The Cresset (Vol. LXI, No. 3, Lent)

Valparaiso University

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THE CRESSET is published seven times during the academic year, September through July, by the Valparaiso University Press as a forum for ideas and informed opinion. The views expressed are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the preponderance of opinion at Valparaiso University. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Editor and accompanied by return postage. Letters to the Editor for publication are subject to editing for brevity. The Book Review Index and the American Humanities Index list Cresset reviews. Periodicals postage is paid at Valparaiso, Indiana. Regular Subscription rates: one year -- $8.50; two years -- $14.75; Student subscription rates: one year -- $4; single copy -- $1.00. Entire contents copyrighted 1998 by the Valparaiso University Press, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383, without whose written permission reproduction in whole or in part for any purpose whatsoever is expressly forbidden.

Postmaster send address changes to The Cresset, #10 Huegli Hall, Valparaiso University, 651 S. College Ave., Valparaiso, IN 46383
Today is the day before Karla Faye Tucker will be executed in Texas, which may seem an odd way of keeping a calendar. But somebody has to do it. Now that convicted murderers are put to death at a rate of one every five days, the news coverage has dropped off. Apparently it is much more important to keep the public aware of things like semen-stained dresses than violent deaths authorized by the state. Thus, the task of keeping people alert to the execution business and our role in it falls to a few cranky souls who, for a variety of reasons, insist on their mission, regardless of their persistent failure to make any difference. The case of Tucker, a white woman who has become a Christian since her imprisonment, has stirred up a wider spectrum of people into discussing the issue, but when February 3 has passed, few of these conversants are going to notice the date of the next execution.

The headline in our local paper read “Pace of executions on the rise in the U.S.” In almost any conversation where people discuss the death penalty, this fact will be linked to the statistics on falling crime rates: “We told you that if we got tougher on crime and re-introduced the death penalty, the rates of crime would drop.” Two points need to be made in rebuttal. The first is that making a causal relation between the two facts is more difficult than simply asserting that both facts are true. (It’s called post hoc ergo propter hoc, if you want to know the exact terminology for the logical failure involved.) Second—and this is much more to the point for Christian people who are discussing something—even if it were true that more death penalty makes less crime, that still doesn’t make the death penalty right.

Further, even if the death penalty were “right” in some sense—not just effective, but right—its present condition in the United States is wrong in every sense. The statistics are heavy and can be put in any number of ways, but even relatively conservative figures show that blacks are four times more likely than whites to get a death penalty sentence if convicted of murder, and if the victim is white, then a black is eleven times more likely than a white to draw a death penalty. Almost all death penalty sentences are handed down to poor people. Certainly part of what contributed to the convulsive responses to the sentencing of O.J. Simpson involved some shock that the money card actually trumped the race card in the deliberations. Contrary to the decisions in hundreds of other cases, a black man was acquitted of murdering white victims, at least in part because he was a rich black man.

Tucker’s case is rare, not because she has become a Christian, but because she is a white woman. There will be big media coverage down in Huntsville tomorrow, and because of that there will be a large showing by the anti-death penalty groups. But last week in Indiana, when Robert Smith was executed, there were only some local writers, who reported that “about 20 protesters milled around the prison grounds three hours before the scheduled execution, holding candles and a ‘Thou Shall Not Kill’ sign.” Smith had been baptized and his final statement included a prayer for God’s forgiveness. Those of us who were “milling” did some praying too.
The anti-death penalty movement is a strange place to be today. It is composed of people on the fringe, I think it would be fair to say. People have many different reasons for coming out to a prison on a nasty January night and “holding candles.” Those who have religious reasons come out of a belief in the sanctity of life, their faith in a God who is in the life business. If you are known to be opposed to the death penalty for religious reasons, some people always think that you will have to change your mind if they simply say, “The Bible says ‘an eye for an eye.’” I am pretty consistently amazed by what people think the Bible has to say about criminal justice systems. Certainly the Bible prescribes legal conditions for the death of murderers, but these exist within elaborate systems for keeping the people of God together, for preventing the exercise of merely personal revenge, and for the continuous re-integration of those who have wronged others through rituals of repentance and restitution. It hardly seems legitimate to claim Biblical warrant for our present accumulation of haphazard and arbitrary exactions.

In the Gospels Jesus gathers the many activities of kingdom work into three or four categories: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and lonely, attending to the prisoners, preaching the good news. I suppose three out of four is not bad; the Christian church has its tradition of soup kitchens, hospitals and churches. But we have largely kept out of the prison business, leaving the heavy-duty work to a few chaplains, and generally denying that that we have much to do with the state-sponsored systems of punishment and retribution. With few exceptions, most Christian people in this country seem to believe that, while feeding the hungry and caring for the sick is to be taken literally as an injunction to the Christian, setting prisoners free is strictly metaphorical. Using this familiar move, we have allowed ourselves to put prisons and prisoners out at the edges of our attention. But we cannot continue to do this in good conscience. At least where the death penalty is concerned, we have little reason to trust that the state is trustworthy. And in many cases, even this public business is about to become privatized, giving even more reason for our intervention. It is time for the churches to turn to prisons with the active words of repentance, forgiveness, and liberation which are literal and life-giving. The church is not in the world simply to recapitulate a demoralized people’s slogans about toughness and revenge.

At some time during the season of Lent we will sing the hymn, whose unknown author’s 18th century Italian words were translated by Edward Caswall this way:

Abel’s blood for vengeance
Pleased to the skies
But the blood of Jesus
For our pardon cries.

But Abel’s blood did not, according to Genesis 4:10, cry out for vengeance. It cried out to God from the ground which had received it. Hearing the blood of the victim, God curses the murderer with separation from human community: “a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.” But then God also hears Cain’s plea that such a separation is “greater than I can bear,” and mitigates the punishment so that Cain not only lives but fathers the rest of the line to Noah. So what are we to surmise that Abel’s blood called out for? More death? or more life? And what was God’s answer?

Peace,

GME
GAME DAY

Ball thuds on backboard, rattles rim;  
I rise from chair and stand at window.  
On asphalt, my son, twelve and small,  
Labors to master distance, trajectory, spin;  
Leaps against the pull that holds him  
Far below the rim of his ambition,  
The high goal to best his dad.

I’m so stupid, he said, looking glum.  
Took lousy shots, played dumb defense.  
No, you played well. You can’t expect  
To beat a person twice your size.  
Wait a few years; you’ll get me then.  
I can now, he said. I just need practice.

Watching in fading light I taste regret  
Like dirty pennies on my tongue.  
Why did I not let him win?  
Losing would have been no shame  
For me, but joy for him.  
And yet I know the loss I feared.  
If he could understand would he feel  
Pity toward my holding on,  
As I for his impatience to arrive?

Long into twilight he persists,  
Turns to the window, raises a clinched  
Fist, and does not smile.  
If he could see as I see  
He would not strive so to compete,  
Would stop this furious practice  
And wait patiently, knowing time  
Gives to him what it takes from me.

Kermit Turner
The Moral Value of Sports
lessons for the Church

Don C. Richter

It’s Sunday morning. The children are getting dressed in clothes laid aside for this day. Mom and Dad load the kids in the car and drive away from their comfortable suburban home. This is a typical (albeit not universal) scene throughout the country. What’s becoming even more typical is that this family is on their way to a soccer game—not to Sunday School and church.

More and more, it seems, parents are encouraging their children to participate in organized sports, even when practice and game times conflict with religious services. Those of us concerned about over-programming our young people might view Sunday sports as further erosion of the sabbath rhythms that keep us sane and healthy as a society. And we might well be right.

Yet could it be that organized sports are meeting some deeper need that is not being met by contemporary religious communities? Is it possible that parents are relying more on sports than on faith traditions to form their children morally? What is the moral value of sports? And what can the church learn by paying attention to the lessons of athletic competition?

Scriptures throughout the ages have drawn connections between athletic competition and the life of faith. During the 1996 Olympic Games, as athletes staggered in Atlanta’s sweltering heat, we saw televised images that daily echoed these familiar words from Isaiah 40:

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (NRSV)

Olympic athletes reminded us of the second letter to Timothy (4:7-8), when early Christians were challenged to “fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith” so that we may attain “the crown of righteousness” which has been reserved for us.

The Olympic Games have long shaped public imagination—modern historians trace the Games to at least 776 B.C.E.—so it is no wonder that biblical authors referred to sports when describing the life of faith. Sports analogies are convenient currency for illustrating virtues such as courage and perseverance, or vices such as cowardice and cheating. We recognize the endurance a marathon runner must have simply to finish the race. How similar is the endurance needed to be faithful over the long haul, to remain steadfast day after day—particularly on days when life seems more like a treadmill than a pilgrimage.

To view sports simply as metaphor for some deeper spiritual truth, however, is to overlook the way a sport itself forms people morally. Jeffrey Stout, building on the work of moral philosopher Alasdair Maclntyre, portrays sports as complex social practices that shape our moral vision and character. In his book Ethics After Babel, Stout contends with cultural critics who claim that the American moral landscape is hopelessly fragmented. Instead, argues Stout, we can discover the
The Moral Value of Sports?

a response to Don Richter

Jon Pahl

Anyone who has sat within twenty rows of me at a V.U. basketball game knows that I am a passionate fan of sports. And I suppose I could argue, with Don Richter, that my passion for the game somehow stems from my appreciation of the excellence of the athletes I observe, or my assent to the virtues of teamwork and courage the competitors display, or my loyal identification with the home team of the Crusaders. (A brief aside: when WILL we get rid of that anachronistic team name? Not only were Crusaders largely ignorant “Christian” barbarians who were duped (or intimidated) by unscrupulous church leaders into specializing primarily in killing innocent Muslims and Jews, but they also usually LOST in their Crusades and wound up dead themselves. Is that really the image we want for our University’s sporting teams—The Valparaiso Intimidated Ignorant Dupe Barbarian Dead Losers? It’s embarrassing.)

Back to my point: I could argue that my love of sports is moral, but honestly I think it’s more primal than that. I enjoy competition. I like struggle. And I love winning. As a spectator at sporting events, and even more as a competitor, I live for a theology of glory (and so do you, if you’re honest). The god we worship is named Nike (the Roman god of victory).

Sport is an industry in the United States, not “a metaphor for the life of faith.” Or if sport is a metaphor for the life of faith, then it would appear as if the church must completely give way to the market and its impulses. We don’t live in an innocent age of Olympian struggle anymore, where sport serves religion. We live in an age of eleven-million dollar salaries, where sport is religion. Why not adorn our altars with Nike swooshes (they’d pay well for the space, and many churches lack any other iconography these days)? Why not boldly embrace Nike’s moral imperatives of “Just Do It” and (more recently) “I Can?” These slogans fit with the prevailing American theology anyway, and simply make overt what is already covert in many “Christian” communities. I have little doubt that in a typical “contemporary” Christian church you can already find more Nike swooshes than crosses adorning the audience’s apparel on a typical Sunday. Not that signs like these necessarily mean anything. Clothes don’t make the man (right?), and who cares who makes the clothes? Just make me look and feel good, baby.

Of course, as Richter argues, sport is a social practice, but the actual practice of most people at sporting events consists of passively (more or less) consuming the images and events staged for their benefit in order to drive them into some kind of voyeuristic frenzy (the Latin, fanaticus, from which we derive our word “fan,” translates (loosely) into “one who is possessed by the god.”) I know this feeling. I’ve heard myself break out in fits of glossolalia at basketball games. And I’ve seen other parents act as if possessed by legions of demons at the Little League diamonds of Valparaiso. A best case scenario: like old camp-meeting revivals, which channeled some of humanity’s most bestial urges into relatively civil forums (at least those who went barking down the sawdust trail didn’t pro-

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moral language of America by observing how parents devote long hours and go to great expense to conscript young people into social practices such as chess, ballet, piano lessons, tennis, and baseball. We train our children in multiple practices because we trust that each practice will form their character in particular ways. In general, one may experience the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange as well as on the golf course. In particular, one can only experience the thrill of a hole-in-one or the agony of a missed putt on the golf course, a stylized moral landscape of rough and smooth terrain.

A word of clarification is in order about the term “social practice.” We commonly use the word “practice” in its verbal form to mean the repeated performance of an activity in order to achieve proficiency. We say, “practice makes perfect” to a basketball player who rehearses layups and foul shots in order to play better in the actual game. In this sense, practice is utilitarian: it is the necessary repetition required of those who wish to perform a particular activity.

There are situations, though, when our use of the word “practice” extends beyond technical rationality and points toward a way of life. When we speak of “legal practice” or “medical practice,” we refer to more than the rehearsal of specific skills or techniques. No one would want to go under the knife of a surgeon who is “just practicing” a set of skills. The term “medical practice” encompasses skills, to be sure, but also means a regulated, social form of human activity that includes an ongoing tradition and designated practitioners. A medical professional is held accountable to various legal and ethical standards and codes of behavior—ancient and modern—which shape contemporary medical care as an ongoing practice. Medical schools go to great effort and expense to induct students into this way of life.

To view a sport as a social practice is to make similar claims about participants in this form of human activity. Ken Burns’ made-for-PBS Baseball epic portrays the sport as a social practice that has profoundly shaped and mirrored our national character. Just as the Civil War was a defining historical event, the ongoing practice of baseball continues to show us who we are and what we value as North Americans. This claim was artfully made by A. Bartlett Giamatti, former President of Yale University who served as Commissioner of Major League Baseball from April 1, 1989, until his death on September 1, 1989. In his book Take Time for Paradise, Giamatti described baseball as a shared moment of leisure that promotes human freedom: “Baseball fulfills the promise America made itself to cherish the individual while recognizing the overarching claims of the group. It sends its players out in order to return again, allowing all the freedom to accomplish great things in a dangerous world. So baseball restates a version of America’s promises every time it is played. The playing of the game is a restatement of the promises that we can all be free, that we can all succeed” (pp. 103-104).

Giamatti was a faithful steward of professional baseball, and his suspension of Pete Rose (for gambling) was a decision rooted deeply in Giamatti’s love and respect for the game. As Stout observes, the “goods” internal to a social practice are always threatened by “external goods” such as power, prestige, and money.

When participation in a sport is primarily motivated by political, economic, or religious interest—including personal desire to win a gold medal for a deceased friend or family member—the integrity of the sport is compromised and the stage is set for the athlete’s profound sense of personal failure. We recall the Olympic anguish of speed skater Dan Jansen—and more recently of gymnast Vitaly Scherbo—encouraged by the sensationalist media to win a gold medal for the sake of honoring family members. In winning only a bronze medal in Atlanta, a thoroughly dejected Scherbo stated that he had failed his wife, who was at the time recuperating from a near-fatal automobile accident. Scherbo expressed that he felt no satisfaction in his gymnastic accomplishments. By packaging the Olympics as a sequence of dramatic episodes, television producers betray a fundamental cynicism regarding the nature of athletic competition as sport that has its own intrinsic value and merit.

The 1981 movie Chariots of Fire illustrates well the reality of mixed motivations in athletic

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ceed to bite anybody—peace, Marv Albert and Mike Tyson), sporting spectacles can function as what William James called “a moral equivalent of war,” where the bounds of competition are carefully contained by the rule of law, and where aggressive impulses achieve cathartic release.

But I’m not sure I buy that fancy bit of rationalization, either. When my sons accompany me to the basketball games, which they usually do, our primary topic of conversation is often how stupid the officials are. So much for the rule of law. We talk not at all about gun control or poverty reduction, and even less (if possible) about compassion for those who suffer in Bosnia. We’re caught up instead in an irrational process as awe-inspiring as the most ornate ritual in its operation, drawing devotion and attention. And at what cost to the participants does the ritual work? Richter argues that sports demonstrate “embodied stories” which teach “virtues.” But somehow in his telling of the tales, the bodies get lost in the stories.

Well, I’ve spent a lot of time over the last few years in the V.U. trainers’ room, healing and rehabbing from one sports-induced injury or another, and in that trainer’s room I see the scars surgeons’ knives have carved in athletes’ bodies, and I watch the athletes grimace in pain as they receive treatments designed to prepare them to return to competition. I’m grateful for the expertise of the trainers, but somehow I can no longer have a romantic appreciation for the bodily “sacrifice” of athletes and the virtues their examples are supposed to teach us. “Virtues” (especially as William Bennett imagines them) sound like violence to me (the word is historically connected to the “manliness” best exemplified in warfare), and “sacrifice” is too laden with pain for me to gloss over its original meaning. We don’t burn virgins on altars anymore; we offer up young people on court and field, instead.

Maybe, if there were articulate voices linking sports to a “theology of the cross,” where we identified with those who suffer, where we loved even losers, and where we reached out in compassion to the sacrificed (young) victims of our social systems (in more than the token gestures of noblesse oblige for which professional athletes currently receive fawning media coverage), maybe then the church could indeed make common cause with sports in ways that would dramatically reshape American culture for the better, ending some of the grossest violence in our society (in the sporting industry is only the tip of the iceberg on that one.) But my guess is that most parents who head off to the soccer field on Sunday morning are hoping to create some little “Crusaders,” miniature conquerers, tiny devotees of Nike. I admire Don Richter’s work with youth, and look forward to the day when “Christians can affirm the moral value of sports while emphasizing that their congregations, too, can initiate young people into a set of life-giving practices...that will form their moral character as deeply as—and ultimately deeper than—sports.” But first the church must clarify how its message is deeper than that of Nike’s, and how it nurtures young people in practices where they can “do it” and don’t have to “sacrifice” their bodies for team, nation, or God, because Grace has already done it for them out of love. And I’ll cheer together with Don Richter when congregations truly nurture youth in ways of playing (and living) with wills free from bondage to fear of punishment, or quests for glorious reward. We need no more Crusaders. We could use some Valparaiso Liberty.

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competition. The two “outstanding” characters in this film are Eric Liddell, a Scottish missionary, and Harold Abrahams, a Jewish Cambridge student. Both men are sprinters for the British team in the 1924 Paris Olympics. Both men are driven to run by different motives. Liddell views his God-given speed as an offering and a commandment: “When I run, I feel His pleasure.” Abrahams presses toward the goal of being the fastest human on earth, trusting that his victory will bring dignity to all Jewish people.

Because they are driven rather than drawn to run, both Liddell and Abrahams are respectively stymied. Liddell is convinced he is running for God, yet his strict sabbatarian principles prevent him from running a Sunday race. Abrahams is willing to breach training protocol to win, yet he despairs when contemplating the achievement of his ambition: winning the 100-meter dash. For both runners, religious and political motivations threaten to overwhelm their athletic motivation for the sport of running. It is a flawed interpretation to suggest that Liddell’s personal religious motive for running is somehow superior to Abrahams’ personal political motive.

Enter Lord Andrew Lindsay, an aristocratic Cambridge student who runs simply for the delight of the sport. When Abrahams brashly announces he alone will break the school record for running around the courtyard, a bathrobed Lindsay appears on the scene with a cigarette holder and bottle of champagne to make the race a friendly competition. Later, at his country estate, Lord Lindsay playfully jumps hurdles topped with champagne glasses. He jostles a hurdle and the champagne sloshes out of the glass, yet this lack of perfection doesn’t diminish Lindsay’s enthusiasm and delight for running.

Indeed, it is Lord Lindsay’s non-possessive delight in the sport that enables him to make the critical sacrifice in this story. Lindsay respects Liddell’s sabbath convictions and volunteers to let his teammate run a race in his stead on another day. When Liddell and Abrahams win their respective races, Lindsay is as happy as if he himself had run and won. Such is the moral character of an athlete who refused to conflate the goals of athletic competition with the goals of religion and politics. (For fans of H. Richard Niebuhr’s Responsible Self categories, it is instructive to view Lindsay as homo dialogicus—the responder who asks What is fitting?—in comparison to Abrahams as homo faber—the builder who asks What is my goal?—and Liddell as homo politicus—the lawmaker who asks What is right?)

Sports are social practices that form us morally. Sports are as salient for character formation as the stories William Bennett commends in his popular Book of Virtues. Bennett is correct that good stories have the potential to transform the imagination. Stories can best teach us about virtues and vices, however, as we encounter these stories embodied in the concrete practices of a local community. Indeed, apart from communities of interpretation, care, and accountability, a “book of virtues” remains an abstract ideal, a compendium of cultural (and perhaps ideological) desiderata. Expanding the canon to include more non-Eurocentric stories is laudable, and may help expose Anglo readers to unfamiliar portrayals of virtue and vice. What is still missing, though, is how these narrative portraits function to build character in living communities.

Children and adults alike experience the cardinal virtues and vices firsthand on the Little League baseball field. We may initially speak in terms of “hogging the ball” and “chickening out” instead of “avarice” and “cowardice.” Yet over time, as Jeffrey Stout observes, these rudimentary expressions form the basis of a nuanced moral vocabulary that will transfer to other practices later in life:

The more we learn about the social practices around us (whether by participation, observation, or hearsay), the more variegated our conception of human excellence and our vocabulary of appraisal can become. . . . A young doctor summoning up courage for the first time in the pursuit of goods internal to medicine doesn’t start from scratch. Experience in other practices where other kinds of courage are required should make the going easier. (271)
Adults who care about the moral formation of their children are eager for the dependable lessons children can learn from participating in sports. This is basically a pragmatic approach—ala John Dewey—that views life experience as our primary teacher. Religious communities can create a safe space for reflecting on that life experience, especially the personal sports stories of children and their parents. Religious educators can prompt lively discussion by asking questions about their embodied stories: How does the rule-bound, disciplined world of sports enable/inhibit human freedom? What is it about the nature of sports that promotes racial and ethnic diversity? In what ways do our teenage daughters (and sons) build self-esteem through healthy athletic competition? What happens when athletes cheat to win, and how do we respond to situations where the coach urges players to gain unfair advantage?

Discerning the moral value of sports is a good place for church educators to begin. Christian congregations can also reconceive their educational strategies by identifying ecclesial activities that have a “practice-like” quality. Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People, edited by Dorothy Bass, is an excellent resource that describes the practiced character of faith. We are not born knowing how to pray or read the Bible or extend hospitality to strangers, Bass and her colleagues contend. These are historical practices of the church that have a long history and tradition. We need to become as intentional about teaching children the practice of prayer as we are about teaching them how to play the piano. People don’t just pick up a practice without some intentional, sequential, structured learning.

After identifying the fundamental activities that animate Christian faith, congregations can conduct a local “practice inventory.” It is difficult to teach something that we ourselves do not practice well. Providentially, we are not alone in our education efforts. The church is a global, trans-historical reality. With our children, we can learn from those who have come before us and with those who are more proficient in some of these practices. And even though we maintain that faith is a gift of God—not our doing—we will find our faith deepened and enriched as we embrace the way of life into which these practices invite us.

Families may still drive past our churches on Sunday mornings on their way to soccer games. People of faith may still share concern over the need for sabbath observance. Church-goers, however, need to appreciate how athletic teams bear a family resemblance to congregations: both function as much-needed mediating institutions between public and private life in our complex society. Christians are called to support voluntary associations that contribute to healthy public life. In this spirit, Christians can affirm the moral value of sports while emphasizing that their congregations, too, can initiate young people into a set of life-giving practices. . .practices that will form their moral character as deeply as—and ultimately deeper than—sports.

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The reason that animal stories teach us so much may be that we never expect to learn from them. Anastaplo shows why the tradition has so long a history.

I visited the three horses in the Creek Pasture yesterday. They are three elderly, thin, dark bays, two geldings and one mare. Metaxa is the mare and Basil and Kerrie K. are the geldings. The Creek Pasture is a removed piece of land on Doris’ property, a vast expanse of greenery, edged by woods, the railroad tracks, poor fence, and the Otter Creek. It is not that far away from the hubbub of the farm, really, but when you’re down there, it feels like there’s no one around for miles. Doris put these three down there, hoping that all the green grass they could possibly ingest would help them pick up some weight.

When I first got down, I saw only two horses, and got nervous. I am always expecting to find a dead animal out at Doris’ farm. Whenever Bootjack, the ancient white cat, is sleeping in a horse’s manger or, as he’s wont to do of late, on the ground in the indoor ring, I have to go over and see whether he is breathing. He always is. I got into this habit of checking animals with my cat, Barney, for some reason. She was very healthy until the very end of her life, but I guess I dreaded losing her, so I would always check her breathing when she was lying particularly still. One time, when my friend Heidi and I had adopted a sickly kitten in Annapolis (Pablo we called him), I came up to our room after a night at a party, and saw him lying on her bed. I went over to check his breathing because he was lying so quietly, and, lo and behold, he was indeed dead. That was all I needed to confirm that this ghoulish habit was probably not so unrealistic and pessimistic as those around me seem to think it is. Then this past winter, I was helping distribute hay for sheep at Tom and Lisa’s farm, and was the finder of the dead ewe in the pen. (I didn’t need to check for breathing this time, because no self-respecting ewe would lie so still in the pen during feeding time, while lambs and ewes alike gamboled on top of her). This is all to say, I expect to find dead animals, and when I counted only two bay horses, I began to calculate where to look for the third’s body, and how to tell Doris about it.

I got over the gate (though we are supposed to open it, not climb it), and was relieved to see the third, Metaxa, grazing alone in a different area. The horses started when they saw me on the gate, because they have visitors so rarely, but then their heads went right back down to the grass. I walked over to the two together, saying hi to them by name as I approached. I patted Basil, who acted as if he’d rather be left alone, then scratched Kerrie K. for a bit. Metaxa noticed the action, and came to join us. I let the two geldings get on with their grazing and went to the old mare. I began scratching her skeletal body, especially her neck, and she looked ecstatic. She stuck her neck way out far, and twisted her head a little, and her lip was wiggling the way their lips do when something is extremely pleasurable. I kept on scratching and changed sides, and kept on scratching some more, all the time telling her what a good mare she was. She seemed so grateful and appreciative of the attention. I started to pat her to say so long and walked away, and she followed me so closely and insistently that I couldn’t leave her.

I kept scratching and patting and talking to her, and reflected on my memories of her. She is very tall for an Eddy Farm horse—her wither is even with top of my head, 5′1″. In her younger days she was an excellent show jumper at Madison Square Garden. I began to think she might really be lonely for human companionship, because she had all her life worked so closely with one human or
I wondered whether being alone with only horses in this great expanse of pasture was a treat or exile for her, and resolved to visit her as often as I could.

I thought about the time—the one time—I rode her for about half an hour. She was stocked up from being in in the wintertime, so Doris offered me a ride on her, to get her moving a little. I like to try various horses, so I agreed. I didn’t know her very well before then, only as the mother of Cornwall Ridge, a beautiful colt who was the only foal the summer I began coming out to the farm. I groomed her and got to know her a little, and then we took her over to the indoor ring. We didn’t do anything much, but I was very glad to ride her. She’s very arthritic—trotting hardly works at all—so we just ambled around the ring for awhile. She was very gentle and good-natured.

Another time, she was the companion horse for Aye Aye, a grey thoroughbred who was in foal. Doris thought that Metaxa could be a friend and give helpful motherly advice to Aye Aye, since this was to be Aye Aye’s first foal, and Metaxa had just weaned Cornwall Ridge. One day long after they had bonded to each other, someone let another group of horses into their barnyard by mistake. The other horses started to bully the two mares, and hooves were flying. Metaxa went with Aye Aye to a little pocket in the barnyard, and put her on the outside, near the fence. Metaxa placed herself between Aye Aye and the other horses, and kept them at bay until humans cleared them out of the barnyard again.

I believe Metaxa has a noble heart. She is so quiet and gentle that I am apt to overlook her most of the time. But when I remember to pay attention to her, she is almost heart-wrenchingly affectionate and grateful. I sat down next to her in the Creek Pasture, just to stay with her for a bit, and she stood by me. Every once in a while I’d encourage her to eat something, telling her I’d stay near her to keep her company, but she didn’t seem interested. She would look around for a bit, then lower her head to nuzzle my head with her nose a little. I thought how with any other horse, I’d wonder whether that nuzzling was going to turn into an inquisitive nibble, but with her I felt completely confident that it wouldn’t. I looked at her from beneath her, and she looked so tall. I looked at her stomach and her udder, almost from a foal’s point of view, and thought, as I also have of my own mare, Peaches, what a very comforting presence she would be as a mother.

There is no guile or shyness about Metaxa. Her calmness and transparency are beautiful and humbling to know. I can be irritable and I can be sneaky and I can be anxious, and so can just about every horse I know. Metaxa is not that way, through and through. She has the wherewithal to be a show jumper and to defend her friend against ten mean horses. But she does not do these things because she is an inherently “tough” mare. I realize that I may be anthropomorphizing too greatly, but I sincerely believe that Metaxa does what she does out of love. I cannot make all of the parts of her fit together without putting love into the equation. She could not be so grateful and gentle-seeming and also so fierce in the barnyard without that underlying ingredient of love.

I had to get up to go, finally, because the ground was wet. I grabbed her neck and asked her to help me up, and she stood while I leaned on her to rise. I scratched her some more, and told her I’d be back very soon. I turned to go, and of course she followed me. I patted her once more, and walked on. I patted her again when I reached the gate and then climbed over it. I walked a few strides on the path away, and then turned to look back. The second I looked back, her big dark eyes looked alert and her ears shot forward. Always loving, always eager.

forgiveness

What is true forgiveness? I have a hard time knowing what it is when I am interacting with people, because I have met so few people who are truly capable of it. I find it next to impossible to forget my wounds and forgive completely, because I am afraid that forgiving means inviting further wounding in the future. I tend to operate more on the “once bit, twice shy” principle, and reserve a little bit of myself from those who have wounded me in the past, so that there is less of me available for them to hurt from then on. As a rule, I do not “forgive and forget;” I “remember and reserve.” Some would call this normal and prudent self-preservation, but the price is too high. When I love, I love with my whole self, ardently. And if I reserve more and more corners of myself from others,
Theodora Anastaplo was raised in Chicago, educated at St. John’s College, The University of Chicago Divinity School, and McCormick Theological Seminary. She completed the internship in spiritual direction at Chicago’s Claret Center, and now lives in Vermont with her husband, David Westerberg, and her horse, Jupiter. "prudently" protecting my wounds, I go around trying to love with only part of myself. I love flatly, not wholly, this way—it restricts my heart and squashes my soul, until I start to wonder when I will ever feel joyful and vibrantly alive again.

Good dogs and Metaxa show me the way. After neglecting Metaxa for long stretches of time, I happen to visit or groom her again. She receives me wholly, with no part of herself reserved. She embraces me with her eagerness to be in the present, to love the attention I am giving her right now. She does not put her ears back and say, “YOU? Who are YOU to come and groom me and make nice to me after months of not coming to visit?” She doesn’t high-tail it to the other side of beyond, wordlessly telling me that my inattentiveness has made her wilder or shy of people. And she does not smother me greedily, either, gobbling up all the attention I give her. She bask in the attention I give her. She tells me with outstretched neck and quivering lip how delightful it is that I have come to her. She reminds me with her gentleness that she is a mare who has known a lot of handling and deserves attention and affection in her old age.

She is an animal and she cannot say, “I forgive you,” and she almost certainly does not think anything remotely like that thought. She does not spend her days in the Creek Pasture recounting past and present grievances, I am sure of it. But I am a human, and I know my own guilt. Many people know their own guilt. I confess to myself over and over “what I have done and what I have left undone,” and I believe we all do. I do not need to be reminded of what I did to hurt another being; I will remind myself incessantly.

And so this is what happens: I, the human, knowing my own guilt, go to Metaxa, the animal, who does not “know” what forgiveness is, and Metaxa embraces me with her welcome and says, above all, “You delight me. Stay awhile.” Love is here in the present. Metaxa is stretching out her vulnerable neck for me to scratch, and showing me how glad she is by quivering her lip and cleaving to me. She reserves nothing of herself from me. She is not ashamed of her own love. It does not make the impact any less great to know that she is not capable of being ashamed of her own love. The fact remains, she holds nothing against me, and withholds nothing from me. As I scratch her and talk to her, she has without a doubt forgiven me, and equally doubtless, forgotten any past wrongs I have inflicted on her through neglect. And me, what does that do in me? It strengthens my love for her immeasurably. It makes her big bony bay body beautiful in my eyes, and makes me yearn to visit her when I cannot. This is what true forgiveness is like. The forgiver showers the forgiven one with love, and the love of the forgiven one is washed clean and renewed a thousandfold. How lovely to imagine a God with an aspect of the the big, bony, dark bay Metaxa. When you come to confess or apologize for your shortcomings, she, too, will say, from the bottom of her heart, “You delight me. Stay awhile.” And maybe she’ll stretch her neck out so you can scratch it better.
hot and cold

Fredrick Barton

A dominant theme in the commentary of such conservative columnists as George F. Will is that the social problems of the 1990s stem from the various excesses of the 1960s. Will and his colleagues are no fans of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and blame programs like Affirmative Action for causing the great racial divide of current times. In their view, the permissiveness of the 1960s undermined the American family and gave birth to a drug culture that continues to plague us.

As someone who graduated from high school and attended college in the 1960s, I’ve always been offended by the conservative attack on the decade of my coming of age. In defense of my generation I might point out that the Beat celebration of rootlessness and pleasure-seeking was a phenomenon of the Eisenhower fifties. And the nation’s concern with drug use was well enough established before World War II that it gave rise to the hysterical and unintentionally hilarious Reefer Madness in the mid-1930s. I might further argue that cowardly white flight in the 1970s, not racial integration in the 1960s, is largely responsible for the decay of inner-city public schools.

In fact, I think Will and his peers have got the whole analysis wrong by ten years. America’s current social problems began in the 1970s when the most flamboyant cultural elements of the 1960s were adopted by the same suburban middle-class that was otherwise rejecting George McGovern’s liberalism in favor of Richard Nixon’s appeals to the “Silent Majority.” That majority was smoking pot in the basement and embracing sexual experimentation while remaining resolutely silent about the great ideals of brotherhood and peace which are the sixties’ true legacy.

Two superb current films examine the cultural transformation of the seventies in dramatically different ways. Ang Lee’s The Ice Storm is a look at the disintegrating suburban family during the era of Watergate, and Paul Thomas Anderson’s Boogie Nights is an examination of desperate and radical alternatives to family in the late seventies of pornography chic. Both are must-see films of the season.

In what is at once the funniest and most disturbing scene in The Ice Storm, two New England teenagers stumble toward a sexual experience it’s by no means clear either really wants. The girl is fourteen, and the boy is fifteen, and they’ve petted previously but never with much urgency and always, it seems, without even a fillip of pleasure. As the youngsters almost numbly negotiate who will now touch whom and where and for how long, the girl suddenly finds a Nixon mask which she slips over her head. And negotiations continue until clothes are unbuttoned and the boy is lying between the girl’s jeans-clad legs. And all the while she leaves the Nixon mask on. The scene reverberates with symbolism, of course. It is 1973, and the chilled gray weather, the messy den, the children joyless in their sex play and the haunting visage of America’s most disreputable president all conjure a nation that has sacrificed its soul on the altar of material prosperity and self-indulgence.

Adapted from Rick Moody’s novel, The Ice Storm is the story of two 1970s families in New Canaan, Connecticut, and by extension their entire suburban community and even America as a whole. Both fathers Ben Hood (Kevin Kline) and Jim Carver (Jamey Sheridan) are prosperous businessmen who have been able to provide their families wonderful, spacious homes situated on huge, tree-shaded lots. Neither Ben’s wife Elena (Joan Allen) nor Jim’s wife Janey (Sigourney Weaver) works, but both are disin-
tent, though in different ways. Sixteen-year-old Paul Hood (Tobey Maguire) attends an elite prep school in New York City. His sister Wendy (Christina Ricci) attends school in New Canaan along with Mikey (Elijah Wood) and Sandy (Adam Hann-Byrd) Carver. The two families are next-door neighbors, and their lives are intertwined in a number of ways. Ben is having an affair with Janey; Wendy is the girl in the Nixon mask, Mikey her partner. This is the time of waterbeds, leisure suits, flared pants and moral rot. The Hoods and the Carvers have everything they could conceivably want except a sense of purpose. Then on a late fall night when the Connecticut coast is rocked with the worst ice storm in a generation, the children slip away when they're supposed to stay home, and the parents go to a key party, a polite name for a wife-swapping lottery.

Extracting Moody's rich detail, screenwriter James Schamus and director Lee have crammed this film chockablock with meaning. Nothing is random. All text points to subtext. Nixon sweats and prevaricates from every TV screen. Parents cheat. Wendy steals candy. Paul smokes dope in his dorm room. Mikey and Wendy pig out on junk food. Though she hardly needs to, Elena shoplifts make-up from the local drugstore. The world is full of dishonesty and disloyalty. Whereas only a half-generation earlier, friendship meant steering clear of a pal’s girl, Paul’s prep-school roommate routinely strives to score with any girl Paul finds attractive. Such is the final result of the sexual revolution. Friendship has become much less important than sexual conquest.

Sex, of course, is a central issue here. But all the magic, all the warmth, all the personal elements have been stripped away. Janey and Ben couple on a gray afternoon while Elena runs errands. But their sex has all the heat of Jello. At some point there is presumably a spasm of physical pleasure, but no connection is made. Janey could just as well be using a stud service. Afterwards, when Ben tries to talk about a concern at work, Janey chides him for boring her. Often, we gather, perhaps not to soil sheets on which Jim will later sleep, Janey and Ben copulate in Sandy’s bedroom. The coolness of their illicit union is reflected in the sexual experimentation of their children. They are all looking for something they’re clearly not finding in the Pandora’s box of the new sexual freedom.

Elena knows what’s going on between Ben
and Janey, and at first she turns, haltingly, toward the church. We learn that she's attended services recently but hasn't continued. And no wonder: the pastor has hair down to his shoulders and speaks in phrases as hip as his outfits. God has become as passe as fifties haircuts. Pastor Philip Edwards (Michael Crumpsty) seems more interested in becoming Elena's lover than her spiritual shepherd. He doesn't seem to have a wife, but that doesn't keep him from showing up at the key party. Repelled but directionless, Elena tries to cope by regressing. She envies her fourteen-year-old daughter and takes to riding a bicycle. Jim makes a comparably adolescent response. He runs away from home, figuratively, if not literally. He spends days at a time on business trips. But he's so disconnected from his family that his sons don't realize when he's gone. Eventually, Elena and Jim draw together in sad desperation and resort to sex, like teenagers, in a car.

In a series of images, Lee reminds us of ice's brittleness. Under sudden pressure, it shatters like glass. Drain a family of its warmth, and it cannot hold together. Janey has become so cold in her pursuit of impersonal pleasure that her family is poised to fragment. She moves from a neighbor's husband to another's young adult son. And though she exhibits at least the surface concerns for her children, they are withering in the frost. At fifteen, bright, handsome, likable and athletic, Mikey uses drugs and escapes into distracted vacancy. Sandy seems even more lost. Lonely and aimless, he blows up all his toys with firecrackers. Questioned about it by Wendy, he begins to whip the blossoms off a large potted hibiscus. The ultimate price of Janey's chilly negligence will be tragedy, though it's unclear there's enough heart left in her to long care.

Bleak as all this sounds, however, Lee insists on the possibility of redemption. The only real sexual urgency portrayed in the entire film rises between Ben and Elena, husband and wife coupling in the afternoon like the lovers they once were. Perhaps Ben and Elena can stop their slide down the icy slope of self-indulgence. Perhaps their children can be saved. Ben insists that Paul come home for a family meal at Thanksgiving. Before dining, Ben invites his daughter to say grace. And even though the room is filled with tension and faintly concealed acrimony, there's a residuum of love there as well. Things have gone bad between Ben and Elena. But there was obviously once something better, something that might be rediscovered and nursed back to health.

Ben and Elena aren't providing the discipline and the nurturing that their children need, but they've instilled in Paul and Wendy something essential: brother and sister clearly love each other. Whereas Mikey and Sandy seem disaffected and hollow, Paul and Wendy exhibit a moral core. Wendy waxes indignant at Nixon’s clumsy coverup of despicable crimes. Oddly, we can even see her core of decency in the sex games she plays with Sandy, whom she treats with great gentleness and evident concern. Sandy is still just a little boy, and she wishes to be just a little girl with him. Her shocking overture, "You show me yours, and I'll show you mine," is the challenge of a grade school child, not an invitation to sexual contact. Wendy yearns for that earlier time when Ben and Elena acted like adults, and after she's caught in a sexual act with Mikey, she wants her father, literally, to carry her home.

Paul shows a comparable substance. He remains a virgin in an atmosphere of rampant teenage sexual activity. And though he has a boy's natural hunger for sexual experience, he wants that something more that involves interacting with a person and not just the interplay of sexual organs. He's grown fond of a bright classmate named Libbets Casey (Katie Holmes). But when she over-indulges in alcohol and drugs one night (activities he's tried to dissuade), he refuses to take advantage of her. Instead, he returns home to his family, striving to keep his curfew. He is caught in the ice storm. But he makes it home where all the members of his family await his return in the rising light and gradual thaw of a new day. Hope springs eternal. The Ice Storm is that rarest of recent cinematic creatures, an American movie that dares to think of itself as a work of art.

body and soul

Anderson's Boogie Nights is less somber and more self-consciously seductive. One seduction is executed in the film's opening moments while another is only begun. It is 1977, and the disco scene is raging in the Me Decade. In the roaring dimness of a dance club, a pornographic film director sits with one of his stars and takes
notice of a handsome busboy. It's the adult film industry version of discovery at Schwab's Drugstore. The filmmaker is Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds) and his companion is Amber Waves (Julianne Moore). They signal over a gorgeous blonde on roller skates (Heather Graham) and direct her to gather information about the busboy. Her method is disarmingly direct. Hi, would you like some oral sex (I'm paraphrasing). Who could resist? Mission accomplished, Rollergirl reports back to Jack: The boy is endowed. Jack makes the next contact himself. The lad is co-stars Reed Rothchild and Rollergirl, Eddie becomes the toast of the adult film industry. Action clips from a series of Who could resist? Mission accomplished, Rollergirl reports back to Jack: The boy is endowed. Jack makes the next contact himself. The lad is seventeen. His name is Eddie Adams (Mark Wahlberg). Would he like a role in Jack's next film? Eddie is seduced by dreams of fame. And Anderson begins his seduction of his viewers. We are watching people who earn their livings in the flesh trade, and by generations of training in propriety we are prepared to look down on them. But by the end of this film we will come to care about them a great deal.

Boogie Nights takes us on a voyage through the back streets of the late 1970s. Eddie changes his name to Dirk Diggler. And together with his co-stars Reed Rothchild (John C. Reilly), Amber and Rollergirl, Eddie becomes the toast of the adult film industry. Action clips from a series of his films look like bad "Starsky and Hutch" (yes I know that's redundant). In them, Eddie stars as a secret agent named Brock Landers who beats up bad guys and saves the world as he beds all the beauties along the way. Interesting, isn't it, how close that description comes to capturing the long James Bond series. Is it just a matter of where you put the camera when you shoot the sex scenes?

Eddie and his pals get rich. Eddie buys himself a red Corvette, a fancy pad and furnishings that make us hold our sides laughing. Before we get too smug, though, we need to remember what Graceland looks like. As with Elvis, things go bad after a while. Too little discipline, too much dope. Elvis turned his head and his audience was stolen by The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. Eddie gets sloppy and pretty soon the naked guy in front of the camera goes by the name John Doe (Jonathon Quint).

Vastly different from The Ice Storm in style and tone, there's still a world of things to admire about Boogie Nights. The film is notable, first of all, for its firm determination to avoid being judgmental. Boogie Nights is neither a champion of the pornographic film industry nor its self-righteous accuser. The characters the film situates in the industry are mostly damaged. Eddie comes from a horrible lower-middle-class home with a vicious mother and an impotent father. Rollergirl is a high-school dropout. Amber is a divorced mother who has lost a custody battle with her cold ex-husband. A black performer named Buck Swope (Don Cheadle) has turned to porn because of the dearth of decent roles for black actors. In one fashion or another, all these folks are looking for a family. Some troubled souls in our society turn to religious cults; these people find an oddly nurturing community in the adult film industry.

But just as Anderson probes the scandalous to find the human dimension at its core, he refuses to romanticize and in that manner to patronize his characters. Eddie is an innocent (his last name isn't Adams by accident). And he's actually quite nice, as illustrated by his relationship with Scotty (Philip Seymour Hoffman), the homosexual sound man. But Eddie's not exactly the brightest bulb in the lamp. And in the film's sober denouement we can see the extent to which life has reduced him to his own sexual member. Amber really does care for Eddie, and there's no question that her maternal instincts are both strong and genuine. But she's contemptible for turning Eddie on to cocaine. Jack readily plays father to Eddie and Rollergirl both, but his dreams of genuine artistic achievement are laughable. He means what he says, but his coarse exegesis on art porn is a howler. When Jack studies footage of his latest skinflick and waxes ecstatic about what he has wrought, we can't help but think of his nursery-rhyme namesake's penchant for self-congratulation. And, in addition, Anderson recognizes that the adult film business is a magnet for legitimate creeps. The man who bankrolls Jack's films is busted for kiddie porn, something Anderson obviously does condemn.

Anderson's script is endlessly inventive and far more interested in complexity of characterization than in forthrightness of theme. But he has points to make. One can't help but reflect that the various debauches of the seventies gave way to the cultural backlash of Reaganism in the eighties. The character of Little Bill (William Macy) may be seen as an emblem of this transformation. He works in the pornographic film industry, but he's incensed at the sexual licentiousness of his wife (real life porn star Nina Hartley). His wife's thoughtless behavior is wrong, but Little Bill's responding violence on New Year's Eve 1979 is hardly an appropriate response.
Elsewhere, issues such as race bubble up with great subtlety. Both Buck and the black female star Becky Barnett (Nicole Ari Parker) seem to have arrived on the porn scene for slightly different reasons than their white counterparts. And both try to escape to notably unglamorous places. Becky moves off to Bakersfield with a man who manages an auto parts store. Buck strives to realize a dream of owning his own audio equipment outlet. It is, moreover, fascinating to note that the problems the picture's characters encounter are not the direct by-products of having sex on film. AIDS is never introduced, for instance, nor are any other sexually transmitted diseases. Neither is sexual jealousy among the performers ever a problem. Rather, trouble stems from that traditional host of vices including greed, vanity, faithlessness and various forms of excess. It is clear that Anderson is not out automatically to censure people who appear in and make sexually explicit films, but he is ready to condemn drug abuse, infidelity and violence.

*Boogie Nights'* dialogue recalls that of Kevin Smith's for *Clerks* and Quentin Tarantino's for *Pulp Fiction*. It is casually explicit and riotously funny. In one segment Eddie drives us into the aisle with laughter as he holds forth on pornography and the lessons of history. And Reed splits our sides with his ridiculous self-assurance as he contemplates what life would be like if he weren't a porn star: "I'd just have sex on my own time," he posits. Funny and imaginative as this movie is, it finally triumphs over a work like *Pulp Fiction* because of its heart. Tarantino is a terribly clever writer. But he has yet to make us care about the people in his movies. We absolutely do care about the characters we meet in *Boogie Nights*. They make a living in a manner that makes most of us at least a little squirmy. But they need what all of us need: acceptance, respect, tenderness, friendship, and after we've gone astray, forgiveness.

Like all who have walked the clay of this earth, those of us who came of age in the 1960s were guilty of an array of excesses. We set a variety of bad examples for our younger siblings, and for that and other sins we are in need of forgiveness. But I strongly balk at the 1960s being saddled with responsibility for all the problems in contemporary American society. I would like *The Ice Storm* and *Boogie Nights* purely for their artistry, but I take heart at these pictures' implicit understanding that the seeping wounds we face today date to crucial ruptures in the 1970s when the license of the sixties was divorced from its attendant idealism.

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**WIND CHIMES**

I do not see the wind chimes my neighbor hung, but when I step onto my back porch to meet spring in its newborn moments, I hear their rapturous birthing song. I imagine them hanging all winter silenced in cocoon ice, waiting months for the melt. Now it is their time. Warm wind returns, makes ice drip wet away, allows metal to mingle. As that same stranger wind tickles them alive, it carries their voice to me, and I remember I have ears.

Lynne Flowers
Letters from the Front

in the big inning

Tom Willadsen

It’s Holy Week so naturally I’m cleaning my office, reading long lost telephone messages and faxes. There’s something about having to write two sermons in the next four days that’s forcing me to neaten my work space. At least that’s the positive spin I could put on this endeavor. The real reason is closer to my old friend Procrastination. (Do I really work better under pressure? I don’t know because I only work under pressure.)

One of the treasures my recent foray into “desk archaeology” netted is a brown, tattered scrapbook of the 1929 World Series, lent to me by a man who is an elder, in both senses, at my church. The scrapbook was the work of this man, now 79, when he was a 12 year-old boy in love with the Philadelphia Athletics. He found it in his basement a few months ago, and, knowing my fondness for baseball and the Chicago Cubs, passed it on.

It was bittersweet reading the carefully folded, yellowed pages. The sweet part is thinking that, “yes, there is historical proof that Cubs have played in the World Series” The bitter part (also the better part) goes like this:

A’S RUIN CUBS 10-8, IN ORGY OF SWATS; FANS GO BERSERK

and

CUB FANS FEARED A’S WINNING RALLY “Wait Till Next Year”

Say Chicagoans as They Prepare Rousing Welcome for Team Chicago, October 15, (Associated Press)—Sympathy mingled with hope for better returns next season was the mental reaction of Cub fans as their favorites blew on and out of the now historic World Series picture of 1929.

1929 might not seem that long ago to some of you, but it was seven years before my mother was born. And it still hurts me to read the account of how the Cubs blew an eight run lead, giving up ten runs in the bottom of the 8th inning of game four. It hurts a lot. Too much. It hurts me to realize that we Cub fans have been saying, “wait till next year,” for close to 70 years.

In 1984 I had a great entrepreneurial idea. My plan went like this: once the Cubs had beaten the Padres in the League Championship Series (four games, tops, I thought) and returned to the World Series for the first time since 1945, and maybe, miracle of miracles, beat the Tigers, I was going to sell sweatshirts that said, “Last year was next year.” It was not to be. Ryne Sandberg spilled Gatorade on Leon Durham’s glove. Leon made a costly error in game five and it was the Padres who faced the Tigers in the fall classic.

Was I bitter, crushed, inconsolable? Of course, until spring training started. Spring training gets us ready for the Hope that is the return of baseball. Spring training leads up to the day when every team starts a new season. Spring training isn’t a ray of sunshine in February(everyone knows the sun doesn’t shine in Chicago during February) it is the hope that the sun will shine again.

During my first year of seminary WGN radio carried a contest, for which, in 25 Words or Less, entrants answered the question “Why My Mom is a Cub Fan.” Winners received four tickets to the game on Mother’s Day, some sunglasses and a coupon for Tropicana orange juice. My essay, one of the winners, reads

Why My Mom is a Cub Fan
by Tom C. Willadsen
My mom is very proud of my brother and me.
The reason she is a Cub fan—NOBODY’S PERFECT. The end.

I could have written that essay when I was five years old or now as a thirty-three year old. The Cubs have truly been one of very few constants in my life. I have loved them longer than I’ve loved God. Before I could read I recognized Fergie Jenkins on a baseball card. Ten years before I was baptized the Cubs broke my heart. It was 1969, year of the Cubs infamous collapse to what everyone now concedes to be a superior New York Met team.

Shortly after moving to Baltimore I tried to assure someone that I was acquainted with suffering by talking about the ’69 Cubs. Baltimoreans suffered more that year, I was told. The Colts lost the Super Bowl to the Jets; the Orioles lost to the Mets and the Bullets lost to the Knicks.

“Yeah, well, I went to Northwestern too.” I was in the marching band when Northwestern extended its NCAA record for most consecutive losses. And then, one fateful day in the fall of 1982, I stood proudly on the field at Dyche Stadium, playing my trombone after NU crushed Northern Illinois 31-6. Students tore down the goal posts and carried them to the lake. It was finished. “So this is what it’s like to win,” seniors commented. Our chants of “That’s all right, that’s OK—you’re gonna work for us some day!” gave way to “This is great, we’re on our way—you’re still gonna work for us someday!” for one day.

Nine years later when I was candidating for my first gig, the senior pastor introduced me to the congregation by saying, “There are two things that recommend this candidate. First, he is a fan of the Chicago Cubs. Second, he went to Northwestern. Fans of the Big Ten know that a game against Northwestern is a certain victory.”

I responded by saying, “There’s no better preparation for the Christian ministry than rooting for the Cubs and playing in Northwestern’s Marching Band.”

Northwestern’s recent success on the gridiron is a little disconcerting for me. On the one hand I wear my Rose Bowl sweatshirt very proudly and have made the acquaintance of many closeted NU backers on the East Coast. On the other hand, football games aren’t as fun anymore. There’s all the pressure and expectation. Instead of being happy two or three days a year, as I was when NU won the occasional game over Indiana, now I’m deeply miserable two or three days a year when we lose a contest to a school like Penn State. I miss the jokes like Interstate 94-Northwestern 0 and Polysorbate 80-Northwestern 3. I miss the infamy and notoriety of taunting the Opposition losing spectacularly, trying valiantly and with cheers like, “We won the toss,” and “Our SATs are higher.” Cheers like “We won,” and “we scored more points,” somehow lack the edge I remember from my College days. A good football team makes us just like everyone else and that makes me a little sad.

Yet today Spring Training is drawing to a close and I’m just like everyone else and I feel pretty good. My team is just like every other team, entering the season tabula rasa, no hits, no runs, no errors—yet. The day I’ve been waiting for, Opening Day, the most-hope-filled day of the year is less than a week away.

I went to Opening Day at Camden Yards last year. It was the 20th ball park I’ve been to. It was good to be a part of the excitement of a new season, even if I wasn’t watching my boys. I walked around the stadium, soaking in the atmosphere and eavesdropping on ushers. “If they win the World Series I’ll retire,” one said.

I’d been carrying a grudge since 1994 when the players went on strike. That summer I arranged to have a weekend off to drive to Chicago and take my bride to see a contest between the Cubs and Mets at Wrigley Field, which singer Steve Goodman called, “that ivy-covered burial ground.” Because of the strike we went to the Lincoln Park Zoo instead. Last year’s Opening Day helped me set some of my pain aside. I explored the park, took in its panoramic views of the Harbor, and smelled the barbecue Boog Powell was fixing in right field. I walked past Baseball’s First Kosher Hotdog Stand; their hotdogs were $3.75. A Superdog at a non-kosher stand was only $3.00.

“What’s the difference?” my friend asked.
“Your kosher dog is all beef”
“and the other...?”
“Who knows?”
We splurged.
President Clinton was at the game. Rumor
was that he bought two Superdogs, gave the vendor a $5 bill and said, “Keep the change.” This is the man I want handling our deficit.

I felt so good I tipped the beer guy. It was good to be back. It felt like Home.

I don’t know whether it’s a coincidence or an accident that Opening Day is often so close to Easter. I think it’s not too great a stretch to think of Spring Training as being analogous to Lent. Both begin in February. Both are seasons of getting ready. Both are times set aside to get in shape as individuals and as teams. Both feature times of high drama— which rookie will head North with the team, which disciple will hand Jesus over to the authorities?

Whether you sing “Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia” (“Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!” Charles Wesley, 1739) or “We’re born again, there’s new grass on the field.” (“Centerfield” John Fogerty, 1985.), both of these songs remind us to celebrate new life.

And finally, both Spring Training and Lent end in Hope. Hope isn’t everything. Hope isn’t a World Series appearance, or even a Wild Card berth. (Some would say Christians’ Hope came as a Wild Card birth.) “And this hope is what saves us. But if we already have what we hope for, there is no need to keep on hoping. However, we hope for something we have not seen, and we patiently wait for it.” (Romans 8:24-25, Contemporary English version) Hope is enough to keep me, as a Cub fan and a Christian, going.

Play ball!
Christ is risen!
Amen!

MARCH: HALE-BOPP AND BULBS

These March days, rife with weather change, with flower bloom, with comet hanging low in dawning sky, these March days, as grass grows thick, weed clover creeps over border bricks, and amaryllis shoots its stalky flowers high opening reddening to a blueing sky, these March days, while braced walking the growing dawn, enthralled watching comet’s tail stretch a million miles away from sun, content counting the roses’ buds, these March days I count love for you, for Christ, for spring amongst the many miracles I know and need to know.

Michael Kramer
NOAH AMONG THE ANIMALS

The construction finished
the collection complete
I wandered among the cages
wicker baskets and pens
and noticed for the first time
that wild streak of red
whizzing across the breast
of painted buntings
the troubled way turtles
blink their tiny eyes
size of an elephant’s ear
grooves on gorilla hands

Never really was struck
by the way wolves’ eyes glitter
before the black and white
madness of a zebra’s belly
the unreasonable humps
crowning camel backs
spike of a sparrow’s beak
raccoon, salamander
platypus and kangaroo

Below the chickadee cage
a small speckled egg
lay crushed on the floor
and the thought sprung
on me like Cain on Abel
that maybe, just maybe
You don’t have any idea
what You are doing

I swear as I remember
it was at that moment
that my youngest son
Japheth burst in trembling
gasping for breath screaming
over and over again
that storm clouds
were gathering in the East

Shannon Gramse
Dr. Frankenstein goes to sea

Jennifer Voigt

In 1971, the year I was born, the United States discontinued its policy of inoculating newborns against smallpox. Consequently, I have no scar on my upper left arm to signify my body's ability to resist the virus. I am—and so is everybody born with and after me—instead a child of a world in which even the most elusive of our enemies can be systematically starved out of existence, or, in the case of the last few samples of smallpox known to remain on the planet, be imprisoned in government-sponsored medical facilities, heavily guarded, to await extermination. We are the beneficiaries of modernity, separated by our need not to be resistant to things that once were something to be feared. Of course, there were only a few years separating the last reported cases of smallpox in 1978 from the first time we identified HIV, and now we have strains of antibiotic resistant bacteria. This is the apex of human pride: our technologies have backfired, leaving us vulnerable once again to what ailed us. Nature laughs at us: it took the human species countless generations to develop the technology to prevent these diseases, and only forty years for evolution to render bacteria resistant to that technology.

Such human vanity has produced a number of tragedies, and God only knows what it will produce in future. By “tragedies” I don’t mean events such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki—those moments in human history were premeditated; a number of people knew the consequences of their outcome, and they had much to do with policy, racism, and power and nothing to do with pride. By tragedy I mean those events in human history brought on by blind human confidence that technological experiments would not fail. The story of Titanic provides a perfect example of such confidence in human powers—a ship that cannot sink is like a body resistant to deadly disease—and James Cameron, who previously directed the technology-wary film Terminator 2, appropriates the story for himself in his most recent film. Christened Titanic, the film presents the end of a world in which all confidence rests in spectacular feats of engineering, and it does so on both a physical and moral level, by examining its ethics and their consequences.

Now, Titanic is a conservative film. It came from Hollywood, and the pleasures it affords us as viewers stem from its very conventionality. Titanic is a genre film; even if we didn’t already know Titanic’s fate we could predict the destiny of the protagonists from having seen the previews. We enter the theatre knowing who is poor and who has wealth, who dies and who lives. An audience takes comfort in watching a familiar narrative unfold. And what narrative is more familiar than Romeo and Juliet’s? Titanic is a romance commingled with a disaster, both of which satisfy.

Titanic may be conservative but it isn’t mindless, and during its long climax it does momentarily reach beyond the boundaries of Hollywood romance and disaster film conventions. At points the narrative dissolves. The eye of the camera moves well beyond the narrator’s eye and shows us what she cannot see. As the ship begins to sink we see it from far away, sending up its tiny flare—a “God shot,” I call these, because they are so surprisingly full of judgement and pity. They are frequent in Bergman’s films, though usually they judge and pity only a handful of people. A little while later we see momentary vignettes that approach a sort of visual poetry: a man and a woman embracing...
on their bed as water engulfs their stateroom; a mother tells her children a bedtime story.

The rest of the narrative looks as if it had been structured by Mary Shelley. The interruption of one story by another in Titanic mimics Frankenstein's structure. Where Frankenstein's cautionary tale postpones (both literally and figuratively) Walton's adventure in the arctic, Rose's story similarly interrupts another maritime adventure. The drawing of Rose as a young woman waylays the explorers' plot, turned as it is by fame and greatness—the same forces driving Victor Frankenstein's plot. When Rose boards the ship, presumably to advise the adventurers on their search for sunken treasure, she assumes control of the story with a few dismissive words: “Thank you for the fine forensic explanation of that night.” You could write off this sea-change in the plot by reading it as one of the film's many conventionalities—the use of a small scene or sequence to herald the arrival of the object or person who sets the story in motion (Stephen Spielberg, who got rich and famous by exploiting convention, uses this in films like Raiders of the Lost Ark and ET)—if not for occasional interruptions in Rose's story that double back on each other.

Shelley associates interruption with the creative process, and the quest for "greatness." In her contrived introduction to Frankenstein Shelley recalls the circumstances of that novel's conception, the competition between herself and her companions. Byron, the great poet, produces only "a fragment;" Shelley's husband, the other "illustrious" poet, abandons his story also. Only Mary, a pregnant teenager, finishes her. Keats' gravestone—"humbly" asserting that his name is "writ on water" when he completed what he did before he died in his twenties—describes the Romantic understanding of "greatness" that Shelley attacks. (It is interesting to note that Kenneth Branagh in his version of Frankenstein shows no understanding of interruption. Instead, he concerns himself with Frankenstein's potency, leaving nothing to ambiguity regarding the mate that the monster demands Victor Frankenstein build for him.)

Mostly, Cameron uses interruption as a plot device. Why does Rose insist that Jack draw her when her metamorphosis as a person has already been established? The drawing gives her a chance to tell her story. Cameron comes closest to understanding interruptions in the way that Shelley does when he uses them to subvert the film's most conventional moments. In the drawing scene Rose subverts convention by appropriating the male gaze. It is Rose's erotic fantasy, and her acting it out—to the point where she "pays" Jack—solidifies her control. Why does Rose allow herself to believe that Jack has betrayed her? (Indeed, why do all heroes of romance call themselves Jack?) We have seen this moment before in every film of this genre, but in Titanic it is the film's least believable event. It simply isn't needed; enough resistance to their union exists in the first place, and you wonder why such a thing comes between two people whose very meeting depended on mutual trust. Cameron utilizes this convention to delay a revelation of truth, and we finally see it when Rose hacks at Jack's handcuffs with an axe. The conventional moment makes room for the characters to represent something beyond themselves, and sends forward a plot that both intersects with and becomes their own. At the moment that Rose frees Jack, we see Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio enacting the liberation of the oppressed, confirmed by the shot of the Statue of Liberty at the end of the movie and its visual connection to Rose.

And what of that huge, conspicuous diamond? What more interruption could there be than to create characters on the verge of discovery, only to frustrate them? To send them on a search for fame and riches and to instead give them an illustration of the object of their endeavors?

Male and female Romantics divide neatly on the subject of passion. Jane Austen captures, reroutes and "improves" passion as if it were a small stream flowing through a part of Pemberly, while Keats and (the other) Shelley resist such cultivation, and extol passion's virtues. Mary Shelley understands passion's consequences, and tortures Victor Frankenstein for indulging his. The same dangerous passion that propels and then ultimately pursues Frankenstein leads to tragedy on Titanic, the film suggests, and occasions its fall from grace.

The creators of Titanic, represented in the film by figures from real life, bear a guilt like Frankenstein's. The three representatives,
Andrews, who built the ship, its captain, and an official of the White Star Line that owns *Titanic*, all look to this marvelous invention to propel them to greatness. *Titanic*’s captain allows himself to make mistakes in his seafaring to crown his career. The White Star official suffers from perhaps this century’s other fatal flaw—believing one’s own press. Andrews by far is the most artist-like of the three; he delights in his ability to bring the idea of *Titanic* to fruition, and in this sense is most like Frankenstein, or (the other) Shelley or Byron. “Writ on water,” indeed, I thought as I watched water covering the Picassos that Rose brings with her from Paris.

The consequences of greatness extend well beyond the personal lives of those who strive for it. Director Cameron, like few of his other colleagues in Hollywood, is quick to examine the economics of ventures that lead to greatness. He draws a sharp contrast between the privilege of the passengers in the ship’s first class cabins and the cramped quarters that steerage affords the poor. Rose and her entourage board the ship with little trouble, while in the foreground the lower classes submit themselves to the indignities of “medical” examinations before they are allowed to use the tickets for which they presumably have paid. We see the men who tend the engines that power the ship in a scene that reminds us just whose bodies fuel the pursuit of greatness. At a particularly grisly moment the film reminds us that the crux of *Titanic*’s ingenious design—compartments that seal off, protecting the rest of the ship from water penetration—requires human sacrifice when one of the engine-room workers ends up unable to escape from one of those wonderful, salvific compartments.

*Titanic* does not go where other movies, (notably *Boogie Nights* and *The Full Monty*) do in exploring the connection between the exploited bodies and personal dignity. In *Titanic* there are elements of Brecht’s Epic Theatre, as “background” comes to the screen. This film would have worked just as well as spectacle had the lower classes stayed in the background where they usually belong in costume pictures, but in that early shot of immigrants sticking out their tongues to have their teeth checked, Cameron commits *Titanic* to bring class issues to the foreground. Poor Mollie Brown, thou-
sands of miles away from Denver’s Sacred Eighty-Something, withstands fresh discrimination (though indeed, in terms of accent, actress Cathy Bates is a few hundred miles to the south—somewhere in New Mexico.) But where Brown for all her new money attempts assimilation into the world of perpetually moneyminded families, Jack plays up his origins unapologetically.

Once the ship begins to sink class tension escalates into class warfare. Cameron borrows heavily from *Potemkin*, recreating a number of shots, and triggering the viewers’ memories to remember earlier moments in *Titanic*, in which he has shown us machinery at work. He does not attempt to recall Eisenstein’s sense of rhythm in *Potemkin*, but the connection between machinery, workers, and revolt nevertheless remains continuously present in the evocation of the earlier film. As the ship pitches, equality between passengers in steerage and passengers in first class levels out. Money becomes worthless in the face of death, as Cal learns when his bribe to secure a place for himself and Rose on a lifeboat is thrown back in his face. A Guggenheim who announces that he will die like a gentleman ends up dying like a thousand laborers that night. The attempts of passengers and crew to uphold class difference as the ship sinks are simply ridiculous: that same Guggenheim, after he announces his intentions of how he will leave the world, orders a servant to fetch him a drink. As all of this unfolds you get a sense of *Titanic* as a metaphor of wealthy Americans before the advent of income tax and the stock market crash. They fancied themselves like the ship—unsinkable.

The camera definitely identifies with the proletariat, and the only really bad guy—the one whose motives have nothing to do with vanity or love and everything to do with income—is a class traitor. But while *Titanic* exposes all of this through juxtapositions of life in the sweatshop with life in the drawing room in one vessel, it fails to connect gender and technology issues as successfully as it does those of class. By assuming that Rose has the power to choose her path in life, rather than admitting to *de facto* conditions that limit her, it falls short of the insight of Cameron’s *T2*. Contrast Rose’s unbounded future to the future that Sarah Conner faces in *T2*. Where Rose’s voyage on *Titanic* becomes an
experience that revives her soul, Sarah’s experiences steal hers. She is nothing but a shell—a concept that Linda Hamilton’s overbuilt body communicates powerfully—a human image of the machines that she dedicates her life to destroying. This she does in the name of motherhood, though it keeps her from being able to raise her son. Technology has inverted nature. The creative energy inherent in parenting finds its expression only in destruction. Sarah Conner becomes a personification of a number of issues related to women’s issues: abortion, surrogate motherhood, other reproductive technologies. Shelley wrote about this: *Frankenstein* is about parenting and reproductive technologies, about appropriating nature’s functions. But Rose remains a passenger on *Titanic* rather than its product. The horror of that disaster is more like a terrifying dream than an experience that leaves her, like a Romantic hero, sadder and wiser. Her story is the story of an individual rather than the story of a collective; floating above the proletarian story line, it intersects with, but never fully dissolves into it. The moments in her life that Rose commemorates with photos celebrate the small triumphs of an individual spirit over her circumstances. It is essentially a capitalist plot, pushing class struggle to the background once again. The *Titanic* disaster preceded women’s suffrage in the United States by ten years, yet we see no photograph of Rose demonstrating or casting a ballot.

All of this makes me wonder why Hollywood can’t create fresh ways of portraying liberated women. When we first see Rose, she’s at a potter’s wheel. What is it about pottery that lends itself to hackneyed images of vibrant women? At best it reminds me of the dessert dishes my mother made in the seventies when she was a bored and frustrated housewife; at worst it brings back memories of the schmaltzy eroticism of *Ghost*. You’d never catch Sarah Conner mixing glazes.

Film itself is an exploitive technology, a fact that *Titanic* admits. In this movie there is no chain of special effects to gratify our need for spectacle only. The film does gratify in this way—please do not misread me—it simply uses its full bag of tricks to push forward the plot and to deepen its meaning. Consider the opening sequence of shots in which we watch a small submarine descend through opaque ocean to meet *Titanic*. It’s such a conventional sequence that you see it in all Spielberg movies that have to do with aliens. It looks like a flying saucer from a ’50s movie—one of those movies both frightened by and obsessed with technology. Only this submarine penetrates the depths in our lifetime. Our capabilities have caught up with our dreams, but still elude our control.

Think of what film has given us as a warning: Frankenstein struggling to right his creation in the Branaugh version; Sarah Conner’s compulsive chin ups; the soundtrack of *2001*, and everything Hal’s voice conveys—omnipresence, omniscience, insidiousness, paranoia. Hal’s is the voice of cloning, of mad-cow disease, of smallpox inoculations. He reminds us how hideous our progeny can be.


Henri Nouwen’s ministry included teaching, pastoral care, and writing. His nearly three dozen books reveal the searching life of a Dutch priest as well as the God for whom he searched. Readers emerge from the back covers inspired toward a more intimate relationship with self, others and creator. Nouwen’s books, more conversational than theological, succeed in lives where sermons and lectures might often miss the mark.

In 1996, Nouwen had begun research for a book on the Nicene Creed. The death of a friend named Adam brought pain, reflection and a new mission. The life of his friend—Nouwen came to believe—revealed Gospel truth. As he explored the parallels between the lives of Adam and Jesus, he found an opportunity to communicate the personal relevance of the Gospel. He found “an expression of my belief, my creed.” The resulting book, *Adam: God’s Beloved*, was published this year shortly after Nouwen’s own untimely death.

Adam was a man with multiple disabilities, and Nouwen was his primary caregiver and friend while Nouwen served as pastor of L’Arche Daybreak community for persons with disabilities. Without speech and with limited movement, Adam forced his caregivers to “reevaluate all the basic assumptions of...individual and action-oriented lives.” Readers are thus challenged to repent of a life-as-commerce worldview. Adam’s family life, painful isolation, effect on others, death, and spirit are presented in a Gospel framework. Adam, seemingly “the least among us,” was a dynamic revelation of God’s real presence in modernity.

As a child clinical psychologist, an activist, and the foster parent of a child with disabilities, my heart leapt as I encountered Nouwen’s thesis on the book jacket. The ideal is not entirely new but might, I supposed, be particularly well treated by this talented writer. His death early in the writing process, however, leaves an imperfect text.

Writers often use filler and cliché in first drafts to avoid writer’s block and quickly lay a foundation. The book is unmistakably a first draft; an explanation in the foreword is the first but not only clue. Nouwen’s inspiration is most evident in the final chapters (material concurrent with the spiritual discovery that gave rise to the book), but earlier chapters retain many thin areas, contrived passages, and some awkward postmortem editorial adjustments. He intended “not to romanticize Adam,” but the published book often does just that. In focusing on the spiritual dimension of Adam in the rush of a first draft, he neglects the mundane. Particularly to a parent, sibling, or person with disabilities Adam may not seem real or whole. Nouwen nowhere rejects the humanity of Adam and his family (what Webb-Mitchell would term “spiritual abuse”), he simply appears to neglect that humanity as he focuses elsewhere in laying the foundation for this book.

Brett Webb-Mitchell’s *Dancing with Disabilities* considers the role of persons with disabilities in congregational life. Webb-Mitchell, a professor at Duke Divinity School, writes of what church can be, should be, and often is not. Seamlessly drawing support from philosophy, theology, and social science, he prosecutes his theses with the witness of compelling stories from persons with disabilities.

His “theological reflection on acceptance” makes clear that the church needs persons with disabilities to itself be whole. Far from a saccharin call to service, the book engages the reader at both spiritual and political levels. Persons with dis-

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Stephen Webb’s *The Gifting God* is an insightful and broad study of the contemporary debates about the possibilities and limits of giving and generosity. Not content with merely describing these issues to his readers, Webb’s goal is to utilize the insights of his predecessors in his own constructive project.

Particularly helpful is the manner in which Webb places a wide variety of modern and contemporary debates into one of these two paradigms. Indeed, the first two of four chapters are a survey of varying anthropological and sociological theories of society placed within the language of givenness. And his argument for the widespread significance of this debate is convincing; for instance, the sides of the debate on welfare can be interpreted on the one hand as “the conservatives...arguing...that gifts should be earned,” and the “liberal tradition...defending a giving...without...an explicit expectation of a return.”

Ever since Marcel Mauss examined the phenomenon of generosity peculiar to potlatch in his *The Gift*, the academic community has tried to think through how gift-giving is possible without it succumbing to an economy of exchange. Literary theorists, theologians, and philosophers of a Continental persuasion will of course know that people such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion have focused a large portion of their work in the last fifteen or so years on these questions. The debates strike at the core of thinking about the possibilities of experiencing God, art, justice, and ethics.

An explanation of this debate would be helpful then. Briefly, the central problem concerns whether anything like a “gift” is possible. The “model of exchange” understands the gift in terms of reciprocity; every gift is subsumed into an economic exchange. I give you a gift not out of pure generosity but in order to make you admire or owe something to me. Thus every gift I give is not really given as a gift, but as a downpayment on a future return. Likewise, every gift is received with the implicit demand of a debt; the gift must be reciprocated and returned. Thus any gift is not really a gift if it is recognized as a gift. The structure of the giving process betrays the essential features of the gift. No gift is possible, only payments made and credits received. The “aporia” of the gift is that as soon as it starts to appear, it dissolves. The conditions that make the gift possible also make it impossible. If the claim of this model is right, then talk about generosity to one’s neighbors is supplanted by *self-aggrandisement.* A notion of the theological virtue of charity, which functions in the Christian tradition as the prime expression of one’s love for God and the diffusion of that love into the world, becomes works-righteousness to its core. So these are no small matters.

The “model of excess” affirms the possibility of generosity against reciprocity, but to the point of making a response to the gift impossible. A gift comes from an originary abundance and excess which cannot be responded to in word or deed by the receiver. This excess is, in Webb’s mind, akin to “squandering.” Every act of giving is egotistical because the only one who can benefit is the giver. The gift is not given for the benefit of another (altruism to an-Other) but simply is the by-product of an ecstatic discharge of energy; one can interpret much “postmodern” art and music and the general hedonism
of contemporary culture along these lines. Human responses to Divine action are thus problematized; if they are freely given and unmerited, how can humans be obliged and bound to the gift? How do we conceive of God’s gifts as both gracious abundance and something to which we respond and participate in? The question of the gift strikes to fundamental theological issues.

The “theo-economical” model Webb proposes to synthetically overcome the debate suggests that “the Christian God squanders, but not as an exercise of blind-affirmation or sovereign freedom; instead, God gives abundantly, in order to create more giving, the goal of which is a mutuality born of excess but directed toward equality and justice” (9). God’s giving (creating) from God’s own abundance “endows a mutual exchange, simultaneously making the excessive productive and the reciprocal unpredictable” (11).

I find Webb’s arguments helpful in seeking a way out of the messy complexities that can issue from these discussions. A particularly insightful move is his dialectical overcoming of the dyadic structure of the two poles of exchange and excess, arguing that when one turns to theology and talk of Divine action, the elements do not occur in isolation but intimately bound up with each other: “Divine excess begets reciprocity” (90).

The impressively wide range of this work is also its major shortcoming. It is too broad and synthetic to ever really get into the depth of the material. An average of three and a half pages is spent on each thinker, with many others thrown into the discussion. The wide scope keeps him from really giving attention to the interesting and promising constructive work in the final chapter. I hope he will write a theology that expands the work in the last twenty pages. I would recommend this book as a map for anyone interested in contemporary theology, philosophy, and social theory. Use it as a map. If you want to explore particular facets or ideas, you will have to put this map down and turn to a reading of the texts Webb discusses. Remember that a good map is one that gets you to the place of being able to knowingly traverse the territory on your own. In this task, Mr. Webb’s work is a success.

Michael Kessler

MIDWINTER THAW

When the plowed snow sprawls into cold sandy pools on a sudden warm day; when people go coatless, brazenly courting the splash of snowmelt; when the blind man plays his accordion outside again, and the kids loiter on bikes at the Quik-Mart, then it all makes sense. The geese see it all from a distance, they hear the commotion, and change their minds about maybe staying south this time.

Tim Gustafson
Alexander Anderson (1775-1870) is widely considered the finest American wood engraver of his age. By all accounts, he was the first to apply the new technique of wood engraving to the illustration of American tracts and books. The American Tract Society acquired his services in the 1820s to illustrate their tracts and children's books, and the cover here displays Anderson's illustration for Tract No. 34, entitled "A Sabbath at Home," which presented "the meditations of a Christian detained from public worship." The image on the back cover, "Mary Magdalene Repentant," a plate from the Bible illustrated by Gustave Doré (1832-1883) is also a wood engraving taken from Doré's original painting for the Bible project, which was published in 1865 in Paris (an English-language edition followed the next year in London). Although Anderson is not well known today except among specialists in print history, he produced an enormous body of exceptional work, ranging from many illustrated bibles to children's literature, primers, spellers, and books. The pictorial edition of Noah Webster's spelling book was profusely illustrated by Anderson. Thus, insofar as mass-produced images are concerned, it is arguable that Anderson before the Civil War and Doré after it shaped the visual culture of nineteenth-century American Christianity more than any other image-makers.

But why illustrate their work on the covers of The Cresset? Aside from the fact that I have an inveterate fascination with knowing who the Warner Sallman of every generation might be, the reason is quite personal. In my Lutheran youth, Lent meant sensory deprivation. It also meant preparation for the Resurrection, but the sensuous excess of Easter morning in my little congregation (the only time when women would wear decorous hats and brilliant dresses and when the organist would discover the full range of his keyboard) only served to accent the sense of constraint that Lent brought at the end of each Iowa winter. Deprivation is not something middle class Americans do very well. But the understated richness of these wood engravings, the strange starkness of a man burying his face in prayer and the Magdalene, retired to the wilderness, contemplating a skull, speaks in visual terms of what Lent means still: going without.

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on poets—
Lynne Flowers
an alumna of VU, she is making her way in the Twin cities and heading for seminary in New York City. This is her first publication in The Cresset.

Shannon Gramse
born in Owatonna, Minnesota and a graduate of St. Olaf College, currently studies creative writing at the University of Alaska.

Tim Gustafson
sends his poetry from Bronxville New York, where he teaches at Concordia College.

Michael Kramer
teaches English at Lutheran High School of Orange County and spends time raising four children with his wife Becky, a math and home economics teacher.

Kermit Turner
teaches English and creative writing at Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, NC. He has published poems, short stories, and a novel, Rebel Powers.

on reviewers—
Timothy Daugherty
teaches in the Department of Psychology at VU

Michael Kessler
another VU graduate, currently works as a Ph.D. candidate at University of Chicago Divinity School.