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he waiting room of the in-patient procedures area was not crowded, and the loud squawking of a television made it difficult for even this reading addict to read. You may find this hard to believe, but the program being aired was one in which we watched a series of couples while one of each pair confessed to at least one adulterous affair, while the camera focused on the betrayed person’s face to record the response. Meanwhile, the audience cheered, gasped, hooted, jeered, and in a number of ways registered their excitement at the level of emotional nudity that had been produced for their enjoyment. Every so often, commercials encouraged us “at home” as the announcer on the program referred to those of us not in the studio, to improve our lives with something we could buy. In this context, mere eavesdropping seemed not only benign, but positively a social good, an activity of actual communal involvement. In any case, I eavesdropped, and this is what I heard. After the first exchange, I began to write it down, so my account is at least accurate enough to pass the Janet Malcolm test.

The conversation was between two men who did not know each other. The older was the quintessential Hoosier retiree, about 70, white, dressed for town in slacks and windbreaker, and minding his wife’s purse, which occupied the seat beside him. The other man was about 30, and he was there with his Hispanic wife and mother-in-law, waiting for news about the father-in-law. The two women were silent and preoccupied, but the young man restlessly angled for a bit of conversation. He was wearing jeans, tee shirt, leather jacket and Nikes. He nodded in the direction of a door, through which staff people had just wheeled out of our area a very old hospital patient, who, though unable to speak, had been groaning, apparently in pain, for several minutes.

“Nobody should have to suffer like that,” said the young man. “It’s your life, and if you want to end it, you should be able to do it.”

“You’re right. This fellow Kevorkian has the right idea. Nobody else has any right to say what you do with your own life.”

Moving right along, though I am not sure how the transition occurred, the older man now seemed to feel that the next subject should be at his instigation. “These teenagers, now, who kill their parents, that’s a terrible thing.”

The young man responded with a nod of agreement. “Yes, it’s awful that there’s no right or wrong. You hit your kid, he calls the cops and bang! you’re the one in trouble.”

“Of course it’s hard to teach anybody right and wrong today. Look at Clinton and what’s going on in Washington. You can’t tell me this is about what he’s done wrong. The economy is in the best shape it’s ever been—somebody just wants to distract us from that.”

“You bet it has to be something like that. All these guys in Washington, you know half of them have done the same thing.”

“Why, I was in the Army, and even Eisenhower. . .Kennedys. . .everybody...”

A pause while general iniquity is pondered. But the two are on a roll, and the next subject is welfare.

“These people get it by having kids, that’s all they have them for, is to get money.”

“They get more benefits than you do from working.”

“You got that right.”
“Well, I say we’ve got no business pouring all that money into other places when we got homeless people right here.”

“We waste all that money on foreign aid, all this aid, and what for? We waste a lot of money on the military, you know? $700.00 for a toilet seat? I saw a program on that one.”

At this point, an Indian doctor came in to talk to the family about the prognosis on the father-in-law, and they listened silently, then gathered their things and left. “Good luck,” said the older man. “Hope things go OK for your wife,” said the younger.

The retired Hoosier picked up his wife’s purse and went out to the men’s room, so that when his wife returned from her procedure no one could find him and she worried about her purse. “He’d never take it with him,” she said. But I reassured her that he had. Meanwhile, above us, the television audience continued to shriek and guffaw and jabber behind an announcement that if you had ever slept with your mother’s lover, you should call this number.

The two men had talked to each other for about half an hour, across any number of social and cultural dividers. They had found common ground, much of it founded in prejudice, hearsay, half-truth and misinformation; nonetheless, they saw themselves as citizens of the same republic. I couldn’t decide whether to despair that such confident ignorance could vote, or to take heart that the ethical quandaries of our social bonds provide the material of conversation for the most unlikely of partners. Contrary to some stereotypes about the common man, they had not talked about the ephemeral in sports, or entertainment, or even the subjects which the television directly over their heads seemed to insist that they should find fascinating. They tried, not very ably but with undeniable success, to establish personal connection on matters of our mutual life in this last decade of the century. I guess, on the whole, I’ll take heart.

Peace,

GME

HOLY SATURDAY

After the bloody sweat, the nails, after the stench of death, after all the blood and excrement that could be wiped away was, with such rags as could be gathered on the spot, after the hardening flesh had been put away, wrapped tight to fix in false repose the limbs already stiffening in the crucifixion attitude, after all that, what could the disciples do, but sit around, stealing glances at each other’s faces, going over the whole thing again, looking for clues, willing to wait, willing to live by hints that it had not all been in vain, and willing to live like that, if necessary, forever.

George Slanger
Visual Media and the Church Today:
an interview with video producer Adán Medrano

David Morgan

On January 23, 1998, David Morgan, art editor of The Cresset and chair of the VU Department of Art, attended an exhibition entitled "The Body of Christ in the Art of Europe and New Spain 1150-1800" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, with Adán Medrano, a former television producer and currently a video maker and president of JM Communications in Houston. The exhibition, composed of seven centuries of depictions of Christ in devotional imagery, altar paintings, vestments, and liturgical objects, served as the occasion for Medrano and Morgan to discuss the role of images in Christian worship and devotional life. Medrano, born in San Antonio and long active as a media consultant for Catholic foundations and the US Council of Bishops, has produced several videos for Roman Catholic audiences, including "Soul of the City / Alma del Pueblo," 1996, and "Yo Trabajo la Tierra: Una Meditación" [I Work the Land: A Meditation], 1991. Medrano is also the director of the International Study Commission on Media, Religion, and Culture (www.jmcommunications.com), a group of religious media producers, scholars, and religious educators, which travels throughout the western hemisphere and beyond to study Christian media production. Morgan is a member of the Commission.

DM: After seeing this exhibition, do you believe that Christian video makers today share any important concerns with these European and New World image makers?

AM: Yes, we do, but what I lament is that media producers today have no space or forum where we can help each other deal with the problems of visualization, of Christian video making. I suppose the artists were members of guilds. What I realize after seeing the exhibition is that there were certain conventions, certain accepted ways of doing things if you were a painter, so that when you used them, you were understood.

DM: There was a way of judging your performance as an artist?

AM: Yes—and you felt certain, for yourself as well as for others, whereas I feel that video makers today are within that tradition, but we are very unsure about the relationship between what we do and traditional visual piety, that is, as the artists themselves live their faith and as their praying community lives it. That’s in question.

DM: Are Christian video makers struggling against their medium or against an even broader question of what religious images do or don’t do?

AM: First of all, the medium, but the medium as a modern medium. The video medium. Video is a difficult medium to talk about. But, second, the problem of the expression of spirituality within an institutional setting is a basic challenge. It is in part the problem of how artists fit into the institutional church.

DM: Do these video artists understand themselves as ‘artists’? What does that loaded term mean? And is it different from how medieval and renaissance religious artists thought of themselves?

AM: Christian video makers talk about themselves as artists in terms of their relationship to Jesus Christ as well as their spiritual or religious experience, whatever that may be for them. They consider themselves grounded in the church. That’s their first strength. I think they make judgments
about their work on this basis. Second, they believe that self-revelation and risk are necessary for their work, which is part of the fear and the difficulty in what they do. Every time they do something, it’s self-revelation. And when you reveal yourself to someone, that’s tough. Their business could go under if nobody likes their work. All of them are entrepreneurs. The difficulty with the video today is that it has to make money.

DM: As you looked at these rooms of images, what seemed different to you? Was there anything that seemed discontinuous with what you do as a Christian imagemaker?

AM: After viewing the exhibition, I’m confused because one of the fundamental things that I have always thought to be true in my work and that of my colleagues is that we were attempting to show that which can not be shown, that is, God. And that you don’t show God by painting the face of God. You show God in ways such that in dialectical form images come together so that what you experience visually is very removed from the actual representational figure or geometric diagram that you see on the screen. Sergei Eisenstein used to say: “It’s not this frame or that frame, it’s what happens when both frames are juxtaposed.”

DM: So it is a dialectical as opposed to an essentialist understanding of the image—you’re not seeing the thing itself, but you’re seeing a process? That really separates you from the traditional Christian artist whose work we saw. For instance, we looked at the Veil of Veronica, which a sixteenth-century believer would think is what it refers to. It’s more than just a picture. It’s a kind of sacred photocopy of Christ’s face.

AM: Yes, that’s what I mean. But at this moment I am seeing my work in a different light—because I am showing in it. It is important that what is shown, be shown. I need to think about that some more. I think that the difference between video makers today and what I saw is that, were video makers to use such traditional religious imagery, their work would immediately become meaningless because it would become one dimensional and able to be explained very easily. So all the power of it would be lost. I don’t know if that was true in those days. What we have yet to find is a currency in video language that will be strongly religious and not able to be dismissed. Yet at the same time video makers must take a good look at those traditional images that people have to have, otherwise they don’t find images compelling. That’s a big difficulty and the option we’ve taken as Catholic video makers is to tell interesting, documentary stories about neighbor helping neighbor and the social relationships of believers because they involve self-sacrifice, emptying of yourself for the other. Everything that Jesus did in his life. Through this we show the effects of belief and then, by showing faces of people who are believers and doing these things for others, we are inspired. I think that’s the direction that we have gone.

DM: So the holy is, in your phrase, to “show the effects of belief.” In your video, “Soul of the City,” you show the social manifestation or effects of belief, between neighbor and neighbor, in the communitas of the Cathedral de San Fernando in San Antonio. In filmic or videographic terms, what is the ontology of the sacred? Would you say you don’t actually see the sacred itself, but the social expression or consequences of the sacred?

AM: Unfortunately, that’s what I mean. But at this moment I am seeing my work in a different light—because I am showing in it. It is important that what is shown, be shown. I need to think about that some more. I think that the difference between video makers today and what I saw is that, were video makers to use such traditional religious imagery, their work would immediately become meaningless because it would become one dimensional and able to be explained very easily. So all the power of it would be lost. I don’t know if that was true in those days. What we have yet to find is a currency in video language that will be strongly religious and not able to be dismissed. Yet at the same time video makers must take a good look at those traditional images that people have to have, otherwise they don’t find images compelling. That’s a big difficulty and the option we’ve taken as Catholic video makers is to tell interesting, documentary stories about neighbor helping neighbor and the social relationships of believers because they involve self-sacrifice, emptying of yourself for the other. Everything that Jesus did in his life. Through this we show the effects of belief and then, by showing faces of people who are believers and doing these things for others, we are inspired. I think that’s the direction that we have gone.

DM: It’s not a sacramental view—it’s more of a materialist view in a sense.

AM: Yes, and the strength of documentary allows one to do that. I think we’re stuck there. What we have yet to find is a bridge to these awful images that we saw this afternoon so that we can deal with
that currency which exists in people’s memory. And we don’t know how to do that. If we use those currencies, it’s discounted.

DM: By whom? By the people themselves or by the intelligentsia? By the artistic establishment?

AM: First off, it would be discounted by the gatekeepers of the marketplace. That is, if we want to have videos and television programs widely disseminated, there are no existing distribution mechanisms that will deal with religious subjects. They will only deal with religious subjects insofar as there is a human interest feature/news story approach.

DM: So this is the commercial apparatus of distribution. Commercial products must fit within certain templates. These gatekeepers are those who determine what’s salable and what’s not.

AM: The religious distribution venues in television and in books and artifacts are very successful. There is success because the product goes directly to the people. A plastic Jesus for your dashboard—all of that. The distributors and sellers deal directly with the people who want to buy those kinds of things. In our video distribution mechanism there are no viable distributors or markets. I think there is a need, I think there is a demand, but I don’t think there is a market that has been developed for these types of religious videos. When you can sell them, sales are very few. The success of people like Mother Angelica and or the satellite television network called Claravision [based in Puebla, Mexico]—both are examples of programming that use the kind of traditional visual currencies represented in the exhibition we saw—their audiences are very, very small because they can not compete in the video telecommunication marketplace. The only way that they survive is through the support of one or a few very large donors. So the positive side is that these ministries are in fact a reflection of faith that is happening, but it is reaching very few people.

DM: There’s a big difference between the commercial marketplace and mass entertainment, on the one hand, and the function or the intention of your work and your colleagues’ work, on the other. Is there a category in the marketplace for what you do or is that part of the problem?

AM: That’s part of the problem—that’s exactly it. Right now there’s “Nothing Sacred,” a hopefully successful show, at least it’s made it on prime time television and it’s a very important show because it talks about religion and it shows spiritual presence and experiencing God on network national television. But again it’s by the social effects of having faith. I suppose inspirational programs like that do move the heart and you do have a movement toward some religious experience. But that’s very different from what I do. The distributors are looking for educational material, which is didactic, which says what the faith is and where it comes from.

DM: It sounds very catechetical.

AM: Yes, it is. Or they want a more straightforward documentary about the cathedral, what is the history of the cathedral, what is its date. I call “Soul of the City” a documentary/poem because there are moments in the video where I attempt to have the viewer experience a sense of contemplation. And that means you have to be seated and ready for it and want to do it and it becomes what the Assumption by El Greco was for many years for me. You are making present something, which, when the viewer sees it, transcends what that image is. And in some sense the viewer is in the presence of God. That is what I would like to do. But people don’t want that from video.

DM: I can imagine secular documentary makers saying the same thing: complaining that their work doesn’t get the distribution that mass entertainment does. No documentary will ever make two hundred million dollars like “Titanic.” And that’s simply because the function of much mass culture
is not intellectual engagement, it does not demand critical reflection in order to be enjoyed. It's entertainment. So are you expecting too much? Is your situation pretty much comparable to what any documentary film maker or video maker would confront?

AM: I think that what I'm expecting is that the media culture in which we live doesn't have enough space for the sacred and that it is up to artisans, perhaps people with images who believe that if faith is lived in the context of mediated culture we've got to work out ways that people can experience things that are very important to them. So in the sense of market share I suppose I would be in the same boat as a documentary film maker who is not out just for entertainment, although I think being out for entertainment is just fine. I think many things happen there that are very enriching.

DM: Do you find that this interest in gazing upon the sacred and showing or manifesting the sacred, seeing it, is something that does happen occasionally in film? For instance, "Jacob's Ladder" or films that much of the mass market does not know, such as "Breaking the Waves" or "Babette's Feast," which are mainstream, commercial films, but certainly not as widely recognized as "Titanic." Do you believe it's possible to achieve that?

AM: Yes, but it's different. I think that "Nothing Sacred" does this.

DM: "Touched by an Angel"?

AM: "Touched by an Angel" also.

DM: It's certainly a commercial success.

AM: Not just commercially, I think it's successful in its intent to be religious.

DM: It is explicitly religious. It doesn't try to conceal that.

AM: I think the producers want to be religious, they want you to feel God.

DM: The producer is an evangelical Christian.

AM: And the lead angel, Della Reese, is actually a preacher. I think more work should be produced because I think that they're achieving something that's very important. When I showed "Yo Trabajo la Tierra" [I Work the Land], to a meeting of Movimiento Familia Cristiana [Christian Family Movement], there were 1,500 to 2,000 people present at their annual convention. "I Work the Land" is a thirteen-minute meditation and it's labeled "una meditación." It has no dialogue. It's just thirteen minutes of nothing but images of migrant farmworkers hoeing the land. It's tedious. And it's constructed—it's migrant farmworker life. And I had a difficult time distributing it and everything I said before about difficulty I experienced with that video. I did get the bishops to distribute it because of their commitment to migrant farmworkers, and it has done well. But when the convention audience saw it, there was a silence in the assembly hall and then, instead of continuing my talk, I allowed one lady who raised her hand to talk. She began to cry and to give this declaración, this testimonial: "This is my life. I am there." And then someone else spoke and I realized no one could hear them so I jumped down from the stage and became like Phil Donahue. We did that for forty-five minutes. This whole thing became a testimonial session.

DM: Is there an explicit religious reference in this video?

AM: At the end there's a song about the farmworker God and there's the reprise of the previous
scenes where the three members of the family that's featured in the piece go to receive holy communion. So you actually have the host and they're taking it in. I do a very explicit overlay of the tortilla being made by the mother over the host, so that the tortilla becomes the bread. And then the wine, the blood of Christ, becomes beer being poured because this is what they do—I mean, this is their blood of Christ, really. So, to answer another question, that's what I think we can do. I think it's going to be a narrow market, not a wide one. These migrant farmworkers are not a big market. I am not trying to sell the video, I am trying to protect the migrant farmworker community with their faith experience. We need to show that faith is lived within a particular context.

DM: What are the obstacles in the way of having video accomplish this?

AM: We've got to bring video back into the church. Physically.

DM: So it's a matter of finding the moment, the proper physical setting for viewing this visual form?

AM: Yes. But the problem is also getting the video to the churches. Religious distributors think that video is only for entertainment. When the image moves, then it's too distracting, it can not be evocative of the holy. But who are our market? The people who meet for Lenten prayer services, who have Advent Bible study groups, who meet in the basement of the church for marriage encounter. They're already meeting and they live their lives in a visual process media environment and when they come to have their moments in the church those products are not there. I believe that the people would be able to deal with them very, very well and naturally, because I've seen it with "Yo Trabajo la Tierra." I saw it among the people. It's there. But the gatekeepers, the programmers don't quite know how to handle that. We can talk about video only in terms of entertainment, prime time, the big conglomerates, but not about video in terms of the parish-based, believing, praying community. We need to be able to talk about video in those terms so that we can get the relationship between the artist and the community straight.

DM: Do you think it's a problem that the venue, the public or collective moments when people view media, are in a sense too few and far between? Are such corporate acts of seeing out of sync with the practices of looking at advertisements, movies, and television?

AM: No, I think the regularity of Catholic grass roots community parish experiences is very strong and I think the Catholic church survives upon that. That is what makes people Catholic, that's why the Catholic church has such vitality in the US. Ultimately it comes down to our parish experience. People meeting people. The same must be the case within Protestant churches as well. I think that those are very regular venues and that's our market. Get videos into those places because when they see them, properly presented or presented in a mutually integrated way, I know people will respond to them. But some church leaders and many media distributors don't listen to this. We are discounted because we're video makers.

DM: Are there problems that video artists face other than distribution and presentation?

AM: I think that one of the first problems is film artists need to feel more secure about the fact that what we do is really very important and it isn't just selling or moving a message. What we do is vital to the expression and to the continuity of the community. I think we know that, but we constantly doubt it because there is no way we can talk about it—unless we paint a crucifix or show a baptism, all of these traditional signs. And we know that when we use those signs, we will be irrelevant. It's a terrible space to be in.
DM: That's a major problem.
AM: That’s the first problem. We have not developed the video language or idiom, the video conventions that really work. On the one hand, they will not be discounted when we are too traditionally representational. And on the other hand, given its purpose, you end up making a documentary about people doing good things and you don’t have this moment of secrecy. We have not been concerted enough in our efforts to grapple with that. That’s part of the problem. And the other is that we have been too unwilling to have conversations with catechists, who have the vocation of transmitting the faith from one generation to another. We have been too eager—because we can get jobs—to say: “All right, I can make your message look pretty.” We’ve sort of become—

DM: Illustrators?

AM: Illustrators. And we have not taken the time to deal with them as co-creators of the catechetical moment. We’ve got to start doing that. We don’t have all the answers. They need to become part of this because they can help us define and understand better that moment of exhibition.

DM: ‘Exhibition’—that’s an interesting term to use. What do you mean by exhibition?

AM: You show the video.

DM: Okay—but do you also mean it as a kind of visual metaphor for **showing** truth?

AM: Well, ultimately that’s what it is. But it depends on something very specific. Part of the exhibition is what will happen when we engage catechists at the level of equals. Usually catechists will say, “Okay, if you think it needs to be done this way.” The communicator will say, “Yeah, this is too boring and we need to doctor it up.” One defers to the other. There’s got to be a meeting of minds so that each will champion his turf better. One of the things that we too easily give up as artists is that we don’t help the catechists understand that the exhibition moment is very important, that the room be a pleasant exhibition space, that the projection be good quality, that the sound be good quality—because the experience depends upon very tactile, very corporeal conditions. And if you are going to have this moment, the exhibition has to be good. The aesthetic of actually watching and hearing is downplayed by the catechists. We need to change that.

DM: Do you encounter a certain discomfort or resistance from educators, pedagogues, priests, or from the church establishment regarding the place of the image?

AM: When you say ‘image’ I think of the Catholic tradition, in which the image is so strong that it is not questioned as an essential part of the life of the church. Think of the Virgin of Guadalupe, for example—it is enshrined in church authority. On the other hand, the use of the image by the people is distrusted.

DM: That’s an important distinction?

AM: Yes, it is. I really don’t think the church hierarchy distrusts the image. I think they distrust the people. It is only when the image becomes used that its power to evoke and to be ambiguous becomes uncontrollable. But objections to this power are ultimately a heresy against the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can’t be controlled by anybody.

DM: How do you go about changing things? How do you get the church to trust in what the faithful can do with images?

AM: I have a theory about how to do that. It’s going to take awhile. But it has to be pursued, other-
wise people's faith will not be articulated in the way that they live their lives. I have to go into their bedrooms and see those Warner Sallman paintings hanging there in order to understand the visual currency of their piety. But increasingly what is meaningful and what makes people of faith vibrate is going to be other visual forms such as video and film.

DM: Why bother with Sallman?

AM: Sallman is the latter-day version of the medieval and renaissance visual piety we saw in the exhibition. Sallman's work offers something that we must discern about the visual nature of Christianity. I believe that video and film will find their market when they can engage what is present in Sallman's *Head of Christ*. And the church has to recognize that and do everything it can do to nurture it. Because the seeds of the Word, the Verbum, are there. The reason they're there is because the people creating those images are men and women of faith. They know what is in their soul.

DM: What's the rest of your action plan?

AM: The first thing is to have a series of very good workshops and symposiums with producers and people like yourself and video theorists so that we can begin to forge a vocabulary that makes sense in humanistic terms about the craft of religious video making. Theoretical, conceptual vocabulary does not exist. We need that first of all. Then, secondly, we take the work which already exists, which is clearly iconic or has iconic aspects to it, that are revelatory and religious, and do the things that still images used to do or still do, take those and explore them with catechists and those who program the training of catechists, textbooks, and lesson plans, so that they see that people contextualize and identify signposts to their faith based on moving images. We've got to situate the sacred within the currency of their media culture context. Then engage the praying communities, the pastors, and maybe three or four bishops. A bishop is very important. If he is a man of prayer there will be no doubt of what he sees when he views the video. We must start having some experiences of prayer. This is where the power is going to come from when video is situated within the liturgical context of praying Catholic communities. We need to do that—that's got to be done on a more or less regular basis.

DM: Is the church hierarchy the primary audience for you?

AM: Everything I've said so far will occur at the local level, the grassroots. These initiatives are related to the institutional church, but they depend mainly on grassroots community and charismatic leaders, and eventually affect their field because they are the people whom others follow. I'm talking about the head of the national Catholic leadership conference, for example, and the catechetical leadership conference. But the hierarchy of the institutional church will be guided by that, they will make decisions based on their advisors. They are important because ultimately when they feel the responsibility to lead in the apostolate, they will be better able to discern whom they should enable and whom they should not, which is their responsibility. They must discern as gatekeepers because the community expects that from them. The bishop is both canonically and theologically in charge of exercising this responsibility.

DM: In the work of the International Study Commission on Religion, Media, and Culture, you have made it a point to include Protestant media producers and church officials concerned with communication and media issues. Many Protestant church bodies and organizations have long made enthusiastic use of visual technologies for outreach and instruction as well as for Christian entertainment. Do you see important parallels between Catholics and Protestants in visual media production and use?
AM: In North America the similarities between Protestant and Roman Catholic churches on media production are striking. Historically, there has been a good deal of cooperation. I'm thinking of such organizations as NABS-WACC (North American Broadcast System-World Association of Christian Communicators) and the National Council of Churches. But the media environment has changed so dramatically in recent years that Protestants and Catholics are both scrambling to adjust to a media marketplace in which they can no longer rely on access or recognition. Traditionally, church bodies have looked to communications departments to handle media production. Anything concerning "communications" was automatically the responsibility of a discrete department, the office that dealt with production and policy. But this is a problem now because in a highly competitive market the principal task has narrowed. The issue now is to determine the institutional church presence in the broadcasting and cable television media marketplace. Everyone is asking what their market identity is.

DM: What do you urge church bodies to do today when you act as a media consultant?

AM: Two things. First, to strengthen the public relations department. Public relations should replace the old communications department paradigm as the arm of the institutional church's policymaking activity. Among Catholics, the focus of public relations should be on the bishop's announcements. For Protestants, public relations should be the instrument of the church body's leadership. Second, the communications budget should be invested in redesigning the religious education program, seeking to make it relevant to today's media culture.

DM: This is a very corporate model.

AM: It is a model adapted to the media environment, to the mass-mediated culture in which institutions and individuals exist—in which the institutional church and its communal life exist. This is crucial for churches to understand: media are not simply guns used to shoot message-bullets at human beings. Media are the sites in which religious identity formation happens, where revelation takes place. I'm not talking about media as information. I'm talking about media as formation.

DM: If communication departments traditionally handled production for church bodies, where would you locate production now within the church?

AM: Production should belong to the office of liturgy. Liturgy is the proper locus for the creation of communications media, the place for the artist/producer. When we start to think of media production as a form of liturgy, then media acquire the sensibility of formation. Likewise, youth departments should choose for themselves how they will engage the culture in media rather than having communications departments do it for them. It is not a matter of delivering a message, but of engaging the culture. Media production should be a natural outgrowth of worship, a celebration in the artistic forms of the media environment. Public relations, youth programs, and religious education should all rely on the media producer/artist to find their expression in the media environment.

DM: The media artist stands between the church and society, mediating the institutional church and the larger culture?

AM: This is and always has been the place for the artist to stand. But it's not as if the church is alienated from the culture and requires reconciliation with it. We are the church and we are the culture. The artist interprets the two to and for one another.
Does God test us? The question is annoying because it seems to suggest a manipulative pettiness about God and because both the faithful and the skeptics keep wondering. The first time I ever encountered the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 was not in church but in a university classroom when I was a new Christian. The story raises some pretty troubling questions about God. My fellow students were outraged by the story and highly indignant at God. For many of them it confirmed the absurdity of Scripture and ample reason to dismiss the God of the Bible. I, too, was disturbed by the story and wasn't sure what to make of it—but I knew something important was going on here, something that couldn’t be dismissed because it is so outrageous an episode. Disturbing as it may be, in the first verse, God undeniably puts Abraham to a test, as the Hebrew, nacah, says: to try, or to prove, or to put to the test.

We wonder, then, does God test us? Is He testing me in this or that situation? But over the years as I have talked with people in the classroom, the office, the parish, the coffee shop, the bus station—anywhere I can get them to wonder about God—I’ve noticed a concern behind the question of God’s testing us, something deeper and even more troubling, what I think actually bothered those university students. It’s the question of God’s character. What is God like? How do I make Him out? Is He for me or against me? What kind of a God would even suggest, much more command Abraham to sacrifice his son? That’s why it’s shallow comfort to rush to the end of the story and say, "But it’s okay. God saves Isaac in the end." The story is so drastic it just screams, “Something’s wrong here!” And something is wrong.

What is wrong is not the test; rather the test reveals what is wrong. Listen again as God states the test: “Abraham, take your son, your only son, whom you love and offer him as a burnt offering. That is, hear it this way: “Abraham by your own hand bring to Isaac that for which he is destined—death. You, Abraham brought him into this world in your old age as you approach your own death. You brought him in as your own flesh. Now let him receive all that he inherits from you. The promise and covenant you have made with him is death. Now be the instrument and executor of your own promise to him. For that, O sinful mortal, is the natural relationship between you and Me.”

In this test of Abraham God declares in the harshest, clearest terms who we are and what He thinks of us. He announces what our own imminent death haunts us with constantly. The test contains what has distressed believers and unbelievers alike since 2 centuries before Christ till 20 centuries after: “God, first you create me, for I cannot exist apart from You. Then you hold me accountable for my own sin. And there is nothing I can do about it, either about my own sin or about your holding me accountable. God, you put me in an absolutely impossible and contradictory situation!” Is it any surprise that people wonder what kind of God this is?

And even apart from God actually testing us, we are surrounded with experiences which, for
us, challenge God's character:

The woman who sits in my office, three years after the loss of her infant child, still wondering where God is in all her grief;

The families of passengers on plane crashes, with no explanation for the disaster, but vaguely suspicious that God could have done something about it;

The student against whom life conspires, experiencing the death of a parent, her own major physical illness, and failing to qualify for her academic program—all in one semester.

In describing our “primal experience” of who he calls the “hidden God,” Martin Luther says the same: “It seems one must look on God as unfair, brutal, and unbearable. This repugnant thought has caused many distinguished people of all times to go to pieces. And who would not find it repugnant? More than once it hurled me down into the deepest abyss of despair and made me wish I had never been born—until I learned how blessed this despair is and how close it is to grace!”

Now we know what the test was. It was a test that defines bitterly and passionately the condition between sinful man and holy God; a test that reveals the character of God’s holy sovereignty, autonomy, and wrath over the pathetic and helpless situation of weak, death-bound creatures; a test that demanded a drastic response: either to ignore this monstrous, divine maniac and keep the kid, but then eke out the rest of one’s days with no hope or promise of anything more than one’s own inevitable death and, eventually, Isaac’s to follow. Either that, or to believe something quite different about God’s character despite all appearances to the contrary.

And that’s what the test was for. Scripture says, “After these things, God tested Abraham.” After what things? After God has pledged to Abraham not once, not twice, but at least three times, “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.” Abraham already has this Word, this promise, from God. “Abraham, through your son, Isaac, I will make a great nation through which will come a blessing to all nations.” Now in this test, he also has God’s demand for Isaac’s death, a reminder of God’s true and real disposition toward us apart from His promise. A reminder that the only promise Abraham can give to his own son, and grandson, and all their descendants is a promise and covenant of death. It is a reminder of the deepest abyss of despair. And this is what the test is for: so that Abraham might realize whether he, Abraham still experiences God as the God who has bound us to death and left us there because of our sin—or—if Abraham believes God’s promise that God is the God of life even in the face of death.

So what does Abraham make of God’s character? What does he think God is like—capricious, cosmic maniac or the God who can overcome even the death of Isaac so that descendants might be named through him? Which drastic and outrageous conclusion will Abraham draw?

Hear the answer in verse 5: “Then Abraham said to his young servants, ‘Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and we will return to you.’” Abraham is not being deceptive with the servants. He genuinely believes that God will raise Isaac from death so that descendants might be named through him. Which drastic and outrageous conclusion will Abraham draw?

We can be relieved that, apart from the cross—upon which one of Isaac’s descendants was nailed and for whom Isaac was a type—apart from the cross, no other test like this occurs in Scripture. You will not likely have to face such a trial. But it’s true that God does test us. There is Job. There is Peter and Jesus’ arrest. There is Paul’s thorn in the flesh. On the walk to Emmaus, Jesus does sound as though He would leave the two disciples and walk on.
But now you know the purpose of such tests. Because God would never tempt us to sin, we rightly pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” But he tests us so that we might know our own heart toward him, whether it be a heart of despair and mistrust or a heart of godly fear and love.

He tests us so that we might better distinguish where we place our hope and trust, whether in the flesh and the things of this world that are passing away or in His promise of care and of life despite any word of wrath and death, even His own! He tests us in order to drive us back to His grace when we discover nothing but gloom and darkness apart from that grace. For these reasons James says, “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” And Peter says, “Rejoice in this, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

For it is this very testing that refines and galvanized the faith God Himself has put in us. And just as this faith comes through his Word, so He does not test apart from his Word. In Abraham’s test, Abraham received a word of command and a word of promise from God. Therefore, we can be sure that the griefs and hassles of the devil, the world, and our sinful self are not tricks, deceptions, and secret punishments from God. These experiences may test our patience and our character, but they are not tests from God. These things usually call for the virtues of discipleship and calm, reasonable action, not the drastic response of a tested faith.

The tests God gives us are always grounded in his Word to us and are sufficient to challenge our response daily. Test yourself for instance, on these two words: if anyone would come after me, let him pick up his cross and follow; or, whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever would lose his life for my sake and the Gospels will save it. Or consider as a daily test for us as an institution Jesus’ words to the church in Rev. 3: I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. So, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

Clearly, as with Abraham God’s tests call for drastic responses, just as God’s response to our sin called for a drastic action in the crucifixion of His own Son. There is no easy path up Mt. Moriah or Mt. Calvary. Lenten discipleship is not about the comfortable way. But, meanwhile, know this: On the cross, God tests Himself for us, and here we learn God’s true character. And if God is testing you today, it means you are already His, for the Lord disciplines those whom He loves. (Hebr. 12:6) And if God is testing you, it is to prepare you and refine you for even greater service, for as Jesus says in John 14: “He who believes in me will do the works I do, and greater works than these will he do because I go to the Father.”
THE LESSER GOOD

Guilty of loving the flower and not the soil,
the damselfly and not the fecund river,
the cat and not the sun, the bird and not the air,
the trinkets of the day and not the giver,

I bob on a raft above the boundless depths.
My heart was changed by anecdote, not epic.
My voice is thin and unGregorian,
your antiphonal small bed my dialectic.

It was way too cold to view stars from a mountain
when at my feet lay warm stones of the valley.
There are vast symphonic OM's I'll never hear.
The music of my sphere's from Tin Pan Alley.

I turn quite daft and live in awe of herring
and not the rainbow promise of the land.
My hands are fit to save no wider world
than that which gathers on a grain of sand.

In darkness that gets thicker every year
I am ashamed once more to choose less light.
Though prophets question, love will not keep me here,
and love will not supply a second sight.

William Aiken
visions and revisions

Jennifer Voigt

For my mother-in-law, Jeanne, sometimes, it’s as if the Second Vatican Council had never taken place. She attends mass sung in Latin, still, at a Carmelite monastery just down the street from the church where my father preaches. Elements of an old-world understanding of God resonate in her daily life. When my husband and I were selling our house, she buried a statue of Saint Joseph upside down in our front garden (Saint Joseph is the patron of selling houses, and by inverting him and burying him facing the street, you can attract buyers.) My mother-in-law once took a pilgrimage to the Kansas border to witness the apparition of the Virgin on some one’s living room wall. A photograph of her kissing the apparition appeared in the Rocky Mountain News.

When they were young girls, St. Bernadette visited Jeanne’s sister as she lay in her bed saying her nightly prayers. Aunt Judy later said that she had been mistaken, and that her visitor was Mother Mary herself. Jeanne’s own sons, my husband included, all of whom were educated in Catholic schools and universities, think of their mother’s interest in visions and apparitions as bordering on the hysterical. Jeanne has taken to speaking of these things in a half self-mocking-way—so as to lessen the eye-rolling that tends to occur when she brings up the subject.

By no means think of my lovely mother-in-law as theologically simple. When I said that sometimes I think of a chronic illness I have as a demon possessing me, my own mother thought I’d finally lost it. She got a very frightened look on her face that betrayed her disappointment in having raised such an irrational child and exclaimed, incredulously, “You’re not trying to cure it by turning around three times and bathing in holy water are you?” But Jeanne just said that she could understand how I might see things that way, indicating that she understood me to mean that my struggle is religious and spiritual as well as psychological and physical. Though I admired Elaine Showalter’s Hystories, I do not roll my eyes when Jeanne mentions that she has tickets to hear a talk about children’s visions of Mary in the former Yugoslavia. When her picture appeared in the News, I asked her what she finds in apparitions. She told me that she feels privileged to be able to see them, and that they help to calm her fears, serving as a reminder to her that God is with her and protects her.

Having been raised by my aforementioned mother, my Lutheran minister father, and educated at a university dedicated to its particularly Lutheran character, I learned to trust only words, for in the Lutheran church, we are taught that only from study of the holy scripture can one know the Word. Ours is an iconoclastic tradition, mostly because of politics rather than theology. Jeanne’s experience of the Roman Catholic tradition includes image as well as word, enough to allow her to worship in a language she does not know and find the message of God’s constancy in an apparition. (I should note here that the Roman Catholic Church itself rarely authenticates or sanctions visions and apparitions; these images tend to have a life of their own separate from official church doctrine and practice.) Jeanne—and even her incredulous sons—are capable of experiencing God in a way that escapes me completely. For example, in our kitchen we have an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that Jeanne gave my husband when he moved into his first house, years before he knew me. Chris passes it every day but I have never

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seen him give it a second look. For him it represents a constant—for me, an alien presence. I can only respond to it on an intellectual level. I have some icons, too, but they’re artifacts, gifts from family members who traveled to foreign countries. But the Sacred Heart has meaning for half our household, and it is in that meaning that I find the mystery and the power of the image.

These questions I have about the mystery and power inherent in the still image lead naturally to a question about the mystery and power inherent in moving images. Recently I have been asking myself, can moving images function iconically? Can they aid in worship? Can they promote faith?

The film farthest from anyone’s mind when considering this question may be Harold Ramis’s delightful 1992 comedy Groundhog Day, but as an artifact it shares with Jeanne’s apparitions and inverted saints a certain popular acceptance. Starring a model and the golfer-obsessed groundskeeper from Caddyshack, it has none of the stigma attached to foreign or “art house” films. No one would claim that Groundhog Day belongs only to intellectuals, nerds, or people who wear black a lot. Recently, my rental of Groundhog Day elicited this response from a clerk at my local video store: “A classic film.” He said nothing when I rented Chloe in the Afternoon, however.

Furthermore, Groundhog Day enjoys a special currency during Lent, when Christians engage in a season of preparation. Groundhog Day, the story of a man who must relive the same February 2 over and over again until he gets it right, speaks to the person engaged in the daily examination of his or her life through fast. The continual repetition of even the most incidental aspects of Phil’s (Bill Murray) life stress alternately the meaninglessness of the trivial and its potential to take on meaning when Phil approaches it from a different perspective. Like a person keeping a fast, Phil must rearrange his life to find a new perspective. In this way, the film’s interest in the banal prompts Groundhog Day to explore territory beyond that of daily human endeavour. When Rita (Andie McDowell) asks Phil, “Is this how you spend eternity?” the film wonders how we can embrace our free will while we are seemingly sentenced to a life like Phil’s, “stuck in one place, and every day... exactly the same and nothing that you [do matters].”

Though the film operates on an intellectual level as it demonstrates Phil’s ability to break free of destiny to find that which matters in his daily life, the key to Groundhog Day’s function as an icon also resides in its constant repetition of one day of its protagonist’s life. In Groundhog Day, save for the opening scenes that set the narrative into action, we see the same day repeated over and over again, sometimes verbatim. Though the early, expository scenes have hinted this way, it is only through this constant re-telling of one day that the film illustrates the vast wasteland of Phil’s soul. The same repetition re-enforces the values that the film holds preeminent: self-improvement, self-examination, compassion. An icon serves almost as a quick-reference reminder of our faith; it occupies a constant space on a wall or an altar, and often it is portable. It delivers one message. In contrast, a Bible, though it is portable and can be considered to contain one message, is in reality a collection of many messages all piled on top of each other, all of which we cannot access in one sitting.

But consider my own icons—my artifacts. Two-thirds of them portray Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Why? Because I enjoyed studying Raphael’s St. Catherine of Alexandria. Because I read her story in The Lives of the Saints and I liked it. Because when my father went to Sinai and climbed to the top I asked him to bring me back an icon from St. Catherine’s monastery. My collection grew from there.

The parable of which Groundhog Day reminds me the most is The Parable of the Pounds. In Groundhog Day, the property with which Phil is entrusted is time, America’s most valuable commodity. But cinematic convention allows this story to operate on a plane separate from the parable’s allegorical model. Film, with its ability to represent the passing of one day in only one scene, one exchange of dialogue, or a single shot, is the medium uniquely capable of both representing the master in The Parable of the Pounds and acting as the agent of Phil’s redemption. Though Phil muses about God’s omniscience, cinema’s ability to twist reality gives Phil all the time in the world to develop his soul, and also responds with patience when he fails.
During one sequence in the film, PhilCommit suicide numerous times, only to wake up again the following morning to face the same day. The film forces spiritual growth on Phil by refusing to allow Phil's life the pattern of the standard narrative—the pattern in which death means the end. Instead, this narrative places death squarely in the middle of life. This film envisions no end. Phil tries in vain to stay awake to force an end to the cycle of Groundhog Days, but again and again the film refuses to let him do it. The script requires him to wake up and face the day he faced the day before—it envisions only beginnings.

Rita, the object of Phil's eternal desire, acts as an icon in her own right. The second commandment forbids the creation of graven images, but in some ways it is a useless commandment, for who can imagine the face of God? Because they refer to certain reverential figures whose works and lives represent the values of our faith, icons give us pictures of God's characteristics. Phil's pursuit of Rita in the first half of the film is no mere contrast between the sweet and decent Rita and the spiritually bereft Phil, nor is it only an illustration of the wrong way to go about trying to release oneself from such a predicament as Phil's. Rather, in the first part of the film, as Phil gets to know everything about Rita, he begins to use her as a model to shape his own life. As he grows, he searches for the good in life using a map he creates with her history, her dreams, her values, and her passions. When he finally gets to woo her successfully, it is because he has become her spiritual equal. Part of Phil's courtship includes his sculpting an image of her face in ice. As he does so, he tells her how he has spent days on end studying her face. Like an icon, Rita's face is an image of the holy.

The love story that propels Phil's spiritual growth mimics the love story that propels our life of faith. Groundhog Day also reminds me of the parable of the woman who loses a coin and sweeps her whole house to find it. We may search for God, but God also searches for us. Rita returns to Phil no matter how often or how brutally he insults her. When he finally shows himself worthy of her, it is she who spends all the money she has to buy him at the bachelor auction rather than he who seduces her with his knowledge of her most intimate feelings. Icons are things that we can approach actively, outfitted with our desires to use their subject as examples or as objects of study. They are also things that approach us. They catch our eyes. They beckon us. We look at them searchingly, the way we might look at our beloved.

The moving images that represent Phil's days compare and contrast the damage he can do and the beauty in which he can participate. The linear way in which the film presents these images emphasizes Phil's growth, and portrays his life as an example to those of us who tend to live the same day over every day. It promotes both faith and worship by emphasizing discipline through its example of the work that Phil must do daily for the narrative to release him. Its examination of such discipline focuses us to concentrate on our interaction with God and others in daily life. It reminds us that we do interact daily with God. Oddly enough, it comes to us by way of entertainment. When we watch Bill Murray slouch, we don't expect to see the divine, but of course, surprise is the surest of divinity's distinguishing marks.
DESPAIR

You have found it, your letter says, in a green West African village. The cure for despair is to slaughter a goat and several chickens and then drink millet beer from a broken calabash. Drinking transports your troubles from your brain to your stomach, the villagers tell you. You knew that much already.

Next, smear the animal blood on the calabash, on your forehead, on the altar. Pluck feathers from the chickens and add them to the blood. They will give loft to your sadness. Everyone drinks from the newly decorated calabash as the holy man chants prayers for your healing. Your friends crowd in to touch you; their hands lift the invisible weight from your thin body.

You write that this is more effective than it sounds, more powerful than our tepid Christian petitions for healing or comfort. You complain that nothing has come easily for you—not joy, not love, not even breath.

In truth, you have wrestled with every angel. Air and light and kisses—they have all come to you, friend, and you could not take them in.

Celeste Duder
america the OK? the state of the nation at the millennium

Robert Benne

Gregg Easterbrook, a prolific and respected journalist who has written widely about ecological matters and recently on religion and science, has a blockbuster article in the January 4 & 11 issue of The New Republic. He has given it the same title as this article, but he didn’t put a question mark after the title. The thrust of his essay is captured in its subtitle: “Why life in the US has never been better.”

However, in the same issue of the magazine, Robert Brustein, its veteran drama critic, reports on a recent trip to Las Vegas after years of absence. He tells of the massive growth in gambling that Las Vegas’s expansion represents. He marvels at the mega-resorts that are being devoted to entertaining the whole family, which also serve as a strong come-on to attract even more gamblers. The mega-resorts are characterized by ersatz replicas of other cultural meccas—New York City, Egypt, Italy. He writes: “Nowhere is America’s obsession with instant wealth exploited more efficiently than in these trackless gambling wastes, where thousands of funereal characters, many of them women, huddle over machines like wraiths. I had visions of Dante’s circles of Hell (I had not thought death had undone so many).”

Both of these pictures of America are presented in the same journal by perceptive writers. Which one is true? Or are both true? What is the state of our nation as we wind down one millennium and begin another?

1. First, we must admit that the good news that Easterbrook brings is pretty convincing. In section after section he marshals empirical evidence for his thesis that things are not only good in America, but slowly getting better. Crime has fallen sharply. The economy continues to boom. Teen pregnancy is declining. The federal budget is running a surplus as are many state budgets. The air and water are getting cleaner. Health is improving by almost every measure, including the first-ever decline in cancer incidence. Deaths in accidents are decreasing. Standards of living continue to improve. The use of drugs and cigarettes is waning. Levels of education keep rising. Women and minorities are acquiring an ever-larger slice of the national pie. Personal liberty is greater than ever while American culture becomes more and more diverse. Even home runs are at an all-time high!

George Will, in a column appearing at nearly the same time, adds more good news from his conservative perspective. The number of welfare recipients is declining, as are illegitimacy and abortions. Americans saying that abortion should be “legal under any circumstances” has fallen from 34 to 22 percent since 1990. Church attendance is rising. Since the late 70s the percentage of Americans saying that religion is “very important” in their lives has increased from 52 to 61. There has been a sharp increase in charitable service and giving.

Easterbrook argues that this good news is obfuscated by the left elite because it smacks of triumphalism, particularly on the part of those on the right who have presided over the public and private agencies of these improvements. It is denied by the right elite because many of these improvements have come through governmental policies, and besides, such good news can damage the right’s commitment to the culture wars.

Easterbrook is not complacent. He thinks we have serious problems with the greenhouse
effect on one front and poverty on the other. We also have great problems with world imbalances in wealth and well-being. But his point is that incremental reform has brought us a great distance in recent decades and that further commitment to reform will make us even better. So, he says, it is time to quit the doomsday rhetoric and commit ourselves to further reform.

I've never been captivated by doomsday analyses of the world nor by apocalyptic strains in Christianity. After all, being raised a Nebraskan protected me from the former and being a Lutheran inoculated me against the latter. So I find Easterbrook credible. But I also find the more somber and disturbing sensibilities of Brustein credible. He ends his article on Las Vegas with a snippet from the poet Robert Lowell: "A savage servility slides by on grease."

Other indices reveal some darker elements in this American portrait. A recent Washington Post poll shows a precipitous drop in the trust of people for the government above all but also for other institutions. Seventy-one percent do not think their fellow countrymen and women lead lives as good as in the past. The same percentage think that Clinton does not have high personal moral standards and only a slightly smaller percentage think they are about the same as others of his generation. Fifty-five percent believe that the country is becoming too tolerant of behaviors harmful for society.

One also is reminded that the promising drops in crime, illegitimacy, divorce, and so on mentioned by Easterbrook are departures from historic highs and are yet high in comparison with many other countries and with earlier periods of our national life.

Yet, I enjoy the good things that seem to be abundant as we close the twentieth century. I delight in seeing my pension accumulations grow. So many products and services are affordable. We enjoy peace and prosperity. Why knock it? Easterbrook is certainly describing part of our reality.

Nevertheless, my spirit of unease is unquenchable. At a very basic level, I believe, our culture is weakening. Indeed, the very success of our society—its affluence mixed with large measures of freedom—is paradoxically at the root of our malaise. The virtues we need for continued humane existence are being eroded by our very successes.

Robert Bellah's analysis of the drift of our culture seems eminently persuasive to me. He has argued over many years now that the two great traditions in American life—the biblical and the republican—are being undercut by two new lifestyles: utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. While both older traditions are characterized by "practices of commitment" (the former oriented to the will of God and the latter to the polis), the newer forms of individualism dispense with such practices altogether as they seek individual success or individual expression.

While the two forms of individualism are parasitic on the older traditions for any substantive goods, they also undercut them by instrumentalizing their practices or by turning them into vehicles of personal expression. So, one has the unencumbered self, freed from the constraints of tradition and its practices and freed for the fulfillment of individual desire or expression. And one has to have a pretty sunny view of human nature to believe that the unencumbered self will automatically choose and express itself wisely or responsibly.

Our colleges experience the effects of these forms of individualism. Raised on entertainment—the epitome of the American commitment to freedom of choice in the search for one's pleasures—students increasingly find it difficult to master the practices of reading a challenging text, of analyzing the meaning of the text, and of constructing coherent arguments. Adeptness with computers doesn't help either. Computer exchanges seem too quick, fragmentary, biased, and protean to carry real intellectual weight. It is difficult to sort out the serious from the trivial on the burgeoning Internet. It takes far more savvy than most students have to make those distinctions.

Higher portions of our students seem to bear more impediments than those who have gone before. A surprising number come with learning disabilities for which colleges are obligated to compensate. Many are emotionally troubled; college counseling centers could expand dramatically and still not meet the demand. Indeed, expansion might stimulate demand. Troubles are often acted out in excessive drinking,
though most students need no such excuses for binge drinking. Behind the troubles one frequently finds broken or turbulent homes. It is amazing how much “life” some of our students have already experienced, and they are definitely not better for the wear.

Enhanced utilitarian and expressive individualism also undercuts what Stephen Carter has called “civility.” Defining the term as the willingness to sacrifice our own desire for the sake of living together in a common world, on the one hand, and the active helpfulness we offer to fellow citizens, on the other, Carter laments the loss of lawfulness, modesty, manners and considerateness that incivility breeds. Unrestrained individualism leads to more friction in all areas of human social intercourse; violence seems right around the corner even when it does not flare up overtly. Add to these dynamics a strong dose of high decibel music and one gets a very unpleasant combination.

Perhaps most disturbing is the waning of practices of commitment with regard to institutional life. Modern individualism eschews ongoing engagement with organized religious communities, with conventional patterns of marriage and family life and with the community associations which have played such an important role in American civic life. Americans increasingly demand freedom from institutional bonds that cut down on their prized autonomy. We may lament the loss of such commitment, but perhaps we are not ready yet for recapturing it; that would leave us too few free evenings.

So, while I am willing to accept and enjoy the OK-ness that Easterbrook and others describe, I find a sobering darkness at the heart of our culture. Can such high rates of individualism sustain the kind of economic and political success we currently enjoy? Can they do anything but diminish the already impoverished and decadent forms of popular culture we copiously consume and just as copiously export? Can they support the institutional life without which we risk confusion and chaos? Can they inspire the sort of common commitment needed to address the stubborn poverty that continues to plague a significant portion of our population and the world?

Rather than adapt a breezy optimism about the “happy” close to this century, it might be wiser to claim a more dialectical view such as that proposed by Reinhold Niebuhr. He argued that the historical potentialities for evil grow in proportion to the expansion of the good. The prosperity of America the OK may have nestled next to it the seeds of cultural and social decay. The complex technics that drive our civilization have implicit in them the capacity for enormous malfunction and disaster. The larger world may yet collapse in a catastrophe that will encompass us too. Indeed, as Niebuhr argued, history may not solve but rather cumulate the problems of humankind.

As the millennium comes closer, it behooves us Christians to realize that we really cannot “read the signs of the times” with accuracy. We should not let our basic faith be swayed by either the anticipation of good times or bad. Indeed, good times do not guarantee a good reception of Christ or his followers. We know that the crucifixion of Jesus took place in “good” times, executed by the best and the brightest of the day. Good times are no guarantee of good faith. And we ought to prefer the latter.
I'm balancing my slow way up a single flight
Of stairs, pressing on the height-set props of crutches
To keep full weight off my repaired knee. Push and step,
I chant, satisfied at never falling, so far,
A week from surgery, though I've read, leg-resting,
About Carter Cummins, who balanced playing cards,
Once, to build fifty-one floors in his single house.
Witnesses watched, not moving, for creases and glue,
Counting two thousand, two hundred and twenty six
Thin bricks like my wife counted stairs six nights ago,
Saying "yes" and "yes" while I tottered seven hours
After anesthesia. "Eleven," she murmured,
"I'd never counted," and we stood between the three
Reached floors of our house to celebrate the re wired
Circuitry of my knee, speaking the familiar
Benedictions of renewal, putting aside
The brief paralysis of one-day surgery,
The half-numb, wobble home. How frail our frequent claims
To anything, that we're measured by pain endured
Like some St. Appolonia, whose teeth were pulled
For not renouncing God, one more operation
In the gallery of the holy where every
Portrait turns flat as the dogma of brotherhood,
As belief in eternity extended by
Diet and drugs, by exercise, machinery
And transplant while we count our way to paradise.

Gary Fincke
Dear Editor:


What follows concerns yet another way for the human mind to run amuck. This we should probably resist, though ample nonresistance is modeled for us, by our default yackers, in American public life of various eras, including the present. Among "default yackers" I include, of course, opulent televangelists and Dr. Laura, but am thinking mainly of politicians and media smoothies, all of whom get at us by default, because wisdom chatter hasn't even been imagined, much less invented, by the commercial media. It's dreg time still.

Default yackers. Wisdom chatter. Dreg time. What if Dr. Samuel Johnson, our earliest serious lexicographer, were still alive? The critic Walter Jackson Bate observed that Johnson's dictionary ambition in the mid-18th century was "to establish by examples [of word usage] a flexible standard of propriety," and that his examples were to provide, in Johnson's own words, "a kind of intellectual history." Johnson lamented in the preface that after long labor "amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow," he published his dictionary with a feeling of "frigid tranquillity," having "little to fear or hope from censure or from praise."

Of the non-political ways for the mind to run amuck, one is to be inordinately distracted by language, which is of course the very air that we breathe out. Distractions near millennium's end have included oral sex, bimbo eruption, and censure alternative. It may have been that middle phrase, in fact, that started me wondering, WWSJD? What would Samuel Johnson do? Linguododdments always get to me, but lately it's these assertive couplings. Bimbo eruptions. Frigid tranquillity. Flop sweat. Irreducible combinations: one modifier, one noun. Not strings of prepositional phrases, or other complex locutions. Assertive couplings. Wouldn't Johnson have started a whole new dictionary for this sort of thing?

He would reason, as a rational man in a rational age, that you want to go directly to a definition for any enigmatic coupling, and not have to forage in a long entry on either of the two component words. Furthermore, wouldn't some of these couplings need considerable detail for clarity, and on that ground alone deserve a separate entry? Bimbo eruption (Am. South): "sudden perky visibility of over-endowed and underbred young woman in unescorted proximity to a male in public office (see Bubba ascendancy), amid the mirthy helplessness of functionaries procured to divert the public's prurient nose."

Is that enough, though? Wouldn't the lexicographer need to develop the definition in terms of Samuel Johnson's "flexible standards" and even "intellectual history"? Such questions arise when you pay attention to these combos—you start rethinking lexicography, and even worse (and more time-consuming), you wonder if certain of these combos are an index to our times. Psychocultural history, if not Johnson's intellectual history.

Some are timeless, flop sweat, for example. The flop could be an episode in any presidential descendancy, such as Andrew Johnson's impeachment and near-conviction, but the expression is more recent and nonscandalous. It derives, ac-
cording to Joan Acocella in The New Yorker, from dancer/choreographer Bob Fosse in the 1960s: “He had an expression, ‘flop sweat,’ for the sweat you get into when you think you’ve got a flop on your hands, and he had flop sweat much of the time” (Dec. 21, 1998).

**Toner conservation.** Enigmatic couplings don’t explain themselves immediately, when your eye lights upon them. Perfume gridlock. Your pace slows down, your mind grapples for smelling bunch who sometimes can cause perfume of some witness’s statement; early in December: fume fumes,’ said one Democratic clear that he has no sense of toner impeachment proceedings, there is a recurring scent of toner conservation.” Democratic women in the House are “a fine-smelling bunch who sometimes can cause perfume gridlock.” “It’s not one scent. One scent you can get accustomed to. It’s the clash of perfumes,” said one Democratic staffer.”

How would Samuel Johnson have handled *Congressional staffer?* What distinctions would he come up with, sane man but antic tongue, to avoid ribald conflation with *Presidential intern?* His candid hagiographer James Boswell famously refused to defend Johnson’s “introducing his own opinions, and even prejudices, under general definitions of words, while at the same time the original meaning of the words is not explained” (*Tory* and *Whig* are among Boswell’s examples). Johnson had issued an amiable disclaimer by including in his definition of *lexicographer* the memorable combo *harmless drudge.*

As noted, we’re not talking plain pairings (“criminal misbehavior” or “pardonable peccadilloes,” depending which party you tolerate better), but mainly cryptic or ambiguous ones. And we’re interested chiefly in combos that could be used widely, and as self-contained entities. Miss Manners in the *Washington Post* advises a complainer left out of her boy friend’s family’s *Christmas grab:* “Rise above the rudeness with a ruthless display of goodwill.” *Christmas grab* goes in the needed dictionary, but not ruthless display, which depends on a prepositional phrase (though *ruthless display* might help define *bimbo eruption*?). Oversize *stills* goes in the dictionary as ambiguous—these aren’t megakettles full of white lightning, but as the *Post* reports, Hollywood bar decor: great big pictures from old-time movies.

Also, let’s leave out the whole realm of technical jargon, another set of dictionaries entirely. The 1991 *Oxford Dictionary of New Words* does this, excluding “the highly literary or technical.” In our local coffeehouse last December, during intermission at a Celtic concert mostly on wood flute, I browsed through *Gig Magazine* and found *bass attack, generation loss,* and *direct box,* combos for a modern Johnson as tech freak. The performer, Grey Larsen, used the expression *slow air,* not the gas station’s annoying tire-pressure machine, but a sweetly lugubrious lament. Let’s also omit nonce combos; the Prism Coffeehouse emcee, Fred Boyce, told the audience that if we’d had enough *flute intake* this evening, we could hear other instruments the next night, guitar and fiddle.

Catching the Grateful Dead show on local college radio, I’ve noticed that *tribute band* isn’t the American Legion horn section on Veterans Day. But here comes *surrogate lighters,* used by music writer Neil Strauss in the *New York Times.* Indoor pop and rock concerts, says Strauss, are different these days because no-smoking regulations can confiscate your cigarette lighter at the door. Since crowds can’t bond “during sentimental ballads or while waiting for encores” by holding up their lighters, a “new kind of luminescence has been emerging: the green glows and flashing red lights of cellular phones.”

It wasn’t *bimbo eruption,* a sort of neon roadhouse of a phrase, that started this collecting and speculating, now that I think of it, but *charismatic megafauna,* with its rhythmic Greek architecture. What are these critters—are they *babe magnets* (perky Lettermanism), insouciant babas who hold open office in confident hope of *liaisons dangereuses?* No, downsize and sanitize your thinking to Furby™, “Economists have their own euphemism for the cute and furry animals that people [environmentalists] like to save: They call them ‘charismatic megafauna.’” Thus *Lingua Franca* recently, the attitude mag of higher education culture in our time. People
prefer, writes Paul Kedrosky, the spotted owl to the striped shiner. The shiner he blandly defines in parentheses as only “a fish,” presumably no bass attacking.

Charismatic megafauna seemed to breed dozens of other combos, both common and uncommon, an example of the former being ozone days in a Sunday Times story on Atlanta. The Oxford DNW surely includes this, I thought, noticing its ozone entry, but not so. Only ozone depletion, layer, hole, and destroyer. Unfortunately, writes Kevin Sack, unhealthy ozone days in on-the-make Atlanta are becoming part of its international profile. A Post story on Wyoming points to that state as a resource colony, “a top producer of coal, oil, gas and other minerals that sends its products elsewhere for international profile.

The Oxford DNW showed me that these expressions should really be called combos, not combos. Entry after entry, from crystal healing to sick building, has the notation “formed by compounding.” To complicate compo investigation, the front matter in my old (1966) unabridged Random House Dictionary reveals the lexicographers’ default expression hidden entry. For Central time, and even Yukon time and Bering time, there are entries, but you’re cross-referenced to the big entry on standard time, hiding place for the various regional times. This entry on standard time begins distractingly: “The civil time officially adopted for a country or region.” But there’s no entry for civil time, though deeply hidden in the entry on civil is this: “9. (of divisions of time) legally recognized in the ordinary affairs of life.”

While puzzling this out, I thought of time in another sense, the liturgical year. Random House has no entry for penitential season, and though it identifies Lent as “penitential” it doesn’t do so for Advent. Nor is penitential season in the American Heritage Dictionary (3rd ed., 1992), which does use the word penitence in both Lent and Advent entries. Neither dictionary includes liturgical year, but church year in Random House gets you a cross-reference to Christian year. American Heritage, lacking both church year and Christian year (nor is either hidden under church or Christian or year), does give a ten-word description of church key.

For compo addicts, religion seems to be a fertile field. In Harold Bloom’s fascinating 1992 book The American Religion, the Yale celebrity scholar, self-characterized as Gnostic Jew, learns from Baptist historian E. Y. Mullins that you need only one concept to grasp traditional Baptist atrology: soul competency. It’s the opposite of papal infallibility; it “excludes at once all human interference, such as episcopacy, and infant baptism,” and it “does not refer to an unmediated relationship with Jesus.” Bloom also has an anonymous Baptist informant: “Soul competency means to me that anything I understand to bring me closer to God is true and cannot be taken away from me.”

Probably common to biblicists is Bloom’s useful compo interpretive fiction, referring to what the antic imagination produces when too pedantically at work on a text. Construction of a troublesome ahistorical utopia called the Primitive Church is his chief example. Perhaps common among sociologists of institutions is Bloom’s expression decisive dilemmas, referring to crises compelling groups to choose their future by taking one of Frost’s roads and not the other. American Baptists split over whether slavery was Christianly acceptable; the Southern Baptist Convention, or plantation, was created in 1845 to accommodate the affirmative.

Bloom’s reading in American religious history is also the source for salvation cocktail, an Appalachian intake concocted out of the Gospel of Mark. True followers of Jesus are not harmed by taking up serpents or drinking deadly substances; the substance of choice for heaven-bound “Holy Ghost cultists” of the mountains, reports Bloom, is strychnine.

Wisdom chatter. Reading rage. Chary kudos. None combos. Attitude mag. Celebrity scholar. It’s compo proliferation, all of this: the amuck mind. Non compos mentis. The bedrock justification must be, as surely with Johnson, celebration of abundance and novelty and humanity’s chronic verbalunacy. And we need more than a dictionary. Shouldn’t someone be watching the newspapers and magazines all year, entering combos on computer, and after some winnowing and advance publicity issue an annual February list of the year’s harvest, both the
very nonce ones and the ones deserving duration? People would call it that, the *February list*, and take to it the way people take to Fat Tuesday, Mardi Gras: revelry in antic and earthy abundance.

“There hasn’t been a man in the White House who hasn’t had a sugar woman,” says a black mechanic in Durham the day after impeachment, reported in the *Washington Post*. His universalizing of presidential dependency may be dubious, but we need that *sugar woman* pulled out of specialized dictionaries (of slang, of black English, of regional speech) and put into general circulation in the February list. *Sugar woman*, by the way, is not in Clarence Major’s 1994 dictionary of African-American slang, *From Juba to Jive*, though *sugar daddy*—did white folks make her up, or is she maybe only a North Carolina item (by way of Arkansas)?

We want *meringue wakes* too, which won’t be in any of the general and specialized dictionaries. John Shaw, in Sydney, Australia, for the *Post*, participated in an *escorted climb*. People pay $50 for the adventure of walking high up the Sydney Harbor Bridge, and there’s the view: “Little green ferries trail meringue wakes.” It’s a bit pretentious for a newspaper, but consider: A second list for February has to be a string of the quotidian compos that deserve banishing for at least a year—*white noise, witch hunt, deep end, sound bite, historic moment, constitutional responsibility*, all on just one bad news page of the *Post* at December solstice. Up against these superannuated duds, *meringue wakes*, from a healthier hemisphere and altitude, has a soft shine truly welcome here in murky yacker American air.

From Dogwood, faithfully yours,

C.V.

P.S. This just in: “Call it the Washington *pizza index*: The bigger the crisis and the more time that government staffers hole up in their offices, the more pizza they eat.” Complete with bar graphs from Domino’s, the *Post* reports that the late unpleasantness in Washington may go down in pie annals as the *impizzament crisis*.

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Music

can music be too emotional?

Maureen Jais-Mick

What are the roles of music and their order of priority in the church? Music has entertainment value. It has the power to uplift people. It can be high art or tacky. It reflects a congregation’s resources and personality. If you have money you can buy whatever kind of music you want. If you have little money your musical life may be less grand. I know that music is educational. Graded choir programs teach children to read and enjoy music, to cooperate with others, to appreciate the arts and, we hope, to worship.

For some folks simpler music programs are more godly. “Oh, that big church, they have a professional choir, but our little church choir sings from the heart.” We’re out of tune but sincere. What value does God place on our musical offerings? Do we gain or lose points for performing Renaissance motets? Is the music for us or for God? It’s for us, of course. We have no idea what kind of music God stocks in the cosmic jukebox. Those four creatures around the throne in Revelation 4:8 may be humming or rapping their endless refrain of “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and to come!” Music is like theology—it’s a human activity. We write about it, we fight about it and every so often we lose touch with reality and claim to know God’s opinions.

Martin Luther’s preface to the 1524 Wittenberg Hymnal is often quoted: “That it is good and God pleasing to sing hymns is, I think, known to every Christian; for everyone is aware not only of the example of the prophets and kings in the Old Testament who praised God with song and sound, with poetry and psaltery, but also of the common and ancient custom of the Christian church to sing Psalms. .. . And these songs [the ones in the 1524 hymnal] were arranged in four parts to give the young—who should at any rate be trained in music and other fine arts something to wean them away from love ballads and carnal songs and to teach them something of value in their place, thus combining the good with the pleasing, as is proper for youth. Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts, as some of the pseudoreligious claim. But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of Him who gave and made them. I therefore pray that every pious Christian would be pleased with this [the use of music in the service of the gospel] and lend his help if God has given him like or greater gifts. As it is, the world is too lax and indifferent about teaching and training the young for us to abet this trend. God grant us his grace. Amen” (Luther’s Works, Volume 53: “Liturgy and Hymns,” Edited by Ulrich S. Leupold. Fortress Press, 1965).

Kid’s choirs are in. Luther said so. Train them to sing harmony and turn their minds from their hormones to higher thoughts. This is not so far-fetched. The Urban Harmony Movement, whose goal is “to spread harmony through harmony by building a supportive teen community through a cappella singing,” is already at work (visit them at http://www.casa.org/). Then there is Luther’s preface to Georg Rhau’s Symphoniae iucundae, whose most famous line appears on many choir room banners: “We can mention only one point (which experience confirms), namely, that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions. . . . For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to

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appease those full of hate—and who could number all these masters of the human heart, namely, the emotions, inclinations, and affectations that impel men to evil or good?—what more effective means than music could you find? The Holy Ghost himself honors her as an instrument for his proper work when in his Holy Scriptures he asserts that through her his gifts were instilled in the prophets, namely, the inclination to all virtues, as can be seen in Elisha [II Kings 3:15]. On the other hand, she serves to cast out Satan, the instigator of all sins, as is shown in Saul, the King of Israel [I Samuel 16:23]" (Luther's Works, 323).

I'm interested in what Luther had to say about music and the emotions because we frequently criticize the emotional power of music in church. “Too sentimental,” we say disparagingly of the hymns of Fanny Crosby or contemporary Christian writers. After 30 years as a church musician I still can't define “too emotional.” Is it the ecstatic young woman full of the spirit who shakes, dances and faints in church? Imagine going back in time and telling King David that he was “too emotional” when dancing naked before the Ark of the Covenant [II Samuel 6:16]. Perhaps we need a category of hymnody for the other end of the spectrum. We could call it “not emotional enough.” Music for folks who can’t recall which hymns they sang at church this morning.

In Plenty Good Room: The Spirit of African American Catholic Worship (Publication #385-X by the United States Catholic Conference, a joint publication of the Secretariat for the Liturgy, Secretariat for Black Catholics, and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, pp. 50-51), the writers address the issue of emotion as a way of learning:

...the qualities of an African American spirituality suggest that this spirituality, which is deeply rooted in faith, has a strongly intuitive and emotive base. Nathan Jones, Jawanza Kunjufu, Alvin Pouissant, Na'im Akbar, and many others tell us that there are many ways of knowing and relating to the world. ...Father Clarence Joseph Rivers, noted African American liturgist, informs us that in this way of knowing, “there is a natural tendency for interpenetration and interplay, creating a concert or orchestration in which the ear sees, the eye hears, and where one both smells and tastes color; wherein all the senses, unmuted, engage in every experience.” This way of knowing does not exclude a discursive dimension. It simply states that emotion is the primary way of knowing among African peoples and their descendants. It attests that objective detachment and analytical explanations are useful, but are not the sole means of communicating faith. And lastly, it asserts that peoples everywhere are not poetic or discursive, but both poetic and discursive.

Isn't this the alternative spirituality for which so many people search? Many self-help and motivational books are about freeing ourselves from whatever confines us and getting in touch with our inner child, hidden goddess or spiritual voice. People are searching for wholeness, for wellness, for the reality of shalom. Luther recognized that music could be an important tool on this spiritual journey. What he would have said about today's varieties of worship music I have no idea. But Luther was a lute player and he lived before organs accompanied hymn singing, so he could be comfortable with folk groups and praise bands. And if we can't know Luther's opinions, how much less can we know the Almighty's?

We sometimes disparage music as being just “feel good,” having no real foundation. I don't know exactly what this means either. Could it be Pachelbel's Canon? Many people seem to like it, which, as a trained musician, automatically makes me suspicious of its musical quality. Reading reports of contemporary worship in some publications one fears that there are thousands of churches nationwide where congregational song consists of endless repetitions of “Jesus is okay!” by wildly enthusiastic worshippers with nothing on their minds other than the next Living Christmas Tree Pageant. These people are so dumb that many actually tithe. “A pox on your seeker services!” we cry.

On Christmas Eve I was at an African American Baptist church. As the minister improvised a eucharistic prayer that intertwined the words of institution with the concerns of the community I felt that I was experiencing Christian worship before our learned councils limited the words we could say. Most of us say the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-14), not remembering that according to Matthew's account Jesus told his disciples to “Pray then like this,”
not “Say this same prayer every time you gather.”

People go to church where they want and worship as they want. We are blessed in having so many choices for our time on earth because I don’t think whether I sang from a hymnal or an overhead projector is going to matter in the after-life. The challenge for churches and their musicians is that most of us need and want to accommodate varying tastes in music and worship. This, combined with denominational theology and custom, current affairs, trends and fads, makes for interesting worship planning. The old joke about the difference between a liturgist and a terrorist (answer: you can reason with a terrorist) often comes to mind.

I take comfort in the words of the prophet Samuel that “No matter what outward form worship takes, all is in vain unless it is a sincere expression of the heart. For after all, God looks upon the heart” (I Samuel 16:6). And if, my fellow musicians, you try not to cringe at what comes out of my heart, I promise to do the same for you.

GOD’S MEDICINE

The doctor declared measles most contagious,
Saying nothing about jealousy, greed,
And the rest of the seven deadly sins
Whose figures I colored in Sunday School—
The fat face of sloth, the mole-plagued mirror
For envy, and lust covered by a thousand
Pock marks as if it caused a terrible rash.
My mother, who carried the half-dollar scar
Of vaccination on her thigh, trusted
That doctor who’d delivered her at home
And kept her from diptheria and smallpox
And the complications of infections.
She stored his medicines until I caught
What my sister had suffered years before:
Ear drops, penicillin, antibiotic creams—
They aged like the interest on money saved,
And more where that came from if we scrubbed
Our hands with hot water before we prayed
One after the other and sat up straight
To clean our plates. God’s medicine, she said,
Meaning obedience, and she was right
Or as lucky as that doctor who thought
He understood the simplest cure of childhood,
Taking out my tonsils to ease my earaches
So frequent I thought their pain a common curse,
That they would disappear like baby teeth
And bring me the good fairy’s overnight
Of profit when I put my memorized faith
In the anesthesia of what I didn’t know.

Gary Fincke

This book is the third installment in a series titled “Public Expressions of Religion in America,” edited by Conrad Cherry and published through the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, under the auspices of Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. Author Robert Detweiler has published widely on the confluence of religion, literature, and culture, and this volume is no exception. *Uncivil Rights* explores the relationship between the body politic, a familiar (if ill-defined) site of public discourse and two other such sites of his own creation, the “body erotic” and “body apocalyptic.” Detweiler argues that these three sites of discourse are “shaped in part” by fiction that highlights issues of state, sexuality, and aggression, and so elucidates “who we are and what we live for.” He is especially interested in twentieth-century fiction with explicit religious content and includes in his study writers as varied as Arthur Miller, E.L. Doctorow, Robert Coover, Nella Larsen, Toni Morrison, Philip Caputo, and Louise Erdrich.

Detweiler’s thesis is radical, but ultimately persuasive. Although some might be skeptical of his claim that fiction significantly influences the public domain—or more precisely, public domains—of contemporary America, he reminds us that it has always played a part in readers’ imagining their roles as subjects within the social order. The novel, in particular, has had such a shaping influence, though as George Yudice, whom Detweiler cites in his introduction, observes, the vision of the social order it presents is no longer unitary. Indeed, Yudice concludes, readers of so-called “multicultural” fiction today use novels “to construct particular rather than overarching hegemonic identities.” Detweiler acknowledges the limits of this and other theories he uses in the study; the complex relationship between fiction and public discourse requires a new language, a new way of thinking about these terms, and toward that end, he emphasizes, *Uncivil Rites* “raises more questions than it answers.” Here, Detweiler correctly identifies the book’s main contribution to the fields of literary and cultural criticism, for its real strength lies not in its controlling idea—which is as unwieldy, finally, as it is compelling—but rather, in the author’s close analysis of the many fine texts he has chosen to illustrate his point.

Detweiler’s interest in postmodernism leads him to focus in part one, “The Body Politic,” on Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977), both novelizations of the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg trial. These are considered alongside Miller’s play *The Crucible*, which opened in 1953, the same year as the Rosenberg’s execution. Detweiler is interested in how the texts respond to the theological aspect of cold war rhetoric, specifically its crude opposition of communism as “atheistic, satanic, and evil” and capitalism as righteous and “godly.” Significantly, all three texts lay bare the confessional dynamic incited by McCarthyism, a dynamic that expresses itself in “the creation of an exhibitionistic-voyeuristic public space . . . one pathological expression of a public realm.” Straightforward and mercifully jargon-free in his prose, Detweiler urges us to view the Rosenberg fiasco as Miller does through his metaphor of the Salem witchcraft trials—as an example of scapegoating which is really about our neurotic need to incarnate and control evil.

The real, historical aspects of the Rosenberg affair were transformed into a public religious discourse in which the reality of communism is of little matter after all. The Rosenbergs, their ac-
cusers and defenders, and the larger American community then and since have engaged in a ritual of accusation and confession that both mimics and replaces a weakened formal religious ritual; Americans, in spite of their secularism, have attempted to explain the threat of communism in terms of the mythologizing of evil; and the trial not only took on substance as one of the most momentous acts of public exposure in the nation’s history but also established new conditions for the engineers of such exposure in uncovering and punishing evil.

In part two, “The Body Erotic,” Detweiler organizes his analysis around the problem of “disembodied” sexuality, that is, the fetishization and concomitant revilement of the physical body which effectively deny sexuality’s spiritual and emotional dimensions. He reads six texts that treat this problem either explicitly or implicitly: John Piemleier’s Agnes of God (1979), Ron Hansen’s Mariette in Ecstasy (1991), Gordon’s The Company of Women (1980), Morrison’s Beloved (1987), Larsen’s Quicksand (1928), and a little known first-novel by Elizabeth Dewberry Vaughn, Many Things have Happened since He Died (1990). Lacking a unifying historical event to lend coherence to this section, as the Rosenberg case does in part one, he proposes an archetypal pattern that runs through public discourses on sexuality and also informs the six texts: “a pattern of seduction, abuse, and abandonment that stands as an auxiliary formation to our still-flourishing... anticipations of romantic courtship, happy family life, and lifelong fidelity.” Although all of the texts (one play and five novels) are about women’s experience of sexuality, Detweiler’s argument for a connection between erotic and religious experience is cast in universal terms: “Our conflicted expressions of sexuality are closely connected to our efforts to learn and feel what it is that we believe.” I find this slippage between women and “we” somewhat suspect, and yet certainly the same argument about sex and alienation might be made using texts that feature male protagonists; indeed, I would be interested in a study that examined the same trio of problems—seduction, abuse, and abandonment—from the perspective of protagonist perpetrators. Having said this, I feel grateful to Detweiler for introducing me to Vaughn’s novel, which is certainly now on my to-read list; I also commend his decision to ignore canonical boundaries by setting Vaughn side-by-side with established writers like Larsen and Morrison, who supply new moral questions every time one reads them. One especially powerful chapter in this section examines Larsen’s and Morrison’s treatment of shame as a mechanism of control by the dominant culture over black women’s bodies. Detweiler finds the character Beloved’s “shamelessness” a reflection of the slave-master’s own brazen moral failure and a vehicle by which, through her exorcism, the community in Morrison’s novel returns to a healthier sense of shame. Such moments of insight redeem Detweiler’s (frankly baffling) need to justify the inclusion of writers of color several times in his study: Does Morrison require justification? Perhaps he is imagining an audience that assumes female sexuality is separable from race, culture, and economic class.

Arguing against Harold Bloom’s claim that “the American desire to know... at all costs is an overwhelming gnosticism,” Detweiler maintains in part three, “The Body Apocalyptic,” that our quest for knowledge is “radically corporeal” and that we will sometimes approach self-annihilation in order to demonstrate this. His historical examples are the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee and the Vietnam War, and his texts include two contemporary novels and a film: Caputo’s Indian Country (1987), Erdrich’s Tracks (1988), and Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (the screenplay of which was completed in 1975, although the film itself, distributing four years later, departed rather dramatically from this script). Detweiler’s choice to pair two seemingly unrelated historical events is at first surprising, but he explains: “the drive to conquer the threatening Other on his and her own grounds... marked the Indian wars as well as the Vietnam venture.” Moreover, Vietnam is yoked to Native American concerns in Caputo’s novel, which features a veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and guilt over having caused his best friend’s death in the war. To heal himself, the protagonist, who is white and allegorically named Christian Starkmann, seeks the counsel of the dead man’s grandfather, an Ojibwa shaman named Louis St. Germaine. But the old man refuses forgiveness on the grounds that it “is not an Indian concept.” Having killed his friend through “misapplied technology,” a kind of alienation from the natural world, Chris ultimately seeks redemption through a kind of symbolic baptism: Returning to a river where he nearly drowned years earlier, he removes his clothes and swims across it, discarding the war memorabilia that connect him to the past. Detweiler sees an analogy between Chris’s post-traumatic stress disorder and white America’s recent efforts to come to terms with its exploitation of Native Americans:

[It] will not do merely to admit the guilt and request forgiveness. Forgiveness is not for the Native Americans to supply, certainly not before their heritage is somehow returned to them and maybe not even then (should that miracle occur), for Native Americans’ presence, still as the other, subverts the system that grasps forgiveness as a possibility or resolution. A harsher way of putting it is to say that a nation that produced the Indian apocalypse as an expression of Christian conquest does not deserve Christian forgiveness as a way out.

The lines must be redrawn. The dialogue with this uncanny dimension of our past and present must be reconceived in a way that
the uncanny presence at least in part proposes. Louis invites Chris to look within himself, but in the process the white man gains insight into the Indian’s ways. One could follow his example.

It is a radical statement, but I admire Detweiler’s candor; few literary scholars are willing to take a moral position (which is different than a political one) on issues of public policy, at least they are unwilling to do so in writing. Caputo, in an appendix (there are four, three by authors discussed in the book), adds that the novel was also meant to be a story about myths, myths not in the sense of lies or fables but in the sense of narratives by which we make sense of our lives and the world. Louis is a man whose sacred myths are in danger of being lost due to the influence of an alien culture; Starkmann is someone whose myths were obliterated in the fires of Vietnam.

Here again, Detweiler does what few scholars that I can think of would dare: he gives the novelist the last word.

Jana French


The most recent addition to Eerdmans’ Library of Religious Biography is the first in the series to treat a literary figure. *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, by Roger Lundin, the Clyde S. Kilby Professor of English at Wheaton College, examines Dickinson’s poetry as an “art of belief” in terms of both her characteristic subject matter and her devotion to the artistic process as a way of revealing the central truths of human existence. The book’s title points beyond the poems on the page, however: Lundin is equally concerned to show that the way Dickinson chose to live her life was itself a creative self-discipline of intensely focused spiritual exploration.

In many respects, Lundin’s work can be seen as a natural outgrowth of Dickinson scholarship over the last half-century. Previous biographers have traced the poet’s lifelong engagement with spiritual issues. The still definitive 1974 biography by Richard Sewall recognized Dickinson’s Christian heritage as the central force shaping her consciousness and writing. A dozen years later, Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s influential biography argued that Dickinson’s chosen paradigm for her own experience was the Genesis story of Jacob wrestling with God; from that premise, Wolff went on to interpret the poetry in almost exclusively religious terms. In the wake of many studies of Dickinson’s relationship to New England Calvinism and its spiritual counterforce Transcendentalism, Alfred Kazin’s *God and the American Writer* underscored the Amherst poet’s pivotal role in the intersection of American religion and art.

Lundin’s new biography makes even larger claims for his subject, for he calls Dickinson not only “the greatest of all American poets” (6) but also “one of the major religious thinkers of her age” (3). To support these judgments, Lundin analyzes Dickinson’s complex responses to the prevailing intellectual and social currents of her age.

Of primary importance is Dickinson’s attitude toward her Christian heritage. In Lundin’s view, it is an oversimplification and distortion to interpret her well-known refusal to follow family and friends in accepting formal Christianity as a revolt against a harsh, monolithic Calvinism. Lundin argues that the proper theological context for understanding Dickinson is not the Puritan world of Jonathan Edwards but a hybrid New School Calvinism that blended Whig republican ideals with evangelical moralism (13). Amherst College, to whose establishment Dickinson’s grandfather, father, and brother all committed themselves, articulated its mission in terms that exemplified the transformation of the Calvinist creed into a doctrine of social usefulness. The revivals of 1850 left Dickinson regretfully unconverted, unable to feel the wholehearted self-submission involved in a public profession of faith and acceptance of church dogma.

Yet, as her poems and letters richly document, she felt the necessity for faith, and never underestimated its cost. The very act of distancing herself from her social circle’s brand of religion was a corollary, Lundin asserts, of an essentially Protestant emphasis on the spiritual world within the self—an emphasis that Dickinson pursued to its limits, most dramatically in the increasing seclusion that coincided with her most prolific years as a writer. Because her Christian heritage played a crucial role in shaping her sensibility, Dickinson also remained unconverted to the optimistic faiths of romantic and transcendental philosophy. Although she could occasionally worship at Nature’s shrine, ultimately she could not reconcile the finitude and sufferings of life with those secular alternatives to Christian belief. And although she was well educated in the natural sciences that culminated in Darwin’s evolutionary theory, she accepted the new naturalistic science as accurate without embracing it as good (184). Thus a late poem moves from acknowledging that “God’s Right Hand /... is amputated now / And God cannot be found” to the recognition that the loss of belief spells the loss of meaning: “The abdication of Belief / Makes the Behavior small— / Better an ignis fatuus / Than no illume at all—” (#1551).

For Dickinson, then, belief is equally a necessity and a struggle. One of the virtues of Lundin’s biography is that he does not camouflage the impossibility of organizing Dickinson’s work into a steady progression toward either belief or unbelief. The integrity of the poems and the letters is the integrity of experiential truth, encom-
passing the fluctuations of doubt and confidence, denial and acceptance. Taken together, they "show Dickinson to have been a highly nuanced thinker who took theology seriously and who had an especially keen sense of the peculiar ambiguities of belief in the modern era" (144).

Dickinson's poetic use of the Trinity to scrutinize God's dealings with his creatures is a striking case in point, all the more striking against the backdrop of the Unitarianism espoused by the Emersonian transcendentalists and by her mentor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. In one of the most intriguing sections of the book, Lundin analyzes how the three Persons of the Trinity function as *dramatis personae* in Dickinson's art of belief (166-74). She frequently focuses on the Father to explore the soul's sense of an absent or hidden God, indifferent rather than just or merciful. Bridging the chasm is the Son, the incarnation of suffering love, the crucified one who does not erase mortality and alienation from God but rather shares it. As the soul struggles to follow in the footsteps of this "Tender Pioneer" (#698), the Holy Ghost bestows comfort, inspiration, and the mixed blessing of the endurance to walk "the Scarlet way / Trodden with straight renunciation / By the Son of God —" (#698).

The fluctuating faith that Dickinson dramatized by dissecting the doctrine of the Trinity characterized her throughout her life. In his penultimate chapter, Lundin demonstrates that in the period of successive losses which Dickinson called "The Dyings," from the death of her father in 1874 to her own death twelve years later, Dickinson struggled to believe in the comforting promise of eternal life. But one of Lundin's recurring themes is her unwavering confidence that artistic immortality had nothing to do with publication. Unlike many other scholars, Lundin is convinced that Dickinson never had any desire to publish her poetry except in the self-controlled forms of her letters and the small books into which she bound her poems, leaving them "in ordered form for discovery after her death" (141). Given the inward focus of her life, her poetry was an end in itself. In it she enacted an art of belief best summed up by the witty compression and life-and-death urgency of her own metaphor, "Faith—is the Pierless Bridge" (#915).

This biography offers many avenues of exploration for students approaching Dickinson. Chapter 8, "Vesuvius at Home," is a particularly good example of Lundin's judicious mixture of textual and cultural analysis. His explication of nineteenth-century American culture provides a valuable antidote to some of the clichés of Dickinson criticism, although references to twentieth-century figures such as Dinesen or Bakhtin sometimes seem forced or even irrelevant. Taken as a whole, the book tends to reiterate its central arguments rather than developing or deepening them, and certain chapters lack a clear focus. Lundin's prose style, however, is unfailingly clear as well as erudite. His biography never slights the complexity of this poet whose difficulty is as undeniable as her greatness.

Marion Meilaender


This is an ambitious book. And Christians should pray that it realizes much of what it intends.

While writing the book, Ellen Charry—the Margaret W. Harmon Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary—began seeing herself almost "as an Irish monk in a scriptorium, carefully preserving the tradition." One can see why. Displaying a remarkable gift for summarizing huge blocks of theological and philosophical writing, Charry opens up a conversation with pre-seventeenth-century theologians and doctrinal texts which today are widely regarded as either useless or harmful—works such as Augustine's *De Trinitate* and Basil's *On the Holy Spirit*. Within modern theological studies, the field that has been most indifferent to such works is precisely the field toward which Charry's project tends, the field of practical theology.

Charry calls her work "constructive theology," but this may be to underestimate the significance of her own project. In fact, she wants to transform the domain of practical theology altogether, and that is not all. With Ed Farley, David Kelsey and others, Charry is taking aim at the very structure of mainline seminary curricula, with their sharp distinctions between "academic" and "pastoral" fields, between the doctrinal and the practical, etc.

Through a series of careful studies of major theological treatises, Charry shows conclusively that doctrines are practical. The very idea confuses us, she continues, because even in theological schools we have lost touch with the pre-modern Christian doctrine of God, wherein truth, beauty and goodness mysteriously cohere. A key purpose of Christian doctrine has always been to guide believers, to help them live happier, more excellent lives, to encourage them to turn to God. As re-presented by Charry, the classic Christian tradition has always been solidly based in a conviction modern Christians are only now beginning to rediscover, to wit, that knowing and doing are connected, that virtue is formed as much through wisdom and insight as through practice and behavior.

But through wisdom about what? Charry advocates a type of theology she calls "sapiential;" her entire project is condensed in this one word. I cannot do justice in the confines of this review, but its main elements are clear. Sapiential theology for Charry
is patristic theology. We flourish, the Church Fathers believed, by knowing and loving God. For them, knowing and loving God was “sapience,” and was the foundation of all human excellence. Such wisdom includes correct information about God, but emphasizes attachment to that knowledge. Sapience is, therefore, engaged knowledge which emotionally connects the knower to the known. Such an approach stands at some distance from most modern theology, which is no longer expected to be a practical discipline, burdened as it is with the awkwardness of speaking of God at all.

Indeed, sapiential theology has waned with modernity. As Locke, Hume, Kant and others gradually narrowed the categories of truth and genuine knowledge so they now all but exclude faith and sapience, most modern theologians have moved away from primary Christian doctrines and focused on theological method instead. Charry wants to reverse this process, and recover the practice-oriented content of central doctrines of the faith as an ancient and significant focus with relevance for modern theology.

But such a recovery is impossible without the development of a new reading skill—the final piece in Charry’s exciting proposal. She calls this new type of theological reading “aretegenic,” which means examining doctrinal texts for their various psychological and rhetorical strategies that ground human excellence in knowing and loving God. Though drawn from the Greek word for “excellence,” Charry’s neologism here strikes me as needlessly awkward. Since the strategies she mentions are always pedagogical, why not use the word “sermonic,” a familiar category that appears to capture much of what Charry has in mind? So whether in the New Testament or in the work of a modern theologian like Paul Tillich, such a reading will gravitate toward linkages between accounts of God and various construals of human excellence, giving particular attention to themes of imitation and modelling.

In sum, the book under review is worth any reflective person’s time and attention. In the opening chapter, Charry remarks that her work arose from reading classical texts in Christian theology slowly. May Charry’s fine volume help us all to read slowly enough to discern the divine pedagogics at work in Christian theology today.

Wayne Boulton


The centenary of C.S. Lewis’s birth was marked by dozens of conferences, lectures, and articles commemorating the anniversary. With a new year, perhaps interest in Lewis will fall to its normal, albeit not insignificant, level with books and conferences on Lewis back in the high single digits, rather than double-digits. Of the wide array of publications last year, one of the most voluminous works is this encyclopedic undertaking by Jeffrey Schultz and John West. It is a book which well deserves consideration in 1999 and in the years to come.

At 464 pages, The C.S. Lewis Readers’ Encyclopedia is certainly as complete a comprehensive reference as has yet been assembled on the life and work of C.S. Lewis. It is indeed an encyclopedia, with more than 800 alphabetically arranged entries. The entries cover all of Lewis’s works and include letters and poems, people and places which influenced Lewis, as well as discussions of Lewis’s basic philosophical and theological concepts. The book also includes brief entries for all of Lewis’s published but uncollected letters. Simply knowing where to find these letters can prove a significant time-saver to the serious researcher. In addition to the encyclopedic entries, the book presents a biography, a list of research resources, and a timeline. There is at least one shortcoming to what otherwise appears to be a well-organized index—many of the entries about the uncollected letters mentioned above. They are indexed by correspondent rather than by topic, meaning that someone looking for a letter commenting on a particular subject would have to read them all in order to find out if Lewis comments on the subject in a letter.

Particularly useful for the academic or researcher are the bibliographies which follow most of the major entries and many of the minor ones. Oddly enough, however, many entries have no bibliography and others have bibliographies which appear incomplete. Some entries have, for example, quotations which are undocumented with a bibliographic entry. There is no apparent reason for these inconsistencies; perhaps they are what Christopher Mitchell, in his foreword to the volume, euphemistically refers to as “a certain amount of unevenness with respect to particular entries” as a result of having so many contributors to the volume (8).

Doubtless the impressive list of contributors to The C.S. Lewis Readers’ Encyclopedia is the reason for its thoroughness in addressing Lewisiana. Editors Schultz and West have assembled the work of forty-three scholars, theologians, philosophers, and free-lance contributors to the volume. Most notable on the list are Kathryn Lindskoog, Wayne Martindale, and Valparaiso University’s own Gilbert Meilaender. Though Schultz and West appear to have done a remarkable job of quality control, some of the contributors are clearly better than others. The length and detail of certain entries, for example, is clearly driven by each individual contributor’s expertise and interests and does not necessarily reflect the proportionate importance of the topic in Lewis’s life and works. Commendable, however, is the fact that all entries do
meet a minimum standard and are straightforward and refreshingly free of the academic jargon which so often lards similar works.

The “Brief Biography” of Lewis which introduces the volume can hardly be called brief. Running some fifty-six pages, it manages to be both detailed and comprehensive. Biographer John Bremer, clearly a fan of Lewis, presents the man warts and all. Throughout, his concern with presenting an ostensibly objective account seems apparent. Claims Bremer, for example, of the eighteen year old Lewis, “He seems to have had powerful sexual feelings, not understood, not controlled, not controllable, but confused. While admitting that he could appreciate being the [sadomasochistic] ‘sufferer,’ he felt that this was more appropriate for women, and it was his role to inflict pain” (26).

One difficulty with *The C.S. Lewis Readers’ Encyclopedia* is deciding just what niche the volume will fill. For the neophyte or reader just discovering Lewis, the encyclopedia will most likely be a source of basic background information and perhaps a guide to direct further reading. Lewis scholars will already know much of the information in the entries, and the book might serve most usefully as a listing of locations for primary documents and other resources. The list of contributors serves as a convenient record of some of the most prominent contemporary Lewis critics. Despite the unevenness mentioned earlier, both the Lewis aficionado and the academic will find this a useful volume.

Sandra Visser

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on reviewers—

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Marion Meilaender

*is presently on staff at Albion College Library, has taught English at several colleges, and has published on seventeenth-century religious poetry.*

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George Slanger
lives and teaches in North Dakota, not far from the Canadian border. He and his wife cross-country ski in the
winter and canoe in the summer. His poetry and prose have appeared in Winterset, Plains Poetry Journal, and
North Dakota Quarterly.

Gary Fincke
recently published Emergency Calls, a collection of short stories and a poetry collection, The Technology of
Paradise, is coming out in May. Other new work is upcoming in The Paris Review, American Scholar, Gettysburg
Review, and Doubletake.

Celeste Duder
graduated from VU some years ago and is now pursuing a Ph.D. in speech-language pathology at Vanderbilt
University. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee with her husband and has published poetry in Borderlands.

William Aiken
works for a low-cost housing project in Appalachian Virginia. His most recent poems have appeared in Poetry

Diana Postlethwaite
Washington Post Book World, and Women’s Review of Books. Her movie reviews are nationally syndicated
on the public radio program “51%.”

Two wood carvings adorn the covers of this issue. The front cover displays a crucifix by the nineteenth-century
carver, Jose Aragon. It is a moving example of the kind of imagery I viewed with Adan Medrano in Houston last year.
Christianity is a religion that has at its historical and sacramental heart a practice of communication that presses
every bit of etymological meaning from the word “communication.” There is the communion of saints, the church;
there is communion with God in prayer and the sacraments and daily life; and there is communication, the transmis­sion and handing-down of good news. One might view every material practice in the religious life as a form of com­munion or communication.

In a religion that finds God manifest in the life and death of a man and articulated definitively in letters circu­lated among ancient communities, in a religion that regards the universe as originating in and as sustained by God’s
creative activity, everything is a medium. Even in spite of human alienation from God, as it is portrayed in George
Lopez’ Temptation in the Garden, the wood carving reproduced on the back cover, nature nevertheless communicates
something essential about God. In this carving, informed by the visual tradition in which Aragon created his sculp­tures, the old becomes new. This is a sophisticated piece of art that occupies the involuted cultural space of fine art.
Not really “folk,” not really ecclesiastical, neither secular objet d’art nor ethnographic curiosity, this work of child-like
naivete assembles the cast of a biblical narrative within an aesthetic category of ambivalence. This gives us pause to
wonder about how dependent we are on concepts of authenticity and accuracy in making sense of a medium.

But the old story in Lopez’ sculpture remains intact and is imbued with a novel humor and delight that serve as
welcome complements to the gravity and asceticism of Jose Aragon’s dead Christ. While the two parents of humanity
share the fruit of transgression, the leaves that Adam has collected in his naming of all things hang innocently, ar­rayed like clumps of drying clay. Even as the earth bears the sign of disobedience, the craftsmanship of Lopez’ art and
the splendor of carved wood announce a stubborn goodness, an image of creative zest that cannot be wiped away.
The message is there, in the medium of a tree, one carved with fruit and leaves, the other in the shape of a cross.

—DM
A DEATH NEXT DOOR

The ambulance came and went in darkness, while we were all asleep. Soon after sunrise, the pickup trucks begin to circle Pioneer Court. A guy in work clothes skates up the icy driveway, balancing a flat cardboard box of freshly-baked crullers, long johns, and deep-fried apple fritters from Quality Bakery.

All morning long, the frozen quiet of this December day is fractured by the sharp retort of slamming doors, the reluctant growl of engines sparked back into life. A fitful snowfall frosts the neighborhood with powdered glaze.

Once they’ve come and gone, all that’s left along the pavement of our empty cul-de-sac is a row of white rectangles, marking the place where the trucks were parked.

Diana Postlethwaite