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Valparaiso University

THE CRESSET

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On the cover: Clifton Wheeler (1883–1953). *The Silo*, c. 1928. Oil on canvas. Collection of Robert and Ellen Haan.

Clifton Wheeler was an Indiana artist who painted portraits, still lifes, and landscape scenes of locales all across the United States. Wheeler studied with the acclaimed Indiana artist William Forsyth before moving on to study in New York City, where his classmates included William Merritt Chase, Robert Henri, George Bellows, Rockwell Kent, and Edward Hopper. He later studied in Italy and France, befriending Picasso in Paris. Wheeler went on to teach at the Herron Art Institute and Butler University. He received many awards for his work, and his paintings are represented in museum collections nationwide. This particular painting by Wheeler won the Indiana University Board of Trustees Award in 1928 for possessing a high degree of artistic merit.

Wheeler's peaceful farm scene is just one of the many beautiful works in the Brauer Museum of Art's current exhibition, Selections from the Robert and Ellen Haan Collection of Historic Indiana Art, on view through November 20. Exhibition curator Dr. Laurette McCarthy chose pieces from the Haan's vast collection to give an overview of the collection's variety and remarkable quality. The Haans have committed themselves to seeking the finest available pieces of art by Indiana artists. We at the Brauer are pleased to display these selections which reflect the creative efforts and contributions of artists in this state.

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THE CRESSET

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In Luce Tua
In Thy Light

JSP Remembered

The Cresset and the Valparaiso University community suffered a sad loss this past July with the passing of Prof. John Steven Paul. "JSP" was a member of the Cresset's Advisory Board, a regular contributor to these pages, and one of the finest colleagues you could ever hope for. Through his tireless service and remarkable gifts, he served this university in many roles, including Professor of Theatre, Chair of the Faculty Senate, Program Director of the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, and Director of the Soul Purpose liturgical drama troupe.

When the terrible news began to spread, the entire community was stunned. JSP was so young and full of life. His work at this university was important in too many ways for us to lose him. We could hardly imagine what our campus gatherings would be like without his generous character, cheerful hospitality, and unfailing smile.

A few days later, the university community came together in the Chapel of the Resurrection. (Another service was held more recently, after classes began, so those who were away for the summer could join in the celebration of JSP's life.) Provost Mark Schwehn and Prof. Fred Niedner spoke words that were beautiful and touching. A choir of over eighty voices led us in song. But more than anything else, I will remember looking around the chapel and seeing the faces of young men and women who had come from all over the country to join us that day. They were scholars, teachers, performers, and artists now serving countless other communities. Their presence made me realize that while JSP's work meant so much to us at Valparaiso University, his legacy reaches far beyond our campus.

In this issue, we are pleased to be able to present one last piece by JSP: "Soaring, Avian Marginalia" (page 15) as performed on 17 October 2008 during ceremonies for the inauguration of the university's new president. The work was performed by active and alumni members of Soul Purpose, a group of young people in which he took great pride. JSP sent this piece to me last spring and asked if it might be included in the Trinity issue, which commemorated both the University's 150th anniversary and President Heckler's inauguration. By the time he sent it to me, the issue was nearly complete and the pages were full. So we bring it to you now, in remembrance of a colleague who will be missed and whose good work lives on.

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Thirteen years have passed since *The Cresset's* last major redesign. The old look was tweaked now and then, but the Trinity 2009 issue looked much like the Michaelmas 1996 edition. The old design served us well for many years, but it was time to try something new.

Readers of *The Cresset* know that the real strength of this journal is the quality of work done by our writers. Our goal in the redesign process was simply to make their great work that much easier to get to. We've introduced a touch of color to the journal. That creates a little more visual interest, but, more importantly, the color will highlight design elements that make the journal more accessible and easier to navigate. The front-cover lists our feature essays more prominently, the reworked table of contents makes it easier to find your favorite columns, and the new page headers lend a more distinctive feel to each section and department.

We have worked hard to get this new look right, and we hope you find it to be an improvement. As always, your comments and concerns about these changes or anything else in the pages of *The Cresset* always will be appreciated.

—JPO

Whitman's Café

Reviving the American Conversation

Harold K. Bush Jr.

Once again this year, I have chosen to teach the poems of Walt Whitman to my undergraduate students. My well-thumbed copy of the Norton edition of *Leaves of Grass* is back in the mix, ready to unravel its secrets to another generation. Old Walt, the Good Gray Poet, just keeps making his presence felt in my classroom, it seems. It is one of a teacher's fondest privileges to initiate students into the appreciation of some of life's great delights: American prose masters like Hawthorne, Jewett, Fitzgerald, and Cather; Beethoven's piano concertos; albums by the Beatles and Bob Dylan; Frank Capra's movies; and home-made sushi, among other things.

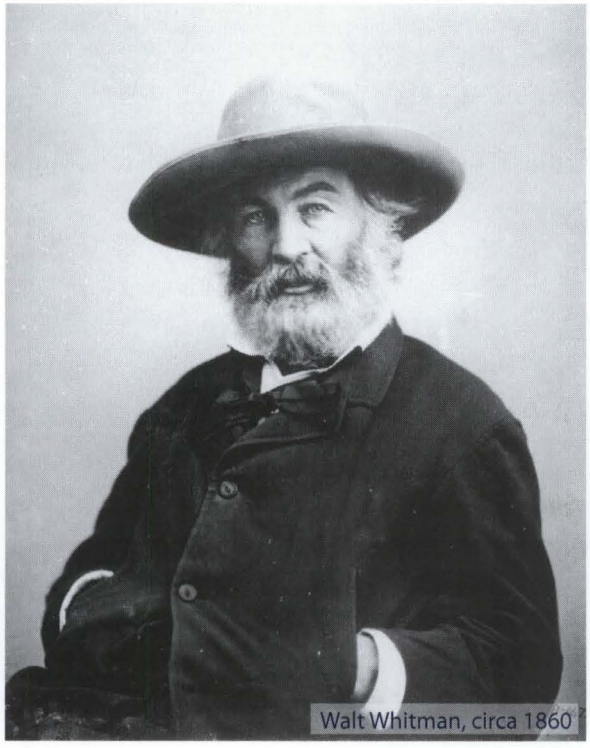
But it is especially a treat to introduce students to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855, which is how Whitman introduced himself to the wider world. His reflections on the meaning and purpose of our nation remain some of the most inspiring and infectious words ever penned by an American. As a person, Whitman had long periods of depression, confusion, illness, sexual infatuation, and hero worship. He could be an impressively caring human being, such as during his lengthy service ministering to injured and dying soldiers in the notorious hospitals in Washington, DC during the Civil War; or he could be petty, delusional, and vindictive on a scale larger than life. Similarly, his poems were at times sentimental or brash, selfless or brazen, wildly optimistic or deeply depressing, and almost always so over the top that a reader breaks out in a laughter of sheer wonder: "And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any statue,/ And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

To a large extent, Whitman was trying to fulfill Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for a new kind of American poet to come forth and make his stand. Emerson had made this call in a variety of essays, such as "The Poet," which in 1842 Whitman had heard Emerson deliver at a lecture in New York. For Emerson, there were poets, and then there were poets; but eventually the "poet of poets" would rightly emerge. This artist would achieve sublime expressions on the order of a prophet: "[The Poet] stands among partial man for the complete man.... The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre.... whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down."

By the 1850s, Whitman had become almost obsessively interested in fulfilling Emerson's call for such "primal warblings." He yearned to express cosmic views about America in a new voice, a new style, and to speak the sublime truth about America, with its grandiose promise and destiny. Indeed, "newness" characterizes Whitman's accomplishment: never in the history of English poetry had there been poems that sounded like the verse in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman also made audacious claims about the meaning and purposes of his nation: "American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races.

Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people.... His spirit responds to his country's spirit.... he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes."

It is fair to say that Whitman is the most revolutionary and most idiosyncratic poet in our national history. His century's closest companion, Emily Dickinson, certainly gave him a good run for his money, even though their poems are as different as night and day, as were their distinct personalities. But it is just as fair to say that the revolutionary qualities in



Walt Whitman, circa 1860

Whitman's verse derive from his subject: the most revolutionary and idiosyncratic society yet conceived on planet Earth. "America," said Whitman in the original preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "is the greatest poem." This great land, an Imaginary Community par excellence, with all its different sorts of people, jobs, families, geographies, faiths, joys, and horrors, constituted for Whitman a large and ungainly Poem, and remained the subject of all of his efforts for the duration of his life. The community he envisioned, and all it contained, was somehow destined to meld together poetically, and express to the rest of the world the cadences and beautiful imagery that might engender a new kind of social and cultural vanguard. And somehow, despite all of the community's differences, this vast nation would be able to maintain a cosmic unity: "the merge," as Whitman liked to call it.

Such was the magisterial vision, and as some might put it, the grand arrogance, of America as expressed in the poems of Walt Whitman. Introducing students to their first long encounter with Whitman's work is one of the truly great and joyful experiences I have had as a teacher. He still has an uncanny knack for inspiring young people with his sympathies, his wide-ranging compassion, his proto-feminism, and what we might call today his multicultural sensibility toward minorities and the poor. Nobody before him had shown as much interest toward factory workers, butchers, prostitutes, the mentally deficient, the terminally ill, Indians, or slaves, but Whitman embraced them all. As he puts it in "The Sleepers," "I pass my hand soothingly to and fro a few inches from them, ... I swear they are all beautiful." Whitman's celebration of the multitudes of different American types often takes the form of song, and as a result he not only includes that word in some of his titles ("A Song for Occupations," "Song of the Broad Axe," "Song of the Open Road"), but his poems have that elusive sing-songy aspect that has become the poet's trademark. "I sing the body electric," and "I hear America singing," he tells us—and then beckons us to join in the chorus.

Students in my classes usually roll their eyes and sigh when I tell them to read the poems out loud to their roommates, but the magic of Whitman's verse when spoken in a grand and semi-theatrical voice is impossible to deny. His poems are often more like songs than what we hear on the radio these days, even without a melody. I have had many students thank me specifically for the time we have spent on Whitman, and inform me of their thrill at hearing me read from the poems aloud in class. Some have gone to bookstores

on their own, in search of more writings by Whitman or biographical works on his life, and it appears that of all the writers I have taught over the years, the Good Gray Poet has remained a part of some students' psyche more than any other. One enthusiastic young man earnestly told me a couple of years ago how Whitman's embrace of the cosmos (and my lectures on the Transcendentalists' views of the world) had literally "changed" his life. I wish my lectures did have the power to change lives, but in this case I must give all the credit to the poets and essayists of that remarkably fertile moment in American literary history. That time was the 1850s, more grandly known as the "American Renaissance," and leading the parade was Whitman.

Somehow Whitman's cosmic vision does have a way of getting under our skin, of infiltrating the very deepest grammar of our views of the world around us. In a sense, this sort of apocalyptic conversion-experience is precisely what "Transcendentalism" is all about.

Somehow Whitman's cosmic vision does have a way of getting under our skin, of infiltrating the very deepest grammar of our views of the world around us. In a sense, this sort of apocalyptic conversion-experience is precisely what "Transcendentalism" is all about. My students are always trying to get me to summarize that word, "Transcendentalism," in twenty-five words or less. When backed into a corner, I tell them this: Transcendentalism is fundamentally a call for a deeper, spiritual vision of our world and of everything in it. It is for these same reasons that Whitman became such a great influence on the Beats and the Hippie generation, who yearned to break through the "doors of perception" (Aldous Huxley's famous term, riffing on William Blake) and to view the world afresh. The Doors, named in honor of Huxley's book, urged their frenzied listeners to "break on through to the other side."

This longing to break free also explains why Whitman is the reigning presence in what is arguably the greatest and most famous film about American poetry, the luminous *Dead Poets Society*. The title speaks for itself: we may be living in a society in which the true power and pathos of the Romantic poets has died. In the movie, however, a somewhat countercultural band of students runs off to hidden caves at night in order to read aloud from the great bards of the past. Sadly, despite the power of the verse in shaking their lives, the young romantic protagonist, whose father sternly rejects his desire to become an actor and forces him to pursue a medical career, sees no way out and dies a tragic death. Perhaps this death suggests precisely the attraction of Whitman for many students today: he reminds us in his later poems that we need not die to romance, passion, and mystery.

Of course, the greatest of the great Whitman poems, in most critics' views, is "Song of Myself," which presents a dramatic picture of the inherent value and sacred splendor of each individual American citizen. Placed first in the original volume, "Song of Myself" was in many ways never surpassed by Whitman as both his most characteristic and his most excellent poem. The title refers to the seemingly omniscient presence of the poet himself throughout all of America, as an observer and healer. But in some strange way, while Whitman is supposedly singing about himself, as the title states, he is actually singing about each of us. More comprehensively, "Song of Myself" is America being given voice and singing of itself. The poem is fundamentally a celebration of a democratic view of each and every American citizen. We are each mysterious, beautiful, regal, and indeed "divine inside and out."

It is useful to recall that much of the poem's strength derived from a specific moment in

Whitman's life. At least that is what Richard Bucke claimed in his book *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901), a title that signals much of his perspective. On a balmy June day in the early 1850s, Whitman experienced some kind of religious or cosmic awakening, out of which a new mood of transcendental insight evidently took hold of him. Something enchanting and mysterious happened to him that day, possibly even as he lay in the grass and sunned himself, and possibly just as the poem describes it. At least this has become the mythic moment, one available to each of us, if we but seek it. An ideal "spot of time" is presented as spiritual, ecstatic revelation, and it is this concept of the poet that becomes one of the most ennobling statements in all of Whitman's work:

> Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
> that pass all the argument of the earth,
> And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
> And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own.

This is step number one in understanding the Transcendentalists, I inform my students: an invitation to see the world anew, to get outside the box of your own preconceived notions about life and society. To wake up and smell the coffee. A concrete moment of revelation.

Armed with this new awareness, the poet sees cosmic reality everywhere. America constantly confronts the poet with its spiritual secrets: "I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, ... I find letters from God dropt in the street." At times Whitman's excess rises to an almost comical level: "Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world." Yet who among us can resist such passionate desire for goodness and unity as Whitman throws our way? Generally, my students are smitten by it and forever hooked thereafter. Just as the poem ends with the narrator assuring us that he will be waiting for us on that long and winding road of life, the first reading of Whitman is often long-lasting and unforgettable.

But romantics like Whitman only tell part of the story, as many will protest. And so, in terms of our literary history, "Song of Myself" can usefully be compared with T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published in 1922. Together, these are probably the two greatest and most influential poems ever written by Americans, the yin and yang of American song. Each is the landmark poem of their respective centuries. And yet it would be hard to imagine two poems that have such different attitudes, and which seem to serve such different purposes. Eliot's long and difficult poem includes a series of meditations on the darkness, futility, and horror of modern life. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," as he famously puts it; "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," he states. This image of the pathetic modern sojourner searching desperately for some "fragments" from which to draw meaning, yet seeing mostly only "a handful of dust," has become one of the centerpieces of the modern imagination. It is an imagination that would become even more enervated as the twentieth century's horrors continued to unfold. Eliot's vision was of course deeply influenced by the death and destruction of the Great War, and most of it occurs in the "Unreal City" that arose in America and abroad through massive industrialization, blatant capitalism, racial unrest, and secularization with all its attendant problems. Eliot's work does not paint a very pretty picture of what it means to be a citizen of the modern urban world.

Eliot, like Whitman, also has a strangely overwhelming ability to capture the minds of young people. Frankly, when I was younger I thought Eliot was the greatest American poet. He was magically able to grind out beautiful verse from a view of the world that was in fact quite bleak. Furthermore, I was convinced that Eliot was onto something important about our world. We had failed, he seemed to be saying; we are all very far from home. As a young English major who cut his teeth on jeremiads like *Catcher in the Rye*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Bell Jar*, or *Breakfast of Champions*, there was a long period in my life

when I swallowed whole these kinds of stories, with their harsh critical views of human civilization, including most importantly an almost complete embarrassment about the American nation. Then, like some fulsome and lazy snake, I would digest those swallowed texts, which slowly were assimilated into my system. In short, it is precisely how healthy young skeptics are manufactured in our English departments these days.

Today's youth are already well acquainted with fear and loathing about civilization, and yet badly malnourished when it comes to hope and vision for the future. They know firsthand about the "fear in a handful of dust" that is one of Eliot's central images in his masterpiece. What they desperately need is an alternative symbolic language.

Those novels are all wonderful, and in their own ways, strangely empowering, but it is no great insight to observe how much their popularity depends upon the Star Wars metaphysics of their mainly angst-ridden, teenaged readers. A deeply engrained and yet somewhat naïve cynicism seems quite remarkable during the adolescent years, but in the end one learns that a balance of extremes is not only valuable but even necessary for psychological well-being. This balance is actually on display in both of these great poems, though it is easily overlooked. We need to notice, for instance, how "Song of Myself" contains many acute criticisms of America and how *The Waste Land* contains redemptive hope and spiritual promise. These facts keep us from simply labeling these poems as complete opposites—a sign of their literary excellence. And it would be wrong to suggest that students do not turn on to Eliot's work as they do with Whitman's. Many students find *The Waste Land*, after the initial shock of its notorious difficulty, a wonderfully hopeful literary treasure. Still, I cannot recall too many of my students ever telling me that they had run down to the bookstore to pick up a copy of Eliot's other poems, or a biography on him—or, that their lives had been forever changed by an acquaintance with J. Alfred Prufrock.

Perhaps this is because today's youth are already well acquainted with fear and loathing about civilization, and yet badly malnourished when it comes to hope and vision for the future. They know firsthand about the "fear in a handful of dust" that is one of Eliot's central images in his masterpiece. What they desperately need is an alternative symbolic language. In "Song of Myself," a central metaphor is the image of a child coming to the narrator with an armful of grass. Thus the title of the volume, *Leaves of Grass*. The narrator responds to the child's question, "What is the grass?" It is many things, and all things, he seems to tell that child: "the handkerchief of God," "the beautiful uncut hair of graves." And the grass is also a "flag of my disposition, out of the hopeful green stuff woven." There is something hopeful about that grass, something potentially life-giving, that can radically alter our dispositions—if only we can perceive it.

The images of the fear in a "handful of dust" and the hopefulness notable in mere "leaves of grass" signify in a nutshell a major difference between Whitman and Eliot, it seems to me. Both dust and grass are elemental, and often together in the very same frame; but the meaning depends very much on the sensibility of the observer. One sees inanimate matter, dirty, and dark—a symbol of death. The other sees a living and growing organism, colored green and multiplying rapidly—a symbol of life. If Eliot holds out to us a frightening handful of dust, reminding us of death and destruction, old Walt is right there beside him, with a large

bulging load of new-cut grass, fragrant with life and green as a spring valley. No wonder young people respond so powerfully to his outlook.

What a curious thing it might be to see Whitman and Eliot meet one another in a café somewhere, and to listen in on their interactions, covering life and love, or death and disappointment. Or perhaps they might talk about the crucial changes that each experienced mid-career: Whitman's devastating Civil War experience in the grisly hospitals of Washington, tending to the needs of dying soldiers, followed by physical and mental exhaustion and illness, led him into a period of writing that is much more restrained in its hopefulness and much more gloomy in its outlook. Conversely, Eliot's dramatic conversion to Anglican Christianity in the 1920s led him to create some of the most beautiful spiritual verse of the American century, including the marvelous "Four Quartets." As Whitman became more ambivalent and darkened with age, Eliot opened up to another sort of inner light.

In particular, I would feel privileged to eavesdrop on their conversations about the meaning of America, the nature of humanity, the possibility of communal dreams and hopes. These conversations, if it were magically possible to overhear them when they were both late in life, might be more interesting and affirming than some might suspect (since it is true that Eliot was not a great admirer of the earlier poet). It is easy for me to suppose, for example, that a lot of good ideas and good insight into the nature of our lives and of our nation might flow from these two bookend poets of the American journey. Possibly they would not mind if I were to throw in my own two cents, or if other listeners like me, sitting around the edges of the café, were to do the same. Especially welcome, we might imagine, would be not answers but more and more questions, about the destiny of America, the valuable lessons of our national history, the exact meanings of words and phrases from our national documents, the legacy of some of our cultural personae, and so forth.

One might even go so far as to consider such an evening to be a model for a meaningful, ongoing conversation, one that could be continued on a weekly or even daily basis, something along the lines of what Kenneth Burke called the "unending conversation." As someone gets up to leave the café, another takes her place. As one person arrives, someone else might have to leave for work or for home and

T. S. Eliot

1948

Nobel Foundation Photo.

a warm bed. Always at the head of the table, whether literally or figuratively, would be the looming presence of Walt Whitman. Eliot is there also—but he defers to his older master and the peculiarly American tradition that he represents. As a result, soon the place is christened by some of the regulars as "Whitman's Café."

At Whitman's Café, all Americans are always welcomed, and allowed to rest and listen, or if they wish, to raise questions, present opinions, or analyze arguments. Above all, Whitman's Café would be the place to talk about the meaning and purpose of America. One need not be a "true-blooded" American, whatever that might mean: participants need not hold certain views about this or that. This sort of café would not be either predominantly red or blue, to use the current lingo. Whitman's Café would be a safe house for

good talk about America—a site for passionate, though always cordial, discussion about the things that Americans have stopped talking about in public spaces.

"Good talk about America"—that is a concept that may sound a little quaint here at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Like Mark Twain, however, the rumor of the demise of an ongoing American Conversation has been greatly exaggerated. Whitman's Café is thus a metaphor of an older and more cordial model of the American public sphere, a model that has fallen on some pretty hard times as of late. My call for the establishment of local versions of Whitman's Café is premised on the need in our culture for a user-friendly, rigorous discussion, interpretation, and celebration of the promise of America. At the same time, it is a place of intensive questioning and deliberation about the fulfillment of those promises. As one small response to the lethargic state of the American Conversation, I have initiated my own local version of Whitman's Café. For now, it is a small, organic manifestation of the ideas outlined here, and it serves as a tiny protest against the usurpation of the American public sphere by the huge, nameless forces that have dominated for these many years.

Whitman's Café is premised on the need in our culture for a user-friendly, rigorous discussion, interpretation, and celebration of the promise of America. Whitman's Café is thus a metaphor of an older and more cordial model of the American public sphere.

As such, Whitman's Café is a peculiarly American version of the recently popular emergence of what Christopher Phillips has called "Socrates Café," an intelligent attempt to recapture the popular work of philosophizing. In his volume *Socrates Café* (Norton 2001), Phillips urges regular Americans to take back and recover the power of everyday philosophizing. He writes,

> [T]he demise of a certain type of philosophy has been to the detriment of our society. It is a type of philosophy that Socrates and other philosophers practiced in Athens.... that utilized a method of philosophical inquiry that "everyman" and "everywoman" could embrace and take for his or her own, and in the process rekindle the childlike—but by no means childish—sense of wonder.

Phillips's emphasis here on the wonder of such conversations is of radical importance, I believe. For most Americans, that childlike wonder is either already dead or in serious danger of vanishing—at least, when the topic of America comes up. Largely this is the result of our living in what Deborah Tannen has described as an "argument culture." Most of us learned as children from our elders that the two things not to talk about in mixed company were religion and politics. America is a topic that combines the two; and as such, I suppose one might suggest that it is of all things the least desirable of topics. Regarding the current sad state of the media, much of it dominated by cable television, our public models for such discussions generally amount to pitting the two most oppositional talking heads directly against one another. Far from offering a sane and pleasant conversation about America that one might encounter in Whitman's Café, cable television presents an ugly, even grotesque, alternative. Left screams at right, and right fires back at left, and as a result, most of us end up tuning out the rancor and simply clicking the remote in search of another Seinfeld rerun, an intriguing new reality show, or a "crucial" sporting event.

The dominance of argument culture within the media has made most Americans

weary of trying to dialogue on the treacherous topic of American meaning. Phillips notes in *Socrates Café* that he is often told by people that they hunger for a more humane and sustained search for truth and meaning. "People are 'weary' of the 'guru approach' to group discussion"—but also, I would submit, they are weary of the reigning argument culture as well. Instead of finding an alternative space for real and substantive conversation, or of themselves trying to create such a space, most Americans have just given up, and allowed the politicians and the pundits to dominate the cultural production of the meaning and purpose of our nation. Meanwhile, young people who have never even known media BC (Before Cable) routinely despair of even the possibility of a mannered and cordial environment for such talk. And they have abandoned belief in a national purpose.

In trying to create an alternative space, it all starts with the human imagination—an insight that Whitman himself understood. We need to begin thinking about the possibilities of founding and sustaining safe spaces like a Whitman's Café. These spaces might include any number of positive attributes, but there are at least five major elements. First and foremost, I think, it would be a place filled with lots of laughter and wonder, music and singing. Song and laughter represent for many people today a kind of retro-romanticism, but this is precisely the charm and the charisma of Whitman's achievement. We need to celebrate our nation's great achievements and even great promises, as stated in our national scriptures, such as the Declaration and the Bill of Rights, and the keynote speeches of Lincoln, King, and many others. These things are best done through song and joy. And the celebration of Whitman's Café would jump-start the historical appreciation of America's best and brightest achievements. Without a more prevalent cultural memory, America as a nation is in serious danger of becoming like one of the patients described in Oliver Sacks's study, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. There, Sacks recounts tale after bizarre tale of men and women whose injuries result in tragic loss of memory or other brain functions. These cases emphasize how crucial memory of the past is to human identity—and, as I would like to suggest here, how crucial memory is to a national identity as well.

Second, we would need to pair this celebration with a sober and all-encompassing recognition of our failures and our historic abuses of these ideals. This need to recall the horror and traumas of the past is perhaps even more crucial for healing and restoration. In the remarkable recent film "Reign Over Me" (yes, I'm really citing an Adam Sandler vehicle), a man who has lost his wife and children in the wreckage of one of the airliners of 9/11 haunts the nighttime streets of Manhattan, broken and delirious. This fictional tale of the beginnings of redemption through the retelling of the horrific past has been confirmed in many contemporary settings, perhaps most notably in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. Thus would a meaningful conversation of American history require both the joys and the horrors of the past. In the spirit of full disclosure, old Tom Eliot hovers in the corner, always keeping us honest, with his neat collars and his simple tie pins.

Third, Whitman's Café would need to be fully democratic—a space where all views are welcome and encouraged, and in which no voice can be ridiculed or silenced. Somehow we need to reconceive a public sphere in which love predominates over judgment—a kind of revolutionary discourse, admittedly, that at this late stage in human civilization seems increasingly difficult to imagine, if not completely naïve. Ours is a time when the top-rated shows on cable are so far removed from such civil discourse that our imaginations have become frayed. We need to reinvent the concept of serious conversation and find ways to model it for our youth, who often shrink back from serious engagement because it connotes "argument" in a negative and threatening sense to them.

Fourth, we would need to resurrect the conceptual possibility of America actually having an ultimate end or goal. This idea of an American purpose, or teleology, which is at the very core of our historical existence, and which was taken for granted for most of our history, has suddenly become not merely quaint and outdated for many Americans. In fact, for a growing minority, American purpose and meaning are violent and oppressive ideas that have done great damage in American and world events. The inherent violence of metanarratives is today taken to be a commonplace by many intellectuals and regular citizens. And yet most people dream of becoming part of some story bigger than themselves. Thus, one of the preoccupations of Whitman's Café would be to work through this conundrum and consider how this important aspect of the American experience can be revivified and brought up to date for the twenty-first century. Without these larger stories, individuals are bereft of common hope, and of any meaning larger than themselves.

Finally, Whitman's Café would have to be a place of great hope in the human project. It would be a place for sowing the seeds of human hopefulness. Fr. William Lynch once defined hope as a constant decision to move into a new and brighter future, and Whitman's Café would be founded upon this principle of change. The human imagination is a wonderfully powerful tool for the betterment of humankind, and despite Marxist critiques of faith as an opiate, human hope has been the greatest motivator of political change in the history of the world. One thing we have learned from Whitman is that imagination, when fired by the coals of truth, goodness, and beauty, can warm us and be taken from place to place, warming others. Indeed, the fires of hope are often ignited most forcefully by critique and protest, as the theologian Jürgen Moltmann has reminded us: "[hope] is itself the unquiet heart in man.... Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present." My students often tell me that Whitman's blazing imagination has been a source of great hope and encouragement to them. Whitman's spirit accelerates them into the future, as one student once put it. This would be the fundamental objective of our conversations—to propel us into a better future.

I know that if there were such a place as Whitman's Café, I would want to become a regular there, and so would a lot of people I know. They'd have an elaborate coffee bar, decent beers on tap, with fresh pastries and salty snacks on the side. Students would show up, too—if there is one thing I have learned about them in over twenty years of teaching, it is that they yearn for meaning and some bigger story, and that they desperately need an injection of hope. I also know that there would be naysayers: for many twenty-first-century Americans, it is pretty hard to imagine such a place working for very long. But in the spirit of Walt Whitman, in the spirit of the Great American Poet, who sought to compose the greatest poem about our land and our world at large, let us seek to restore America's conversation about itself and encourage the ongoing composition of the Great American Poem, still in vitro but still growing.

Can I buy you a drink down at Whitman's Café?

Hal Bush teaches American literature and culture at Saint Louis University and is the author of two books and numerous articles on topics ranging from American literary figures to the pragmatics of teaching and reading.

Soaring

Avian Marginalia

John Steven Paul

A liturgical drama performed by student and alumni members of Soul Purpose at the Inauguration of President Mark Alan Heckler as President of Valparaiso University, 17 October 2008.

Written and directed by John Steven Paul, (1951–2009). Professor of Theatre, Valparaiso University; Program Director, Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts.

Cast: Dan Cobbler (Class of 2005), Emily Weller (2009), William Milhans (2011), Sarah Beckerman (2010), Jay Michelson (2009), Briana Hallman (2009).

I Inauguration

Dan — What's all this?

Emily — This is the inauguration.

Sarah — So *what* is an *inauguration*?

William — All *this*.

Sarah — But what does the word mean?

Jay — Haven't got a clue.

Dan — (points at Jay as if introducing him.) Clueless!

William — Must mean, something like, *first*.

Dan — The *first* time President Heckler makes a speech to the faculty and students.

Sarah — But it's not… the first. That was at the Opening Convocation.

Sarah — So what does *inauguration* mean?

Emily — Let's take the word apart.

Dan — OK, we're *in here* for a start.

Jay — Where?

Emily — The Chapel of the Resurrection.

William — Dedicated in 1959.

Sarah — [points to William as if introducing him] The historian.

Dan — And, *–ation* makes a verb into a noun, I remember that from Latin.

William — Another Cicero!

Sarah — But what about *augur*?

Emily — I used that in a crossword puzzle yesterday. *Augurs*, actually.

Sarah — What was the clue?

Emily — *Bodes.*

Jay — What does *bodes* mean?

William — Later…. sing now.

The assembly sings "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty."

II Augury

Jay — In-

Emily — -augur-

Dan — -ation.

Sarah — Augur?

Emily Augury.

Briana Augurer.

Jay You mean *arguer*?

Emily No, augurer.

Dan It's *augur*, actually, and here's the definition from the Oxford English Dictionary. "A religious official among the Romans, whose duty it was to predict future events and advise upon the course of public business in accordance with omens derived from the flight, singing, and feeding of birds…"

Emily Flight.

William Singing.

Jay Feeding.

Sarah Of birds!

Briana I'm like that.

Jay A bird lover?

Briana A Prophet.

William According to Aeschylus, the circling of twin eagles over Mycenae inaugurated the Trojan War.

Sarah I remember in high school we read *Julius Caesar* and he met a soothsayer on the way to the Senate.

William Turned out to be Caesar's last day, right?

Sarah The soothsayer warned him not to go out in the Ides of March.

Jay How'd he know?

Briana Augury. Signs from birds.

Dan So an in-AUGUR-ation is for the birds then?

Jay What'd I tell ya?

Sarah *From* the birds, Dr. Dictionary.

"To inaugurate is to take omens from the flight of birds, to consecrate or install after taking such omens and auguries."

William Like when Noah sent a bird out to find dry land. A raven, I think.

Briana And the bird came back wet!

Sarah But then Noah sent out a dove.

Emily And the dove came back with an olive branch in its beak.

Jay And then Noah knew it was everybody out. Finally. Time to start up the world again.

Dan I wonder what the birds would tell us today.

Jay So, Briana…, You're a prophet! What will happen next?

Briana More singing.

William [he sees it] And the entrance of a cross.

University choirs sing an arrangement of "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty," as the procession begins.

III Procession

Dan In-

Emily -augur-

William -ation.

Briana Augur.

Sarah to take omens from the flight of birds,

Emily Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul

Dan Nice. Yours?

Emily Emily Dickinson's.

Sarah Here come the professors.

Jay Their scarves make them look like birds.

William Walking birds.

The faculty process into the Chapel for the inauguration of Valparaiso University's eighteenth president. (Photo: Jon Hendricks)

Dan Those "scarves" are called "hoods."

William Each color for a different major.

Dan They're called "disciplines."

Jay [Points to him as if to introduce him] The Expert!

Emily Look, there's a cardinal.

Dan A purple finch.

Sarah A goldfinch.

William A mourning dove.

Briana An oriole.

Jay Lots and lots of red-winged blackbirds.

Emily All those black gowns.

Dan Lots of doctorates!

Sarah Why so many blue birds?

Sarah Lots of Doctors of Philosophy.

William An egret.

Jay A woodpecker.

Emily A hoopoe.

Dan A flamingo.

Sarah A swallow.

Briana A hawk.

William An owl.

Emily So much wisdom.

Jay A parrot.

Dan So many colors.

William A robin.

Emily So much hope.

Sarah A peacock.

Briana So much plumage.

Emily Soaring birds.

Sarah These birds will help *us* soar.

Dan These birds augur well.

William Good signs. For soaring. Indeed.

The procession continues.

IV Witnesses

Dan In-

Sarah -augur-

William -ation.

Briana Augur.

Jay Augurs.

Emily Augury.

Briana A good day for soaring say the signs.

Sarah Soaring? Where?

The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Emily To the clouds.

William To the cloud. The great cloud of witnesses.

Jay Hey wait! I'm not ready for that yet.

Sarah I'm glad to be here. As a witness.

William *Under* that cloud. In this place.

Dan Under these witnesses.

Emily And with these witnesses; these bird witnesses.

William And there are others. Hundreds.

Briana Thousands. Not just here. Outside. Along the "live stream."

Emily And, in the cloud, the great cloud of witnesses.

Jay Who's up there?

Dan Saints…

Sarah …and angels,

William …and presidents.

Emily Their names are…

William Francis D. Carley and Charles N. Sims

Jay Erastus Herman Staley and B. Wilson Smith

Sarah Thomas Bond Wood and Aaron Gurney

Briana Henry Baker Brown and Oliver Perry Kinsey

Emily Henry Kinsey Brown and Daniel Russell Hodgdon

Dan John Edward Roessler and Milo Jesse Bowman

Jay …and Horace Martin Evans.

William Then came the Lutherans:

Sarah William Henry Theodore Dau

Briana Albert Frederick Ottomar Germann

Emily John C. Baur

Dan John C. Baur, Albert Frank Scribner, Frederick William Kroencke, and Henry Herman Kumnick.

Jay All at once?

Emily A flock!

William Oscar Carl Kreinheder

Dan Walter George Friedrich

Jay Otto Paul Kretzmann

Sarah Albert G. Huegli

William And soaring still:

Briana Robert V. Schnabel

Emily and Alan F. Harre

William and the eighteenth president of Valparaiso University: Mark Alan Heckler.

Jay And that's what this inauguration is all about, right?

All Right!

The Inaugural Ceremony continues.

V Birds in the Windows

Following the ceremony:

Dan As the Psalm says "the days of our life are seventy years,

Sarah Or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;

William Even then their span is only toil and trouble;

Emily They are soon gone and we fly away."

Briana We fly away.

Jay And stay.

Dan We soar away.

Jay But stay… like that little flock of birds, in the window, soaring away from God's hands

Dan Where is it?

Sarah Where are they?

Jay In the windows.

Briana Birds in the windows.

William There! Way above that rooster crowing on the steeple top. See it?

Jay There.

Sarah And at the very top a dove like Noah's dove.

Dan With an olive branch in its mouth.

Emily For peace...

Sarah And the promise of home.

William In the center there's a phoenix, a symbol of the resurrected Christ

Briana Over on the right there's an owl.

Jay Way up on the right. It's—

Emily It's another dove.

Sarah Where?

Jay Way up on the right. See? It's—

Emily It's the Dove of the Holy Spirit.

Sarah How do you know?

Dan See the Pentecost flames surrounding it?

Emily Windows full of birds.

Sarah Why?

Briana They're signs of things to come.

Dan They augur well?

Jay They're soaring.

Emily We're soaring.

Dan They augur *well.*

Briana And they'll be here, in those windows, when we're home!

NIGHT STUDY

Up again late into the night
singing to myself
or not so much as singing,
nothing coming out that's careful, kind, or graceful,
nothing brutal, either, just the interior *amen, amen*
to mice among the ivy, crickets,
fireworks someone within a mile or so
shoots off each night at one or one-fifteen,
and trains that wrap the night in warning:
We can't stop fast enough. Stay off the tracks.
Stay back. We pass. Just wait.
Inside—the soft computer hum, my breath,
two small-voiced cats announcing that they need
to be outside right now, right now, right now.
Downstairs, asleep for hours now, you breathe and dream
and heal from this last surgery
to mend a fraying tissue in your leg.
And I'm up here, awake, not watching over you,
not praying that this be the last thing you need fixed
for some long while, not fretting or remembering
when you were nearly swallowed whole by the infection—
just up again late into the dark, with trains and crickets,
singing my *amen* into the steady night.

Devon Miller-Duggan

Brains

Gary Fincke

MY MOTHER SAID FISH WAS BRAIN FOOD. She breaded it and fried it and told me to finish whatever she put on my plate, and for a while I expected my IQ to rise, maintaining the same belief in that promise as I had in the carrots she fed me to cure my nearsightedness.

Long after I lost my faith in both of those home remedies, right about the time I got my first pair of glasses, my father put two pans on the kitchen stove one Saturday morning and slid slimy-looking meat into them from two different packages. He saw me turn my head and barked, "Don't be so squeamish."

As usual, I wasn't wearing my glasses, so all I had to do was take two steps back to turn the meat into fog. Whatever filled those pans where Crisco was melting into puddles was comfortably blurred. "What is it?" I asked, like I knew I was supposed to.

"Veal kidneys," he said, pointing to one pan. "Calves brains," he said, pointing to the other. "Wait until you try some," he added, but I was stuck on the word "brains," and he read my face. "You don't know what's good," he said. "You want the real smart food, here's your chance."

When he relented, asking me to try one or the other, I chose the kidneys. They didn't promise to make me better in any way, but they didn't seem much different than the hearts and livers of chickens and turkeys, meat that I loved even as a nine year-old.

Once the smell of urine faded as they finished cooking, the kidneys were rich and greasy and delicious. My father was pleased. He ate all of the brains himself.

2

Despite not eating brains, I did well in school. Later that year, near the end of fourth grade, my teachers suggested I skip a grade, and a "readiness evaluator" tested me for an hour, asking, early on, for the quick recall of body parts, current events, and trivia. I loved showing off what I'd read. For science, I mentioned Ptolemy, the sun as God's spotlight; I sequenced Copernicus, the Church, and Galileo. He smiled and read me puzzles like the one about Bill meeting his mother-in-law's only daughter's husband's son. What relation, he questioned, is this person to Bill? His son, I blurted, not bothering with the proffered pencil, and I thought he'd be astonished because I could calculate, in seconds, the equal number of quarters, dimes, and nickels (twenty-four) to get nine dollars and sixty cents. I knew how many nines (twenty) I had to pass counting from one to one hundred, and how to slosh water back and forth from a five quart container to one that holds three quarts in order to finish with exactly four. I thought the expert loved my top-scale score and would show me off to every teacher in the district, but my parents voted *no* and *no* before he spoke.

In our yard that winter I built, after a snowstorm, a model of the solar system, rolling and shaping the huge ball of Jupiter, the extraordinary mound of the sun. I worked the planets to scale, measured circumference and

the distance from sphere to sphere to sphere. I needed the neighbor's yard for Pluto, and when the frost planets seemed plain, I gave them their moons to scale, snow berries and packed pebbles of ice. At the end of the street I snowballed another star. I stood, according to my imagined scale, a hundred million miles from it, thought of my house, and readied myself for ignition because surely, in all that snow, some life had formed and evolved to visit me.

"Three generations of imbeciles are enough," Oliver Wendell Holmes said in 1927, supporting the Eugenics Record Office, which wanted to sterilize everyone deemed unfit.

3

That summer, when I had to spend afternoons at my father's bakery because my mother had started working there to help make ends meet, the woman who owned Peluso's, a nearby bar, introduced me to her son. "This is my boy Raymond," she said, as if she expected us to become friends and play together. He was nearly twice my size, and I guessed that he was about twice my age. His face was round, and his eyes seemed glazed. When he spoke, he sounded the way my father's records did when I changed the speed from seventy-eight to thirty-three, but Mrs. Peluso acted as if she understood every word.

"He loves his lime pop," she said, pointing to the bottle he held in his hand. "I keep some in the cooler with the beer."

Raymond slurred a few more words, pointing at one of the display cases where trays of cookies were laid out. "Such a sweet tooth," Mrs. Peluso said while my mother retrieved one of the vanilla sugar cookies and handed it to her.

Raymond seemed agitated. He growled out another phrase or two, and Mrs. Peluso stepped toward the door, tugging him away from the case with a sort of leash that was attached to a harness he wore around his chest and back. "He'd eat it and ask for more if I let him," she said, and then she led him into the street like a dog.

"Down Syndrome," my mother said as soon as the door closed. "It's her cross to bear."

"He can't even talk," I said.

"Yes, he can. You heard him. A mother lives long enough with that, she learns what it means." My mother closed the display case and leaned on the counter as if she needed to get closer to where I sat by the space heater that wasn't turned on until November. "You know," she said, "he's not the only one. It's not rare."

I looked out the front window as if I expected Mrs. Peluso to be listening, but the street was empty. "I never saw anybody like that," I said. "Where are they?"

"They're put away mostly. There are places for that."

"Where?"

"Where bad luck lives," she said. "Where, God willing, you'll never be."

4

In health class, eighth grade, we learned the descending categories for results on the Stanford-Binet IQ Test that all of us had taken in first and fourth grade.

You couldn't do worse, if you made a mark, than *idiot*. I thought of Raymond, who still loved lime soda and slurred his private language at the end of a leash near my father's bakery. That year there were imbeciles bused in and out for half-days in the resource rooms, and like other eighth graders, I told "little moron" jokes: *The little moron was playing with matches and burned the house down. "Your daddy's going to kill you when he gets home," his mother said. But the little moron laughed and laughed because he knew his daddy was asleep on the couch.*

My friends and I laughed and laughed at everything the little moron did. *Why would he*

take his ruler to bed? He wanted to see how long he slept. And we wanted, joke by joke, to bring the dead metaphors to life—time, butter, and fire flying out his busy window.

"That will do," Miss Hutchinson, our health teacher said, sick of those jokes one afternoon.

"Three generations of imbeciles are enough," Oliver Wendell Holmes said in 1927, supporting the Eugenics Record Office, which wanted to sterilize everyone deemed unfit. Harry Laughlin, Superintendant, hoped, in two generations, to eliminate what he considered the submerged tenth of our population. He meant the blind, the deaf, the orphans, and the homeless. He meant the poor and the stupid, and the Supreme Court backed him up, finding a "clear and present danger" embedded in the family tree of the Bucks, who were illegitimate and poor; who were Emma, Carrie, and finally Vivian, who made more than enough of those morons and was declared deficient at seven months after someone gave this expert testimony: "There is a look about the baby that is not quite normal, but what it is I can't quite tell."

None of the Bucks, it turned out, was a moron like the one who took his ladder to church for High Mass, but like Emma and Carrie, Vivian was sterilized, too, for good measure.

5

In college, an English major, I took a course called "Swift and Pope." One afternoon the professor, to give us context, delivered a lecture on The Great Chain of Being, how angels move above us while brutes make do below. Edward Tyson, the professor said, was a comparative anatomist in the later seventeenth century, and he believed that he'd verified the thinking approved by the church. He studied a chimpanzee, expecting a link that placed it close behind man. Tyson needed that chimp to walk upright, something snug between the large apes and us for the Great Chain. But in one of Tyson's old plates, the chimp uses a walking stick; in another, it ambles away, holding a rope stretched overhead like a commuter's hand rail.

At the time, the professor went on, those chimps were as exotic as the humans from Africa, who were placed one step above them and several steps below the British in the writings of Charles White, biologist, who championed, a century later, the Great Chain of the Upright by defining intelligence through the shapes of jaws and foreheads. The American Savage was next in his chain; the Oriental its neighbor. Charles White worked his way, by facial features, to Europe, and, by extrapolation, to the Greek ideal in antiquity. And as for intelligence? In the Golden Age of assigned place, the white man bound to God, form followed function.

During the next class, we were asked to recall Pope's heroic couplets, passages chosen from "Essay on Man." The Great Chain of Being jangled and clanked while we remembered how the bored superior beings "Show'd a Newton as we show an ape," another theory taken to heart. The professor explained how Immanuel Kant, in the Charles White years, believed Jupiter was the planet of sufficient size to support all of God's higher beings, the ones who were links between us and the angels.

6

One summer afternoon five years after I graduated from college, my cousin and I sat our year-old sons on her living room carpet, and I counted the handicaps in her first-born until I felt her stare and had to turn away. An accident, she said her doctor had told her. Too little air. Unfortunate.

I nodded like someone saving his job in an office of lies. My son pulled himself up on a chair and staggered until he fell. Her son crawled as if he'd lighted on the huge, invisible web of God. "My sister's boy has a problem, too," she murmured. "Both of us are moving closer to cities so this never happens again."

Too little air in Pennsylvania where we lived. Too little air in Georgia where her sister lived. Too little air in the living room where we stared from one boy to the other, so quiet, so long, we might have been practicing conservation, as if that room had been sealed by

a landslide and we were finding the essential, slow rhythms of survival.

7

Without knowing what I offered, that son of mine, a few years later, sampled the veal kidneys I occasionally made for breakfast before I walked to the nearby high school to teach. He asked for more. I told him what he'd eaten,but it didn't slow him down. He was four years

"Superior beings, when of late they saw A mortal man unfold all Nature's law, Admired such wisdom in a earthly shape, And show'd a NEWTON as we show an ape. Could he, whose rules the rapid comet bind, Describe or fix one movement of his mind?"

Alexander Pope
"Know Then Thyself" from
An Essay on Man: Epistle II (1711)

old and wouldn't have been able to point out where his kidneys were located if some preschool expert had asked in order to determine his school readiness.

For that whole school year he asked me to wake him on the days I cooked kidneys. One morning I asked him if he'd try brains, and he looked horrified. I told him the story of his grandfather, and he said, "Grand Pap eats brains" as if he was revealing a secret kept for centuries.

8

By the time my daughter and another son had been born, I learned that some mornings chimpanzees are known to skip breakfast and hike in a group to where the Aspilia grows. They gibber in a way that shows reluctance, chatter in a manner that sounds as if they're complaining, but all of them gulp the plant's bitter leaves, each cleaning a branch like children frightened by the taste of medicine.

Aspilia, it turns out, is a purgative in the rain forest, a home remedy to fend off parasites and fungi. The chimpanzees have been filmed by scientists, who also have learned that the oil of the Aspilia destroys the malignant cells of certain tumors. Likewise, we can be instructed by the pharmacy of the primates if we watch the sick chimp who drags herself to the foul bush of Vernonia to chew its leaves and swallow its juice. We can witness her next day recovery, how she grooms herself again and forages for food.

It turns out that in the natural selection of medicinal plants, the ignorant and stupid will swallow poisonous leaves and end their faulty genes with an incorrect prescription. Pay attention, survivors lecture, to pattern, color, texture, scent. Eat these stems during the rainy season. Take two of these petals for climate change. And here are the aids for fertility, their counterparts for prevention. There are howling monkeys who follow a diet that helps produce daughters or sons, who eat acidic or alkaline to shift conception odds for the x or the y of sperm. And if we observe the howlers who feel betrayed or trapped by conception, we discover that they grind the leaves for induced abortion, take care of themselves without consulting doctors, lawyers, politicians, or priests.

9

Ten years after we watched our first-born sons on that living room carpet, my cousin told me about Fragile X Syndrome, how her son made progress through care and love. Her husband was tossing a ball to our eleven-year-olds, casually and carefully by turns. Two steps closer, two steps back, handicapping the distance and the arc of the ball. My son, later, listed all of Fragile X's unlucky signs of awful coordination and speech, the long face and big floppy ears of the donkey.

I was told that my cousin's son knew the name of every bird at the feeder near the back

patio, and I agreed to say "What's that?" each time one settled. He shouted "House wren," waved his hands, bit his fingers, and screamed "House wren" for the next and the next, laughing and laughing at my ignorance. And whether it was the same bird, three different ones from the same species, or he was bluffing like a parrot, I asked again, looking to where my son was throwing horseshoes for the first time, already bored with ringer and leaner, the simple language for play.

10

When my cousins hosted a party for their parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, I had a chance to spend a few hours with their three Fragile X sons, all, by then, in their late teens. My older son was in college; the boy who had shared that carpet with him worked clean-up at McDonald's.

The two brothers from Georgia bumped butts and squealed, "Hammer time!"

"Can't touch this!" I shouted back, giving solidarity a shot.

"Hammer time!" they shouted, ecstatic, slamming again before they tumbled to the carpet of the reception hall.

Their mother gave me a smile that was part grimace. "They each have a Walkman," she said. "It kept them busy on the drive from Georgia. They listen to the same thing over and over."

"It looks as if they love M. C. Hammer," I said.

"They're sedated," she said, and when I couldn't think of anything to say in answer to that, she added, "Just this once. Just for today. I can't have them spoiling this."

Later that afternoon, she told me about the tests I could have my daughter take to find out whether she was a carrier. "For your peace of mind," she said. "So you know for sure."

11

Someone has claimed the dinosaurs forgot everything but the drugs of flowering plants in the centuries they first flourished. Those lizards gorged and got high; they overdosed and died in an apocalypse of the giants. We've laughed and laughed at their idiot ways, more foolishness in the great chain of brutes who rattle the links of their life spans—the sestina of dog years, the sonnet of the hamster, the haiku of the mayfly.

And we believe so much in the epic of our lives, the photographs, the slides, and the long pauses for our stories that enlarge the past until our memories are edited to accept the anthropic principle, how the purpose of everything has been to lead to our ascendancy.

We believe so much in the epic of our lives, the photographs, the slides, and the long pauses for our stories that enlarge the past until our memories are edited to accept the anthropic principle, how the purpose of everything has been to lead to our ascendancy.

My uncle keeps a chart of ancestors that he shares with my mother, the men's occupations in parentheses beneath their life-spanned names. *Tailor, tailor, tailor*, it says, fading like an echo through the nineteenth century and stopping, 1782, in Germany, five generations fixed in one village before the coming to America.

The great chain of a construct. All but one of them died from lung disease; I use an inhaler for cats, pine trees, and the dust from his redundant flow charts, checking for myself in my mother's weaknesses and my sons in mine. When the meal is served, my cousins, the mothers of imbeciles, watch their husbands tend their boys' plates, buttering corn before they carefully cut ham to prevent their teenage sons from choking.

Thirty years after that health class and fifteen years after watching those babies with my

cousin, I could repeat the rosary of heredity, say Fragile X, the syndrome that claimed my cousins, their three imbecile boys, one generation enough, in this case, to confirm a chromosome passed down like a family job. If that flaw had been handed down through my uncle, I'd beaten the odds by being something other than stupid. And my sister was a carrier unverified because she had no children.

Vivian Buck? She managed to make the honor roll in grade school the year before she died. My sons? Both of them were gifted enough to take, like their father, skip-a-grade intelligence tests.

12

A few weeks ago, in a city I was visiting in order to talk with college students about stories I've written, there was a fair going on. My student escorts, happy to show me local color before we were due at the college, pointed out the longest line at any of the food booths. "Guess what's sold there," one of the young women said.

We were in Southern Indiana. I figured maybe beef or pork slathered in some sort of special sauce. "Close," she said, pausing for effect before saying, "Brain sandwiches."

"Really?" was all I could come up with.

"Pigs' brains this year," she said, "because mad cow scares off customers." She was twenty-one, and she and her friend had sampled those brains as freshmen. "They say it's a week's worth of cholesterol on a bun," she said, "but there's a whole wheat option for those who think healthy. And plenty of onions," reminding me how my father eventually added those to the brains I'd refused fifty years ago.

Loitering among a crowd of Hoosiers who were swallowing something like a heart attack, I thought of how my father had tried to teach me the body, how each soft part of animals could be eaten for pleasure while we imagined it healing its namesake within us.

13

There's the Internet now, information readily accessible, and Fragile X has become more widely known. I never had my daughter tested, but my cousins finally told me it was their mother's side of the family that carried the gene, that it was their brother who had beaten the odds.

Their father is dead now, and for the first time since that fiftieth anniversary, we all gather together for the funeral. The three boys are men now, nearly thirty like my sons. The two boys from Georgia have been placed in a home by their mother; the one from Pennsylvania, no longer working, lives at home.

Hammer Time has been over for years, the parachute pants a staple for laughter, Hammer himself in public financial difficulty. But neither boy has a Walkman today, and their sister (gifted, it's turned out) sits between them.

My cousins' mother knows the news about bloodlines. They've trusted her heart not to break. Until she dies there is little chance we'll all be together again. She smiles grimly. "He went peacefully," she says about her husband's death. "In his sleep the way we'd all like to go."

After the funeral, the extended family assembles in one huge, rented room to face the camera of each parent. The light is weak and varied near the north window. The children of younger relatives are sullen or self-conscious or bored with the afternoon's focus on the past. My two sons and my daughter, none of them touched by Fragile X, pull themselves up straight. "Ok," I say, "ok," finding the three imbeciles who are gripped on the shoulders, two-handed, by grandmother, mother, and carrier sister, each of those wild boys smiling and still, momentarily, for my flash.

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SUKKAH

A word that I mispronounced "succor," thinking
of leaves as they blanket the sidewalk in red,
orange-gold, hushing the fall afternoons on my way
home from school. Succor, the cup of hot chocolate
my grandmother makes, the sound of my mother's voice.
Later, it will be the taste of words, a poem unpeeling
from its own sharp pit. In Esther's backyard,
nearly hidden by shrubs, it's a house leaning into
the wind, a thatched roof open to sky. "A sukkah,"
she tells me, her mother explaining you go there to pray.
My heart wraps around "succor."

The word grows ripe after fifty years. In the art
museum, the stained glass temple window
with its pendant grapes and shock of wheat—
the Feast of Sukkoth! That shimmering air, smelling
of rotten apples and last summer's heat, province
of lost toys and cicadas. I could not, would not go back
where her grandmother rocks in the bedroom, softly intoning
the names of the dead whose images, black and white,
stare from the wall. No one is home at the old addresses
where doors used to open. Their empty shoes clutter
the street, a long silent cry. They know: we lose everything,
everyone we love. That's why, before winter brings
its bag of bones, they built a house in the garden,
took their quiet meal, offering one tender gift still warm
from their hands: that rare food, succor.

Diane G. Scholl

The Meaning of Meddling

Obama, Lincoln, and Democratic Statesmanship

Peter Meilaender

Among the summer's most riveting events was the disputed Iranian election and the remarkable protests that followed it. The Iranian regime, using forceful and often brutal measures, successfully put down the protests, but it has been weakened, and significant fissures within the Iranian political and clerical elites have surfaced. Though its short-term ability to suppress opposition by force is unsurprising, the Iranian regime has tottered visibly. Its foundations are rotten, and the mid-range prospects for real change in Iran, with all that would mean for peace and security in the Middle East, look more promising than they have in decades. One is reminded of Aristotle's observation that of all regimes, tyranny is the weakest and most short-lived.

President Obama's reaction to these events was, I think, his most shameful moment in office. He initially made only the most cautious statements about the election and its aftermath; only belatedly and tepidly did he finally bring himself to offer any criticism of the regime or support for its opponents. One can appreciate his motives: the desire not to offend a government about whose nuclear ambitions he had just announced a willingness to negotiate, and a concern that America not be seen as an international behemoth meddling yet again in the internal politics of an Islamic nation. Indeed, the president's most frequently sounded note was this warning against "meddling."

In sharp contrast stood Obama's willingness to "meddle" in Honduran domestic politics just a few weeks later. In this case, he followed the lead of Hugo Chavez in condemning the "coup" that removed Honduran president Manuel Zelaya from office and calling for his return, even threatening Honduras with a loss of US aid if it did not comply. As various commentators have amply documented—such as Miguel Estrada in the *LA Times*, Mary Anastasia O'Grady in the *Wall Street Journal*, and Christopher Caldwell in *The Weekly Standard*—Zelaya was attempting to establish his personal, extra-constitutional authority in Honduras, on the model of Chavez in Venezuela. The Honduran Supreme Court had ruled that Zelaya's attempt to extend his term of office violated the country's constitution. His ouster had the overwhelming support of the legislature, including his own party. To be sure, it would have been preferable to have arrested and tried him, rather than expelling him from the country. Doing so, however, would have involved serious political risks of violence and unrest. In any case, here was a clear instance of a poor country's fragile democratic institutions uniting to confront a very real threat of socialist despotism.

No amount of hair-splitting can possibly explain why the Obama administration's fierce denunciations of Hondurans' defense of their democratic constitution did not constitute inappropriate "meddling"—denunciations to which, moreover, threatened consequences were attached—while even mild criticisms of the Iranian regime's ruthless willingness to crush dissent would have. Clearly, the president's reaction to events in Iran did not reflect a consistent aversion to meddling. His response involves errors at several levels. One is a substantive error in judgment: Obama failed to perceive correctly the historic opportunity for change in Iran, just as he failed to perceive correctly the character of events in Honduras. This criticism implies, incidentally, no wooly-headed optimism about the kinds of change we might have seen—might still see—in Iran. One need not expect the Ayatollah

Iranian presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi and supporters.
Credit: Hamid Saber, http://www.flickr.com/photos/hamed

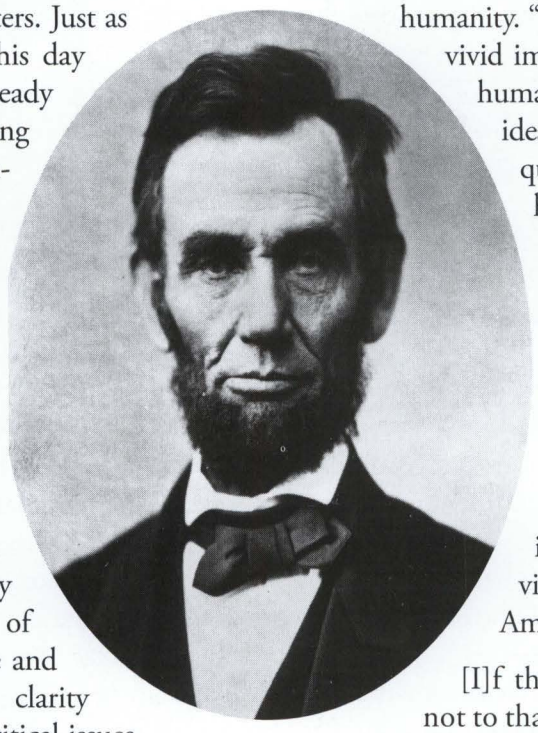
to become a European social democrat. But an Islamic democracy prepared to live at peace with the United States and Israel—a more realistic possibility in Iran, perhaps, than in any other country in the region—would be of tremendous geopolitical importance.

Another error is a confusion about what constitutes meddling: no nation that counts freedom of speech among its core ideals should concede that the mere expression of opinions constitutes impermissible "meddling" in another nation's affairs or an infringement of its sovereignty.

Connected to this, however, is a third error, this one a confusion about the relationship between moral principle and political practice. The Obama version of *Realpolitik* implies that the affirmation of our principles is itself an offense to other countries and must therefore be avoided. Certainly there are times when it is better to remain silent than to speak one's mind, and clearly Obama was concerned that this was such a time—that any clear articulation of American support for democratic protest would offend the Iranian regime (which, to be sure, is easily offended!) and endanger his hopes for negotiations. If so, however, the fault would have been entirely Iran's. Criticism of another government's principles and actions is by no means incompatible with diplomatic relations, bilateral talks, and even direct negotiations about, for instance, nuclear technology. Indeed, if our foreign relations are to be based on honesty, transparency, and mutual respect—as Obama normally claims—then surely we owe it to our international partners to say what we think at critical junctures. The Iranian government, after all, is hardly shy about saying what it thinks of us.

Ronald Reagan's approach toward the Soviet Union provides an instructive contrast on this point. No one ever accused Reagan of being excessively unwilling to criticize the Soviets; to the contrary, the critic of the "evil empire" was repeatedly chastised, loudly, in both political and media circles, for being overly harsh in his public rhetoric. Yet Reagan's example shows clearly that such criticism is fully compatible with a willingness to work together where interests are shared and to cooperate for the sake of peace, even in unexpected ways. Reagan's statements of American principle were combined with a willingness to respect the political realities of his world. Indeed, he showed how rhetoric can be a powerful tool of American interests in instances where *genuine* meddling would be inappropriate or impossible.

In all of American political history, Abraham Lincoln's attitude toward slavery provides the finest example of political principle guiding the messiness of democratic practice—of what we might call, to use traditional language, statesmanlike prudence. Though the bicentennial of his birth has put a damper on Lincoln-bashers, it has been fashionable in recent years to criticize Lincoln for his insufficiently enlightened attitudes on racial matters. Just as the radical abolitionists of his day scorned Lincoln's slow but steady approach toward correcting the injustice of slavery, contemporary critics have taken him to task for patiently engaging the views of his own constituents and fellow citizens. These critics suggest, anachronistically, that Lincoln should instead have held positions that only came to command widespread American support more than a century later. But an examination of Lincoln's statements on race and slavery reveals remarkable clarity and consistency about the critical issues at stake: slavery was a moral evil; it violated the nation's founding principles; and therefore, while the national government lacked constitutional authority to eliminate it where it already existed, slavery should not be permitted to spread.



Indeed, Lincoln's refusal to cloud the moral wrongness of slavery can fairly be called the engine that drove his spectacular rise to political greatness by sparking his return to politics in 1854. That was the year that Lincoln's Illinois rival, Democrat Stephen Douglas, successfully led the fight for congressional passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which overturned the Missouri Compromise by making slavery in the territories a matter of "popular sovereignty"—that is, allowing the inhabitants of the territories to "establish slavery, or exclude it, as they may see fit." Lincoln not only foresaw the act's on-the-ground consequences—that pro- and anti-slavery forces would move into the territories, causing political violence as both sides sought to tip the demographic balance in their favor—he also repeatedly objected to its central ethical flaw: it treated slavery as a matter of moral indifference. "This declared *indifference*, but, as I must think, covert *real zeal* for the spread of slavery," he declared in his great speech at Peoria in October of 1854, "I can not but hate." Lincoln zeroed in on the key question of black Americans' humanity. "Judge [Douglas] has no very vivid impression that the negro is a human; and consequently has no idea that there can be any moral question in legislating about him. In his view, the question of whether a new country shall be slave or free, is a matter of as utter indifference, as it is whether his neighbor shall plant his farm with tobacco, or stock it with horned cattle." And he drove home the utter incompatibility of such a view with the principles of America's Founding:

> [I]f the negro *is* a man, is it not to that extent a total destruction of self-government, to say that he too shall not govern *himself?* When the white man governs himself that is self-government; but when he governs himself, and also governs *another* man, that is *more* than self-government—that is despotism. If the negro is a *man*, why then my ancient faith teaches me that "all men are created equal"; and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another.

To the contrary, the "leading principle—the sheet anchor of American republicanism" is this: "that no man is good enough to govern another man, *without that other's consent.*"

It would be difficult to find a more unambiguous declaration of moral principle that should guide political action. And it must be conceded—

to return to my original topic by giving Obama his due—that the Southern states did indeed regard Lincoln as "meddling" in the institution of slavery. It is important to point out, therefore, that Lincoln's clear statements of principle were combined with a persistent and remarkable willingness to search for compromise solutions that did justice to the interests of all involved, both North and South. This is revealed not only by his support (a favorite target of critics today) for hapless recolonization schemes for sending freed blacks to Africa. We see it also, for example, in his long-held belief that emancipation programs should include compensation for the owners of freed slaves. We see it in his consistent position that the federal government lacked authority to interfere with slavery where it already existed in the Southern states, and in his unwillingness to free slaves until doing so (in the Emancipation Proclamation) could be justified on the basis of the president's constitutional war-making power as commander-in-chief. And of course we see it most notably in his great Second Inaugural's refusal to condemn or seek revenge upon his opponents, calling instead for malice toward none and charity toward all, and even insisting to his northern audience that somehow all Americans shared the guilt for slavery in the eyes of the Almighty, who now "gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came."

There is a lesson here about statesmanship in a democracy, which—as Lincoln reminds us—requires both principle and its prudent application. But the former is indispensable, for unless the principles are clear, their application will be faulty. Democracy requires leadership, not management. What was missed in Iran was an opportunity to remind public opinion, both at home and abroad, of those truths we hold to be self-evident and of their continued relevance in the contemporary world. Such a reminder cannot, in and of itself, constitute inappropriate "meddling" in another country's affairs.

We know that Obama promised hope and change; we know that he has grand legislative ambitions. During the campaign, those ambitions appeared shaped by an expansive and inclusive vision of equality—not red states, and blue states, but the United States—one that inspired Americans across the political spectrum and could plausibly lay claim to the Lincolnian tradition. In office, however, the practical politician in Obama has seemed much less at ease with the would-be principled statesman. His failure of vision in Iran—his confused willingness to concede that verbal objection to violent suppression of dissent might be objectionable "meddling"—provided a vivid illustration, especially when contrasted with his bizarrely opposite reaction to events in Honduras, of our president's growing difficulty in combining the practical necessities of his office with his role as a molder of public opinion, the role in which Lincoln excelled. This difficulty has become increasingly evident in our domestic politics, as Obama gradually has lost control over the debates on health care and the budget deficit. His current struggles were probably, to some extent, inevitable, especially for one with so little experience in elected office—governing is harder than campaigning. But the one thing Americans thought they were getting was a leader, someone with a vision of the future and capable of inspiring us all to get there. For a refresher course in democratic statesmanship, the president might want to dust off his biographies of Lincoln.

Statesmanship in a democracy—as Lincoln reminds us—requires both principle and its prudent application. But the former is indispensable, for unless the principles are clear, their application will be faulty.

Peter Meilaender is Associate Professor of Political Science at Houghton College.

ACADEMIC COUPLE

for friends, disappointed at not having children

You wait for children like an old yellow
bus, dogged as a Monday dawn, without
any fuss at all. You swing out that arm

with absolute authority, without
a doubt that cars and trucks will fall in line
in front of you and behind, like days completely

unaware of their future as months, as
years, as whatever else they are. Your color
claims an awkward attention, both caution

and delight, a promising security you've
been built to have tested. After you
accept that no children will come, you

swing that shingle back into yourself, release
the brake and roll down the street again

with large, bright dignity, continue without
hesitation or question down that familiar road

toward school.

Mary M. Brown

Silence = Death

David Lott

WHETHER OR NOT THEY HAVE BEEN actively engaged in the current debate over health-care reform, almost everyone has a story about an encounter with the health-care system that in some way encapsulates their opinion. Regardless of whether it's filled with misinformation or is in any way refuted by other, contradictory stories, that story becomes *the* truth for that person about what's important, what is sacrosanct, what the government's role should be.

As I try to formulate my own thoughts on these matters, I keep thinking back to an encounter I had at the National Gallery of Art many years ago now. While wandering through the museum's then newly reopened sculpture gallery, I was approached by a young security guard with this polite query, "Excuse me, sir, may I ask you a question?" It's the sort of approach that one expects from a street person looking for a handout. Coming from a uniformed guard, however, I knew there must be some other agenda. Still, I was totally unprepared for what followed.

Reaching underneath his arm, he looked into my eyes, and asked, "Is it a serious thing to have a lump in your armpit?"

Shocked, I stammered, "Well, I suppose it could be."

"Could something like that be cancer?" he continued.

"It's hard to say; that's something you'd have to ask a doctor."

"But it could be nothing, too, right?"

"Yes, but I'm not a doctor, so I can't say for sure."

For the next several minutes, this exchange continued, the man looking pleadingly in my eyes as he repeated his queries, seeking reassurance, direction, anything, from a stranger, someone he seemingly randomly picked out from the many museum-goers that day. Bringing the conversation to a close, I urged him to get a doctor's attention, did my best to reassure him that whatever it was could be treated, and wished him well. I still wonder if this man sought medical help, and, if so, what his outcome was. But, even more, I wonder why he felt the need to approach a stranger with these sorts of personal questions, what might have held him back from revealing his worries to someone he knew, and why he approached me in particular. Was he afraid of causing his loved ones needless worry? What was it about me that drew him to ask about what could be a life-or-death issue?

Now, in August 2009, watching the health-care town hall forums that have erupted into shouting matches, I wonder if today this man would have the courage to ask his question at all. If this person, in what was likely an urgent situation, would turn to a stranger for medical wisdom, can we be particularly surprised by the fear and misinformation that underlies these explosive gatherings?

Clearly, few things in life can spark terror in people as much as the threat of illness. This terror makes all of us vulnerable not just to bad information but also to exploitation by those who want to assert political power or make a fast buck. Our vulnerability, in turn, can easily turn to rage due to both real and imagined manipulation by vested interests, whether from politicians, insurance companies, the medical establishment, or from some unnamed "other" that seems to be the cause of the problem in the first place. A sense of injustice, no matter how inchoate or misguided, can bring out the obnoxious bully in the best of us. The real problem comes when that sense of outrage becomes detached from moral obligation.

We do in fact, however, have a recent historical example of where such obnoxiousness and a sense of moral obligation worked in tandem. Just over two decades ago, ACT-UP—the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—burst on the scene to advocate for increased funding for and hastened availability of experimental treatments of the HIV virus. The urgency of their

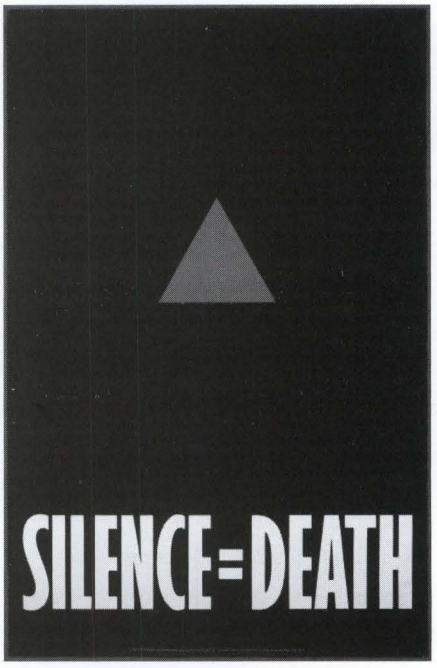
efforts was understandable and palpable. AIDS was rapidly decimating significant segments of the US population, particularly gay men and IV drug users, and was starting its devastating race through many African nations as well. The federal government seemed to be dragging its feet in responding to this threat to a population of marginalized Americans, and this slow response aroused profound anger and protest. ACT-UP's haunting motto "Silence = Death" captured the desperation and determination that marked the movement.

Few look back on the heyday of ACT-UP with particular fondness. The coalition's in-your-face tactics, including "die-ins," disrupted worship services and many public institutions, such as the New York Stock Exchange and the National Institutes of Health. But despite the controversy over their tactics, the strategy arguably worked. Since the early 1990s, a growing array of treatments available for those living with HIV/AIDS permit them to have reasonably normal and long lives. Many who, following their diagnoses in the late 1980s, might have hoped to live only a few years or even months, are still alive today. While a cure or vaccine is still not clearly on the horizon, the felt need for ACT-UP's extreme measures has dissipated, along with the attendant anger and fear, and been replaced with a sense of tentative hope.

Members of ACT-UP were acting on behalf of friends, partners, and selves whose lives were threatened and in memory of those already lost to the pandemic. Although some of their actions were wrongheaded or self-defeating, ACT-UP was, in many ways, heroic in its efforts to save populations that many would rather overlook or condemn to death. Despite its faults, it was a genuinely important cultural phenomenon.

More importantly, ACT-UP's antics were balanced by the actions of other individuals and groups that overcame fear and fought against marginalization of HIV/AIDS patients by providing profoundly compassionate acts of care and building awareness. The extraordinarily moving AIDS quilt, made up of panels honoring the disease's victims sewn by family and friends, was shown around the country and drew millions. Gay men broke through their promiscuous or flamboyant stereotypes to model sacrificial care giving and to promote safe-sex practices.

If there are echoes of ACT-UP's tactics in the recent blow-ups at the town-hall meetings on health-care reform around the United States, unfortunately, they resound mostly with the



group's most misguided and disrespectful efforts. In their attempts to shut down debate and circulate misinformation about legislation, we've seen plenty of people who have got the obnoxiousness and disruptiveness down pat.

But where ACT-UP was motivated by the need for positive changes on behalf of the sick and dying, it is hard to detect any sort of mitigating compassion among the most vocal of the town-hall protesters. Instead, we see amazing declarations of illogic and sheer senselessness. Some demand that the government "keep their fingers out of Medicare," seemingly oblivious to the fact that it's a federal program. Posters depict President Obama as both a Nazi *and* a socialist. Even people you hope would know better, like former Alaskan governor Sarah Palin, accuse legislators of plans to set up "death panels" to weigh the fates of the terminally ill, the elderly, and the handicapped.

In short, these folks aren't acting up, they're acting out.

And so, my thoughts return to the worried young security guard. How could this man's gentle, humble question stand up to the harsh, bullying invective that has marked the health-care debate? His concern wasn't about coverage of a preexisting condition, or of tax ramifications, or about government control, but for his very life. This was a person for whom ACT-UP's slogan, "Silence = Death," could be literally true. Yet taken to heart, that slogan perhaps could also give him courage and hope to ask his questions, something that a catch-line like "Keep the government's hands out of my health care" could never do.

We all have true stories to tell in this debate, but no individual story on its own can hold the whole truth and tell us about what lies underneath the passions at work here. One person's glowing accounts of an experience with the Canadian national health system can too easily be countered by another person's horror story. My story of the security guard certainly doesn't tell us much about the health-care system or about the medical insurance industry. It can't frame any policy initiatives. But, unlike many of the stories that shape people's places in the health-care debate, it does say something about the sort of fear and questioning that drive human hearts and minds. It reminds us of the moral obligation we have to one another as human beings, as we seek answers and peace of mind. Neglecting such obligations, not imaginary "death panels," is what is evil. As AIDS activists reminded us so vividly twenty years ago, our capacity for such abandonment is what is worth acting up about.

David Lott is a religious book editor and a graduate of St. Olaf College and Luther Seminary. He lives in Washington, DC, where he does freelance editing and writing.

HOW NOT TO

The list of Do-Nots is a national best seller,
long as the Canadian border. 1) Don't name
all your children the same thing—like Ellery—
regardless of how easy it might seem.
2) Don't rub horseradish on the cat. 3) Do not
dis your sister, 4) kiss the priest, 5) pierce
your tongue 6) curse the light or 7) forget
how your mother's coffin shone as they lowered it.

Don't keep expecting scarlet shouts of joy
from the geraniums as summer turns
to fall. Don't scan the moon to find the boy
who vowed he'd love forever. There's not time,
given the slant of light, to know all ferns.
Some sonnets fail to give a final rhyme.

Jeanne Murray Walker

A Post-Roddenberry Star Trek

Robert H. Blackman and J. Michael Utzinger

The highly anticipated 7 May 2009 release of *Star Trek,* directed by J. J. Abrams and written by Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman, has received much praise by fans and critics alike. Popularly hailed as a "reboot," this prequel attempted to reintroduce the characters from the original 1966–1969 television series to a new generation of fans. Much of the previous success of the Star Trek franchise can be attributed to the vision of creator Gene Roddenberry. In the world of Star Trek, Enlightenment humanism meets science fiction on the screen. Roddenberry, a self-professed philosopher, claimed that through television and films he could reach a mass audience while a traditional philosopher might reach only a few readers (Alexander, 18). In other words, the Star Trek universe stands as Roddenberry's opus, in which he explored his trust in the power of reason, belief in the gradual progress of humanity, and the eventual elimination of poverty, racism, cultural conflict, and superstition (*Ibid.,* 14). Unfortunately, while the new film is fast-paced, visually stunning, sexy, and fun, it lacks the depth and moral center of the previous series and films. More importantly, *Star Trek* (2009) marks a sea-change for the franchise. It not only subverts Roddenberry's optimistic vision, but replaces it with a pessimistic attitude that is more a reflection of recent history than of a Great Society-era hope for the future.

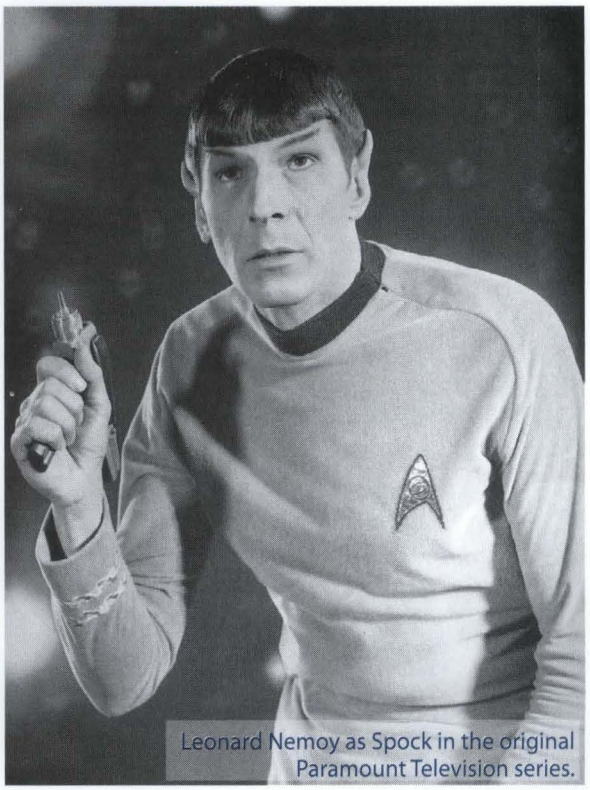
Although Roddenberry's exact philosophical influences are difficult to pinpoint, it is no stretch of the imagination to understand the original Star Trek as a fictional recreation of Immanuel Kant's celebrated 1784 essay, "What is Enlightenment?" The foundation of Kant's understanding of enlightenment rests on the free use of reason coupled with the faculty of self-improvement given to humans by their creator. Kant further stressed the need for humans to act according to an inherent sense of duty. One is not surprised, therefore, that Roddenberry's two favorite Star Trek characters are Mr. Spock, the logical half-human, half-Vulcan of the original series (STOS) and the unemotional android Mr. Data of *Star Trek the Next Generation* (STNG) (*Ibid.*, 19). Spock, in particular, reflects the possibility that humanity, through philosophical commitments and adherence to duty, might lay the foundation for future progress. In the episode "Journey to Babel" (STOS 1967), Spock is unwilling to relinquish his command of *Enterprise* at a moment of crisis so that he could give blood for a transfusion that would save his father's life. Although his human mother is outraged, he replies that it is inconceivable to disregard his duty or to relinquish his philosophical precepts for personal gain. In other words, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.

The essence of the Enlightenment, according to Kant, could be summed up in a simple phrase: "*Sapere aude*" (dare to know)! Each man (and, sadly, for Kant this was a sport open only to men) had the duty to learn and actually understand who he was, what kind of world he lived in, and how best he could live in this world. Such an exploration would lead individuals to solve the problems they faced and would give them the skills necessary to eventually solve problems that they were currently incapable of even imagining (cf. Kant, 3–10). Roddenberry expanded Kant's vision by including all beings regardless of race, gender, ethnic identity, and even species. To put it in terms more familiar to fans of Star Trek in all its formulations, Roddenberry embraced

a Kantian paradigm that envisaged humankind's mission to boldly know where no one has known before.

In other historical essays, Kant elaborated how the quest for enlightenment would shape a future society, a society that closely mirrors the Star Trek universe depicted by Roddenberry. Kant's view of humanity's place in the universe is fundamentally optimistic, as we can see in a phrase from his "Idea for a Universal History": "Thanks be to Nature, for the incompatibility, for heartless competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and to rule! Without them, all the excellent natural capacities of humanity would forever sleep, undeveloped. Man wishes concord; but Nature knows better what is good for the race; she wills discord" (*Ibid.,* 16). While this discord may be harmful to the individual, it forces humanity as a whole to expand its vision, develop its capacities, and realize its potential. The result is progress in all areas that leads to victory in struggle, and, for all intents and purposes, to a kind of victory over struggle. In fact, Kant argued that the personal peace and harmony for which men struggled within a nation could only be guaranteed by what he called a "league of nations" (*Ibid.,* 19) that would regulate the relationships between states in a way analogous to the way laws regulate relationships between individuals within a state. As the number of states within a league grows, one finds more and more relationships governed by law (and thus by reason) rather than by violent struggle. This construct of a peaceful government born out of struggle, a fundamentally peaceful body, which nonetheless prepares avidly for its own defense, finds its near-perfect fictional equivalent in the United Federation of Planets.

The rules Kant set down in his 1795 essay "Perpetual Peace," written in the early stages of the generation-spanning wars of the French Revolution, include such Star Trek values as a general rule of non-interference (the "Prime Directive" in Star Trek lingo), the absolute prohibition on war crimes, and the sensible realization that one can find peace neither through armed truce nor through the use of savagery in war (*Ibid.,* 85–90). Although Roddenberry often develops these themes in STOS and STNG, the episode, "The Devil in the Dark" (STOS 1967) provides a particularly apt example. In this episode human miners inadvertently slaughter the children of a sentient lava beast, a Horta, while digging. Out of mutual fear, the two species seek to destroy one another but to no avail.



Leonard Nemoy as Spock in the original Paramount Television series.

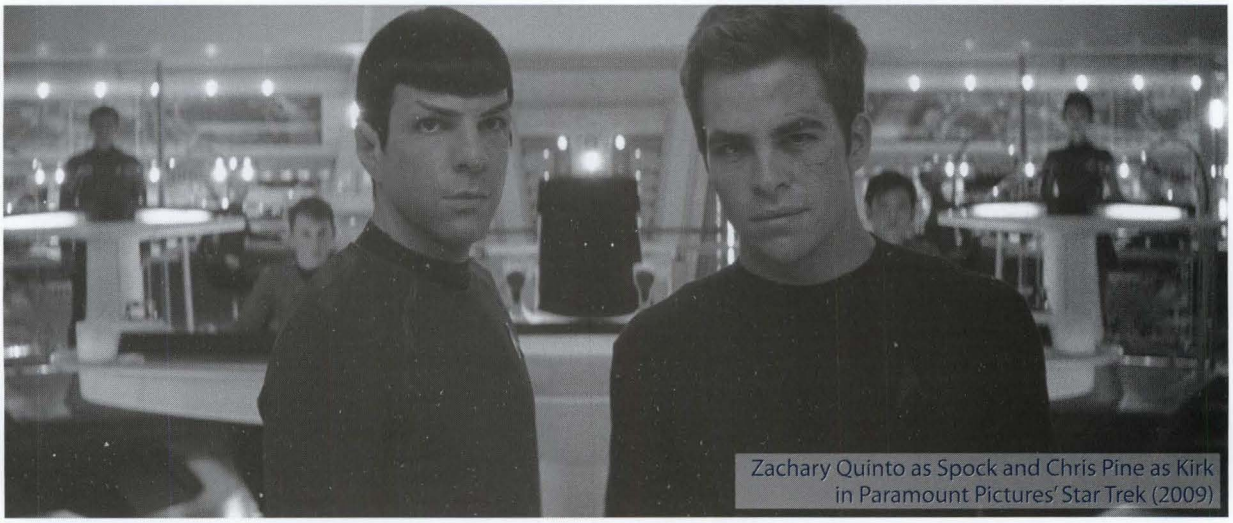
Only once Mr. Spock is able to establish that humans and Hortas share a common sentient spirit, what on Earth we call "humanity," are the two groups able to coexist with mutual benefit. Reason and compassion accomplish what violence and fear could not.

In *Star Trek* (2009) one only sees the shell of Roddenberry's vision. The film begins with Ambassador Spock (Leonard Nimoy) rushing to save the galaxy from a supernova by using "red matter," which creates a small artificial black hole meant to contain the explosive energy of the star. While Spock saves most of the galaxy, the planet Romulus is destroyed, and the black hole accidentally drags both a Romulan mining ship and Spock's smaller craft back in time. Nero (Eric Bana), the captain of

the mining ship, blames Spock for the destruction of Romulus and the death of his family, and he is bent on revenge. Nero's first encounter with the Federation of the past is to destroy the *USS Kelvin*, killing James T. Kirk's father, changing the Star Trek timeline.

This new timeline, in which we meet the new James T. Kirk (Chris Pine) and Spock (Zachary Quinto), is the antithesis of Roddenberry's world. The optimistic vision of STOS is replaced by a fearful world (reminiscent of a post 9/11 America) in which the unwinnable "Kobayashi Maru" scenario of Star Fleet Academy's simulator has become the expected norm, rather than the dramatic exception. Even the logical world of Vulcan seems affected, as the young Spock is tormented between studies of logic by classmates who easily incite him to violence. This is a markedly different reaction from his reaction in "Journey to Babel," in which Spock's mother reveals that he was unwilling to display human emotion in response to the taunts of his Vulcan classmates. We find Kirk an arrogant young man who shows no willingness to learn from or listen to anyone and whose brooding nature apparently signals complexity of character. Eventually, Nero captures the Spock of the original timeline and forces him to watch the destruction of Vulcan and with it the genocide of his own people.

At the film's end, as Nero's ship finds itself a victim of the red matter he used to destroy Vulcan and with which he tried to destroy Earth, the young Kirk (now in command of the *Enterprise*) chides the young Spock for not realizing that it is logical to offer help to Nero and his Romulan crew. While Kirk momentarily reaches back to Rodenberry's vision, stating that offering to save Nero and his crew is an opportunity to put into practice the foundational morality of the Federation, Spock scoffs and demands the destruction of the vanquished enemy. When Nero predictably refuses all help, Kirk responds, "That's what I hoped you would say," and recklessly (for it almost destroys *Enterprise*) unleashes all the weapons of the ship upon the already doomed Romulan vessel. The foundational morality of the Federation is replaced with a vengeance that satisfies dark human emotion but cuts off the possibility of any peace other than the grave. The audience receives the final message of the movie when the Spock of the original timeline converses with his younger self. "Do yourself a favor," he advises, "put aside logic and do what feels right." Such advice is admittedly a step up from Kirk's inclination to destroy anyone unwilling to accept his help; nonetheless, one can hardly imagine a less Kantian message to crown the brave new timeline of Star Trek than Spock's new therapeutic mantra.



Zachary Quinto as Spock and Chris Pine as Kirk in Paramount Pictures' Star Trek (2009)

The divergences of *Star Trek* (2009) from Roddenberry's original television series must be further contextualized to understand its significance for the universe of Star Trek. Several academic studies have explored the quasi-religious

character of Star Trek fandom (cf. Porter and McLaren). The five Star Trek television series and twelve films have mythologized Roddenberry's original Kantian vision of the future. Not only does fan behavior make this clear, but many writers of the show have acknowledged the power of a developing Star Trek mythology (Cf. Braga). In fact, Star Trek fans even speak in terms of a "canon" of the mythology based upon the television episodes and the films, as opposed to animations, novels, fan fiction, or comics. *Star Trek* (2009) by virtue of its canonical status as a film ultimately subverts the very mythology of which it is now a part. Rather than simply creating a prequel exploring the youth of the characters from the original series, the writers have called the very philosophical vision of Roddenberry into question. It is important to recognize that the subversion comes not from testing previous assumptions or exploring their limits, something both Kant and Roddenberry would have appreciated. For example, the Prime Directive, that key Federation (Kantian) ethic, has been put to the test or developed in several episodes, such as "Justice" (STNG 1987) and "Dear Doctor" (*Star Trek Enterprise* 2002). Instead, *Star Trek* (2009)'s device of a parallel universe places within the canon a story line that erases the need to contend with Rodenberry's vision at all. Even more subversive than the parallel universe theme (a device employed routinely in the television series) is the casting of Leonard Nimoy, who played Spock in STOS, in this film. The original Spock connects the two worlds and leaves a canonical imprimatur on the film's new direction. Spock's advice to put aside logic and to follow feelings, therefore, makes the subversion complete. Roddenberry's character who most represents Kantian hopes for human reason and progress rejects his rational, Vulcan side. He becomes a convert to a new world, in which rationality ceases to be a guiding principle or goal. The implication is clear: the old Spock will rebuild and shape the remnants of Vulcan society in a new image that embraces the therapeutic over the rational.

In the final analysis, the new edgier characters in the reboot are merely reminiscent of the characters of STOS. They embody new ideals that do not reflect Rodenberry's hope for human progress based on reason. *Star Trek* (2009) depicts a dangerous world, a world that pulses with demands for justice based upon feelings rather than universal rationality. It is a world in which error has no rights and vengeance is taken for granted. Perhaps, it is simply the case that Roddenberry's Star Trek no longer resonates with audiences of a post-9/11 world. However, given all the possible parallel universes to which the original Spock could have returned, it is lamentable that it was to a post-Roddenberry universe that the creators of *Star Trek* (2009) chose to send him.

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No Easy Answers

John Patrick Shanley's Doubt

Conrad Ostwalt

"What do you do when you're not sure...." So begins Father Flynn's sermon near the beginning of *Doubt.* Father Flynn delivers his sermon to a largely blue collar Catholic congregation in the Bronx in the year following President Kennedy's assassination. Flynn's sermon builds upon a story of a sailor lost at sea who has doubts about the course he has set. The sailor's doubt becomes a metaphor for the community who has lost its certainty—a traditional community disillusioned by the loss of the nation's first Catholic president. It was in collective doubt, proclaims Father Flynn, that a sense of community and security was forged. "Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty."

The sermon sets parameters for this provocative movie. The story addresses doubt as a loss of certainty and security on a variety of levels. The main plot revolves around the suspicions held by Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep), the principal of the parochial school that serves as the setting for the story. Sister Aloysius suspects Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), based on circumstantial evidence, of abusing the first African American male student at the school. Aloysius recruits an innocent, young nun, Sister James (Amy Adams), to collect evidence and to confront Flynn. Sister Aloysius harbors no uncertainty that Flynn is guilty, and Flynn insists that he is innocent. However, Sister James waivers and is caught in a web of doubt over her faith in Flynn's innocence.

While the "doubt versus certainty" issue drives the main plot surrounding the allegations against Father Flynn, doubt also drives a deeper and more complex subplot about the American Catholic community in the early and mid-1960s, especially in the blue collar neighborhood of this film. The conflict that might be easily missed by the viewer hinges on Vatican II reforms and the effect of these monumental changes on traditional Catholic communities of the 1960s.

The two protagonists, Flynn and Aloysius, battle over her claims of his alleged improprieties. On a grander scale, these two characters represent a battle waging in the Catholic Church in the midst of Vatican II. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) brought revolutionary changes to the Catholic Church, challenging traditional liturgy, theology, and authority within the church. Vatican II could be seen as a struggle of tradition versus innovation. In this film, Sister Aloysius represents the tradition-laden pre-Vatican II church, while Father Flynn is a progressive pastor intent on bringing reform to the congregation and school he serves. One wonders how much of Sister Aloysius's allegations might be motivated by her disdain for the progressive reforms Flynn represents. In any event, the struggle between these two strong characters represents the larger struggles of the church of that time and the doubt those struggles created in Catholic communities. The typical blue collar Catholic community represented by Flynn's congregation in 1964 must have been struggling: the tradition built on certainty and continuity was changing; the most powerful Catholic in America had been assassinated; certitudes had been questioned; innocence had been shattered; questions of race and gender surfaced in the film and society. This is the doubt the film captures and investigates.

Sister Aloysius has no use for the "new" church of innovation. One of the recurring symbols in the film is the wind that continually swirls around Sister Aloysius. More than once, Sister Aloysius closes windows to shut out the winds that she complains have "changed," that she describes as peripatetic, that buffet things around and about. But the winds of change that Sister Aloysius despises are embraced by Flynn, who alludes in his final and farewell sermon to the winds that push us along through life. So the winds of change that threaten the church from Sister Aloysius's point of view are the winds of

fate that propel us to progress for Father Flynn and, perhaps, the church. Is it a coincidence that wind is also a symbol for the Holy Spirit in Christian thought? Can the wind (Spirit) be trusted? Throughout history the church has sometimes viewed charismatic movements with suspicion, especially when they challenge authority. Here the wind symbolizes a challenge to authority in the form of progressive reform, and the Spirit unsettles and disrupts. Perhaps the Spirit, like the wind, is peripatetic.

The "winds of change" that upset Sister Aloysius appear throughout the film. From the ballpoint pens that Sister Aloysius despises because they ruin penmanship, to the secular elements that Father Flynn wants to include in the Christmas play, Aloysius rejects the new for the traditional. At one point, Sister Aloysius visits Sister James's classroom. She pulls a picture of a pope from Sister James's desk and recommends hanging it on the wall so James can see the class in the reflection of the glass when her back is turned. Sister James points out that the photograph is of a dead pope, but Sister Aloysius retorts that it does not matter and hangs it anyway. The photograph is of Pope Pius XII, the last pope prior to the Vatican II Council. The pope who opened Vatican II and who was most responsible for the reforms that followed was Pope John XXIII. But the pope at the time of the movie would have been Pope Paul VI. The subtle irony should not be lost. As Sister Aloysius hangs Pope Pius XII's photograph, she appears to pause with hands raised and head bowed to the pope's image. Is this a subtle homage to the last pope prior to the Second Vatican Council? Is this Sister Aloysius's homage to tradition? It is interesting that shortly after hanging the photo, Sister James becomes less patient with her students and more authoritarian in the classroom. Perhaps the change in demeanor reflects her growing frustration with being caught in the middle between Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn, but her stricter attitude is expressed when she spies on students by watching their behavior in the reflection of Pius XII's photograph.

Meryl Streep as Sister Aloysius
Miramax Film Corp

From an aesthetic perspective, the movie beautifully captures a particular place and time. The 1964 setting in the Bronx brings a working class, blue-collar Catholic subculture to the fore. Lighting and seasonal changes further enhance the stark and grim circumstances of the story as the plot progresses. The seasons progress toward winter until the final scene takes place in a snowy courtyard. The setting underscores the turbulence of Catholic life in the mid-1960s in convincing fashion.

Added to the effective setting is superb characterization. The movie lives up to its multiple Oscar nominations. Meryl Streep is eerily convincing as the strict disciplinarian and principal of the Catholic school. Her character is absolutely terrifying as she hisses her reproach to a young boy in church near the beginning of the film. But Streep's portrayal goes far beyond a stereotypical presentation of a nun. While every

Streep's character, with her concern over tradition and morality, also arouses compassion. Streep convinces the viewer that whatever her motives might be for charging Father Flynn with misconduct, she is at least partly concerned that children not be harmed. However, Sister Aloysius is overly zealous in her vendetta against Father Flynn, and it is this unrelenting attack, based on little evidence, that raises the specter that Sister Aloysius has some experience with abuse in her past. At one point she admits to Father Flynn with pained expression that she has some sin in her past but that she has confessed and been forgiven. Sister Aloysius's sin is never explored, leaving in doubt what role this might have played in her certainty about Father Flynn's guilt.

Father Flynn develops as a sympathetic character, and the viewer is caught between believing in his innocence and being horrified by his alleged crimes.

Likewise, Philip Seymour Hoffman's portrayal of Father Flynn is multilayered and effective. Father Flynn is charismatic, popular, and sensitive. In a conversation with Sister James, Flynn accuses Sister Aloysius of sacrificing kindness for the sake of virtue. Is this a clue that Father Flynn's new ideas and ways depart from traditional morality as well? It is not clear, and while Flynn's character is kind and caring, he also raises some questions. He gorges himself with wine, rich food, and cigarettes, and tells unseemly stories at the dinner table while the Sisters eat sparsely and silently and discuss the meaning of Father Flynn's sermon. Is Father Flynn's character built on questionable virtue, and does this support Sister Aloysius's suspicions of him? Flynn develops as a sympathetic character, and the viewer is caught between believing in his innocence and being horrified by his alleged crimes.

Finally, Amy Adams delivers a stunning portrayal of Sister James. She captures the kindness and innocence of the young nun without sacrificing believability. James is caught in the middle of a contest of wills, and she negotiates the difficult terrain with honesty and goodness. By the end of the film, it is James who has become the strong character. With Flynn gone and Aloysius in tears, James becomes the priest who hears Sister Aloysius's confession and emerges as mature and confident, no longer the helpless innocent.

In that final scene, Sister Aloysius confesses to harboring "doubts." Is it doubt in her certainty that Flynn was guilty? Is it doubt in her church that "promoted" Flynn when confronted with the charges of misconduct and that is changing in such a way that she cannot? Is it doubt in her God? The viewer is not told. What seems certain is that "doubt" is the price of Sister Aloysius's actions—the burden for her conscience to bear. Sister Aloysius repeats a phrase from earlier in the movie, "In the pursuit of wrongdoing, one steps away from God... of course there is a price." The price Aloysius pays is her certainty, and her doubt becomes her confession.

Doubt, the movie, was written originally as a play, adapted to a screenplay, and directed by the same person, John Patrick Shanley. It is no surprise then, that this film has a singleness of vision and purpose. The film is entertaining, engaging, original, humorous, and disturbing, thus defying easy categories. And the film is ambitious, taking as it does the question of faith—does faith arise from certainty or doubt—is faith destroyed by certainty or doubt? The viewer comes away with no easy answers, and that is, after all, the point of the film.

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A Kiss to Build a Dream On

J. D. Buhl

We owe the last thirty years of rock 'n' roll to Kiss. I write this as someone who does not have a single Kiss record in his collection. I always considered them evildoers, those who "whet their tongues like swords," shooting their love guns "suddenly and without fear" at the blameless. As much as possible, I ignored them. This was foolish. The joyless, primitive hard rock of the Star Child, the Cat, the Space Guy, and whatever Gene Simmons's blood-spewing, fire-breathing ghoul was supposed to be, has been present at the inception of nearly every significant musical development of the last three decades. From headbangers to hair bands, punk to grunge, kiddie metal to mall rats, whatever rock music has put hearts in throats and fists in the air, it is the faces—or nonfaces—of Kiss that laugh from the inside.

Touring relentlessly behind their first three poorly produced albums, Kiss developed an audience that soon became as important as the music itself, and then *Alive!,* their powerful 1975 live album, went gold.

Responding to *Alive!*, Robert Christgau wrote:

> There are those who regard this concert double as a de facto best-of that rescues such unacknowledged hard rock classics as "Deuce" and "Strutter" from the sludge. There are also those who regard it as the sludge. I fall into neither category—regret the drum solo, applaud "Rock and Roll All Nite," and absorb the thunderousness of it all with bemused curiosity. The multimillion kids who are buying it don't fall into either category either.

From those multimillion kids came the rock stars of the late 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s. The Ramones, R.E.M., and Nirvana all started out playing—or attempting to play—Kiss songs. The Replacements, the most important band of the 1980s, actually recorded "Black Diamond." And with "Beth," Kiss's string-laden hit single of 1976, the career-making power ballad genre was born.

Another one of those kids was Eddie Vedder.

Rereading Kim Neely's *Five Against One: The Pearl Jam Story* (the story up to 1998, anyway), I am struck again by how fantasies with makeup and costumes contributed to the rock we've come to know. Lead guitarist Mike McCready began his career in a high school Kiss cover band. Rhythm guitarist Stone Gossard made Kiss-style platform shoes from two-by-fours.

My best friend Mark—tall, crimson-haired, talented—was another enlistee in the Kiss Army. He used to say he was actually *on Alive!*, screaming his lungs out. I heard the album countless times, drunk or sober, at parties, in bedrooms, on eight-track tape players while speeding down country roads. As a budding critic, I was bound to despise Kiss. I would lean in doorways, plastic cup in hand, and sneer at those of my generation who thought such inane antics constituted real rock 'n' roll. Even as Mark would put his hair in a Kabuki topknot, apply whiteface, and strike poses in his sister's clothes, I could only sigh. Why couldn't he turn his limited interest to actually *learning* songs so we could start a band?

My frustration was with the ahistorical stance of the average Kiss Army member. Theirs was not a movement born of reverence and a desire for continuity. It seized; it shoved its

codpiece in your face and demanded submission. Blue Oyster Cult was attempting the same thing, but they lacked one essential element: the makeup.

What made Kiss loveable was the permission they gave teenagers to hide their selves behind a mask. They offered a readymade rock 'n' roll fantasy with all the trappings of glitter and glam. You no longer needed to do the work of actually remaking yourself, as Bob Dylan or Lou Reed or Patti Smith had done; now you need only remake your face. It was playful. It was phony. And it was the most *real* thing many of these kids had ever done. The future Joey Ramone joined his first band by responding to an ad in the *Village Voice* that read, "Let's dress up and be stars tomorrow."

Kiss offered a readymade rock 'n' roll fantasy with all the trappings of glitter and glam. You no longer needed to do the work of actually remaking yourself.

Blue Oyster Cult was too arty, too literate. Kiss's appeal was their dumbness. They impressed not with subtlety but with spectacle. They pulverized the sensitivity of the singer-songwriters, and sang of "love" with the barest cleverness. Never mind, Christgau would point out, that their idea of love equated sex with victimization "in a display of male supremacism that glint[ed] with humor only at its cruelest." The four characters in Kiss were as understandable as Saturday morning cartoons, and their music as crunchy as the cereal that went with them.

Whether or not Mark had contributed to *Alive!*'s pumped-up audience tracks, we did see Kiss together. Soon after the album took off, they played Veteran's Memorial Auditorium in Des Moines, Iowa, as most touring acts did. I remember the bedazzled look in Mark's eyes as this minstrel show of a rock concert exploded before us. Pocket notebook in hand, I scribbled suitably sarcastic observations and waited it out.

Kiss fans dismissed rock critics. They did not sit home nights reading *Mystery Train*. They didn't do their homework. They didn't care about Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, or Elvis, only about what their legacy could do for them *now*. Kiss's message had been, Anyone can do this; it's easy, as long as you conceal your real identity. The rockers who emerged in the light of *Alive!* were pleasure-seekers of an endless moment. They learned to play their instruments as quickly as possible (often gigging before that process was completed), daring anyone to say they were not stars. They commandeered rock's Cadillac before they knew how to drive. No wonder the whole thing ended up a mangled, bloody mess.

The most poignant attestation of Kiss's influence on 1990s rock comes from Pearl Jam's former drummer Dave Abbruzzese. There had long been a tension between the success-enjoying Dave and brooding, complaining Vedder. Neely writes that, more than anything else, "what drove a wedge between [Abbruzzese] and Eddie was the singer's fear of anything that might cause him to be outfitted with the dreaded 'rock star' tag." "Eddie dressed up like Kiss just like everybody else," Dave laments.

> And he didn't do that imagining himself standing in his hallway. He did it so he could close his eyes and picture the world in front of him. I dreamed of that, we *all* dreamed of it. But all of a sudden it wasn't politically correct to admit it. It just wasn't part of the marketing plan.

Something had changed since the cereal days of *Alive!* Those kids who had gone on to form bands had to lead them through gay pride, the ERA, Greenpeace, and the DIY integrity-based movements of latter-day punk, hardcore,

straight edge, alt, indie, and more. Kiss had become an embarrassment, and ambition was now a stigma sure to cost you street cred. To be taken seriously, you needed to distance yourself from the very remaking of your face that got you into rock 'n' roll in the first place. It was back to remaking yourself. Dues paying—or the appearance thereof—was again in vogue. No one loves an instant star.

Moreover, such post-Kiss rockers as Vedder and Bono and John Mellencamp had made the crucial mistake of *connecting* with their audience. Kiss hadn't bothered. In fact, not doing so has been vital to their longevity. Better to hook your audience, selling them a lifetime of product, than to communicate with them. Communication can break down; commerce is forever. Those who followed did not hide their faces. Knowing instinctively what comes of inauthenticity, Eddie and his contemporaries risked relationship. They have been left holding that messy bag of complexity and compromise ever since.

My friend Mark also moved on from the easy answers of makeup and smoke bombs, though he never did harness his guitar playing enough to make it through even one song without wandering to a next. Even Kiss lightened up. In the second edition of *The Rolling Stone Record Guide*, David McGee praises their 1981 concept album *Music from "The Elder"* "...for the way it seeks to reach the heart rather than the crotch."

Regardless of such maturing, Kiss still inhabits that diabolical realm they cut for themselves long ago, tempting fledgling artists away from the ugly realities of life to a party-every-day superiority. "Those of low estate are but a breath," wrote David (Psalm 62). So often we feel our lowliness and long for more, forgetting his next line, "those of high estate are a delusion."

I've had sixth grade Kiss fans who have never heard of the Velvet Underground tell me how their lives were saved by rock 'n' roll. The band's material remains a rite of passage for young guitarists, while the four once-menacing characters are as beloved as Mickey Mouse. Halloween favorites, Kiss items sell to kids the same age as their original fans and younger. Less a successful brand—which Simmons strove for—Kiss is more like an enjoyable, nonthreatening children's television show in syndication. They survive on reruns—just look at how many collections, live albums, and repackagings accompany their constant touring. Have they even released an album of new material since reapplying the makeup in 1996? Does it matter?

Kiss in Boston, 1984.
Credit: www.flickr.com/people/wok/

Mark overdosed years ago, but I'm sure he would be pleased to know that Kiss's thunderous call for submission has been granted. You win, my brother. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let *Alive!* into my home.

Pearl Jam is currently on tour in support of their new album, *Backspacer*. Kiss is currently on tour in support of their back catalogue. J. D. Buhl is currently living in Philadelphia.

NOTE TAKING

Why does it take
the honing of a star,
the call of a bird
red-beaked and strident at sunset

to announce the sickled moon
is rising, again, oh repeated
advent of the humdrum
magnificent universe, sorrow

of time, and all brevities, elongated
quest into other, more lasting
states of true being, not sold to, enslaved to
the second-hand beating of my jeweled watch.

In red ink I write this:

Let us love
let us love one another
for the brevity we own
and let death take note.

Jean Hollander

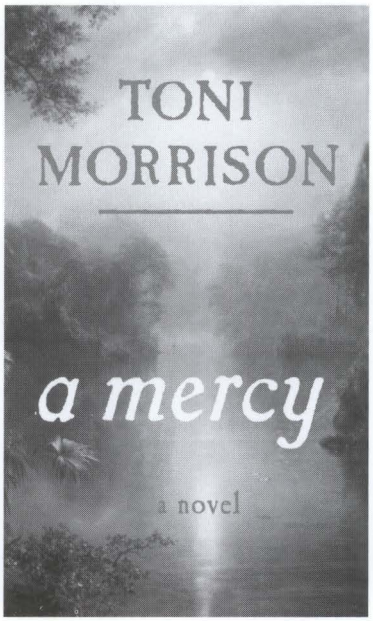
Voices in the Wilderness

Freedom and Dominion in Toni Morrison's A Mercy

Erin Dalpini

A Mercy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT THAT IT IS 1682: the United States of America has yet to be organized, the laws of the land are fluid, and the slave trade is in its early stages. Somewhere at the edge of the forest in New York, there is an empty mansion with a faint glow coming from one of the rooms. Inside, a young Portuguese slave, no more than sixteen, is "carving words" along the walls and floor. She holds a lamp in one hand, a sharp nail in the other. She is exhausted, but cannot stop until she's finished telling her story: "There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor.... My arms ache but I have need to tell you this" (161).



Desperate, passionate, and love-starved, Florens is the central voice in Toni Morrison's latest book, *A Mercy*. The novel depicts Florens's journey as a slave, beginning when she is sold to a Dutch trader, Jacob Vaark, as payment for an outstanding debt. At Jacob's estate, Florens becomes part of a diverse group of laborers maintaining his farm. There are two other slaves: Lina, a hard-working, caring Native American woman whose tribe was wiped out by smallpox, and Sorrow, a melancholy young woman with an equally traumatic albeit enigmatic past at sea. There are also two indentured servants, white gay men who escaped hardships in England by coming to the colonies. Similarly, the mistress of the household, Rebekka, avoided religious persecution in England by traveling to the colonies to marry Jacob, a man she had never met. Jacob, an orphan, worked his way out of the poorhouses to financial security. A collection of damaged souls, this motley cast of characters forms a sort of "companionship out of isolation" (156), and in their community Morrison offers up an alternative way of being whose mere existence challenges the history of slavery in America.

In a interview with Sam Tanehaus of the *New York Times Book Review* ("A Conversation with Toni Morrison," 30 November 2008, video.nytimes.com), Morrison explains that "Dividing the world up ethnically or racially was a deliberate sustained event that grew, but before that, I just wanted to suggest what it [the United States] could have been like, what it might have been like, before the narrative that we have now about the beginnings of this country." To illustrate this possibility, Morrison includes another character, a free African blacksmith, hired by Jacob to craft iron gates to surround the ostentatious mansion he is building. Florens is instantly attracted to and enamored of the handsome, haughty blacksmith and the two surreptitiously become lovers.

A Mercy is the ninth novel in Morrison's body of work, and its colonial setting is the earliest in her writing. In her fresh and dream-like rendering of the landscape, America is an uncharted Eden. Morrison explains her choice of setting, "I was looking for a time before

slavery and black became married, before racism became established, and slavery was the most common experience of most people" ("A Conversation with Toni Morrison"). In the 1680s, slave labor had not yet become an important source of profit, but the beginnings of racial tension and division were present. Early in *A Mercy*, Morrison informs her readers that after a 1676 uprising by the lower-classes against the gentry—a rebellion that united whites and blacks; slaves, indentured servants, and freemen—the authorities responded "...by eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever" (10). Although Jacob himself rejects these "lawless laws," several incidents in the novel demonstrate a growing prejudice.

A Mercy is the ninth novel in Morrison's body of work, and its colonial setting is the earliest in her writing. In her fresh and dream-like rendering of the landscape, America is an uncharted Eden.

The kinship between the workers on Jacob's farm begins to dissipate after the completion of the mansion and its master's untimely death. After Jacob passes away from small-pox, Rebekka and the three female slaves are left to fend for themselves on this farm in the wilderness. With Rebekka infected by the virus that killed her husband and no male heirs to inherit control over the estate, the fate of these soon to be "unmastered women" is unclear: "Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile" (58). On her deathbed, Rebekka recognizes this danger and sends Florens on a mission to find the blacksmith Florens pines for. But the blacksmith rejects Florens, and her feral reaction leaves her etching her tragic story on the walls of a bare room in Jacob's mansion.

Like its heartbroken protagonist, the novel as a whole has a sort of confessional, serious quality; it aches to be read and digested. Each character has a unique story to tell, and Morrison, in her characteristic Faulknerian style, grants most of them a turn or two in advancing the novel's plot via third person limited perspective. These interludes are interspersed between chapters from Florens's perspective, which is communicated using first person narration and is occasionally confusing (given her muddled syntax), and they serve as excellent compasses for reorienting the reader in space and time. The voices build on one another, adding depth and color to the novel while balancing out Florens's lovesick drone. At times, the supporting characters are even more engaging than the heroine, and one may finish these chapters wanting to know more. Morrison, however, is intentional in her economy. These narratives are only threads in a greater tapestry.

Echoes of Morrison's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *Beloved*, abound throughout the text, including motifs of womanhood—its struggles and triumphs—and mother-daughter relationships. The narratives of the women in *A Mercy* lucidly portray the difficulties inherent in the feminine experience in the 1680s, as summarized by Lina: "We never shape the world... the world shapes us" (71). Each female character experiences this lack of power and control in varying degrees, but it is best illustrated in the poignant, appalling life story of Florens's mother—her capture, path to slavery, the brutal rape, and continued abuse she suffers from the men on her master's plantation. It is no wonder that when Jacob suggests the acquisition of Florens's mother to settle an unpaid debt with her master, she begs Jacob to take her daughter instead: "Take

you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight [coins]" (166). Her mother's action changes Florens's environment and life circumstances for the better, but it leaves her feeling heartbroken and dejected. Craving the unconditional love that can come only from a mother, Florens is desperate to care and be cared for. Her neediness first draws her to Lina and later to the blacksmith. But the blacksmith rejects her slavish devotion, and Florens becomes wild with hurt and anger.

Like Florens, every woman in the novel is touched by "Mother hunger—to be one or to have one" (63). Motherhood is an empowering role in Morrison's fiction, one that brings a sense of purpose and identity. Although she has felt lost and alone for most of her life, Sorrow's sense of self is dramatically altered by motherhood. After giving birth, Sorrow's sense of self is dramatically altered by motherhood. After giving birth, Sorrow looks into her child's eyes and decides from that point on she will call herself Complete. This scene is a glimmer of hope amongst many dark moments in *A Mercy*.

Thought-provoking and unique in scope, Morrison's latest work gives voice to those whose voices are so often muted within history, revealing the legacy of the sexism and racism that pervades contemporary society. With subtle grace and deft, Morrison writes of heart-wrenching hardships, ugly realities, and small mercies—acts of kindness which restore for us some faith in humanity (even though these moments are few and far between). The final passage and message of *A Mercy* seems to have come straight from the author, channeling her voice through Florens's mother. She says, "To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (167). As each of these scenarios are fulfilled in the novel, readers are reminded that whether literal or figurative, slavery engenders evil. Even though she cannot physically hear her mother's thoughts, Florens ascertains the same truth. Her storytelling becomes a path to self-discovery in which she reclaims her heart and voice: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (161).

Toni Morrison
Credit: Miami Dade College Archives

Erin Dalpini works in Chicago as an Editorial Assistant at Fourth Presbyterian Church.

Four Funerals and a Wedding

Paul Koch

This past June, in the span of about a week, I officiated at four funerals and a wedding. Eat your heart out, Hugh Grant.

Death always comes as an intrusion, certainly in the lives of the bereaved but also in the lives of pastors. Contrary to much greeting-card wisdom, death is not just a natural part of things. Life is God's plan. Death is an interruption, the result of sin.

My parishioners were certainly feeling that interruption back in June. Death interrupted the visits and conversations they had planned with the ones who had died. It interrupted their future parties at which their grandmother should have been holding court in her usual spot.

As a pastor, more selfishly, I felt that interruption as well. Three of the four funerals were for people I never knew, so I had to give up time with my family to rush to the hospital and funeral home. Moping like Jonah, I was doing ministry for people who did not find the church's ministrations usually worth their time. Tarshish would have been preferable. That week, even the wedding felt like an intrusion, since I doubted I'd see the couple in our church again.

These services felt to me like an interruption, though, only because I did not see them as part of my regular duties. In a little over a week, including my Sunday duties, I was writing seven sermons and leading eleven worship services. It felt as if the funerals and the wedding were bloating my schedule.

But what else, really, is a pastor called to do? Preaching to the bereaved and to brides and grooms—this is my job. It was an exhausting week, but it provided some vocational clarity.

Jesus sent out his disciples with basic instructions. He told them that repentance and forgiveness in his name should be preached to all nations. He told them to baptize and teach. He told them to offer bread and wine, his body and blood, for the forgiveness of sin. Lutherans call this word and sacrament ministry. Preach. Teach. Baptize. Give the supper.

Pastors, however, feel a strong urge to do lots of other things. A glance at my June calendar shows that the week of the wedding and funerals found me at a youth lock-in, a men's club meeting, a parish nursing event, a premarital counseling session, and a wedding anniversary party.

Pastors might blame their congregations and councils for asking too much of them, but we are, to our own detriment, an eager bunch. We are eager to please and afraid of not doing enough. We are afraid that membership might dwindle, and that in the end it will be because we weren't active enough, didn't plan enough, didn't place ourselves at enough activities with parishioners. Pastors love a full church parking lot, and if it tells of our success on Sundays, then why not try filling it the rest of the week as well?

One of the best pastors in all of literature is Fritz Kruppenbach, who inhabits a brief scene in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*. The Episcopal priest Jack Eccles has taken the wayward Rabbit Angstrom under his care, golfing with him and visiting his family in order to sort out the mess that Rabbit created when he left his wife. Eccles is stymied in his attempts at restoring order to the Angstrom family, so he goes to visit Kruppenbach, the pastor to Rabbit's in-laws,

and a long-time fixture in town. Surely, he will have some helpful insights.

Kruppenbach surprises Eccles. He is uninterested in Eccles's evaluations of Rabbit's family dynamics and emotional make-up. To him, Eccles is "selling his message for a few scraps of gossip and a few games of golf," acting like a cop "without handcuffs, without guns, without anything but... human good nature." Kruppenbach reminds him that their duty as pastors is to be strong in faith, so that when facing parishioners in mourning, they can say, "Yes, he is dead, but you will see him again in heaven." The old kraut provides much-needed clarity as to what the pastoral office entails, even though Eccles will not accept it.

Significantly, when Eccles arrives at the house, Kruppenbach is out on his lawnmower. The yard has the groomed appearance "that comes with much fertilizing, much weed-killing, and much mowing." A nearby colleague of mine says you should never trust a pastor who doesn't know the daytime television schedule. It's another way of saying that a pastor who's doing his job should have enough time to get out of the office and watch some television or, in Kruppenbach's case, mow the lawn. Eccles thinks it is his job to go golfing with Rabbit and straighten out his family. A preacher's work is less complicated than that.

Every pastor has surely heard his parishioners crack the joke that he's got an easy life, since he only has to work on Sundays. The humor is obvious, since pastors work throughout the week, often morning, noon, and night. But there is a kernel of truth to the joke. Pastors do not need to golf with their parishioners. They need to preach.

About the time I was enmeshed in four funerals and a wedding, I got a call from the council president at one of my churches concerning the parsonage lawn. Some people were complaining that the grass was getting too long. The next day several of our neighbors were holding garage sales, so lots of people would be driving by. If I didn't have time to mow it before then, there were youth in our congregation whom I could hire to get the job done. The implied message was clear: long grass reflects badly on the pastor and on the parish. Who would want to attend a church led by a slob?

I bristled at the phone call, but tried to remain courteous. My wife got to hear me vent after hanging up. The grass was long enough to mow, not long enough to warrant a call from the council president. Parsonages are as close as you can get to a glass house.

A nearby colleague of mine says you should never trust a pastor who doesn't know the daytime television schedule. It's another way of saying that a pastor who's doing his job should have enough time to get out of the office and watch some television or mow the lawn.

Still, the phone call signaled that I had forgotten the contours of my pastoral vocation. It might as well have been Fritz Kruppenbach on the other end of the line. A pastor always should have enough time to mow the lawn. Four funerals and a wedding might make for a busy week, but a pastor's schedule should have space for it. My job is to preach and administer the sacraments. That certainly means work besides Sunday morning, but the responsibility is really the same whether teaching confirmation, visiting the homebound, or leading devotions at a council meeting: take a word from Christ, and hand it over. A pastor doesn't need to do everything.

Rabbit, Run was published in 1960, and Updike's portrayal of the young pastor Eccles is nearly as accurate today as it was in 1960. Seminary curricula in the 1960s encouraged

pastors to see themselves as counselors and learn from the psychological arts. In today's seminaries, we are schooled not only in the psychology of the individual, but in the web of family systems that produce anxiety and need our benevolent delineation.

If Kruppenbach could see our church today, he would find another paradigm of ministry replacing the model of counselor. I can only assume he would scorn this one just as much. The new paradigm is leadership. My own seminary's mission statement does not even use the word *pastor* but instead refers to "leaders for Christian communities." Leadership has become its own division of faculty, including teachers of education and pastoral care.

It is not hard to see the influence of culture in all this nor hard to guess at the sciences which are sitting on the cultural throne. Fifty years ago, the church had grown enamored of psychology—it seemed to explain so much about who we were, and so our pastors had to learn to analyze and affirm. These days we are in awe of the business world, and so our churches and seminaries have been learning to speak in the language of markets and demographics. With the current international recession and the collapse of major businesses, a new paradigm of ministry might soon emerge—although the church is often a good many years behind the culture when she tries imitating it (how else does one explain today's "contemporary" worship which sounds like adult light pop from the 1980s?), so I'm not holding my breath.

The proponents of churchly leadership would say that it differs from the business model, and that an MDiv is something other than an MBA. We are not just leaders, after all, but leaders in mission. And whose mission is it? It is God's mission. Yet the mission of redeeming the world has one leader, and that is God. The mission itself along with its power and its methods belong to God. Christians—whether they are ordained or not—are more like earthen vessels than leaders. We are pots and not the potter, showing that anything accomplished through us must be owing to the power of God. We are stewards who have been entrusted with the keys to our master's property and have been told to use those keys to let people in the door.

The trouble with borrowing from the culture for our ministry paradigms is that the culture's methods are so rarely God's own. How many businesses would hang their hopes on water, bread, wine, and words to accomplish anything? When we should be relying on these simple methods—since they were the ones God gave us—we end up learning all kinds of other methods, ones that don't allow time for lawn-mowing. We end up learning five-step processes such as Attending-Asserting-Agreeing-Acting-Assessing. We research population shifts and traffic patterns outside our church buildings. We schedule meetings and cast a vision. Naaman surely would have spent lots of time pursuing his own cure to leprosy if his servants hadn't stopped him. Elisha had simply said, "Go to the river and wash."

When we gather, my colleagues and I often complain of fatigue. The job is demanding. It will always be demanding. We work for a Lord who had to tell his disciples to "come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while," because "they had no leisure even to eat." Yet much of it is self-inflicted. The unplanned funerals are many, but the unnecessary pursuits are far more. Like the Psalm says, the Lord does give sleep to his beloved. Waking up early, going to bed late, eating the bread of anxious toil… it's all vanity.

My grass is getting long again. I must have been taking myself too seriously this week.

Paul Koch is pastor of Wannaska Lutheran Parish in rural northwestern Minnesota.

Passing on the Faith

Katie Koch

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.

2 Timothy 1:5

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6

The leaves are turning, a sure and ageless sign that it is time to get out those felt boards, dust off those Bibles, and pull out the maracas. It's time for another round of Sunday School. Before I became a Lutheran, I did a stint with the Baptists. When I joined the Lutherans, I was appalled to find out that, for the most part, Lutherans take a holiday from Sunday School and adult education in the summer. What is this? Is God on vacation?

Before long, I was working as a Youth Director and eventually I became an ordained pastor in the Lutheran Church, so I have become accustomed to our more seasonal schedule. But I've learned that the topic of faith development for our youth will always be a hot one in Lutheran congregations. The emphasis used to be on keeping teenagers involved in church after they were confirmed and what to do about those parents who simply drop off their children for Sunday school and then speed away. Nowadays the celebration of faith milestones is all the rage and folks are much more concerned about nurturing, watering, or "catching" faith in children and teens. (Slogans abound; the popular one these days insists that faith is caught, not taught.) Pastors interviewing in the call process these days are bombarded by questions: How will you get more young families to come to church? Do you like children in worship? How will you help families teach faith at home?

In essence, the questions always remain the same: as Christians, how do we raise our children in faith, passing on to them the trust we have in Jesus Christ? As Lutherans, how do we pass down our traditions, confessions, and law-gospel dialectic? In a world filled with temptations and competing gods that promise everything from reincarnation to immortality, how will children develop a faith with roots that are deep and strong?

As Lutherans, we should excel in education. Luther translated the Bible into vernacular German for everyone to read, and he put his Small Catechism into the hands of parents to teach their children the basics of faith. For centuries, Lutherans have prided themselves not just on their institutions of higher education but also on how they educate little Lutherans from preschool on up through parochial schools. It seems that we've got all the structures we need, and we've even got the Small Catechism for a home study and devotional book.

Recently, there has been a revolt against much of this: down with structure, down with memorization. Often the new trend is simply to have as much fun as possible with children and teens and hope that somehow this fun translates into Biblical literacy and theological understanding. Or, crediting the changing technology available, we tell Bible stories by flashing one form of media after another in front of our children, assuming that if we just talk fast enough we'll hold their attention and the message will sink in.

Perhaps the greatest temptation to all parents is choice. "We're going to wait to baptize baby Sara; we'd like her to be able to make the choice when she's older. Then she'll really own her faith." When a child is born the parents choose a name and a nursery theme for their child. But in the name of "choice,"

more and more parents are choosing not to baptize their children as infants. They feel that baptism is somehow more valid, more real, if instead of carrying their child to the font, they simply wait until their child has decided that they are ready. They will leave it up to their child to make his or her own choice.

This, then, is where Lutheran theology meets the daily life of parents and families. What are Lutherans to do with the children, grandchildren, godchildren, nieces, nephews, or young friends in their lives? How do they pass on faith? Paul exalts the faith of Timothy, faith that grew out of the influence and direction of his faithful mother and grandmother. The writer of Proverbs extols the parent to raise his child in the ways of the Lord. Where does one begin so mighty a task?

What are Lutherans to do with the children, grandchildren, godchildren, nieces, nephews, or young friends in their lives? How do they pass on faith?

On one thing, we have been mistaken. The place to start is not a method, style, philosophy, or trend; the place to start is God. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are" (1 John 3:1). God makes us into his children, with love that does not consult us or give us some choice along the way. God makes faith.

When we try to take on God's job as our own, we may succeed in teaching our children memory work or holy living (both of which I support and use in Confirmation, by the way), but we have fallen short of what God is already up to and have taught them nothing of the true meaning of faith. Faith is trust, belief in that which we cannot see, centered on Jesus and his promises. Faith is, as Martin Luther says in the explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed, not something I can create or come to on my own, but rather God's work in me.

I did not grow up in a Christian home; I was a child who was given the "choice" to find her own religion. I was raised to be open-minded, welcoming, and tolerant. Look where it got my parents; I wandered through the Baptist Church and now I am a Lutheran pastor who is married to a Lutheran pastor, whose first baby was just baptized this past winter. God himself was the only one sowing seeds of faith in me as a child and now I find myself singing the doxology incessantly, praying a table prayer as my son nurses, and fretting over his church clothes. Our God will not be limited to simply one choice among many options.

It seems that God has taken all the work away from us; he is the one who is at work in our children, grandchildren, and godchildren. It turns out that God means what the Letter to the Ephesians says, "By grace you have been saved by faith and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." The faith of our children is not a project we can boast in. In fact, more often our actions in raising them turn out to be the deeds that we must bring to confession. But by God's grace, by the work of his word, he makes faith in our children, despite all of our best efforts that all too often fall short.

In Matthew 19, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Trusting in God's work on the cross, we must not stop the little children from coming to him. What are we to do? Gather up the children and bring them to where Jesus is. He is at the font, ready to get children of all ages wet; bring them there. He is where his word is preached, so scoop up the children and sit next to their squirrelly bodies during worship. Do not tuck them away at some mini children's church or in the nursery, but put them in the pew, to hear his word and jump around during hymns. Do all this even while mom and dad pop treat after

treat into their child's mouth just to keep her from screaming loud enough to derail even the smoothest pastor.

When the time comes, open their hands at the table to receive the gifts of the Lord's Supper. And at any age, place in their hands the Holy Scriptures, reading to them, with them, and listening to their words. Then fold these hands in prayer and sit with them in the presence of God, because he has long been at work in their lives.

Raising children in the faith is not all about our good works, as it turns out. It really is much more about God and his work. He has long been shaping his people into children of God and then forgiving these same people for the terrible things they do to one another. There will always be trends in raising children and new fads in our churches as well, but our faithful God will just keep doing his work.

Katie Koch is pastor of United and Our Savior's Lutheran Churches in rural northwestern Minnesota.

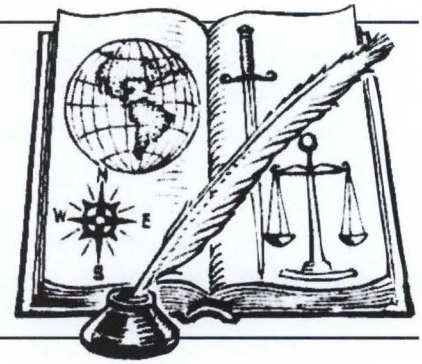
DOUBT

Morse code of rain
on metal gutters
seemed to call us
fools for believing
thunder's promise,
yet when thunder
dragged its dark side
out of town, rain
lingered, pattering
quietly to parched,
quivery leaves,
restoring faith to
skeptics with tin
ears who listened
shallowly at first
but learned to hear
by giving way,
as vegetation does.

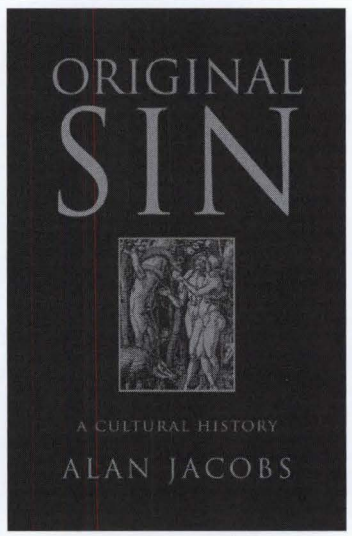
Georgia Ressmeyer

Reviewed in this issue...

Original Sin: A Cultural History
Evidence: Poems by Mary Oliver
Rise, O Church



The opening chapter of Alan Jacobs's latest book is titled "Six Stories." It is a loosely connected series of vignettes, spanning several thousand years, from the end of the Trojan War to the near-present. In each of these vignettes, the characters confront (in one form or another) the ancient question, "*unde hoc malum*?": "whence this evil?" The Locrians, believing themselves cursed for the hubris of their ancestor Ajax, offer an annual sacrifice of two young maidens; the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea fret over the fact that their conversion to Christianity has not resulted in their moral and spiritual perfection.



Original Sin:
A Cultural History
Alan Jacobs
HarperOne, 2008
304 pages
$26.00

Review by
Benjamin J. B. Lipscomb
Houghton College

"Six Stories" is an apt beginning for this wide-ranging, instructive, and slightly disheveled work. Jacobs's book is, fundamentally, a collage. He promises no more, remarking in his introduction that he has written "an *exemplary* history," a story that emerges in its coherence only as its many *petits récits* accumulate. Comparisons that come to mind are P. T. Anderson's *Magnolia* and Ira Glass's *This American Life*.

Even so, Jacobs's story of original sin—really, the story of the question "*unde hoc malum*?"—lacks impetus. This is not a criticism. Jacobs's story (such as it is) is the story of the regular recurrence of this question and of Paul's and Augustine's answer to it. It is also the story of the regular resistance this answer provokes, whenever and wherever it achieves prominence. Regular recurrences do not make for gripping narrative. But Jacobs is a gifted essayist, and his vignettes and attendant commentary more than sustain the reader's interest.

Jacobs does not argue for the Pauline-Augustinian answer: that we *all* do, and must, behave badly—culpably and yet also by nature. He does, however, exhibit the power of this answer, simply by showing how irrepressible it has been. And he offers a provocative suggestion as to where, precisely, the power lies. We receive our first hint of the book's central idea in Jacobs's discussion of an unlikely topic: the rise of the Feast of All Souls.

All *Saints* Day is a familiar celebration and an early one. But saints (in the Catholic sense) are only a subset of the church universal. Around the turn of the second millennium, Odilo, Abbot of Cluny, introduced a new festival: a festival for the rest of us. The Feast of All Souls invited all

Christians—the addicted, the doubting, the lazy, the nominal—into work sometimes supposed to be "saints' work." If the Feast of All Saints was an occasion to fete heroes of the faith, and to beg their prayers for us sinners (now and at the hour of our death), the Feast of All Souls was an occasion for saints and sinners alike to pray for the souls of the departed—again, saints and sinners alike.

The notion of purgatory was just emerging in this period, and the monks of Cluny took it as a particular task to offer intercessory masses for the dead. But in establishing the Feast of All Souls, they invited all Christians to join them in this work. Odilo did not for a moment deny that the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective. The insight behind the Feast of All Souls, though, was (as Jacobs puts it) that "no prayer by any Christian is useless. Some are stronger than others, but all can pull on the same rope, and every little bit of energy helps the cause." Odilo set observance of his new festival, aptly, for the day after All Saints Day. We are all to pick up, as it were, where the saints leave off.

Jacobs follows the twentieth-century social theorist, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, in characterizing the consequence of this new observance as "the Christian democracy of the dead and the dying," "the first universal democracy in the world." When we understand everyone in the economy of salvation as both giving and receiving, it levels the ground beneath. No one is useless. And everyone is needy. Or, rather, no one is useless *because* everyone is needy. Paradoxically, the understanding that we are all profoundly flawed creatures disposes us more charitably toward one another. Or it can. Taken to heart, it means no one can scorn another from a position of essential superiority.

The egalitarianism of Christianity is among its noteworthy features. Illustrations are not hard to come by. When one compares the ethics of Kant with that of Aristotle, one is struck by a number of points of divergence. None is more significant, though, than this: Kant thinks in terms of a transcendent law, manifest to every rational agent; anyone and everyone can do their duty. Aristotle, by contrast, thinks in terms of achievement—the successful exercise of personal excellence. Such excellence and achievement, he says, are attainable only with substantial good luck, in the form of a responsible upbringing, ample possessions, sound health, and so on. Aristotle compares the badly raised to runners who can't find the starting line of the race of life. They can't not lose.

It had not occurred to me before reading Jacobs's book that the doctrine of original sin proceeds from, or at least resonates with, this egali-

When we understand everyone in the economy of salvation as both giving and receiving, it levels the ground beneath. No one is useless. And everyone is needy. Or, rather, no one is useless *because* everyone is needy.

tarian spirit. But it does. What then would lead people—especially moderns—to resist it? Well, love of babies. Famously wrenching conclusions follow if one conjoins the doctrine of original sin with a high and restrictive view of sacramental grace. But let us not dwell on this point, since the remedy seems so obvious: stop supposing that God's hands are tied. Jacobs uncovers a number of other historical objections to "Augustinian anthropology," objections of greater interest.

Most reinforce his point about the democratizing tendencies of the doctrine. There are those, for instance, who have directly (even crassly) rejected the egalitarianism itself. Jacobs relates an anecdote about a Duchess of Buckingham who found the preaching of George Whitefield (which invariably began with a proclamation of universal depravity) "most repulsive and strongly tinctured with impertinence and disrespect... and [doing] away with all distinctions." That it does. I think again of Aristotle, whose ideal man hates to be reminded of any way in which he is indebted to others—in which he is a recipient of

grace. And the doctrine of original sin insists that we all live by grace.

More subtly and sympathetically, the doctrine has been resisted by modern social reformers, who do not wish to believe in the limited and mitigating character of their projects. In addition to the people you'd expect him to discuss under this description—visionaries like Rousseau and utopians like Robert Owen—Jacobs calls our attention to Charles Finney, the charismatic nineteenth-century abolitionist. Finney was adamant that Christians "should not rest satisfied until they are as perfect as God." Anything that threatened to reconcile people with a residuum of evil in their lives or in their societies, he felt, was a threat to the cause.

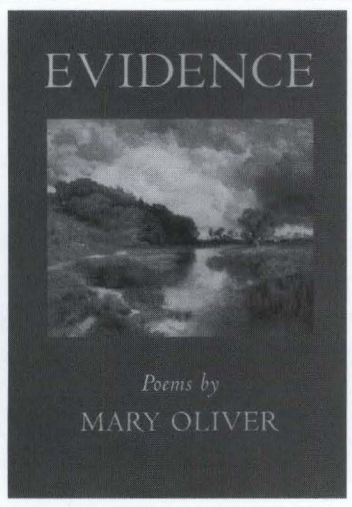
The chapter about Finney and abolition is the most profound and disturbing of the book. As noted, Jacobs proceeds vignette by vignette, always piecing his scenes together with a thread of unity. Sometimes it is only a thread, as in Jacobs's concluding chapter, which juxtaposes the 1854 papal codification of the immaculate conception, Mendel's early work on genetics, and the Stanford prison experiment. But chapter nine, "The Confraternity of the Human Type," is powerfully unified around the dominating social and political issue of the mid-nineteenth century, racial slavery. Finney fought it and the doctrine of sin inherited from a universal ancestor. Others defended it, and some quieted their consciences with a theory, polygenesis, that cut (ironically) both against the doctrine of original sin and against the universal kinship of humanity. If there was no universal ancestor, then there could be no universal inheritance. But that was never the point of polygenesis. The point was, if there was no universal ancestor, then maybe Caucasians needn't see Africans as kin.

This leads Jacobs to ask, why do we so often need a doctrine of shared guilt to convince us of universal kinship? Shouldn't uplifting doctrines like the *imago dei* accomplish everything the fierce Augustinian doctrine does, and more? But, Jacobs writes, "a genuine commitment to the belief that we are all created equally in the image of God requires a certain *imagination*." To see in others—all others—the image of God requires a hard and uncertain effort of self-overcoming, bucking a natural tendency to identify with the ingroup. By contrast, "it takes relatively little imagination to look at another person and think that, though that person is not all he or she might be, neither am I." Jacobs remarks that this fact—that we often need the fierce doctrine to bring us around to appreciating our kinship with one another—"*could* be read as yet more evidence for the reality of original sin."

I have indicated that Jacobs's experimental (perhaps it should simply be called "essayistic") style is not evenly successful. My one *substantive* disappointment with Jacobs's book was that he does less than he might, characterizing and assessing the modern era, which he acknowledges to have been on the whole hostile to the Augustinian view. In a chapter on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century figures, Jacobs remarks, "despite all the Reformers could do to emphasize our utter depravity… increasing numbers of people, while acknowledging the reality of original sin, preferred to minimize its consequences." I can think of several reasons why that might be true, some of which come up in passing in later chapters. (Jacobs's chapter on Rebecca West and the great wars of the early twentieth century is particularly rich. There he characterizes West, at least, as embracing Augustinian anthropology in despair of Augustinian soteriology and eschatology. It is unclear, though, whether Jacobs is prepared to generalize this conclusion. Perhaps he regards this as a necessary corollary of the "exemplary" approach.) But Jacobs never reflects directly on the question, which is regrettable.

Which is to say, I was not ready for the book to end. I learned as much from it as from any book I have read in the past few years. And Jacobs's voice is consistently delightful: at once casual and careful, witty and earnest. Jacobs tells a host of stories but remarks more than once on the place of the doctrine of original sin in *the* Christian story, the story of salvation. It is apt, then, that he closes his book with some brief reflections on comedy. Following Auden, he contrasts "classical comedy" with "Christian comedy." In the former, he says, we laugh at the protagonists, whose arrogance is exposed in the action. The audi-

ence is warned but also subtly congratulated. In Christian comedy, on the other hand, we laugh with the characters, having been brought to recognize that, in Auden's words, "no one, whatever his rank or talents, can claim immunity from the comic exposure." All have fallen short, and must. Our kinship is grace.



EVIDENCE: POEMS
Mary Oliver
Beacon Press, 2009.
88 pages
$23.00

Review by
D. S. Martin
Brampton, Ontario

MARY OLIVER'S POETRY IS A PLACE IN which to dwell—a field, a river, a shoreline that wraps its arms around wild things, and preserves precious moments that appear as the seasons shift. It is about attention and patience, just as love is about attention and patience and about quietly stepping away from our own four walls. It is about memory, and reflecting upon what can only be experienced when we respectfully wait for birds and other creatures to take their turns watching us. It is about praise, thanksgiving, and astonishment. It is, surprisingly, not about the poet—other than that she is the one who has experienced what she is showing us.

There are certain features that are obviously characteristic of Oliver's poems. She seems always to be alone, and out-of-doors, observing the ordinary and extraordinary manifestations of nature, and simply telling us about them with delight and wonder. In "Swans," for example, she tells of a flock flying overhead, "over the dunes, / they skimmed the trees / and hurried on." She shows us something of how she felt, "their shoulder-power // echoing / inside my own body"—how she wished a feather had fallen, so "I should have / something in my hand // to tell me / that they were real"—and how this was foolish, because,

> What we love, shapely and pure,
> is not to be held,
> but to be believed in.

Her conclusions don't seem to be pushed or didactic, but simply part of her experience.

Rarely do people appear in her poems—not because she is some kind of hermit but because her preoccupation is with animals, birds, and trees. A young man is mentioned in a poem about a deer but only as the one who later shot him down with an arrow. A wild conductor is described in a poem about an experience with music. The Chinese poet, Li Po, is written about as a fellow lover of the natural world.

There is a simplicity and clarity in her work that is sadly absent from much of the academic poetry of the last few decades. Even though she has ignored their pretentious trends, Mary Oliver has still received numerous honours: the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *American Primitive* (1983) and the National Book Award for *New & Selected Poems* (1992), among others. What is more impressive is that, according to the *New York Times Book Review*, "she is, far and away, this country's best selling poet."

There is a strong spirituality within her books, voiced in decidedly Christian language. In her poem "Spring," she personifies faith: "Faith / is the instructor. / We need no other." He speaks to her in a young man's voice, and she tells us, "Of course I am thinking / the Lord was once young / and will never in fact be old." She doesn't tell us that they are one and the same but asks, "who else could this be...?" It is almost irrelevant, though, whether Mary Oliver is completely orthodox in her faith or not, because she points at what she feels is

worthy of our observation and, mostly, lets us come to our own conclusions.

One example is how she playfully permits herself the unbiblical idea that angels are the souls of the departed, with wings in the tops of trees. "I have lost as you and / others have possibly lost a / beloved one, / and wonder, where are they now?" ("About Angels and About Trees"). This is more about missing a loved one

There is a simplicity and clarity in Mary Oliver's work that is sadly absent from much of the academic poetry of the last few decades.

than a doctrine of heavenly beings, although she seems here to have limited hope. The poet appears more comfortable with questions than answers, in this regard: "Will death allow such transportation of the eye?" she asks ("Imagine"); "we will all find out" is as much of a reply as she permits herself.

Sometimes she hovers on the edge of pantheism. In a poem that begins "I don't know who God is exactly" ("At The River Clarion") she says,

> If God exists he isn't just churches and mathematics.
> He's the forest, He's the desert.
> He's the ice caps, that are dying.
> He's the ghetto and the Museum of Fine Arts.

Rarely does her own belief clarify itself, as though she has lost faith in human clarity. "Let me keep my distance, always, from those / who think they have the answers," she says ("Mysteries, Yes"). In this poem she is distancing herself from those pushing scientific answers, but there also seems to be more of a distancing from specific theological answers in *Evidence*, than in *Red Bird* (2008)—and more spiritual aloofness in *Red Bird* than in its predecessor *Thirst* (2006). In *Thirst*, several poems use conspicuously Christian language. "I want / to see Jesus, / maybe in the clouds / or on the shore" she says ("The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist"). "On the hard days / I ask myself / if I ever will. // Also there are times / my body whispers to me / that I have." In *Evidence*, the only direct reference to Jesus—if we exclude her use of the word, "Lord"—is to a procession through a Mexican street by those carrying "The flagellated Christ" ("First Days in San Miguel de Allende"). The thirst is of the people, not the poet.

Does her use of biblical language mislead us into attributing Christian faith to her? Oliver frequently speaks of praise, of prayer, of holiness. She writes, for example, "Sometimes I need / only to stand / wherever I am / to be blessed." ("It Was Early"); she uses such terms as "glory" and "Halleluiah." She does not speak of other religions or ideologies, yet draws her faith more from the natural world than from the Bible. Again, things were more pronounced in *Thirst*, where she even has a poem entitled, "Coming to God: First Days." I suspect that once religious people had claimed her as their own, they may have also started placing demands upon her. She is far too private a person to be comfortable with that. Even though she is well known, it has been quite a while since she's given an interview.

At times, Oliver's poetry can be a bit repetitive. She almost seems to write the same poem over and over again—expanding on a subject, perhaps, but not necessarily adding much to what she has eloquently said before. Reading her collections is an experience of mood, attitude, and values, and so I find that my least-favourite Mary Oliver poems have much in common with my favourites. The problem is their similarity of tone, language, ideas, and content. She humbly jokes about this tendency in *Red Bird* where she calls a cycle of quite divergent poems on a common theme, "Eleven Versions of the Same Poem."

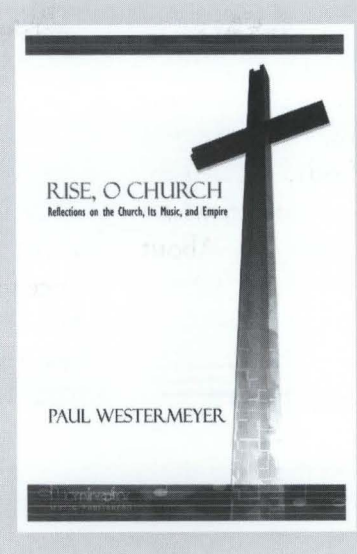
What makes certain poems specifically memorable, though, is when they are telling a story, such as in "Winter and the Nuthatch" (*Red Bird*), about a bird she has, through much

patience, coaxed into eating from her hand. Or in "At The Pond" (*Evidence*)—about one summer when she went to a pond every morning, and the baby geese would climb over her body. The poem "More Honey Locust" seems to be a continuation of something that has gone before, either "When I Am Among The Trees" where the trees explain what we have come into the world to do or, more likely, "More Beautiful than the Honey Locust Tree Are the Words of the Lord" (both from *Thirst*). In "More Beautiful..." Oliver says, "I wanted Christ to be as close as the cross I wear." In "More Honey Locust" she describes the blossoms as "white fountains" and twice calls the seeds holy, asking us to give thanks—concluding that the honey locust is (or our thanks "for such creation" is) "a prayer for all of us." In a similar way, "Almost a Conversation" is independent yet follows after an earlier poem, "Swimming with Otter."

Red Bird was a common character in her latest new collection, but this time, "The mockingbird / opens his throat / among the thorns / for his own reasons" ("Deep Summer"); there's even a poem with the tongue-in-cheek title, "There Are a Lot of Mockingbirds in This Book", and common to each of these poems is the thorn bush. You'll also find swans, hummingbirds, and many other birds by name—plus wolf, mink, otter, and lambs—and receiving as much attention, various trees, flowers, and grasses.

The poet wants to influence us in the way we view the world. In the title poem she says, "all beautiful things, inherently ...excite the viewer toward sublime thought." This is the "Evidence" she is speaking of. She expects us to be awestruck: "if you have not been enchanted by / this adventure—your life—what would do for / you?" she asks.

Since Mary Oliver's poetry is filled with observations of creation, with praise and questions, it is an ideal place to dwell—to meditate—and to consider what our lives should be.



Rise, O Church: Reflections on the Church, Its Music, and Empire

Paul Westermeyer

Morningstar Music, 2008.

72 pages

$15.00

Review by

Neil Elliott

United Theological Seminary

One doesn't have to be an Episcopalian to love this little book, but it doesn't hurt. Westermeyer refers to the Anglican principle of *lex orandi* to describe "how in fact the whole church proceeds." "Christianity is to be prayed before it is to be thought" (34). The church prays and worships preeminently in song and so, in a model of liturgical theology, Westermeyer draws not only from Scripture but from a particularly rich vein of the church's hymnody to explicate our experience of God and our vocation to bear witness to God's love in the world.

These succinct chapters draw on prior lectures, workshops, and sermons and the repeated use of that material with various groups has made for a finely tuned result. Every phrase is well shaped, the same clear theological themes rise up throughout, and Westermeyer strikes never a false note. Though the title refers to three topics, the first two are clearly primary here. The author's wisdom and skill are obvious as he draws bedrock truths from the church's singing and liturgy about Communion, Baptism, the relation of preaching to the Word among us, and the relation between the call to worship and the broader vocation to serve the world. That the broader vocation never recedes from view is one of this book's great strengths. This is a book that reminds all who read it that *through* our worship, God always calls us *beyond* our worship.

The lucid writing makes this a versatile resource. It is easy to imagine this book at the center of a staff retreat for clergy, musicians, and other ministers, calling everyone to reflect on the common commitment that draws disparate personalities together for a larger and weightier purpose. Or it could be required reading in a senior seminar for students preparing for ordination, challenging them to distill their learning into a succinct, coherent vision for ministry. Or the book might simply be kept on the music director's or pastor's desk or bedside table, to dip into it again and again. One can read any of the chapters in just a few minutes, but the truths will linger in the mind and heart, and hours later one may find a hymn tune to which Westermeyer has appealed still running through one's head.

There are no false notes here, but one voice in the chorus is weaker than the others. Westermeyer admits in his preface that his use of the term *empire* (the third term in his subtitle) is "swampy." It crops up occasionally when he wants to refer to the pressures mainstream clergy and church musicians alike feel on their work in late capitalist America, but its use is a rhetorical gesture that must stand in for analysis—or even a succinct identification—of those pressures. Thus the empire is the place "where, in the interest of acquisitive power and control, avoiding or bending or even denying the truth is to be expected" (13); but that also happens in households, so it is not clear what makes the phenomenon "imperial." In another place there is a brief, stirring exhortation to "courage as close and continual as our daily breath," the breath that "goes into choir rehearsals" and "into challenging the emperor" (20); "the two are closely related," Westermeyer affirms, but doesn't spend much time telling us just how. Further, since most of us have never met an actual "emperor," the language seems extravagant, with just a whiff of the (comfortably distant) fairy tale to it.

Again, we read that "the empire around us" militates against the church's singing of a "new song" unless it can be commercialized to turn a profit (23–24). Here "empire" seems clearly to stand in for late capitalism. Against that ever-corrosive drive for the technically "new," Westermeyer poses the church's "unusual" habit of remembering a particular past and a specific future at once. These are riffs of a profound liturgical theology for the twenty-first century, but they never quite carry the tune here.

The issue is important. Surely mainstream church leaders in the US are ready, eager, for hard-headed analysis—however succinctly presented—of the cultural, economic, and political forces constraining the church's life and mission. Many of these leaders harbor deep concerns about the rise of a peculiarly virulent brand of imperialism—a toxic mix of militarism, sheer avarice, and American exceptionalism, all infused with a heady fog of civil religion—whether or not they take these themes on directly from the pulpit. Such readers might be led by Westermeyer's subtitle to expect more sustained engagement of those challenges here.

Just what *do* our choir rehearsals and our Sunday morning liturgies have to do with "challenging the emperor" about military adventurism or "extraordinary rendition" or any of the other realities that the term "imperialism" evokes today? *Does* "the empire" really care what we sing about, so long as we confine our singing to the sanctuary? Does our hymnody in any way *compel* us to stretch ourselves in some less-than-churchly form of protest? Other theologians have written quite explicitly of the "liturgies" and "choreography" in which "the empire" seeks routinely to rehearse us. How does, or how might, the church's liturgy resist that choreography? Are the church's liturgy and the empire's choreography in fact in contact at all? If so, where, and what can we learn from the skirmishes? If not, has the church's liturgy become so domesticated that it is irrelevant to the empire's forward press?

Those are questions beyond the purview of *Rise, O Church*, but one is left wondering why. These pages give every reason to suspect that Paul Westermeyer can answer them quite capably and to hope that he will return to these themes, with greater amplitude, in the near future.

Christians' Cultural Taint

First Published November 1987

Martin E. Marty

Jose Ortega y Gasset, the post-Christian Spanish philosopher, reflected on culture in ways that provide a framework for Christian thinking about it today.

"Cultures," he wrote, "are the organs which succeed in grasping a small piece of the absolute yonder." [1] Christians belong to a universe of universes, all resulting from the creative activity of God. They know they cannot comprehend boundlessness, so they grasp, using their cultures. The Greco-Roman settings were means of grasping small pieces that became creeds; how different these would have sounded had they developed in other cultures, including in modern pluralism.

Ortega was daring enough not only to describe but to attempt to define culture. "It is the conception of the world or the universe which serves as the plan, riskily elaborated by man, for orienting himself among things, for coping with his life, and for finding a direction amid the chaos of his situation." Elsewhere: "Culture is only the interpretation which man gives to his life, a series of more or less satisfying solutions he finds...."

Culture, the Christian believes, is human artifact which God uses to work out divine purposes in Christ. All things—which include the natural or material world and human culture—"cohere" in Christ. (Col. 1:17). In Augustine's terms, "God *is* that which he has made." This does not mean that one draws an equal sign between God and culture, but rather that culture is an enveloping experience and entity apart from which one does none of the "grasping" or conceiving or interpreting of "the absolute yonder" and of God. Christianity, therefore, is always a cultural expression (though not confined to that); it is always "syncretistic," picking up elements from its environment including the religious ecology surrounding it. There is no "pure" place to stand apart from culture. So the Christian has a stake in purifying and refining culture.

When a church-related university or a congregation or any other social form sets out to help create a subculture, as it must and does, it serves people within it well not by keeping them away from the larger culture but by helping them interpret it, orient themselves, and find resolves to change it.

"Serves people within it": the phrase I have just used begins to focus discussion of Christianity and culture. Christianity, through the church within it that gives life to the culture, is a social, a communal phenomenon. Yet it concentrates on the person within it, seeing that person as creature of God, redeemed by God in Christ, visited by the Holy Spirit. Talk about the cultural endeavors of a university or a congregation, then, sooner or later must come to the person.

Sooner might be better. Here a life-motto of Ortega's keeps the connection between person and culture strong. "I am I and my circumstances." The "I" here is not so much to be seen biologically as biographically: I confront a "vital horizon." My circumstances are "compresent" with me.

Let me try to translate and apply. If one said, "I am I," that would be pure egotism, its discourse solipsism. Yet in biblical discourse, the "I" is of great importance. The Thou addresses, "Who are thou...." and I respond. I alone bear this name: it is I who am baptized in Christ and bear his name; I alone occupy this

space and this time with this consciousness, this faith. I bear this vocation in culture.

Yet, also, I "am" my circumstances. One thinks of how different the Christian "I" would be in various cultures. What is it to express faith within Mother Teresa's homeland, Albania, where totalitarians suppress the Muslim majority and where, today, we do not know the name of one Christian? Think of what the culture for faith means, on other hands, in South Africa, or its white, black, colored, Indian, and Malaysian subcultures.

This loss of a world, I argue, is what has bred fundamentalistic reactions to modern cultural change in places as varied as Sri Lanka, Iran, Israel, Ireland, and South Carolina. The victim of cultural change suspects a conspiracy by enemies of faith and culture.

What culture is on Assemblies of God turf in Springfield, Missouri, as opposed to Lutheran-friendly culture in the Dakotas. What adolescent peer "culture" does to lead to certain concepts of the world and interpretations of life. Prison culture. Collegiate cultures. Each connotes a vastly different "circumstance." I am not reduced to my culture, as the materialists would have it, but I am who I am in constant conversation with the culture.

How does one make a way even within subcultures or cultures? Is one equidistant from all its ideas and practices? Ortega's concept of *creencias* is helpful here, and I have often used it to assess the roles and possibilities of Christians in culture. They are "not ideas which we have, but ideas which we are"; *Grundideen* which are so close to us that we may not know we hold them. Thus one speaks of another as being "in the faith," which provides an envelope, as it were, for all of life.

Christians' *creencias* include the firmly held notion, against appearances, that one is not alone in the universe; that there is not mere chaos, chance, finitude, contingency, transience, though these seem to prevail; that a certain story provides the occasion for grace and hope and the motivation to love, despite appearances. One is aware of the way these are bonded to the Christian-in-culture when in another culture. For me, this is most evident in, say, Japan, where Buddhist influence offers other *creencias* at the end of which is not God but Emptiness.

The Christian has not merely a passive but an active, dynamic relation to culture. The culture, with its *creencias*, is constantly changing. The America of the 1980s, we are told, puts a new cultural premium on competitiveness and acquisition or consumption. These challenge or coexist with other root ideas about cooperation, giving, and conserving. Upheaval in root ideas, say, about God or nation or family creates a "crisis of values" of the sort Americans now address.

But culture is not only about ideas; it is also about "binding customs," which Ortega calls *vigencias*. When one says, "that isn't done around here," or "when you're here you ought to..." there is an invocation of ill-defined but strong customs and practices. The Christian subcultures, or interpretations of larger cultures, call forth any number of these. It is not always possible to describe formal sanctions behind a custom; one simply lives with them. The "binding customs" surrounding what Americans call "the nuclear family" are quite different from those associated with "the extended family" in biblical or, say, feudal times.

It is disruption in these *vigencias* that most contributes to the cultural crisis of our times. "Each transformation of the world and its horizon," wrote Ortega, "brings a change in the structure of life's drama." When one who is fifty or sixty years old and more and who grew up in a relatively intact Christian subculture does a summing up concerning change, he or she finds occasion to waver in commitment or to compensate by rejecting change. One thinks,

without finding a need to illustrate the point in detail, of what has happened to change familial or sexual expressions, or to alter understandings of medical services within half a lifetime to see how shattering "transformation" of the world, of the culture, has to be.

Ortega speaks to this: "A historical crisis exists when the modification of the world is such that the world, or the system of convictions of the preceding generation, is followed by a situation in which man is without convictions, therefore without a 'world.'"

This loss of a world, I argue, is what has bred fundamentalistic reactions to modern cultural change in places as varied as Sri Lanka, Iran, Israel, Ireland, and South Carolina. The victim of cultural change suspects a conspiracy by enemies of faith and culture. No counter-evidence will do more than confirm such a victim in the belief that a conspiracy is going on. This victim reaches for sectarian, presumably (but not possibly, in the end) pure, sequestered, protected cultural shells. Or the victim in double reaction turns Protean, changing daily, accepting each fad or fashion that characterizes that culture on a given day.

In the face of such overwhelmingness, instability, and victimage, the Christian church has often described its task as the endeavor of an agency, a ministry to help the believer in the act of grasping, conceptualizing, interpreting, and acting in the world. "Life is not a static persistent thing; it is an activity which consumes itself."

While there is no reason to speak against the value of contemplation on such a scene, Christians have ordinarily associated "coping" with "taking part in changing" in respect to culture and self. Ortega, one last time: "But man must not only create himself, his hardest task is to determine what he desires to be."

Here the Christian in culture, while stressing personality and individuality, claims to have some sense of "what he desires to be," thanks to baptism into Christ. Under the theology of the cross, one lives in the midst of cultural signals that are at times threatening, at others beguiling. The Christian may live without defensiveness (but with risk) in the larger culture. There is no place else to go.

Yet there is a place to go: not toward a Utopia where there is no more values crisis or culture war, but ahead, into the reality and model of Jesus Christ. He, after all, gives name to the Christian church and cultures named in consequence of his appearance. He moves in the world with a dialectic of "at homeness" and an otherness that remains unmistakable.

What such a Christian does not do is to transcend culture in every way, in the name of pureness or unadulterated faith. God in Christ risked participating in a culture, some of whose elements he simply appropriated. Yet the culture of his moment did not exhaust this meanings. Nor need either the values crisis in a negative way or cultural achievement in a positive one lead the believer away from this fulfillment of the new identity in Christ. Being found "in Christ" is not being found "outside culture." Instead one is in its midst, not overwhelmed by circumstance nor reliant only on the "I." Instead, the person has found (or been found with) a new identity in Christ, where that is revealed which helps the believer "determine what he desires to be." There are cultural consequences whenever a citizen or believer does such determining.

Notes

1 Karl J. Weintraub, *Visions of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966), Chapter VI, includes many references to otherwise untranslated writings of Ortega; for quotations in this article, see pp. 258, 266, 267, 252, 275, 287, 254, 255.

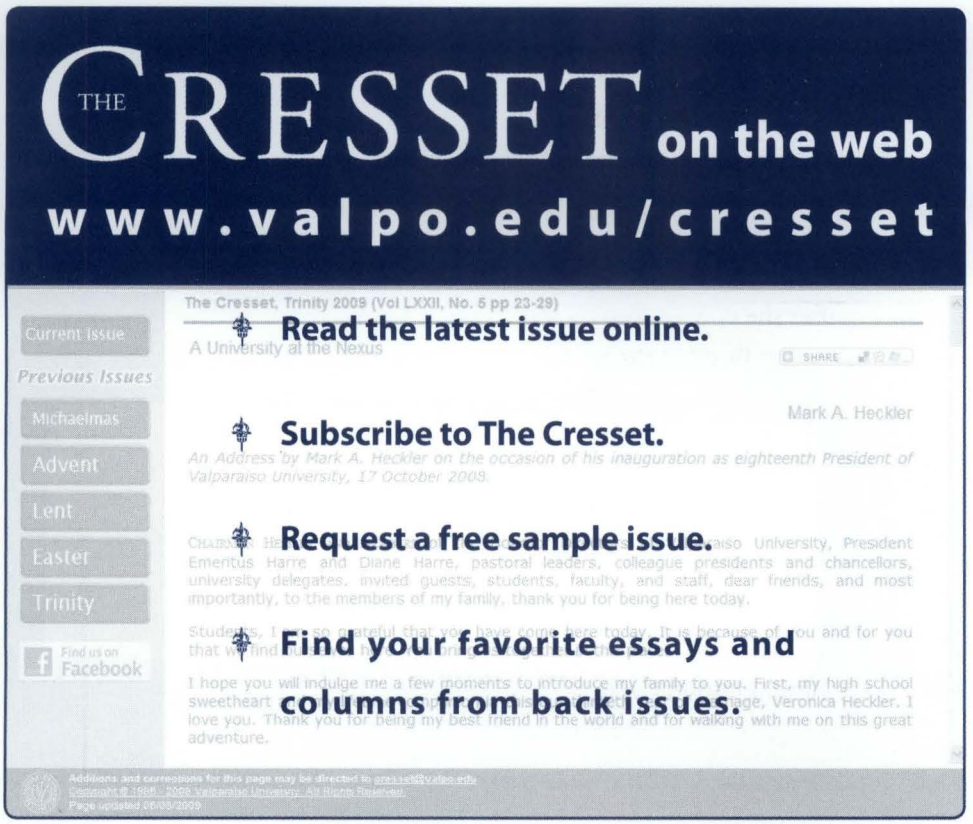
STARS

Driving home across the desert
after the church convocation,
I grope through the stars,
headlights brushing sage,
and hold the dotted line,
seam stitching us fast
to earth. We'd drift,
should the bright thread break,
off the narrow road
into sage and stars.
Whatever led us out
will surely guide us in
though in the strictest sense
we never quite return.
A gray mouse crossing,
life, a welcome sign.
What nectar does it drink
out here among the yuccas?
Dial a station, break
the lullaby of wheels.
Is a church choir
or a sharp spined star
hymning its defiance
defending sage as home?
Along a ridge of black,
Orion, sword of stars
sheathed, on one elbow reclines.
The rising scorpion
stalks us from behind.

Black sky is graying:
the stars are fading into dawn.

That was forty years ago.
If only for one night
I could return
to the desert of my youth
and the beckoning of stars.

Dorothea Kewley



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Bass, Dorothy, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Wright, Basil. "Filming in Ceylon." *Cinema Quarterly* 2/4 (1943): 231–32.

_____. *The Long View*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1974.

ON POETS

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