wonder if there is truth in the manuscript—as does the reader. In spite of all the support groups, counselors, and abundant codependency literature, relationships in today's society are still breaking down. Thus Redfield touches the silent questions in all of us: Is there any hope? Are there answers to what's happening?

Responding to the man's questions, Charlene explains that people have the First Insight when "they become conscious of coincidences in their lives." Charlene relates to the man numerous "coincidences" that occurred for them to meet so that he would learn more about the manuscript. Her words point to the reality that something else is going on beneath everyday life—implying design behind life.

This passage in the book touches on modern culture's hunger for meaning: We want to believe there is purpose in life, but we can't accept truths offered in religions and philosophies because they often don't seem to connect with realities of life. Yet, everyone can recall strange coincidences in life that worked together to move him somewhere or into something—a job, a relationship, an answer. We all want to believe in something. But many of us reject what is offered as an answer.

In his search, the main character discovers that the manuscript's power is tied to the coming of the millennium. With the year 2000 steadily

approaching, people in America and around the world tremble whenever the phrase “millennium” is mentioned. The book’s handling of the topic touches upon the superstitions present in today’s society about the millennium. This connection adds intrigue to the story.

The man also talks with experts in various scientific fields who also happen to be looking for the manuscript in the jungles of Peru. A professor of psychology, revealing his awareness of the manuscript’s insights, declares, “The consensus in his field is that this whole matter is now emerging into public consciousness.” Other experts in differing sciences also cross paths with the main character, and each describes how the manuscript will “complete” knowledge in their fields.

This entourage of scientists and specialists searching for the insights points to the failure of science to provide meaningful answers—a point clearly sensed in our society. Modernism promised answers via the scientific method. After it failed to bring answers, postmodernism came to offer a new answer—world spirituality. Redfield’s characters speak about the current dilemmas in a way that makes the reader hunger for a new answer—a new spirituality.

The Celestine Prophecy also touches readers’ desire. After finding the Third Insight of the manuscript, the main character learns that perception of beauty is the key to understanding the universe. According to the manuscript, once people begin noticing beauty, the world will change and evolve spiritually. Indeed, with pollution, urban decay, violence, and other dark realities in our world, we yearn for a beauty that will transform us. Redfield draws this hunger out.

Another insight of the manuscript involves community. The main character learns he is withholding his insight and self from others. The manuscript, he’s told, implores people to communicate truth to others and not to hold back. He discovers that his emotional distance can hurt others’ progress toward growth. Although we live in cities with thousands of other people, we often walk alone through life even as we yearn for involvement. We may pretend to be content islands, but we need others, and they need us.

Although his novel metamorphoses into a religious text of new age theology, James Redfield’s work is masterful. With the care of a surgeon, the author navigates his novel around the concerns, hungers, and cares of today’s culture. And in the end, *The Celestine Prophecy* becomes what Redfield intended—a parable. 🏰

—Chris Layne

Chris Layne resides in Denver, Colorado, where he works as a counselor. In his spare time he enjoys fishing and writing fiction.

Books Also Reviewed

Facing East: A Pilgrim's Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy, by Frederica Mathewes-Green (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, \$20, hardcover). When the author and her husband, an Episcopal priest for fifteen years, converted to Holy Cross Antiochian Orthodox Mission in Cantonsville, Maryland, they set sail on rediscovering the essence of their Christian faith. Framed in the form of a weekly journal, the book follows the Orthodox calendar and records a year in the life of a pilgrim seeking greater illumination from the disparate threads of friends, family, church, and everyday life. The result is an invigorating burst of spring-fresh air into the often closed winter-house of Protestantism.

The Celibacy Club, by Janice Eidus (City Lights, 1997, \$9.95, paper). A two-time O. Henry Award winner, Eidus offers her quirky humor and sparkling resonance in this new collection of nineteen short stories. From the title story's protagonist, Nancy, who finds herself answering a classified ad to eat chocolate cake with group members who are equally isolated, to the seven-year-old Karen in "The Mermaid of Orchard Beach," the characters ring true as they sort through the endearing absurdities of modern life.

Angela's Ashes, by Frank McCourt (Scribner, 1996, \$23, cloth). In this impassioned memoir of his Irish Catholic family, McCourt creates palpable images of a life harsher than his father's hangovers. Throughout the squalor and uncertainty, however, the author never abandons himself to despair or melodrama. He has an oral storyteller's gift of pacing, striking detail, and reflective unity. An exuberance born of perseverance turns this into a modern psalm, a celebration amidst adversity.

Large Animals in Everyday Life, by Wendy Brenner (University of Georgia Press, 1996, \$22.95, cloth). This story collection won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, and the accolade indicates the kind of power and artistry to expect in these "mysterious messages of survival in everyday life." With dead-center dialogue and engaging descriptions, Brenner not only uncovers our modern lions, tigers, and bears, but she fights them, loves them, kills them, and sets them free for all of us.

I Know Many Songs, But I Cannot Sing, by Brian Kiteley (Simon & Schuster, 1996, \$20, hardcover). This poetic novel places us in Cairo with an American known as Ib, who leads us down dark streets as he is followed by a mysterious Armenian during Ramadan, the period when Muslims fast during the day and feast at night. As Ib struggles to untangle mistranslations and misunderstandings, as well as rumors, we begin to explore the nature of human memory, imagination, and the foreignness of dreams. The writing shimmers with a surreal sense of place and new perspectives on familiar longings.

—Dudley J. Delffs

F I L M

The Artist as Genius and Madman

Shine

Directed by Scott Hicks.

Much madness is divinest sense—to a discerning eye.

—Emily Dickinson

At the beginning of *Shine*, David, a disoriented middle-aged man, is seen wandering about in the rain. He is pouring forth a soliloquy of random words and odd, repetitious phrases, which becomes a litany of self-recrimination. David happens upon Moby's, a warmly-lit piano bar, and, pounding upon the glass, persuades the man and woman who are closing up to let him in out of the rain. Once David is inside, dripping wet, his chaotic banter is met with a mixture of amusement and alarm. Sylvia, the bar owner, reluctantly agrees to drive David back to his disheveled room, where she leaves him, lonely and destitute.

"David" is David Helfgott (brilliantly portrayed by Geoffrey Rush), who in real life was one of Australia's most promising young concert pianists before a mental collapse that led to his institutionalization in his early twenties. The first half of *Shine* depicts, in flashback, the development of David's remarkable gift, coupled with the harrowing relationship between David and Peter Helfgott, his tyrannical father.

As the son of Polish Jewish émigrés, David lives beneath the weight of his father's oft-repeated assertions, "You are a very, very lucky boy"—in contrast with his parents' life during the Holocaust—and "No one will ever love you the way I do." Peter's love takes the form of incessant demands and the numerous small humiliations he feels necessary for David's development as a musician. Peter sees in David the fulfillment of his own thwarted musical aspirations, as he was thwarted by his father, who had broken his beloved violin when he was a child. Peter is torn by the desire to see David attain international renown and a hunger to keep his son at home.

Peter's greatest hope is for David to make his professional debut with Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor ("Rach 3"), which, in hushed tones, he describes as "the hardest in the world" (it does, in fact, have more notes per second than any other concerto). Yet, he refuses to allow David to study abroad, first on a scholarship program in the United States, then by invitation to the Royal College of Music in London. The last refusal is too much for David, who has been deprived of opportunities to advance his skill for years, and he finally defies his father, who responds by beating him. As David walks out, his father's final words to him are, "You are no longer my son . . . you will never set foot in this house again . . . you have turned your back on your family."

Upon arrival in London, David and his teacher, Cyril Smith (John Gielgud), a former pupil of Rachmaninoff's, set about tackling the Rach 3. David spends all of his time at the college's practice rooms and in his unheated apartment struggling with the Rach's "big fat chords" and fearfully fast runs. The physical effort of performing the piece is, in Smith's words, equivalent to "shoveling ten tons of coal."

The most compelling sequence in *Shine* is David's performance before the assembled faculty and students of the Royal College. David creates a bravura performance, playing with consummate skill and a heretofore unheard-of passion for such a young pianist. (His performance is still remembered among the faculty as one that garnered a rare standing ovation.) Yet, near the end, David begins to come apart; he is unable to hear the notes, and when the piece is over, he falls to the stage in a complete psychotic break. David has fulfilled his father's wishes, but at the cost of his own sanity.

The remainder of the film chronicles the rounds of electroshock therapies, institutions, and halfway houses that David endures as he tumbles from fame to the shameful obscurity of the mental hospital. He finally attains partial rehabilitation, and even marriage, through the love of several women who come into his life and recognize the astonishing gift he that possesses, even in the throes of insanity.

Since 1985, David Helfgott has become one of Australia's best-known and most-beloved pianists, beginning with his thrice-weekly performances in a Perth piano bar, and culminating with national tours. With *Shine*, his fame has spread worldwide, and all of his American performances have been sold out. At this writing, it is rumored he will play at the 1997 Academy Awards.

• • •

Two themes emerge in *Shine*. The first is the force of love and acceptance that, offered freely and sacrificially, can transform the hopeless from a place of guilt and terror to restoration and even playfulness. David is not a man who is easy to love. He paces about, exhibiting quirky mannerisms and staccato, repetitive speech patterns that are outward manifestations of his shame and humiliation. Years after he has been banished from his family, his father's opprobrium continues to exert control over David, who needs for someone to liberate him from an endless cycle of inadequacy and self-loathing. His gifts have been long-buried, and David's manner of relating (which resembles schizophrenia, but is never labeled as such) leads his acquaintances to believe he is just another lunatic. When he first arrives at Moby's, the proprietors' reaction is, "Let's humor him and try to get him out as quickly as possible."

David is administered love by several women in his life. Katherine, a well-known Perth Communist, befriends him and nurtures him through his adolescence, but dies before his eventual triumph (and breakdown) at the Royal College. Beryl, an activities director at the Australian institution

where David resides, discovers his identity and invites him into her home where he begins to practice after several years of doctor-ordered abstinence from the piano. Sylvia, upon recognizing his astonishing talent, allows him to play at Moby's, to the delight of the ever-surging crowds that come to see him play flawless renditions of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee" and Liszt's "Sospiro." Gillian, an astrologer friend of Sylvia's, eventually becomes his wife.

However, loving David comes at a high price. His world is entirely disorganized: he allows basins and bathtubs to overflow, leaves a trail of wadded newspapers and crumpled clothing behind him, and occasionally forgets to dress. The nuts and bolts of life seem to have no hold over him. However, the commitment that these women—particularly Sylvia and Gillian—make to David transcends the inconveniences that he brings into their lives. They see that, even apart from the remarkable musical talent David possesses, beneath the wounded beast there resides a witty, affectionate man who longs to bring light and the madness of the beautiful into the normalcy of existence. Ultimately, David is not only tolerated but embraced, and the love he is given leads to his release from the confinement of fear and guilt into a larger life of joy and hope.

The other theme, which is more implicit than explicit, is the interrelatedness of creativity, madness, and giftedness ("gift" here implies the existence of a Giver). Plato describes the artist as a "light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he is inspired and out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him." Plato also says that when the artist "sees the beauty of earth, is transported with the recollection of the true beauty; he would like to fly away, but he cannot; he is like a bird fluttering and looking upward and careless of the world below; and he is therefore thought to be mad."

It is thus—a kind of madness—that creativity appears to the eyes of the world. There is no simple explanation for the existence of genius among us—for the giftedness of Bach, Mozart, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Da Vinci. Yet, upon closer examination, few artistic geniuses lived what we would deem holy lives, and many of us have developed a "love the art, hate the artist" mentality. We are uncomfortable with the extremes that we see in our artist-heroes—the dissipation that we see, for example, in Hemingway's and Faulkner's drinking bouts, Coleridge's and Poe's drug abuse, or Mozart's concupiscence.

One begins to wonder if it is possible to separate the extremes in their personal lives from the desperate risk-taking that the creation of art requires. Not many lawyers or investment bankers would be found writing *Ulysses*, composing *The Rite of Spring*, or painting *Guernica* (though an insurance salesman did pen "The Emperor of Ice Cream"). Joyce was profoundly misunderstood by his Sunday School teacher. Perhaps the madness, the following a thing to its utter, tragic end is the only way that great art can be born. There is something in the mind of the humblest writer sitting in front of his word processor, wanting to hammer out a single line that will join the

ranks of greatness, to be on that path wherever it leads—to the dark places, the waste places, the places that come too close to the fires of hell for most of us to dwell with comfortably.

Apart from our discomfort with the seemingly ubiquitous licentiousness of the artist, we are reluctant, in our practical atheism, to recognize the supernatural nature of artistic genius. The gift of the artist breaks through the ceiling of normalcy, demanding our attention. Plato writes,

God takes away the minds of poets and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses diviners and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves who utter these priceless words in a state of unconsciousness, but that God himself is the speaker and through them he is conversing with us.

In *Shine*, David's father notes that the family name, "Helfgott," is translated, "God's help." God wants to make his presence known through genius, to unleash it upon us.

We long for art and genius. We want to be able somehow to accommodate a space somewhere in our lives for high beauty, to which we can come and go at our leisure and find refreshment. But the place of beauty is a trap laid with brilliant cunning. We do everything we can to keep beauty at arm's length, because it is a desperate gift that calls us to depths where we have to somehow recognize and confront the Other.

David is a living testimony to a greatness that terrifies us, and the gift that David has terrifies him as well. As he plays the Rach 3, he is confronted by something that is so much larger than himself that it nearly leads to his undoing. Yet, in the end, transported by the love of those who have seen through his madness to the beauty beneath, he takes the risk and embraces the unruly steed of his own genius, for to attempt to ignore or suppress the gift leads to death. 卐

—Stuart C. Hancock

Stuart C. Hancock is a freelance writer and counselor living in Denver.

Love and Single-Lens Legalism

Breaking the Waves

Written and directed by Lars von Trier.

The camera work is the first overwhelming distinctive of this disturbing film about madness and mystery. Director Lars von Trier used one hand-held camera to film this entire saga of a woman and her encounter with love, loss, faith, and doubt. The effect is a dizzying view of a magnificent story portrayed with home-video quality. Perhaps von Trier is subtly sug

gesting the disorienting loss of perspective and depth that results from looking at life through a single lens.

The story begins with the wedding of Bess and Jan. Bess is a member of a rigid Calvinist community on the northwest coast of Scotland. The community's absence of music, color, and laughter is juxtaposed against the bright, brash friends of the "outsider," Jan. During the reception, one of Jan's friends and a church elder engage in a round of manly "dueling banjos"—competing with longest drink, loudest belch, and strongest grip. The round ends with the elder breaking his glass in his hand, blood dripping on his austere black suit—hinting that a story is to come of arrogance and violence.

The arrogance and violence are forestalled by a brief glimpse of the pure passion of the newly married couple. Actress Emily Watson allows viewers to follow Bess onto the ledges of human desire and sensual pleasure in her union with her husband. The intensity and purity of her love for Jan is matched by her simple and mysterious relationship with God. The "honeymoon" in the film ends when she kneels to thank God for her husband and the wonders of marriage. Bess believes God gives her his words, and she carries on both parts of their conversations throughout the film. With her spooky, stern God-voice Bess replies, "If you want to be blessed, you must be good."

From this point on the carnage resulting from looking at life through the lens of legalism is almost unbearable to view, especially with the nauseating spin of the handheld camera. Jan must leave to work on an oil rig and is horribly injured. The collision of Jan's head injury and Bess's religion results in a strange unfolding of a tale of law and grace. Bess believes she is somehow responsible for Jan's injury, and thus for his recovery. She promises God she will prove how much she loves him and Jan, and begins to do so in a series of sexual liaisons that come from Jan's drugged mind and Bess's naive heart.

The arrogance in the unfolding tale is demonstrated in a community of people who believe they know the answers before they even hear the questions. They know the sins and eternal destinies of others because they speak for God. Their arrogance excludes outsiders and insiders alike. Women are not allowed to speak or even be present in some cases, and the inevitable result is the objectification of all but a handful of grim and pious men.

I attended this movie with my questioning and changing legalistic mother. I feared her sensibilities might be justifiably offended by this sometimes graphic film. Yet her immediate response surprised me: "I think the most pitiful character in the movie is the mother." She recalled a scene when the confused and fallen Bess stands outside their home screaming for help. The mother is paralyzed by her dogmatic beliefs and does not respond. My mother explained, "Because of her religion, she couldn't even love her own daughter." The arrogance of looking at life through a single lens inevitably results in the cutting off of relationship at great cost to all.

The violence in this film goes beyond the objectification of others. The treatment the church proscribes and condones for Bess is heartbreaking. As children pelt her with rocks and shout out, “Tart, tart,” with the elders’ encouragement, we see the inevitable result of a religion that sees God in its own image rather than seeing the image of God in both male and female, insider and outsider.

The spiraling madness that grips Bess is not a result of her faith; it is the result of a religion whose only unconditional regard is for the law, so that it cannot offer compassion and help to one in need. Ironically, in her resulting insanity Bess demonstrates most powerfully the grace of God. The most dizzyingly gripping scene in the film is when Bess is cast out of the community and crawls up a dreary hillside, mocked and jeered at by her friends and family. Delusionally, she decides to make one more sacrifice to save her husband.

I could not help but think about another outcast who crawled up a hill outside the city gate bearing disgrace “to make the people holy by his blood” (Hebrews 13:12). In her madness Bess offers much more of a glimpse of God than the elders in their “lucid” severity. I wondered, does it not require a fair amount of lunacy to make the mad exchange of single-lens legalism for love—the breadth and length and height and depth of which surpasses all that we can see with a hundred different lenses?

I recommend this film with the same caveat Eugene Peterson issues regarding the church: “It is important to go to church—I wouldn’t think of not going—but you’ve got to be mature. It’s not for beginners.” You also might need some Dramamine. 🏰

—*Sharon Hersh*

Sharon Hersh works as a counselor in private practice in Denver.

Films Also Reviewed

Portrait of a Lady (1996). Director Jane Campion (*The Piano*) set out to give new life to Henry James's novel, and success she found. This is the story of a young American woman (Nicole Kidman) in England who becomes entangled with several very strong characters who change her freshness and strength into fear and desperation. Though any viewer can see the young woman is making dangerous choices, one can't be quick to call her a moron, for the question the film leaves us with is, "Why?" John Malkovich masterfully plays Osmond, an evil man who looks for every opportunity to stupefy his wife. Barbara Hershey, as Madame Merle, is brilliant in showing us the tortured and highly ambivalent effects of a good heart in league with destruction.

In Love and War (1996). This movie suffers from all the worst maudlin elements of a Hollywood love story. Actor Chris O'Donnell is too milquetoast to play Hemingway, and his lack of chemistry with Sandra Bullock makes their relationship hard to believe. Yet the story carries the film's doldrums, probably because it is true. The tale provides a glimmer of the abyss of bitterness and addiction to come that fueled Hemingway's stories. One is left wondering about the course of Ernest Hemingway's life and work in light of the question, "What if he had been able to forgive—most notably himself?"

Hamlet (1997). The arrival of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* compels one to ask, "Do we really need another interpretation of this film?" Few of them have fared well. For those viewers who have seen *Hamlet* performed in other venues, Branagh has a herculean task of getting away with a four-hour film. Fortunately, he is brilliant as both actor and director. Filmed in 70mm, the adapted play is dramatically overwhelming without losing the subtlety of Shakespeare's psychologically trenchant language. As he has in the past, Branagh exhibits a knack for interpreting the bard and bringing his work to a wider audience. Furthermore, in this film, Hamlet's character is more than tragic or mad; Branagh presents a prince who is mad but lucid—mournful but bent on vengeance. Though at times the film can be sensationalist and the actors a bit too Branaghesque, this is truly one of the great interpretations of Shakespeare's immortal play.

Camille Claudel (1989). Nominated for Best Foreign Film, Bruno Nuyteen's story of the love affair between the great sculptor Rodin (Gerard Depardieu) and a brilliant young protégée, Camille (Isabelle Adjani), explores the power of genius to seduce, entrap, and destroy. It would be a feminist cliché to note only the destructive power that the great sculptor has over his young female student, although Rodin's use of Camille is tragically evident; rather, it is the depiction of Camille's descent into obsessive love that makes this film especially notable. If *Fatal Attraction* is the American take on sexual obsession, this French look is more believable and probably more psychologically astute.

—Compiled by Laura Wackman

Another hope is found in each hope's death. Hope will not die; would that it could, but back it comes with each expectant breath. Unloved as I am, but love still tries to lift acceptance into my heart's acceptable gift.

—Madeline L'Engle, *Leah: The Unloved*

Rituals can recall and revitalize memories. They can also arrest time.

—Gina Bria

Men without deep faith live as it were with no center and no heart, and consequently one can only expect violence, injustice, confusion, and chaos.

—Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*

If the rose at noon has lost the beauty it had at dawn, the beauty it had then was real. Nothing in the world is permanent and we're foolish when we ask anything to last. But surely we're still more foolish not to take delight in it while we have it.

—W. Somerset Maugham, *The Razor's Edge*

The sterner side of love is, as we have seen, powerfully present in the artist's attitude to his work; and it is equally present in the attitude of the lovers of mankind. It is a short and sordid view of life that will do injury to the work in the kind hope of satisfying a public demand, for the seed of corruption introduced into the work will take root in those who receive it, and in due season bring forth its fearful harvest. That the eyes of all workers should behold the integrity of the work is the sole means to make that work good in itself and so good for mankind. This is only another way of saying that the work must be measured by the standard of eternity; or that it must be done for God first and foremost.

—Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*

Some people think there are angels whose sole purpose is to make people uncomfortable so that they do not fall asleep and miss their lives.

—Anonymous folk artist

From the simplest lyric to the most complex novel and densest drama, literature is asking us to pay attention. Pay attention to the frog. Pay attention to the west wind. Pay attention to the boy on the raft, the lady in the tower, the old man on the train. In sum, pay attention to the world and all that dwells therein and thereby learn at last to pay attention to yourself and all that dwells therein.

—Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*

Writing is easy: all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead.

—Gene Fowler

This leads me to say that a kind of touchstone of the height of most living art is seriousness; not gravity but the being in earnest with your subject—reality.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

He has seen but half the universe who has never been shown the house of pain.

—R. W. Emerson

We want only to communicate to you an experience we have had that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ.

—Paul Tillich, *The New Beings*

Only friends will tell you the truths you need to hear to make the last part of your life bearable.

—Francine Du Plessy Gray

The man who has meditated on himself for a certain length of time comes back to life sensing the position he can occupy. Then he can act effectively.

—Henri Matisse

Art itself is an instrument, a cognitive instrument, and with religion the only instrument, for probing certain materials and questions. Art and religion probe the mysteries in those difficult areas where blurred and powerful symbols are the only possible speech and their arrangement into coherent religions and works of art the only possible grammar.

—Annie Dillard

Rodin was solitary before he was famous. And fame, when it arrived, made him perhaps even more solitary. For fame is, after all, only the sum of all the misunderstandings that gather around a new name.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Happy are those who sing with all their hearts, from the bottoms of their hearts. To find joy in the sky, the trees, the flowers. There are always flowers for those who want to see them.

—Henri Matisse

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Barbara Edwards lives with her husband, Billy, and daughter, Monica, in Jasper, Georgia. She attended Florida State, Ohio Wesleyan, and the Corcoran Art School in Washington, D.C. She enjoys doing non-representational, experimental water color. As illustrated in "Dychotomy," the painting on the back cover of this issue, her primary motive in creating art is to find a form in the abstract and then develop the painting further so that it reflects her emotions.

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Janice Meyers is a licensed professional counselor in private practice in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Having lived and worked in southern Africa, Jan now serves on the training staffs of O.C. International and Mission Training International. She is also a retreat and seminar speaker. Jan is most passionate, however, when she is in the middle of a field of moguls.

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