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THE CRESSET is published seven times during the academic year by the Valparaiso University Press as a forum for ideas and informed opinion. The views expressed are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the preponderance of opinion at Valparaiso University. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Editor and accompanied by return postage. Letters to the Editor for publication are subject to editing for brevity. The Book Review Index and the American Humanities Index list Cresset reviews. Periodicals postage is paid at Valparaiso, Indiana. Regular Subscription rates: one year -- $8.50; two years--$14.75; Student subscription rates: one year -- $4; single copy -- $1.00. Entire contents copyrighted 1999 by the Valparaiso University Press, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383, without whose written permission reproduction in whole or in part for any purpose whatsoever is expressly forbidden.

Postmaster send address changes to The Cresset, #10 Huegli Hall, Valparaiso University, 651 S. College Ave., Valparaiso, IN 46383
Because of a year-long project about forgiveness, of which this issue of The Cresset is a first outcome, I’ve kept an article from the local paper lying out on my desk for some months. The headline reads: “Drunken driver sentenced in death of woman.” It concerns a local man who has been sentenced to serve eight years in prison for causing the death of a woman while he was driving drunk. This is so common a headline that it scarcely makes a ripple in our attention, unless you have spent the year thinking about forgiveness. By now I have quite a stack of clippings and miscellany about forgiveness, but the last paragraph of this story haunts me every day. Recounting the suffer­ings of the woman’s husband, children and parents, the reporter closes with this sentence: “I can’t ask for forgiveness from them, because I can’t forgive myself,” said Smith, shortly before he was handcuffed and led away by sheriff’s deputies.” (I’ve changed his name, but those are his words as reported.)

The term forgiveness is everywhere around us now, perhaps made more vividly colorful by all the talk about forgiveness during the accusations and revelations concerning President Clinton’s malfeasance. Daily, some part of the press was considering what it might mean to get into forgive­ness talk in this situation. If the President asked for forgiveness, who was supposed to extend it? How does it work? Does the concept have any meaning on an Institutional scene? And what might you do post-forgiveness? Any number of pundits were kept busy with these ques­tions, but the body politic was no wiser at the end of the discussion, and entered into a tacit agree­ment that simply ignoring the guilt/sin/crime (whatever it was) would be the simplest thing. We saw a demonstration of both ignorance and universal uncertainty about how forgiveness can be dis­cussed at all.

Such uncertainty, however, does not stop the term from being invoked. Witness the quotation above. Powerfully and hopelessly, the guilty person focuses on forgiveness. He has a clear notion (notably absent from anything in President Clinton's speeches) that forgiveness is something apart from the court procedure which has just concluded, and the sentence he is about to begin, as we tellingly say, to serve. His equation is that in order to be able to ask for forgiveness from his victims, he would have to be able to forgive himself, which is indeed a common enough phrase. “I'll never forgive myself” rolls off the tongue without hindrance, though we could hardly mean it very emphatically most of the times we use it. Mr. Smith, though, clearly perceives a hierarchy, or a process, in which something within the self must happen before the step involving the self and others. He looks (not surprising in a culture of individualism and self-help) for that first step to come from his own efforts. And his own efforts are ineffectual. “I can’t forgive myself,” he says, making this profoundly theological assertion in a ruthlessly direct form.

This transactional quality of forgiveness has always made it one of the most problematic of topics for Christians. Though it may be, as Walt Wangerin says, “the very bones of Christianity,” I have scarcely ever conversed about the Lord’s Prayer with someone who is not at least a little puzzled by the petition about forgiveness: Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Certainly Lutherans get very nervous at the possible interpretation that the “as” in that construction might be spelled out “to the extent that” or “as a result of our having forgiven” or even more bluntly, “after.” I have heard various ingenious, though no doubt carefully correct explanations, including of course Luther’s own, but our nervousness about the petition remains evidence that we find the...
procedure, the process, the order of steps difficult to account for in the world of undeserved grace. If our experiencing forgiveness from God is to be the result, or even worse, the correlative of our forgiveness of others, then are we indeed of all men most to be pitied for not one of us could be forgiven. To live in the kingdom of grace is to live knowing that the conditions of the environment demand that we extend to others the forgiveness we have experienced, but what if it is not happening? What if there is some kind of cosmic glitch keeping forgiveness bottled up someplace. A proper soteriology will provide all kinds of explanations about how forgiveness has been accomplished, but what makes it effective in the world as we know it?

Perhaps the Church has been frightened off this topic since the Reformation made it less simple to actualize the evidence of forgiveness with the dramatic clink of coin in the coffer. I wonder if, having thrown one's gold piece into the collection box and received an official piece of paper listing the indulgence one had thus earned, one actually felt more forgiven than many people do today? And did that clink and paper, which you could hear and see, make a difference in how you dealt with those around you? What was the effect of the physical practice of getting forgiven? We Protestants experience most often the official words for forgiveness in the Sunday liturgy, and while hearing these words weekly may constitute some kind of practice, it is not very fully involving. The passivity of it reminds us that, in the extension of grace, we are totally receivers. But it remains pretty thoroughly abstract, even in connection with that sip of wine and sliver of something that also ratify our citizenship in the kingdom of grace.

We can hardly ignore the world's cry for attention to the meaning and practices of forgiveness, though. If we have our eyes and ears open, we will hear it continually, in a dozen ways. Raymond Carver's wonderful story "A Small, Good Thing" for example, focuses on a moment at which what Christians must call forgiveness becomes the small good thing in a tragic situation of bitterness and loss. Anguished over the death of their young son in an accident, a mother has forgotten that she had ordered from a local bakery a special cake with his name on it for Scotty's birthday. As she and her husband face the shock and grief, the telephone persistently interrupts their calamity, and a man's voice angrily asks whether she has forgotten Scotty. Nearly mad with rage, she finally remembers the baker, and says she would like to kill him for doing this to her, demanding that her husband drive them, late at night, to the bakery. She screams at the baker that her son has died, that he has done something terrible by his callous threatening phone calls, and the husband emphasizes her accusations by saying "Shame. Shame on you."

The baker, grim and unlovely, says he is sorry, and asks if they can forgive him. They say nothing, but suddenly the husband takes off his wife's coat, and they sit down at a table. The baker tells them of his lonely life, and breaks open for them a dark loaf, "heavy bread, but rich." This story, re-told in the film Short Cuts, which Robert Altman made from a number of Carver stories, illustrates in elegantly brief form the dynamics of forgiveness. The baker is not, of course, directly responsible for the tragedy of the boy's death, yet he participates in a world in which this loss is only one of the quotidian sorrows we somehow cause each other. The couple accuse, but then must receive and accept something from this representative of the world, the person who has without meaning to do it, deepened their grief, made them more than ever knowing sufferers. The baker is accused of shame, asks for forgiveness, and offers them bread, which the three of them eat together. Other readings might even suggest the more directly divine qualities of the baker as he endlessly creates for others, yet remains uninvited to the parties he has provided, accepting the shame of the wrong he has not wittingly done, offering the rich bread and the table at which the three of them experience the "high, pale cast of light in the windows" as dawn signals a modest restoration of human community. However we read it, Carver's story at the very least points to a contemporary hunger for a genuine experience of forgiveness. Particularly striking in its presentation of a kind of ambient guilt, the story presents the baker as an emblem of the bearer of uncaused consequences. The world may not know how to understand forgiveness, but it offers eloquent testimony to the need for real words about the subject, and real practices to embody those words.
If arts and letters do not convince us that we need to spend some time on the structures of forgiveness in order to bring it to life in our world, certain hard political and social situations compel such attention. With all its difficulties, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation process demonstrates that where wrong exists, something other than retribution and punishment alone needs to take place if a community is going to move past the zero sum game of exchanging hurt for hurt, and wrong for wrong. Bill Moyers’ film about the process causes the viewer alternating joy and sorrow; there seems to be no way that mere humans can overcome so much evident evil and produce any good thing, however small. But over and over again, small miracles of forgiveness do occur, beyond any reasonable expectation of their success. Those who would struggle with much more mundane occurrences will need to study these transcripts and pictures as the raw material of ethical analysis and reflection for decades to come. The Truth and Reconciliation process makes evident that, though some kind of minimal reconciliation may be achieved on the basis of mere humanitarianism, forgiveness cannot happen in a blank, humanitarian space. Clearly, if people are going to experience the giving and receiving of forgiveness, they need a religious framework and the practices of religious life to give it substance.

Mr. Smith has it partly right: at the center of things was his act of harming another, and the only way to get things back toward the good lies in forgiveness. Something within him must receive forgiveness, which will enable him to ask forgiveness from those he has harmed. What most prompts our pity is not that he has committed wrong, but rather his belief that he has to forgive himself first. Such a belief damns him more profoundly than any legal process. Can there be a more striking example of the mission field than those among us who, convinced of their guilt, condemn themselves to the impossibility of self-generated forgiveness? Distracted by controversies over minor issues of policy, the conversations within church bodies drown out that despairing cry. But the Church must find a way to hear that cry, and meet it with the truth about the holy comfort of forgiveness.

Peace,

GME

the Cresset conversation on forgiveness

Because our practices of forgiveness, even in church, seem somewhat flimsier than our needs require, some careful and systematic look at how we practice the forgiveness we confess is imperative. If we knew better how the practices of forgiveness worked, and we had a better sense of the practices that impede it, we would be better able to make a more robust and rich contribution to the world’s understanding of the dynamics of forgiveness. As a small step in that direction, The Cresset has been honored to sponsor a conversation this year among five distinguished Lutheran preachers: Shelley Bobb, David Kehret, Thelma Megill-Cobbler, Frederick Niedner and Martin Seltz. We asked them to consider the resources within the Lutheran tradition for a more informed, more vibrant, more active attention to the practices of forgiveness. Further, we asked them to think through their considerations with an eye to the special challenges and blessings of Lutheran preaching. How could Lutheran preachers both inform and reflect the practices of forgiveness among the people, so that the Church might more effectively embody its wisdom about forgiveness?

That task is, of course, monumental and pretentious, but it has been undertaken with admirable skill, energy, hope, and humility. Four of the essays produced by this conversation are published here, and a fifth will follow in the fall of this year, accompanied by a bibliography of readings and films to stimulate thought and discussion on the topic. The conversation has been supported with funds from the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, directed with is by Dorothy Bass. In addition, with funds generously provided to The Cresset from the Gratzer Trust, a round table of readers will discuss these essays as we turn our attention of other traditions within the Church at large. Readers of The Cresset are encouraged to use these essays in whatever forums they may find them useful, in developing the conversation in their own circles. We would, of course, be grateful to hear from you of your experiences, particularly in what you have discovered of the practices through which forgiveness is active in your communities.
JUDGMENT

I have too many packages
underneath the bed for
that kind of reckoning.
A spider crawling up my back
the memory of that judgment—
moored to his death barge
plastic tubes in purple veins
blazing eyes flung open
wide as the day
he perched on the tower of the troopship.
My grandfather sailed out of his days
billowing the whole truth
and nothing but the truth,
his every memory and every feeling
sent floating across the room
as though he were laying it before God
and my grandmother.

Gordon Marino
His decision forced by the honking horn of the car behind him, Michael flipped his directional signal right and turned the corner. He had not driven down Jefferson Street in a year and a half. Avoidance? So, what now? Masochism? It was only a short detour. It would only take a couple of minutes.

The tree-lined street felt like home. The early, summer foliage filtered the late afternoon sun through the leaves. A neighborhood of small, older but well-kept, two-story homes, the streets and houses hadn’t changed in eighteen months. Still the same old problem of too many cars parked curbside, leaving scarcely enough room for others to pass by on the street. Nevertheless, there was space to pull over where he wanted, across the street and just short of the house. It had been repainted, same color but fresh, the shutters Michael once painted charcoal now a rich forest green. Other than that, nothing had changed. A stranger’s car was in the driveway, of course.

They were a nice couple, Michael recalled, though one never really gets to know the folks who buy your house. It was a nice “first house” for a young couple just starting out. Michael wistfully hoped it would not be the last house for their family. He had seen enough. He wasn’t going to sink into that. Michael put his car into gear, pulled out from the curb, and moved on down the street.

Now another “home” to return to. This one went further back, a full twenty years. He had just started junior high the fall his family moved there from across town. Was it still “home?” He didn’t think so. How old do you have to get to get before the house you grew up in is no longer home? Maybe that doesn’t happen unless there is someplace else you call home.

A familiar street. He had been on this one more frequently of late, though it had been some weeks now. Again shaded parkways, a bit older neighborhood, 60’s ranch-style houses. Michael slowed and turned up the driveway. Before he came to a stop Dad was waving from the open garage.

“Louise? Michael’s here,” Dad was yelling through the open kitchen windows. Mom was already at the side door and quickly down the cement steps to the driveway. Dad stood back, then he took his turn bear-hugging his son.

“Oh, Michael, it’s so good to see you!”
“Yeah. It’s good to be here with you.”
“Come on in,” Mom was saying, “and relax from your drive.”
“Right, you go on in with Mom. I’ll be on the patio stoking up the fire.” Dad turned toward the source of the light charcoal smoke penetrating the neighborhood, while Michael held the door for his mom and followed her on inside.

“Oh, let me hug you again.” Mom threw her arms once more around her son. “It seems such a long time. I do miss seeing you often.”
“Yeah, I know. I miss seeing you guys, too, as often as I used to.”
“You feel like skin and bones, Michael. You eating right?”
“No, I’m not. Way too much fast food. So, I was actually putting on some pounds and decided to join a health club. Been working out a couple of times a week, jogging, just to take the pounds off. It’s also a good way to meet new people.”
“Well, maybe we’ll give you a couple of pounds back tonight. Dad wanted to do steaks on the grill, and I’m just finishing a salad. There’s a special surprise for dessert.”

“Louise?” The call came from outside on the patio. “Fire’s ready. Send Michael out with the steaks.”

“OK, Michael, take this tray out to your dad. I think he has everything else out there. Tell him to yell when he turns them over, and I’ll put the bread in the oven.”

Michael picked up the tray and carried it out to the patio.

“Did you look at those rib eyes? Got them on sale at the Super Value. Just set them down on the table. Fire’s perfect. Why don’t you grab us a couple of beers? They’re in the refrigerator in the garage. You know the way.”

Michael knew the way. Looked like Dad was still insisting the only way to drink beer was out of tall brown bottles. Michael grabbed a couple and hunted for the bottle opener Dad had fixed to the side of the workbench. Dad must have been cleaning up the garage a bit. Was that Andy’s old bicycle upside down there with the back wheel off?

“That Andy’s bike in there?” Michael returned to the patio with the two brown bottles.

“Yeah. Remember, we took his stuff to store it when you moved? Put it to the back of the garage, but noticed the other day that the back tire was flat, so I picked up a new tire and tube. Turned out to be the wrong size. I’ll finish it up tomorrow.”

“Fixin’ it up for some kid in the neighborhood, Salvation Army?”

“No. I’ll keep it here in the garage. Just didn’t seem right for the tire to be flat. Here, take these potatoes in to Mom and see if she needs a hand. Tell her I’m turning the steaks.”

Michael picked up the bowl and carried it inside along with his beer.

“Dad said he’s turning over the steaks. Where do you want the potatoes?”

“Just set them on the table, on one of the pads. Oh, take the dinner plates out to Dad. You know how he likes to serve up from the grill right to our plates.”

Michael gathered up the plates and went back out with them. In a couple of minutes he returned with Dad, bearing sizzling steaks to the table. The bread was done. Everyone sat down at their places.

“Dad?” Mom invited.

Dad began. “Lord, we thank you for this food and for being together again...”

Michael heard Mom catch her breath, then try to hold a sob, without success. Before the prayer was over Mom was up and gone from the table.

“...Amen. She’ll be OK, Michael. Don’t worry. Sometimes it just sneaks up on her unexpected. It’s still close under the surface. Why don’t you start the salad.”

Michael filled his salad plate and passed the bowl to Dad. By then, Mom was back, wiping her eyes with a tissue.

“Sorry about that. I’m OK now. Here, Michael, take some bread and start the potatoes around.”

The food made its way around, and conversation became fragmented as everyone attended to the feast before them.

“I wish we could do this more often, Michael. I really miss having you close like before. I’m still not sure why you had to move.”

“Mom, we’ve been over that. There’s nothing for me here anymore. Now I’m close to my job instead of having to drive a hour each way.”

“How are things going at work?” Dad subtly tried to change the subject.

“Well, after ten years with the same company, it’s not exactly a new experience each day. But I did get that promotion late winter, which puts me on a whole new level of responsibility. There’s been a lot of long days and some weekends when problems come up.” Michael paused. “I’m sorry I said there was nothing here for me anymore. I didn’t mean that. There’s the two of you, yet, and you mean more to me than I can say. I guess if I could make that daily commute to work for nine years, I could find time to be back here for a visit more often. I’ll make an effort at that.”
They ate in silence again.

“But how about you guys? You won’t be around here much longer, will you? Don’t you both have retirement coming up next spring? Then it will be travel, travel, travel. And you’ve got that land up at the lakes.”

“Well, we’ve been doing some rethinking about that. They really would like Mom to stay on at the clinic, and I can keep the agency as long as I like. No mandatory retirement in the insurance business.”

“But, you’ve been planning for so long . . .”

“And, things have changed over the last two years. We really think our place is right here where we have always been.”

Mom began pushing her chair back from the table. “Well, I have a special dessert planned. Your favorite, Michael. Warm brownies with soft serve ice cream and hot fudge. But I forgot to pick up the ice cream. So, if you guys would make a quick trip out for it, I’ll pick up the table and have the rest ready when you get back.”

“Sounds good to me. My car’s in the driveway.”

Father and son went out to the car. Michael slowly backed down the driveway. They rolled down the windows and enjoyed the cooling evening air. The sky was turning dark and the first stars had begun to shine. Down the street then onto the boulevard they drove, then down the highway to the fast food places near the edge of town. Half the town seemed out for a summer evening’s drive, stopping for ice cream along the way. Michael pulled to the end of the line at the drive-through.

One car-space at a time they crept forward.

“Dad, I don’t know exactly how to bring this up, but what’s happening with the two of you. Is everything OK?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. What are you getting at?”

“Well, this whole thing with your retirement.” Michael pulled the car forward.

“Can I help you?” a metallic voice interrupted.

“Just a quart of soft-serve vanilla.”

“Pull around to the first window.”

“Yeah, like this thing with your retirement. How long have you been dreaming about it? How long ago did you start looking into that land at the lakes? And those travel magazines and brochures from everywhere under the sun? We’ve spent hours talking about your plans and now when it’s all within reach, suddenly you stop the dreaming and the planning and hunker down for another however many years of working, which you really don’t need financially.”

Michael pulled forward again.

“Two oh nine.”

Dad pulled out two dollars. Michael found a nickel and four pennies in the car divider.

“Pull up to the next window.”

“Well, Son, I suppose in some ways we’ve changed over the past couple of years. All that dreaming just went somewhere. We only went up to the lakes once last summer and haven’t been there since.”

“I noticed our wedding picture was gone from the mantle.”

“Oh, that’s been gone for some time.”

“And the family picture. The two of you, with Andy and Lorri and me?”

“Mom said it bothered her.”

“And in place of them, my high school graduation picture and that picture of Andy from, what, first grade?”

“We don’t have anything more recent.”

Michael moved ahead and was handed a bag at the second window. He passed it over to Dad and pulled away.

“Which reminds me. Don’t say anything to Mom. I really do like brownies and ice cream, OK? But that has never in my life been “My Favorite Dessert.” I don’t know if I have one. Please, I
appreciate Mom going out of her way to make a special treat. But brownies and ice cream and hot fudge were always Andy’s favorite thing, and Grandma’s special treat for him. What was going on with Mom at the table?”

Father and son drove in silence, the highway towards town, the boulevard, the darkening street, the driveway. A full orange moon rose over the horizon.

The buzzer on the stove timer was going off as they came in the side door to the kitchen. “Louise?”

“Just a second. I’m just putting a couple of things away.” She came in from the dining room, and, as if she could read minds, “No, don’t take the brownies out. Have to test them with a toothpick first. Just put the ice cream in the freezer.” She fiddled around in the oven. “We’ll give them another five minutes.” Louise reset the timer.

“Now, Michael, I have something very special to show you. Come with me.” Louise led the way out of the kitchen and down the hall toward the bedrooms. She stopped just short of a door. “Close your eyes.”

Michael puzzled but obeyed his mom. She took his arm, led him forward, and turned him into the doorway. “Now open them.” Michael opened his eyes and blinked. He was looking into Andy’s room. Andy’s curtains. Andy’s bedspread. Andy’s bookshelves, books, a couple of soccer trophies, model cars. A dresser with school pictures and a couple of small toys. In the corner Andy’s airport and farmyard, baseball bat, glove. On the walls, Andy’s posters.

Michael felt dizzy. He reached out to the door frame to steady himself. The kitchen buzzer went off.

“Oh, there’s the brownies.” Mom took off down the hallway with Dad following to help. Michael stood in the bedroom doorway alone. He took a step into the room, then quickly back to the doorway. Once this had been his room, from junior high through high school. It had still been his room, summers anyway, through college and a bit beyond. Then he found his own apartment. Then he got married. “Michael’s Room” gradually become a guest bedroom. He had slept there a couple of times the past year. But now this!

Michael turned and wandered down the hall to the living room. He sat down, still feeling disoriented.

“We’ll let them cool down a little.” Mom, then Dad joined Michael in the living room. “What do you think? Isn’t it wonderful?”

“I... I don’t know what to say. How did you...? Where did you...?”

“Remember when you moved? You didn’t know what to do with Andy’s things? So we said we could store them away? We finally decided they didn’t belong boxed up in the basement.”

“But I thought we’d find someplace to give them away, soon as I got settled. I’m sorry. I put it off. Didn’t mean to burden you with them.”

“Michael, that was no burden. Our grandson’s things are no burden. And we were not about to give them away to God-only-knows-who! We were not about to see Andy’s things trashed. They’re all we have.”

Dad was sensing Michael’s unease. “We probably shouldn’t have just surprised you like that.”

“It was something of a shock. I wasn’t quite prepared for it. I guess I’m OK now. But that doesn’t change what you have done. Andy’s gone. He’s not coming back. You make it look like he might just drop any time for the weekend.”

“I think it’s a comfort for your mother, Michael.”

“And what about Andy’s bicycle, Dad? If you had the right tire, you’d have it sitting out there in the garage ready to ride. Andy’s never going to ride that bicycle again!”

“How can a parent just put their child out of mind like that, Michael, even when he’s gone?”

“I’m not putting Andy out of mind, Dad. I will never be able to do that. I think of him every
day. I stopped by the cemetery on my way in. Put out some flowers. And, I have my mementos, too. But I have not created a shrine as if I’m trying to live in a world in which he is still with us.”

The three sat in awkward silence for a few minutes. Nobody knew where to take things.

“Shouldn’t the brownies be cooled off a bit now, Louise?”

“Yes. They should be ready to cut. Give me a hand with the ice cream, OK? Michael, how about we eat dessert at the dining room table? Could you put out some spoons and napkins?

Everybody went to their tasks, relieved to have something to do. Michael put out the silverware and napkins. Mom and Dad paraded from the kitchen with three bowls of soft-serve vanilla ice cream over warm brownies covered with fudge sauce.

Mom took the smaller bowl to her place. Dad distributed the two large bowls between himself and his son. They all sat and began exploring the edges of their desserts.

“Mom, Dad,” Michael paused for a second, “there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“You know you can always talk with us about anything, Michael.”

Michael waited, using a couple of bites of ice cream and brownie as an time to collect his thoughts. “I imagine you may have gotten a couple of letters from Lorri?”

“I’m sorry, Son, we do not use that name in this house.”

“Then that’s going to make this conversation rather difficult, Dad, because we need to talk about her.”

“I’m not certain she is someone your mother and I wish to talk about. But we will, for your sake, if you need to. Yes, I believe a couple of letters did come with her distinctive return address on them over the past months. Mom put them where they belonged, in the waste can. We didn’t open either one of them. If you know about the letters, then she must have written to you as well.”

“She didn’t write. She told me directly.”

Mom put her spoon down carefully. “You have gone out there to see her?”

“They have visitation times on Sunday afternoons.”

“Your attorney could have taken care of the divorce papers and whatever other legal things needed to be signed?”

“Yes, Dad, my attorney saw to all that. I went to visit her for my own reasons.”

Mom had pushed her half finished brownies away. “I can not imagine you having any reason to see her. You have nothing in common any more.”

“We are still both the parents of Andy, Mom, and we do have nine years of marriage to each other in common. Just because things didn’t work out doesn’t mean that I have to hate her!”

“Things didn’t work out? Michael, she murdered our grandson!”

“Mom, that’s pretty strong language.”

“Louise . . .” Dad began, then stopped. “Michael, lawyers and courts may play around with language, but there’s no getting around the fact that she was the direct cause of Andy’s death.”

“Nobody is denying that, Dad. She would be the last person to deny that. She never has. Don’t you think that fact eats away at her day and night? Even the judge wanted to drop all the charges, because he knew she would suffer the rest of her life. It was only because of that previous car accident when nobody was hurt but her alcohol level was just over the limit, that the prosecutor pushed for manslaughter rather than motor vehicle homicide. And she pled guilty! No challenge! Then the judge’s hands were tied. Two years was the least sentence he could give her.”

“You have always defended her, Michael, I can’t understand it.”

“I’m not defending her. Nobody is defending her.”

The brownies were sitting in melted pools of ice cream and swirled hot fudge. Only Michael still fiddled with his. Through the open dining room windows, the calls of parents to bring their children in out of the dark could be heard.

“It turns my stomach, Michael,” Mom couldn’t hold back any longer, “to think of you going out to visit her in that place. But more than that, it hurts me deeply to know she is wrapping you around her little finger and then sending you as her emissary to get something out of us.”

“She did not send me here, Mom. She tried to contact you directly by letter, not through
me. It was only when you didn’t respond that she asked me. Actually her chaplain suggested it. The chaplain was the one who first suggested the letters to you. It’s all part of her preparing to get out.”

Mom drew in her breath, “She’s getting out?”

“With one day off for each day of good behavior, she will have her first interview with the parole board in a couple of weeks. By end of July she should be released. The chaplain tries to help folks pave the way for reentering the outside world.”

“And so she wants your Mom and me to help in her transition to normal life, I suppose. What does she want? Money to live on? Job leads?”

“She wants to ask for your forgiveness.”

The dining room, the house, even the neighborhood was absolutely still. Mom began to tear and reached into the pocket of her slacks for the tissue left over from dinner. Dad’s face reddened as if he were ready to choke. Finally, he managed to commandeer a calm but cold voice. “I simply cannot imagine her audacity, after what she has taken from us, to ask for such a thing. And you have to have some balls, Michael, to even think of bringing that request to us!”

“I wouldn’t have had to if you simply would have opened her letters.”

“And I suppose next you would like to see us cozying up to her in prison like you seem to be doing. Maybe you belong there yourself!”

“I am not cozying up to her in prison! Most of the time I pick up her dad and take him along, since he doesn’t like to drive on the highways anymore. Mostly they talk. I ask if there is anything she might need that we can bring. I would not call that cozying up.”

“Well, it’s more than I would do.” Mom had regained her composure. “I suppose you just can’t wait for her to get out.”

“Mom, the divorce is final. Andy’s death pushed things over the edge, but our troubles went back before that. That doesn’t mean I don’t care about her. Yes, I will be there for her when she gets out, but she will have to get on with her own life. Somehow I have to get on with mine.”

“Well, I think you know she will never be welcome here. She asks for more than we can ever give or should be asked to give. And if you forgive her, if you turn your back on your son and on us and on the pain she has caused all of us, then you don’t belong here either.”

“I hope to God you don’t forgive her, Son. She doesn’t deserve it, though I imagine she has come begging to you, too.”

“She has asked. From the day it happened, she has asked me to forgive her. I haven’t been able to. Not yet. It just isn’t there, yet. That doesn’t mean it never will be. It just isn’t in my heart yet. Not honestly. I can’t speak empty words that I don’t honestly mean. I’ve told her that. She says she understands. I hope someday.”

“I hope that day never comes, Michael. If it does, if you ever forgive her, then all her guilt and all her shame will be on you. You’ll belong right up there in prison with her.”

“My life is frozen, Dad. It has been frozen in place for two years. Someday it has to go forward again. I don’t think that can happen until I am able to let go of this whole thing from the inside, until I honestly can say to her, ‘I forgive you.’ Lorri can live with or without my forgiveness. I want that day to come for me. When it does, it will feel like a gift.”

“So then the two of you can get back together like nothing ever happened and forget all the grief she has brought into our lives?” Mom was back in the fray.

“It’s not about the two of us getting back together. But I will never be able to throw my heart into any other relationship until I let go of this. I want a life. If you want to go on endlessly being grandparents living with an eight-year-old grandson who never is going to grow a day older, that is up to you. I need a life!”

“We will not forgive her. Ever. You need to know that. And if you ever do . . .”

“That day is going to come. It has to come. I pray for it to come. And when the day comes that I find it possible to forgive her—if I say ‘No,’ then I fear I will wake up some morning and the sun will not rise, the moon will not shine, and one by one the stars will wink out.”
BIG NAME

If I had a big name
I'd let it carry me
for a while. It would be
like having a broad-shouldered
older brother who'd open doors
and introduce me
to his friends.

Having a big name
would be like having a dog,
the kind everyone wants
to pet—they'd cross the street
to greet us already smiling,
hands extended, willing to sit
on their heels.

I want a name as big as
a castle, with a library
in one of the turrets
so I can read and write
quietly, above the heads
of curious tourists, just as I do
in their dreams.

I want a name
so big it's visible from 35,000 feet
at night.

I want a name small
as a key that turns
in every lock.

Sharon Bryan
Thinking about practices of forgiveness leads us back to those earliest practices we know of, and their appearance in the Gospels. Judas' story may be the (literally) crucial test of our theologies of forgiveness.

Y ou must make atonement if you sin, even inadvertently. Bring an offering to the priests. A lamb or goat will do, or shekels of silver. If you can’t afford that, bring doves or pigeons. The priests will receive your offering and pronounce absolution. Thus you shall be forgiven. So says the Torah (Leviticus 5).

Sometimes, however, sins go unforgiven because there’s no telling who ought to atone. In some scenarios, for example, many bear a share of the guilt. Then everyone becomes unclean, tainted and tinged with the bitterness of mishandled, untended sin. For that, too, Torah provides a ritual. Once a year the priests select a pair of identical, male goats, and before all the people they cast lots over these dumb animals. Having secured their distinguishing sign, the priests attribute all the people’s sins to one of the goats and then chase him and the sin he bears into the wilderness, never to be seen again. The priests slaughter the second goat, and its blood they splatter about for the cleansing of the people from their sins. It works. The people are cleansed. So says Torah (Leviticus 16).

The earliest Christians knew this theology of forgiveness like they knew the silhouette of Jerusalem at sunrise. No doubt they still practiced it. But their circumstances led them to ponder about the sins of the whole world, not just their own or Israel’s.

Moreover, early persecutions forced believers to handle the effects of a polarized world where sometimes one of our guys fell in with the nasty villains, while still others denied their connection to us, even cursing Christ in the process to save their sorry hides, while others died bravely and with integrity. Traitors and lapsed believers caused everyone heartache, including themselves, because all too often they hung around. Sometimes they even came back and begged forgiveness.

The Gospel of Matthew addressed a Christian community hard at work on sins of just this kind. As a consequence, we know Matthew’s as the gospel of sins forgiven, the good news of the restless reconciler.

If you need to handle sin, and you’ve been formed amongst Bible-believing Christians, you know that Matthew contains the operating instructions. You prepare to do Matthew 18.

You talk to the person in private. If that doesn’t work, you get two or three fellow-Christians to accompany you and have another talk with the perpetrator. If you still fail to achieve reconciliation, you convene a congregational meeting and air the matter there. If even that gets you nowhere, then treat the other like a tax collector or a Gentile (Matthew 18:15-20). If you can’t recall how to treat tax collectors and Gentiles, remember that your model for action is Jesus, whose behavior patterns, in turn, follow those of the tireless Shepherd in his own parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:10-14).

Peter speaks in this gospel for those of us who catch on to the scandal of this economy of forgiveness. “How often must we go through this? Seven times? Is that enough?” (Can you hear the lilt of sarcasm in his voice?)

Jesus responds with a number that serves as the Semitic equivalent of infinity. “Multiply the
perfect number by ten times the perfect number, Peter. That's how often.” (Matthew 18:21-22).

Then Jesus tells the harsh parable of the unforgiving servant who gladly had his own debts erased but went right out and smoked some poor bloke who owed him the price of a deli lunch. Failure to forgive, or refusal to learn forgiveness, eventually builds a maximum-security prison that holds the hard-hearted in a smelly cell we'd never, ever want to visit (Matthew 18:23-35).

So far we've seen how far God means forgiveness to go. Is there anything that lies beyond the reach of God's forgiveness, or ours?

Jesus answers this in Matthew's narrative when he responds to those who accused him of casting out demons by the old Bug God, Baalzebub. “Every sin and blasphemy of humankind shall be forgiven,” Jesus says, “including speaking against the Son of Man. The only thing unforgivable, either now or in the age to come, is blaspheming the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 12:31-32).

Many have undertaken further definition of this “blaspheming the Holy Spirit.” We remind ourselves here merely that blasphemy means literally to “speak emptiness” toward something, to reckon it vain, powerless, of no account. This sin may well be as simple as it is deadly. When God says, “I can and will forgive everything,” all you need say is, “I'll bet you can't!”

There's the premise for a drama. Now, enter some characters.

First, Jesus, whom Matthew introduces in a birth narrative, long before the child is born. A messenger comes to Joseph in a dream and explains that the child’s name shall be called “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). This much we know for sure, the name Jesus means sins forgiven. We'll see later how that plays out.

Next, we need some sinners. Peter and Judas will do, one a traitor and the other among those weaklings who deny the faith and then come crawling back to beg reinstatement a day or two after we're done burying the real believers who stood firm and died for the cause of the gospel.

Matthew introduces these two not only as individuals, but as profiles the church knew well. They appear in the little parable about two fellows in Matthew 21:28-32. “What do you think?” Jesus asked. “A father asked his two sons to work for him. One says, 'Sure,' and fails to follow through. The other refuses, but then repents and comes back to the vineyard. Which did the father's will?”

In the paragraphs soon after, Peter boastfully insists he'll go all the way with Jesus, even if it means dying. And there's not a Christian anywhere who doesn't know what Peter did on the fateful night just before the cock's crow made a sorry joke of all that boasting.

Judas, meanwhile, said “No.” He spoke against the Son of Man when he went to the chief priests and agreed to betray Jesus. In the end, however, he repented and came back. Oddly enough, it was Judas, not Peter, who died that night with Jesus.

There was no Matthew 18, at least not on paper, when the disciples and Jesus had to figure out what to do with Peter a few days later when he came in out of the night with salty tears dried to his face and beard, and that wretched look of the failed braggart smeared over his countenance. But likely the group did some equivalent of that procedure, and so far as we know it only took a single try to work reconciliation with the Rock who'd tripped over himself.

Judas, however, presented another problem. He could have come back. He'd still been there to take his turn when Jesus had passed around the cup of his blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, when Judas planted the kiss of betrayal on Jesus' lips, Jesus called him “Friend.” Yes, even in that moment, Jesus spoke in the discourse of connection, not alienation.

But Judas didn't come back to beg like Peter must have. He tried to handle his sin in the only way he knew how.

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money." After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been
spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.”

(Matthew 27:3-10)

This account of Judas’ demise has drawn almost universal condemnation upon the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Commentaries typically head this section with titles like, “The Dreadful End of Judas: An Example that Warns against Treachery in the Church during Persecution” (Gundry 552). Another scholar, well-known for his own forgiving spirit, wrote, “From the history of Judas the disciples learned that there is an uncannily certain point, a point which no man can determine in advance, from beyond which a man can no longer return in repentance to his Lord” (Franzmann 204).

Are we stuck with this epitaph on Judas, and on any other traitors we might know, including those who lurk inside our own skins?

Before we can answer this, we must jump ahead in Matthew’s gospel for a moment to look at Jesus’ death, for a bit earlier we left a promise hanging, namely, that this Jesus would save his people from their sins. Maybe, just maybe, Judas is one of those people.

In Matthew’s gospel we find the almost bizarre circumstance of Pilate’s presenting two men named Jesus to the crowds on the day of the crucifixion (Matthew 27:15-26). “Which Jesus do you want, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus called messiah?”

The priests conspire to have the people make a choice, and one Jesus, the notorious prisoner accused of many crimes, is released, never to be heard from again. The other is then slaughtered, his blood splattered around Golgatha. And all the people cried, “His blood be on us and on our children.” Far from being the curse it’s been so often assumed in the history of Christianity, this is a request that this blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins might cover these petitioners, too. These, too, after all, had spoken against the Son of Man—a quite forgivable wrong.

We have witnessed here an Atonement ritual. Matthew’s gospel would have us believe it the ultimate Atonement.

Up to this point, Judas, like Peter, could still have been reconciled to the community by means of the procedure prescribed in Matthew 18. Nothing in Matthew requires that the community of disciples exclude Judas or refuse forgiveness. At worst, he might now be numbered among the Gentiles and tax collectors.

However, his suicide cut him off from any attempt the community might have made to bring him back. No speech, however persuasive, could overcome the breach that began with Judas’ treachery and that death has now made permanent. But is Judas lost also to himself and to God? Or did Jesus’ blood atone for Judas’ sin, too? That is, could God forgive what a community could not?

We return to the scene of Judas’ demise (Matthew 27:3-10). Upon seeing Jesus condemned to death, Judas repented, returned the thirty pieces of silver to the priests, and confessed his sin. Judas seemed to comply with the procedure outlined in Leviticus 5:14-16. The priests, however, failed to fulfill their part of the ritual. By withholding forgiveness, they left Judas still retaining his sin. His collaborators in treachery have now betrayed him as well. By withholding absolution they pinned Jesus’ death on his miserable soul.

Refused forgiveness, Judas executed judgment upon himself by committing suicide. He left the money behind and hanged himself.

All that remained of Judas now were those blood-covered silver pieces that had cost Jesus his life. Blood money could not be used in the temple, so the priests bought a field from a local potter for burying strangers. Up to the narrator’s time it was known as “the Field of Blood,” named, of course, for Jesus’ blood, that very blood which atones for the uncleanness of the people and effects forgiveness. At the very least, it seems, by this account Matthew extends the forgiveness of Jesus’ atoning blood to those strangers or foreigners who would be buried in the plot of ground purchased with that blood. Matthew might have given an unambiguous clue as to whether that blood’s effects extended to Judas by having Judas buried there among the strangers in the Field of Blood. But Matthew doesn’t say that happened.
Instead, Matthew cites the most complex and difficult of the eleven “formula quotations” which punctuate this gospel.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.”

Matthew 27:9-10

The complexities involved in discerning the intent of this citation begin with the fact that no such text appears in Jeremiah. Instead, Matthew here quotes loosely from Zechariah 11:12-13. While important in other ways, the Zechariah connections are not relevant to the question of Judas’ ultimate fate and forgiveness. Rather, the question of Judas’ eternal fate attaches much more directly to portions of Jeremiah’s prophetic legacy.

But which portions? Matthew leaves that for readers to determine. Commentators point to several Jeremiah texts as relevant. In Jeremiah 19, the prophet, obeying a command of the LORD, buys a potter’s earthen flask and goes out to prophesy destruction over the Valley of Ben-hinnom, renaming it the Valley of Slaughter, because among other things, the people had filled the place with the blood of innocents. Jeremiah goes on to prophesy the destruction of Jerusalem as punishment for the sins of the people.

Jeremiah’s purchase of the field of Anathoth for seventeen shekels of silver (Jeremiah 32) also invites consideration here, since purchase of a field is a key element of the story of Judas’ death as well as of the quotation Matthew has fashioned. At the time of purchase, the Babylonian army held the entire region that included the field. Cousin Hanamel thought the imprisoned Jeremiah wouldn’t know this and he could pawn off something worthless for a few shekels. However, Jeremiah did know, but bought the field anyway as a sign of hope and a witness to his confidence that the LORD of hosts would restore the people of God who faced punishment for their wrongdoing (Jeremiah 32:15, 42-44). Linking Jeremiah’s field of hope to Matthew’s field of blood prompts the reader of Matthew to think hopefully about the prospects for forgiveness and inclusion of those strangers and aliens whose path through this world ends in that field. Perhaps Judas, a stranger by sorry choice, rests among them.

Associating Judas’ death with Jeremiah’s prophetic career as described in Jeremiah 19 raises other fascinating and perhaps even disturbing possibilities for what Matthew invites the reader to see in the story of Judas’ life and death. Jesus said to the disciples at their last meal together, “The son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born” (26:24). This last line appears also in the context of Jeremiah 19, though in this instance Jeremiah says it about himself. As at other times in his difficult career, Jeremiah’s forecast of destruction or his urge to surrender to Babylon was judged as treason (cf. Jeremiah 26 and 32), and immediately after the oracle over the Valley of Ben-hinnom, the chief officer of the temple took Jeremiah into custody, had him beaten, and placed him in stocks (20:1-6).

Immediately following this narrative comes the last of Jeremiah’s bitter “confessions” (20:7-18), which concludes with lines such as, “Cursed be the day I was born! The day my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!” and “Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?” If indeed someone had to hand Jesus over for slaughter in order for the atonement Matthew envisions to reach completion, then Judas’ role is analogous to Jeremiah’s role of handing over Jerusalem to Babylon. Both are hated for what they did and both despaired of their lives as a result.

Did Matthew see Judas (and all other traitors in his audience of first-century Christians) as forgiven, at least by God if not by the community of disciples or the priests at the temple? A careful reading of Matthew does not preclude such forgiveness. Indeed, it holds out hope for that possibility. By connecting Judas’ life and death so closely to Jeremiah’s career and his purchase of the field of hope, Matthew holds out hope that the innocent blood Judas had betrayed, which in turn
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by God's own plan had become the blood which “saved Jesus' people from their sins,” could also extend to Judas. Thus, even though the community of disciples could not restore Judas to their number because he cut himself off from them by means of suicide, and though the unfaithful priests refused him forgiveness, it still may be that God, the shepherd who cannot tolerate the loss of even a single sheep, might have Judas back again through the effects of the innocent blood Judas betrayed.

Ultimately, it's not so much Judas' fate that concerns us. His broken soul has rested now for two millennia in some corner of God's own aching heart. The dragging weight on our own consciences has to do with the sins and betrayals we have left lying about untended in our own world, and the fates of those who have died without our being reconciled. Unforgiven sins and festering alienations stalk the earth with wrecking balls at the ready, much like so many of our forebears thought their ancestors walked among them unseen but looking for trouble. We need not look so far as Ireland, Israel, or Yugoslavia for evidence. We see plenty in our own synods, congregations and families.

“Love is strong as death,” says the Song of Songs (8:6). History proves repeatedly, however, that hatred is stronger than either, and revenge rises up from the tombs to slay the great-great-grandchildren of long-dead traitors. Only one thing can meet and overcome this dread power—the blood that bought the desolate field where strangers lie in the dust, their shameful secrets now hid from all but God.

You must make atonement if you sin, even inadvertently. If someone sins against you, go and speak convincingly. You must make reconciliation happen, even if it takes the whole church.

We try, we really do—at least sometimes. Often as not, we fail.

We had best join the crowds in Matthew's story. “His blood be on us, and on our children!”

works cited


he influence of hymnody in forming belief and shaping piety has often been noted. Lex orandi, lex credendi certainly applies to words that are placed on the lips of the faithful over the course of a lifetime. Words married to melody and rhythm have a way of weaving their way into memory in a way that even familiar spoken cadences do not always do.

The Lutheran reformers and several centuries of their hymn-writing heirs noticed and exploited this capacity of congregational song as a bearer of the word of God and as a powerful mnemonic aid to fix the imprint of that word in the heart and mind. Many of the hymns of this tradition from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries were versed pedagogy, with the number of stanzas often well into the double digits. Such hymns were a practical tool for teaching the faith; Martin Luther’s catechism hymns are a good example. Later Lutheran hymn writers such as Paul Gerhardt and Nikolai Grundtvig infused this catechetical focus with a more transparent individual piety, but edification remained a primary goal.

This study grows out of conversation stimulated by Practicing Our Faith, a recent assessment and evocation of representative practices of the Christian life. “Singing our lives,” the chapter by Don Saliers, describes one of those practices, not only as a distinctive (and increasingly counter-cultural!) practice in its own right, but also a means of inculcating other practices of faith. Because the above-mentioned conversation focused upon another of the practices, the practice of forgiveness, the question that I would like to explore is how the church’s hymnody has articulated and supported the practice of forgiveness. Not an exhaustive analysis, these are observations limited to the hymnic repertoire of North American Lutheran worship books in the last half of the twentieth century, with attention also to more recently written hymns and songs.

middle 20th century worship books

The survey begins with two primary mid-20th century worship books, The Lutheran Hymnal (1941, hereafter TLH) and Service Book and Hymnal (1958, hereafter SBH). Singing through the legacy of hymns that has been captured in these books, one can see a primary focus upon the content and expression of the fundamental story of salvation and upon the Christian (and the Christian community) in relationship to God. Much less frequent is reflection upon the Christian in relationship to other people, either within or outside the community of faith.

This emphasis is revealed to a degree by the section headings in both books. TLH contains hymns in sections titled Confession and Absolution, as well as Justification and Faith. SBH includes sections titled Repentance and Faith, as well as The Inner Life. Within these sections the hymns deal almost exclusively with the confession of human sin over against God and with the assurance of God’s forgiveness. The language of sin and forgiveness is not limited to these sections, of course. Many of the other hymns use (our) sin and (God’s) forgiveness as a fundamental paradigm for articulating the work of God in Christ.

However, the references to people forgiving one another are extremely rare. Two points in the life and teaching of Jesus inspired some hymnic reflection: the word of forgiveness from the cross
and the forgiveness petition of the Lord's Prayer. Though most likely limited in its actual use, the Paul Gerhardt hymn “Upon the cross extended” contains the most extended reflection on the practice of forgiveness in these worship books:

When evil men revile me,
With wicked tongues defile me,
I'll curb my vengeful heart.
The unjust wrong I'll suffer,
Unto my neighbor offer
Forgiveness for each bitter smart (TLH 171, st. 11).

Similarly, the stanza of “Jesus, in thy dying woes” associated with “the first word from the cross” includes the prayer:

0 may we, who mercy need,
Be like thee in heart and deed,
When with wrong our spirits bleed:
Hear us, holy Jesus (SBH 81, TLH 180, st. 3).

Luther’s catechism hymn based on the Lord’s Prayer paraphrases the fifth petition:

Forgive our sins, Lord, we implore,
Remove from us their burden sore,
As we their trespasses forgive
Who by offenses us do grieve.
Thus let us dwell in charity
And serve our brother willingly. (TLH 458, st. 6).

Apart from these specific references, there are other hymns that speak in more general terms of love for the neighbor, of Christian charity, of bearing one another’s burdens. Notably, TLH contains several hymns that emphasize the surety of forgiveness extended by the ordained through holy absolution.

It is not wholly surprising that so little mention is made of the practice of forgiveness in this generation of hymnody. These hymn collections are by and large fairly allergic to descriptions of Christian behavior except in the most general terms, perhaps out of fear of suggesting in any way that good works can score points with God. The more or less “official” Lutheran worship books of this generation have tended to favor “objective” hymns that proclaim the attributes and deeds of God and our worshipful response over “subjective” hymns that express individual piety and explore the lived-out Christian response.

Later 20th century worship books

In the next generation of worship books, represented by Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW, 1978) and Lutheran Worship (LW, 1981), several developments can be noted. There are a few more hymns that take up the practice of interpersonal forgiveness. Several hymns relate the gift of forgiveness received in the eucharist to the practice of forgiving one another. A number of hymns of more recent authorship explore sin in terms of the world’s brokenness in addition to individual guilt, and sing of the gift of healing and wholeness in addition to forgiveness of particular offenses.

LBW restores an ancient Latin hymn, “Ubi caritas,” with its description of mutual forgiveness:

We now forgive each other’s faults
As we our own confess
That we may love each other well
In Christian gentleness.

Together with the remarkable act of mutual confession and forgiveness in the service of prayer at
the close of day, which has been restored in these books, this hymn encourages a practice of forgiveness that has a regular and even ritual pattern.

The relationship of the eucharist to forgiveness is echoed in the couplet “Sins forgiven, wrongs forgiving/We go forth alert and living” in the communion hymn “Praise the Lord, rise up rejoicing” (LBW 196). George Herbert’s “Come, my way, my truth, my life” contains the wonderfully expansive line “Such a feast as mends in length...” (LBW 513).

Among the newer hymn texts that explore forgiveness, Olive Wise Spannaus’ “Lord of all nations, grant me grace” includes this stanza:

Give me thy courage, Lord, to speak
Whenever strong oppress the weak.
Should I myself the victim be,
Help me forgive, remembering thee (LBW 419, st. 4).

The necessary balance between the struggle against injustice and nonviolent resistance echoes the time of its writing (1960). A generation later, in light of growing awareness of the dynamics of abuse and victimization, confrontation and forgiveness, new texts that explore those complex dynamics may also be needed.

Fred Pratt Green’s “O Christ, the healer” offers a nuanced description of the interrelationship of physical, emotional, and spiritual health: “In conflicts that destroy our health we recognize the world’s disease...” (LBW 360:2). It is Rosamond Herklots’ “Forgive our sins as we forgive,” however, that offers the most sustained reflection on the practice of forgiveness in this generation of worship books:

“Forgive our sins as we forgive,”
You taught us, Lord, to pray;
But you alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.
How can your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs and will not let
Old bitterness depart? (LBW 307, st. 1, 2)

The hymn offers a keen summation of the frozenness that occurs when sin is retained by the wronged: a heart of stone that walls out the sweetness of God’s pardon. It also makes clear that forgiveness is embodied in words that are prayed to God, in words that are said to one another, and in the living out of those words. Herklots’ own commentary on the hymn adds another striking image. She states that the idea for the hymn came to her as she was digging docks from her garden, coarse weeds with small green flowers and large leaves: “Realizing how these deeply-rooted weeds were choking the life out of the flowers in the garden, I came to feel that deeply-rooted resentments in our lives could destroy every Christian virtue and all joy and peace unless, by God’s grace we learned to forgive” (Wezeman and Liechty 37). This hymn is one of the few to make a direct connection to the gospel readings in the year of Matthew that are drawn from Matthew 18 and from the parables of forgiveness.

recent hymns

The last two decades of the 20th century have seen a continued flourishing of assembly song. In addition to the ongoing “hymn explosion” in Great Britain and North America of English texts in more classical hymnic forms, there is a parallel development of Christian popular song, and there is increased interest in the English-speaking churches of songs from other world cultures.

Content categories in several recent Lutheran hymnal supplements point to one development in the repertoire of hymns about forgiveness: an expansion of language that holds forgiveness and healing in a more prominent juxtaposition. Hymnal Supplement 1991 includes a section titled “Healing,” a category not found in the previous two generations of worship books. With One Voice
(WOV, 1995) titles a similar section "Forgiveness, Healing." Hymnal Supplement 98 (HS, 1998) retains several more traditional categories, "Confession" and "Justification."

Holding healing and forgiveness together is a way of recognizing the often inseparable dimensions of willful harm with its consequences and brokenness whose origins and causes are hard to trace. A number of contemporary hymnwriters have explored in greater depth interpersonal culpability in addition to addressing the ambiguity of systemic evil and senseless violence that is a part of modern life.

Brian Wren’s "Great God, your love has called us" is an example of the juxtaposition of personal and communal sin:

We come with self-inflicted pains
of broken trust and chosen wrong,
half-free, half-bound by inner chains,
by social forces swept along,
by powers and systems close confined,
yet seeking hope for humankind (WOV 666, st. 2).

A number of Sylvia Dunstan’s hymns deal with the pain of interpersonal wrong. "In all our grief" is a litany including concrete examples:

In all our grief and fear we turn to you,
0 God, you know all that we think or do,
you know the pain we put each other through.
Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, grant us peace.

Help us to put aside the angry word,
the clenching fist, the wish and will to hurt.
Teach us the way in which love best is served. . . (WOV 739, HS98 847, st. 1,2).

Fred Kaan’s "Help us accept each other," included in a number of recent hymnals, speaks directly to the practice of forgiveness and alludes to its relationship with the eucharistic meal:

Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved
in living situations to do the truth in love;
to practice your acceptance until we know by heart
the table of forgiveness and laughter’s healing art (st. 3, The Hymn Texts of Fred Kaan #48).

In a hymn that finds a natural home in Lent, "Slowly turning, ever turning," Delores Dufner, OSB, employs several vivid images for the immobility of forgiveness withheld and the reality that forgiving is a process, not the flipping of a switch:

Slowly turning, ever turning
from our lovelessness like ice,
from our unforgiving spirit,
from the grip of envy’s vise,
slowly turning, ever turning
toward the lavish life of spring,
toward the word of warmth and pardon,
toward the mercy welcoming (st. 1, Sing a New Church p. 98).

"Let the truth shine in our speaking" is a Thomas Troeger text that makes a rare hymnic reference to the often-quoted Ephesians verse about not letting the sun go down on one’s anger:

When we wound or grieve each other
let us name the wrong that’s done
but not bear our hurt and anger
past the setting of the sun.
For our sin is in our silence,
in the storm that never comes
or that afterward still lingers
sounding yet its grumbling drums (st. 2, *New Hymns for the Lectionary* #45).

In Shirley Elena Murray’s “Gentle God, when we are driven” is a fresh reflection on the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer:

Let our strength be in forgiving
as forgiven we must be,
one to one in costly loving,
finding trust and growing free;
gentle God, be our release,
gentle Spirit, teach us peace (st. 4, *In Every Corner Sing* #25).

In the years of my childhood there were very few hymns that offered a language for the practices of relationship with one another. We appropriated what we could. A phrase from an Ascension hymn, “Thy glory share,” became an admonition we children used when a toy was not handed over quickly enough. The recent flowering of hymns that tackle the complexities of relationships and inculcate practices such as forgiving one another is a development to be celebrated. Such hymns can bring to awareness and speak the effects of a drought of forgiveness in our souls. Such hymns can suggest the words, the moves, the models, and the gifts of forgiving, and so cultivate the practice of forgiveness. Along with forgiveness enacted in the rituals of worship, articulated in preaching, formed in the home and in the church’s learning contexts, and regularly rehearsed in interpersonal encounters, the songs on the lips of God’s people may help us all “to live the words we say.”

works cited


*Sing a New Church*. Portland: OCP Publications, 1994

THE FAT MAN ON BATAAN

Supposed to be a death march
and look at this joker.
True he sweats more than the rest of us
stripped to the waist. Greasy
moisture rolls down great wads of flab.
They beat him with bamboo,

enjoying the energetic bounce
the broad surface grants. Feed
him mountains of glutinous rice.
To the guards, fatter
is better, especially now.
We hate him.

“What wrong, Joes? You no care for big buddy?”
They cackle as the Fat Man, embarrassed,
begs to die, but each time he stumbles
out of line, they refuse to chop off
his head. Prodding with swords and machetes.
“Hup-two—”

He’s useful and amusing, still striking sparks
in their imagination at the forty-
mile point when they stick thorns
on his head, whip him with leather
and hang the sign around his thick neck:
“TYPICAL AMERICAN”

Arrived at the camp they chain him
to a post in the middle where he’ll
watch over our unrelieved dysentery
and maggot food. ’Til night, tensely still,
one of the enlisted comes to him,
whispers sweetly into his ear,

and slits beneath the jowls with a rusted
can opener. After that it’s too late.
While he lived he took our blows,
preoccupying a belligerent enemy.
Now they about face and turn on us.
Fifty-one die

in a single day.
We miss the Fat Man!
He wept our tears, he shrieked our pain.
The Japanese make us heave him in the lagoon.
He floats for a time,
arms outspread.

On the shore,
coconut palms
rustle.
Hairy hull,
laden with milk,
falls
to the ground.

Albert Haley
Love grew out of hatred as the tree’s crown, spreading triumphantly in the purest sunlight, yet having, in its high and sunny realm, the same aims—victory, aggrandizement, temptation—which hatred pursued by digging its roots ever deeper into all that was profound and evil. Jesus of Nazareth, the gospel of love made flesh, the “redeemer,” who brought blessing and victory to the poor, the sick, the sinners—what was he but temptation in its most sinister and irresistible form? Was it not a necessary feature of a truly brilliant politics of vengeance, a farsighted subterranean, slowly and carefully planned vengeance, that Israel had to deny its true instrument publicly and nail him to the cross like a mortal enemy, so that “the whole world” (meaning all the enemies of Israel) might naively swallow the bait? And could one, by straining every resource, hit upon a bait more dangerous than this? What could equal in debilitating narcotic power the symbol of the “holy cross,” the ghastly paradox of a crucified god, the unspeakably cruel mystery of God’s self-crucifixion for the benefit of mankind? One thing is certain, that in this sign Israel has by now triumphed over all other, nobler values.

—Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals

In a culture in which personal autonomy, self-actualization, and success in every sphere of life are prized, mercy and forgiveness can all too easily be interpreted as arising from, and accommodating weakness. Christian love issues in mercy and eschews vengeance; Nietzsche warns this love may be none other than a guise for the exaltation of the weak, and conventional morality opposed to “nobler values.” Even those who accept conventional morality and celebrate the “democratizing” of society are suspicious of mercy and forgiveness. Mercy toward a blatantly wayward spouse is likely to redound on the wronged party, as it has in some kitchen table analyses of the White House sex scandal: how could Hillary remain married to an apologetic but unreformed adulterer, “when in other respects she is such a strong woman?” We use the language of apology and forgiveness for even the most trivial slights, but when it comes to serious offenses and breaches of trust many would agree with the words of S.J. Perelman: “To err is human, to forgive, supine.”

In the popular culture, action films celebrate striking back as the ultimate solution to being wronged. Violence gets results; even the good guys have no choice but to get tough, and to get even. In the most predictable story line, insults and wrongs are borne only by the weak, and only until the hero steps in to make the forces of evil pay. Since many films presuppose the inevitability of violence, mercy gets little play. Even Saving Private Ryan, which makes a serious attempt to break away from the cinematic glamorization of soldiering, and whose plot focuses on a (fictional) rescue mission, nevertheless depicts mercy for a surrendering German soldier as a fatal misstep in the calculus of retribution.

In other words, to borrow a phrase from my colleague, ethicist David Weber, forgiveness is unbelievable. A sufficiently honest account of human brokenness would problematize both retribution and our ordinary, tamer notions of forgiveness as answers to it. Mercy involves treating a wrongdoer less harshly than we have a right to. Forgiveness overcomes the hostility of brokenness and aims toward reconciliation. Forgiveness is misunderstood when seen as the restoration of a prior state of equilibrium, a restoration which appears to substantiate the suspicion that mercy and forgiveness belong to the pathologies of powerlessness. The fiction of Iris Murdoch is a resource for Iris Murdoch’s novel The Green Knight provides a densely complex drama of sin and forgiveness. Megill-Cobbler leads us neatly through its thickets to its rich conclusions.
understanding forgiveness because in our attention to the unfolding of the unpredictable loves and sometimes predictable conflicts of its characters, we come to recognize what Murdoch called the main problem in morals, the relentless ego. By problematizing both forgiveness and retribution, *The Green Knight* discloses the vulnerability of some notions of forgiveness to the critique that they stem from weakness, and gives full play to the retributive impulse and the love which transcends it in the paradox of justice and mercy. The novel does not, of course, give a Christian account of forgiveness. Nor is Murdoch’s *The Green Knight* a straightforward re-telling of the medieval English poem *Sit Gawain and the Green Knight*. But its eponymous character evokes the mystery and the magical prowess of the legendary knight, as well as his enactment of mercy and forgiveness, rather than retribution.

Murdoch’s insights are valuable for Christian theology because the paradox of mercy and justice is easily dissolved. Either Christian forgiveness threatens to be subordinated to a legal framework, as though God’s forgiveness were only possible once the scales of justice were set right; or else forgiveness and mercy are thought to supersede the retributive impulse in a marcionist reading of the Testaments. Forgiveness becomes gospel without law, love without wrath and vulnerable to the critique that it embodies weakness. The current cultural climate favors this second way of evading the tension between the retributive impulse and forgiveness and accomplishes the evasion though understanding forgiveness as individualized and privatized.

the cult of victimhood and forgiveness

With the increasing visibility of caring professions in our service-dominated economy and the marketing of self-help in print and visual media our language about forgiveness has shifted. Forgiveness is getting public attention, but its scope largely reduced to the healing of intrapsychic wounds caused by resentment and hate. Lewis Smedes’ *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve* is a best-selling example written from a Christian perspective. Smedes extolls forgiveness as a great miracle which has the power to heal. Forgiveness is understood as personal release from hate; this miracle is available even when the wrongdoer has died, or when reconciliation would be unwise. In this and other ways, the emphasis in understanding forgiveness shifts to events that are internal to the individual, at the expense of considering restoration to community. Smedes discusses how forgiveness is needed for unfair hurts that everyone feels from time to time not because the hurt-giver means to be unfair, but because “we experience the hurt as an unfair assault,” (Smedes 9). The subtitle of the book accurately reflects a focus on those who trespass against us and not on our trespasses, which in the Lord’s Prayer for the kingdom are kept together. Such truncated accounts of forgiveness underestimate the world’s darkness and are open to Nietzsche’s charge that forgiveness glorifies weakness according to theologian L. Gregory Jones. Assailing the inadequacy of such “therapeutic” categories he writes, “Unless we are able to acknowledge our own complicity in various dimensions of sin and to recognize when the issues involve tragic misunderstandings or simply accidents (and thus require responses other than acts of forgiveness), forgiveness becomes a catchall for making myself feel better about life’s hurts and unfairness,“(Jones 52). Insufficient and privatized understandings of sin and forgiveness tempt us to think of ourselves as victims only.

For those who think that reality is what happens on TV, there is *Forgive or Forget*, a daytime talk show in which burdened parties confess to the studio audience, the viewing public, and most of all to the host who calls herself Mother Love, the ways they have harmed another and plead for forgiveness. At the climax of the show, those who have been wronged, who have been listening backstage, have a decision to make. When a large door dramatically swings open, they can either appear in the threshold and step through the door to an emotion-filled reunion, or else, more frequently, let their absence from the doorway signal their refusal to forgive. Compared to Smedes, Mother Love at least holds reconciliation and accountability as primary dimensions in forgiveness. As she intones at the end of her show, we should “never underestimate the power of forgiveness.”

As more and more members of our society seek to claim this power, however, there is a danger of confusing exposure with truth. Instead of nurturing communal practices of accountability and
forgiveness, the community becomes voyeur to the mass communication of what is essentially a private transaction. This is no substitute for the truthfulness and accountability engendered within the committed relationships of the believing community where we forgive as we have been forgiven.

Both Smedes and Mother Love seem deficient in their concern for truthfulness in forgiveness. Smedes ignores dimensions of community and accountability. Mother Love attempts accountability through publicity. But truthfulness in forgiveness is not so guaranteed. For it is in the loving attention of community we begin to recognize that even our confessions, the many ways we narrate our lives, betray our self-serving omissions and exaggerations, our incapacity to face the unfathomable consequences of a single sin, our comfortable division of the world into victims and victimizers. Mother Love and Smedes agree that forgiveness is miraculous and powerful but their accounts perpetuate such distortions and dichotomies, and so are vulnerable to the critique that forgiving love is at bottom repressed vengeance by victims. If the status of victim puts one in a position of moral superiority, retribution and forgiveness might be just two different ways of settling accounts after all, forgiveness being the recourse of the weak.

forgiveness and vengeance in Murdoch’s The Green Knight

Murdoch’s novel holds a mirror up to a world in which innocence and forgiveness are not what they appear to be. By showing us the complexity of human brokenness beneath the surface of loving relationships, Murdoch uncovers the inadequacy of certain notions of forgiveness and mercy to set them right.

At the center of the story is a circle of friends—educated middle-class Londoners—who hover supportively around Louise, a young widow, and her three daughters, in the chapter “Perfect Children.” Lucas Graffe, a noted historian, has generously assisted the family financially and mentored the bookish teenager, Sefton. Clement Graffe offers emotional rather than material support. He cherishes a secret love for Louise, but has never settled down in love or work, and spends his varied abilities on a struggling theater company. Louise does not seem aware how much she depends on him. The girls’ good-natured kidding and their flawless kitchen routines suggest harmony, familiarity, being at ease with each other. They doubt their harmonious and uncomplicated lives will remain so. They wonder whether their innocence can be maintained if they just “don’t do things,” but Sefton, already a thoughtful student of history, denies the possibility, and notes tragically, “Besides, who knows whom we harm?” (Murdoch 18).

This harmonious circle is threatened, however, by a presence and an absence. A shadowy figure in a Mackintosh with a green umbrella seems to watch the house, or be waiting for someone. They are all too preoccupied to consider him dangerous. And Lucas is missing. A few months before, he resisted a mugger with such force that the man died. Ever since his successful defense he has shunned both the public and his friends.

What has actually happened, however, is contrary to what the police, jury and friends have believed. Lucas was not alone, as reported, in a deserted park. A man stepped out of nowhere just as Lucas was about to strike his drunken, unsuspecting brother Clement with a baseball bat. The brothers are bound together by a history of pain. Lucas, the older by two years and adopted, has hated Clement for winning all the love and favor which the parents once showered on him. Ostensibly protective, young Lucas secretly devised a cruel game with this bat which they played for some time until “Luc” determined there was too great a risk his mistreatment of Clement would be detected. Even as adults, their relationship in private is not what their friends suppose; Lucas continues to be dominant and Clement deferential. They appear rather close, for Lucas tolerates no criticism of Clement, while Clement is in awe of Luc’s intellect.

A desire for some kind of reestablished relationship, or failing that, closure and fuller understanding of the event drives Clement to seek out his brother. Clement wants to break through his inability to face the terrible hate, to understand and just in that way, to get closer to Lucas. In Christian theological terms, what Clement seeks is to reconcile with his estranged brother, which belongs to the goal of forgiveness and encompasses more than a mere release from hatred.
But the confrontation of the brothers offers no promise of forgiveness as communion. Lucas reveals nothing of his own heart, but explains what happened in terms of causes, so that the fact of his hatred becomes one more datum. Invoking Cain and Abel, Lucas alludes to forces that are more "real and ruthless" than the language of love, brotherhood and forgiveness. Clement seems instinctively to resort to. Lucas explains that he turned on the man at the instant the man tried to prevent him from striking Clement. The violence inevitably intended for Clement has unintentionally been unleashed on an undeserving third party who tried to intervene. Surprisingly, the hatred against his brother has mysteriously disappeared and with it the wish to carry off the crime: one can die for another, he observes. Clement proposes that this release from inner hatred implies reconciliation, but Lucas rules that out. Despite the change in Luc, their relationship has not been transformed. Luc even resists the intimacy of bearing an awful, secret burden together.

Murdoch shows us the enormous capacity for violence which lurks within seemingly ordinary relationships and how our confused and weak understandings of forgiveness fail to address such ruptures of love and trust. Lucas is done with hating Clement, but he is no more loving for it, his relationship to his brother is not restored, and he appears hardly to have changed. Forgotten or vanished hatred is not yet forgiveness and Luc scorns the very term. Clement, true to his name, desires to show mercy on the brother who wronged him and seems incapable of bringing about the release from the burden of the past and communion which he desires. Against Luc's cold and twisted (angelic?) brilliance, Clement's religious vocabulary is stunted and useless.

the retributive idea and servile forgiveness
The retributive idea, which at its most basic is the impulse to strike back, to bring low someone who has brought us low, explains much about Luc's hatred and Clement's deferential posture in offering forgiveness. According to Christian philosopher Jeffry Murphy, forgiveness is sometimes incompatible with self respect. When others wrong us, they also send a symbolic insulting message: they claim the right to use us for their purposes. This is why an attack against our person also degrades us. Wishing not to associate with, or willing ill toward those who wronged us, protests the insult. We are vulnerable to such injuries to self respect because of its social dimension (Murphy 25).

Apology does not change the past, but it eases the way to communion because the wrongdoer takes a submissive stance, pleads for forgiveness, and therefore negates or disavows the insulting message (Murphy 25). I want to suggest that the difficulty with apology is that where it is most used it has become trivialized, and where it is most needed, egocentricity prevents the humble and clear-sighted perception of fault.

On the other hand, the failure to protest being wronged with its insulting message by an eagerness to forgive shows a lack of respect for self (Murphy 18). For Murphy, forgiveness is compatible with self respect when the wrongdoer disavows the insult through apology, but not otherwise. The reactive attitude of resentment or taking offense is overcome in forgiveness. Could forgiveness be granted, that is, could resentment be relinquished without apology? In this view, forgiving one not adequately repentant is compromising and linked to weakened self esteem. Clement's deferential forgiveness merely restores equilibrium within an oppressive relationship. Forgiveness can be, but is not always compatible with self respect. Murphy's definition, like Smedes', individualizes forgiveness, as release from hate and resentment; in contrast to Smedes, Murphy sees forgiveness as potentially damaging rather than healing to the individual.

Retributive justice is a communal extension of that impulse based on some accepted notion of personal worth (whether hierarchical or egalitarian.) More than the individual's desire to see the wrongdoer brought low as a protest of one's self worth, retributive justice aims to uphold the moral order as well. Wrongdoers have unfairly elevated themselves at our expense. Our insistence that they receive their just deserts is not intended to reform them, it is rather intended to reassert the moral truth of our worth in relation to them. Proponents of retribution disavow any telos for punishment, only that punishment is evidently "fitting." Christian philosopher Jean Hampton points
out that a crucial aspect of punishment (and one often misunderstood) is that of humbling or submission, achieved when wrongdoers undergo something they do not choose and which is proportionate to their offense; therefore punishment is not to be understood in terms of its painfulness as such (Murphy 126). However, if we make this leveling a precondition of forgiveness, we seem to make forgiveness a matter of desert instead of a gift.

Without trying to give a full account of the much debated retributive idea, I want to suggest that Luc has distorted the “reactive” impulse that is its root. Although Clement is the cause of Lucas’ grief, Luc’s resentment of an agent who is hardly responsible is unjustified and malicious. Luc dedicates his existence to dominating the brother who ruined his existence. Where retribution levels, vengeance aims for total defeat. Lucas intends to repay the pain caused him, but at middle age nothing will do short of the extinction of the very existence which forever ruined his life.

Yet Luc’s attempt to avoid guilt in the unsuccessful murder of his brother shows he is wedded to the retributive idea. Following the logic of imposing suffering in proportion to the harm one has caused, Luc insists since there was no murder, there is nothing to be avenged. This misses the depth of what we see wrong in Lucas, justice horribly twisted and out of measure, not least in the use of his intellect to manipulate parental discipline, the love of friends and the legal system in his pursuit of revenge. Behind the talk of justice, we detect the cruelty of which children are capable fully grown. In fact, by drawing Lucas so clearly as an advocate of a narrow justice, Murdoch calls us to question whether the retributive impulse could ever be exercised apart from the egocentric distortions so obvious in the character of Lucas.

As a solution to human brokenness, the retributive idea is of questionable worth, since the leveling at which it aims is as fleeting as proportionality in punishment is elusive. But the retribution Luc has set in motion will stalk him. He stands to be humbled in relation to those he has wronged, and to the moral order, which he has violated by ruthlessly using everyone around him. This is complicated by the fact that he was initially wronged himself—he is unlikely to recognize the truth of what he has become, or to empathize with Clement, or to be submissive after a lifetime warding off humiliation.

**the Green Knight claims his rights**

Sefton’s question, “Who knows whom we harm?” complicates a retributivist solution to the rivalry between Clement and Luc. Clement, perpetually youthful and promising, has managed *not to do things* which would entangle him in responsibility. He confides to Louise his love affairs with actresses, gets by on undisciplined talent, and has managed a kind of middle-aged innocence. But there is his brother’s hatred, and the tremendous pain which he did not mean to cause but did cause by merely existing.

Luc, too, maintains a kind of innocence. Sometimes by design, to maintain the facade of brotherly love, or in spite of himself, in the botched murder attempt, Lucas appears poised on the correct side of the girls’ mandate *not to do things*. He is not guilty of the worst that he intended. But since Lucas was long since robbed of his innocence, it is only the appearance of being above reproach that *not doing things* buys. Lucas has managed to assure that there is no one in a position to witness to the truth about him.

This promises to change however, when the stranger with the green umbrella steps into the living room and announces he is the intruder from the park, back from the brink of death. Introducing himself as Peter Mir, the man shows substantial, if fuzzy, recall of the event. Mir demands restitution. In support of restitution he invokes his Jewish background and scripture. Specifically, he wants to be included in their social circle to make up for his own life having been shattered. Toward Lucas, Mir maintains he has been wronged in his person and his reputation; he seeks some acknowledgment of the truth of what happened. When Lucas continually treats him coldly and dismissively, Mir grows angry and hints at vengeance. Mir charges Clement with lying and covering up for his murderous brother.

Clement is unable to feel hate. His indulgence toward his brother after the attack expresses
dependence. His vocabulary of forgiveness lacks terms for accountability and truthfulness. As the weaker party in their relationship, Clement’s allowances for his brother’s evil are motivated by need. The adult is still unable to acknowledge his brother’s hatred; his deferential concern only for his brother’s well-being offers no protest of his own vicious mistreatment. Unable to face the gravity of their estrangement Clement is powerless to overcome it, and unable to live and love as an adult. Lucas uses him again when, in warding off Mir’s demands, he points to his brother having forgiven him. Mir’s scorn for Clement’s weakness and lies suggests that Mir is not only seeking justice for himself, but for a truth which would change the configuration of all of their lives. The reconfiguration comes about through Mir’s person, as his presence and influence casts a spell over all but Lucas. Oddly, Clement and Lucas are united in their apprehensiveness toward Mir. This is partly because his behavior is erratic, partly the shock of his return from the dead but also because they have always been dependent on each other. They know their roles well and continue to play them. Clement begins to see that Lucas has always been in control, in charge and contemptuous of those he could master. Yet, he wants to protect Lucas from possible revenge, and from legal penalties. This means keeping their secrets, as when they were children. Lucas has controlled the truth of what happened, just as he had been able to elude his parents about his mistreatment of Clement in their youth. Lucas insists like a historiographer that what happened was only what can be proved, that is, what has been proved in court already.

Mir’s genius is to unsettle both the official account of the event, and the lives of the friends. By gaining access to Louise and the girls, Mir threatens the story the Graffes have been telling about themselves. Mir wins them with his exuberance, charm, and expensive gifts; they find themselves caring for him. The brothers fear him especially when it seems their official story of the event will unravel. In his escalating confrontations with Lucas, Mir calls for a kind of duel, a reenactment of the violent episode in the park, which he hopes will bring back some lost memory he senses has great importance.

What Mir has forgotten, and what a near-hit by a lightning bolt brings to mind is God—not a personal God, but God as a symbol for a spiritual quest for universal love. His hatred for Lucas on account of his lost life and his lost memory no longer consumes him. He arranges another meeting saying that he wants to end their feud, and will ask only one small favor.

In Lucas’ study, Mir explains his new frame of mind, his renunciation of vengeance. He now recalls a spiritual quest, his attempts to follow the Buddhist path. This confuses them; they thought he was Jewish. Mir announces he is a Jewish Buddhist, therefore, he has banished blind justice with her sword and scales. His peace is assured but he does not want to leave out Lucas. He wants reconciliation, and that “involves two” (Murdoch 317).

Lucas resists. He will not confess guilt, or betoken submission; he wants the “event” placed behind them. Mir insists it needs to be dealt with before it can be put in the past. He wants more than words, some action. He then asks his favor. Lucas takes off his shirt. Mir draws close to Luc and thrusts a blade at his ribs.

Clement, waking from a faint, thinks both men are mad. They are both giddy, relieved, in full agreement everything is now clear. When they are alone, Lucas tries to get through to Clement what happened. Mir was close enough to kill Luc; Luc did not flee nor was he strong enough to resist. Mir could have killed, could still kill him at any time, but now Lucas thinks he won’t: “he chose to dispatch me by a symbolic retribution” (Murdoch 322). Lucas dismisses him in the usual cool fashion, but announces to Clement, still dazed, that he forgives him for all the pain he caused.

Mir celebrates his transformation by throwing a party. The climax of Mir’s enchantment of them all, the dinner party celebrates his return to himself. They are sure Mir is giving them his blessing. Eros is unleashed, new pairings are in the making. Louise realizes that she wishes her relationship with Clement were not so sisterly and motherly. Ironically Mir’s return to himself becomes his farewell supper when the crew from a private mental hospital hauls him away. He is seriously ill and suffers delusions from his injuries. They are stunned. After a time they hear that Mir has died.

Mercy, as the penultimate chapter is titled, is release from as severe a punishment as could be
exacted. It suspends, but does not abolish the order which affirms the worth of victims over against their oppressors. There is a sense in which mercy is never justified; lessening penalties for those not fully responsible for wrong, or for those whom circumstances have brought low, is not mercy, but better judgment; it extends the logic of retribution. The idea of suspending justice is paradoxical. While forgiveness is often privatized, mercy seems to be inherently communal, the suspension of recognized rules by one with rights to judge.

This raises the question of the mission of Peter Mir, whom Aleph had dubbed The Green Knight. What gave him the right to show mercy to Lucas, on his own part, on anybody’s? What gave him the authority to meddle in their lives, unsettle their fixed roles, free them to love and mate and grow up in their middle age? Mir simply assumed rights in the situation, first by intervening in the attempted murder, second, by going back to the place and person that hurt him. He would not leave them alone. Forgiveness is a process which involves holding others accountable, giving up certain claims against others, restoring communion. Leveling as an end in itself is retribution, but communion also involves the removal of obstacles, and includes a kind of leveling. Lucas’ lack of self-knowledge reflects our inability to face fully what we have become and have done; Mir answers Luc’s blow, reflects it back to him pint-sized and harmless. Mir’s unpredictable persona made Lucas, for once, renounce control. Nothing humbles like mercy.

Humility and mercy, the loss of blamelessness are resonances from the medieval poem. Clement muses that perhaps Mir was a wandering agent of justice. Like the magical knight, Mir suffered a blow to the head; he returned from death, he relinquished his right to repay the blow fully, and enacted a symbolic bloodletting. What Murdoch shows rather than tells is that, like the Green Knight, Mir’s magic is that he breaks through the egocentricity, moral blindness, and illusions of innocence which stultify life and prevent love. Clement’s sappy forgiveness is as deadening as Lucas’ cold hatred. Both need to be challenged, both need to be overcome.

a theology of forgiveness for the real world

The Christian story also focuses on a mysterious stranger, a man with a mission who unsettles the accounts by which we stabilize our relationships and defend our worth. Traditional views of that death have often stressed its necessity as some kind of payment which sets humans free from the past. Whether it is a payment to the devil, or a payment to God, such schemes make forgiveness a byproduct of a legal framework and place the action of forgiveness in the heavenly realm. But a look at the gospels shows that Jesus enacted God’s forgiveness. He announced forgiveness, and he also included the non observant, the sinners, in the table fellowship and blessings which implied relationship—communion—with God. It was Jesus’ practice of forgiving sinners—on earth, in action, by doing things—and acting in God’s name, which stirred the early opposition to Jesus that ultimately led to his death on the cross. Forgiveness as release from the past and reconciliation may be the last thing humans want; it renders our lives too unpredictable. It upsets the scorekeeping by which we justify our lives. The cross is our attempt to stop Jesus from doing just that. But the blow we delivered is answered by mercy that is beyond death.

There is nothing servile or sappy about doing forgiveness; the one whose approach entangles him in risk and brokenness bears our violence and returns to humble us with mercy so that there can be communion. Unlike the individualized and privatized counterfeits of forgiveness offered by the culture, authentic forgiveness is communal, it “involves two” or more. It is not simply an internal change in attitude. That forgiveness is bound up with vulnerability and risk, elements of weakness, is undeniable. But Christians distort our own story if we turn forgiveness into excuse, into simply restoring the equilibrium of oppressive relationships. Murdoch discloses the inadequacy of forgiving as an act of mere deference, of an inability to take wrong seriously.

The attempt to live by the letter of the law of retribution is also inadequate. For the reactive impulse does not appear apart from its egocentric distortions. Because there is no inherent telos, retribution threatens to become endlessly reactive; the elusiveness of proportionality guarantees the cycle will continue. Mercy transcends the calculus of retribution altogether, its telos is communion.
Thelma Megill-Cobbler preaches regularly at the Chapel of the Resurrection. An assistant professor in the Department of Theology at VU, she is particularly interested in theology of the atonement.

Perhaps the attractiveness of swords and scales and symbolic retribution in our imagination, is that they address our failures of self-knowledge, our inability to confess adequately, to humble ourselves, to see others and ourselves truly. We don’t know whom we harm. But when our blows are reflected to us as mercy, we can look at what we’ve done in a different light and we ourselves are cut down to size. It’s not, as Lucas willed, that the original act is relegated to the past, but it is reconfigured by a generosity that leaves us more vulnerable, open. Our being cut down to size is paradoxically a raising up to life, as in the poem of the Green Knight.

Kierkegaard expresses something like this reconfiguration, this new light on the past, in one of his prayers:

Father in Heaven! Hold not our sins up against us but hold us up against our sins, so that the thought of Thee when it wakens in our soul, and each time it wakens, should not remind us of what we have committed but of what Thou didst forgive, not of how we went astray but of how Thou didst save us!

works cited


WELLING

Sorrow rises as if you were the well, filling,

chills the stones, seeps into the cracks between

them: how many people would have to drink

from the little silver dipper to carry your sorrow away?

Sharon Bryan
The tales of chivalry that come to us from the Middle Ages are stories about human weakness and they unfold in plots that are tragically predictable: human beings have a way of always screwing up. The more graceful the courtly lady, the more dashing the wholesome knight, the more painful and the more true are the vicissitudes of their ill-fated quest for honor. But like the errant children of Israel, always finding a way to betray the trust invested in them, the courtly heroes and heroines stumble benightedly into mysterious powers of grace and dark goodness. All is not left to chance. Fortune does not have the last word. Forgiveness is at work and wrests from human chaos a plot of reconciliation, though it is a denouement purchased at a costly price.

Consider the story of Alexander the Knight as retold by Reutlingen artist Gerhard Grimm in a fine suite of woodcuts in the Brauer Museum of Art. Two from this series appear on this issue’s covers. When he hears of the unparalleled beauty of an English maiden, the French knight travels to London with his paige. There he spots the ravishing lady at Mass, follows her home, and seduces her. When her husband returns and peers through a small hole in the door, he sees two figures asleep in bed and calls for the authorities. Alexander’s paige rushes home to inform the wife of the unfaithful knight (see back cover).

Here’s where the story subverts reasonable expectations. Rather than abandoning the lout, Alexander’s wife devises a scheme to rescue him from the consequences of his misdeed. She travels to London and gains access to his prison cell. Exchanging clothes with him, she leaves dressed in his suit of armor and he disguised in the clothing of his wife. The next day she appears in court dressed as the knight and defends herself in the place of her husband. She tells the court that she is a woman who heard of the other woman’s beauty and traveled incognito to behold it as a way of preserving her virtue from those who would take advantage of a woman on the road. The court buys her account and sets her free. She collects her repentant spouse hiding in a nearby village and they return home on horseback as he vows never again “to act against loyalty and honor” (see front cover).

When you look hard, through the lust and vanity, through voyeurism and crossdressing, through adultery and seduction, it is possible to discern in this bawdy tale the features of Christian redemption. The savior, a faithful spouse who refuses to abandon the erring knight, stands in his place to save him from the just punishment of his infidelity. Courtly grace and honor flow from the grace that a higher love affords, the love that comes at the expense of honor, that besmirches the polish of ostentatious armor. This assumes, of course, that the wife’s forgiveness is not forbearance, that she does not accommodate her spouse’s self-indulgence, but provides the means of his regeneration. Without her, he is lost, and that is why she rushes into the humiliations of mercy.

DM

Comments to the editor are welcome at The Cresset, #10 Huegli Hall, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN 46383, or by email at Gail.Eifrig@valpo.edu.

Moving with the times, we will have a Website by the time of publication for the Michaelmas issue, around 15 September. Student Assistant Joshua Messner will be responsible for this activity, working under the direction of James Saqui.

Next year’s focus issues will include Latin American art and religion, the meaning of gardens, Britten’s Ceremony of Carols, and of course, the Lilly Special issue on Christian higher education as the Trinity publication in mid-June. Readers are encouraged to communicate with the Editor if they are interested in publishing in The Cresset.
Dear Editor:

As a local missionary to the church and its people, I was struck by the opening hymn at a memorial service last February. At St. Paul’s Episcopal Church we did three verses of the once-famous “Missionary Hymn,” “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains.”

We were honoring the former chair of the psychology department at the university here in Dogwood, and being a nosy sort I later asked Jim’s widow, an old friend, why this hymn? The text isn’t innocent—in fact has become something of an icon of Western imperialism, since it condescends to the non-Christian world as “men benighted.”

“Jim wanted it;” she told me. I phoned to wish her well, before leaving the country for spring break. A former college dean, ordained an Episcopal priest late in life, she was in bed in a sort of hospice, unable to attend the funeral, dying of cancer since last summer but feisty and choosing her words with care, “He was incensed when it was taken out of the 1989 hymnbook. He loved those Lowell Mason hymns. He was most insistent” that it be sung at his service. Then two words that I rather anticipated: “Political correctness” was vexing him.

Reginald Heber in 1819 must have meant “benighted” in the theological sense of people to whom the light of the Gospel has not been offered. His language presumably does not dismiss them as culturally and morally inferior. Though, come to think of it, what else would he have meant, in the first stanza? “They [the people of Greenland, India, and Africa] call us to deliver / Their land from error’s chain.” Insofar as medical missionaries brought healing to remote parts of the world, Christianity was surely a benefit; insofar as missionaries intruded into cultures that had their own merits and integrity, and reshaped them, the mission enterprise (part of the “white man’s burden”) was and is a dubious undertaking.

But that invasive spirit, politically incorrect, has something to be said for it, and my own missionary work is recognizably in that vein. Regarding poetry a century or more younger than Heber’s, Americans simply are benighted. No getting around it. Their culture needs changing.

Conducted deplorably quietly, my mission is to bring modern poems—by Elizabeth Bishop, for example, and Robert Frost, Philip Larkin, and Robert Lowell—to the minds of Dogwood Christians, benighted and enchained in the sense acknowledged by poet W. H. Auden: “We are all of us average men outside our particular fields.” Each of my little efforts thus far has been successful, and the question therefore is whether there’s a formula here. Can the invasion be widely replicated?

The settings thus far have been only two, and in each case I’ve been summoned. Rightly so—shouldn’t a missionary be “called” rather than conduct a self-activated onslaught? The education committee at St. Mark Lutheran, about three years ago, asked me to help plan next year’s program. Unfortunately, I get surly with people sitting around a table not wanting to do things my way, and therefore had the good sense to say no. But remorse attacked instantly—what Emily Dickinson called weirdly “the Disease / Not even God can heal.” The remorseful memory, says Dickinson, revisits those moments when one was incivil; they’re “set down before the Soul / And lighted with a Match,” a flare which is not the “lamp of life” in Heber’s second stanza.

Remorseful at rejecting routine committee duty, I proposed alternative service. For a few Sundays of Adult Forum we could look at some
20th-century poems with religion in them, very leisurely, one a week, no advance preparation required. We'd go around the room reading the poem aloud, then reread it, and then just talk about it. Read it sentence-by-sentence, by thought units, not by line or stanza. Afterward, no tidy study questions leading to religiously correct conclusions.

The committee so quickly assented that I wondered if they gleefully saw this project as doomed. But two facts were in my possession. First, this congregation in the university town of Dogwood, Virginia, has a lot of bright people. Second, the Adult Forum had successfully exposed itself to modern writing—a book-and-videotape series from Augsburg Fortress, a church press, called Listening for God: Contemporary Literature in the Life of Faith. Working through both volumes, published 1994 and 1996, these Lutherans had proved to themselves that they could talk comfortably about short stories by John Updike, Anne Tyler, Andre Dubus, Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, Annie Dillard, and Alice Walker, writers established in the secular canon. Often we ignored the discussion questions printed after each story; people spoke up without submitting to distant pedagogical hand-holding.

Consider one other fact: Anyone like myself who has taught poetry at the college level for years has learned things. About poetry, yes, but also about people. In a class of a certain size, with intelligent people, an adequate consensus reading will emerge. The group is self-correcting. One person will say something dumb or offbase, and another person may do the same. But soon someone will hazard another view, and after a bit of jostling and jockeying, people see how the poem is working and follow what it’s saying. I, the expert, sit back uncomfortably silent, hold the dictionary filched from the church office, and occasionally supply a bit of information.

Information: The poem “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” by Elizabeth Bishop, is exalted by the distinguished and very secular poet John Ashbery as “possibly her masterpiece.” In other words, don’t take teacher’s word that this travel poem by a Pulitzer poet, which also looks at an old Bible with lots of engravings, is worth our attention.

Information: It’s even nicer to sit Buddha-like in calm ecstasy as people struggle with the poem’s long and opaque last sentence, and when they begin to grow travel-weary, provide this soothing confession of Ashbery: “After twenty years (the poem first appeared in Partisan Review in 1948) I am unable to exhaust the meaning and mysteries of its concluding line”:

> Why couldn’t we have seen this old Nativity while we were at it [on our travels]?  
> —the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light, an undisturbed, unbreathing flame, colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw, and, lulled within, a family with pets, —and looked and looked our infant sight away.

Why would benighted American Lutherans put themselves through this kind of experience? Why, after we finished that fall, would they in January, facing an unplanned hole in the forum schedule, ask to do more poems? They want to because they need modern poetry. Which would seem to be Heber’s point about the Gospel. That was the conclusion borne to me. They craved language uncommon and resonant, connecting with their own religious knowledge. These needy included a building contractor, a real estate agent, a history professor, a retired industrial chemist, and a few other people with no connection to the academic world.

I hadn’t been sure they needed modern poetry; as a missionary, I needed them—as converts, recruits to the notion that modern poetry is not harmful or elitist or repugnantely difficult. They themselves, when unbenighted, would become little missionaries, to their still-benighted neighbors, a good thing, since in our present era of glib university-bashing the humanities need every voice lifted.

Much modern poetry is, of course, difficult, repugnant, elitist, and quite possibly harmful. It isn’t hymn-like, offers no blessed assurance, proceeds not with cliche or cant. No myrrh, no widow’s mites, no martyrs. What ordinary Americans in the new millennium may need is precisely escape—from stories and language barren as Matthew’s notorious fig tree.

So while my missionary work required strategy, it didn’t demand heroism. These poems merely had to speak directly, as good medicine does, rather than rely on a teacher’s unction. With Philip Larkin’s “Church Going,” you simply have to imagine a future “[w]hen churches fall completely out of use.” Living in Belfast at the time, and a non-believer, Larkin in the mid-1950s asked “[w]hat we shall turn them into,” and why save these buildings? After lengthy and arresting rumination, his subtle conclusion linked the Church to a human com-
pulsion toward seriousness:

... someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow
wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

Robert Frost in “Directive” is far from
Larkin’s sacred burial ground but close to cer­
tain New Testament paradoxes, notably Mark
4:10-12. There occurs the little-heeded caveat
concerning parables: stories told so that
“people [outside the Kingdom] may indeed hear but not
understand; lest they should turn again, and be
forgiven.” Frost puts it this way, speaking as a
guide “[w]ho only has at heart your getting
lost”:

I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can’t find it,
So can’t get saved, as Saint Mark says they
mustn’t.

Editors of The Norton Anthology of Poetry,
fourth edition, muddle Frost’s allusion by citing
Mark 16, on having to believe and be baptized,
instead of Mark 4. Frost is of course candidly
facing with Jesus the human reality that not
everyone at any old time is ready to go be­
ond cheap grace into what Larkin calls serious­
ness, and what Heber calls “wisdom from on
high.”

So can this reading project be widely repli­
cated? Is a study guide in the offing? My answer
is a provisional no, and these are the reasons.

First, unless you really know poetry, how
do you choose the poems? You might hasten to
obvious sources, such as The Gospels in Our
Image: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century
Poetry Based on Biblical Texts, published by a
mainstream secular press, Harcourt Brace. This
$30 volume was on the Barnes & Noble sale
shelf last winter for $7.98. But only a small
number of its poems, two in my estimation, are
canonical: T. S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi”
and William Butler Yeats’s “The Second
Coming.” Though the canon of course is
unstable, shouldn’t your infrequent encounter
with modern poetry be with poems that count?
Your resident expert rightly distrusts theme
anthologies, and if searching for noncanonical
gems will find them elsewhere: “Wednesday
Night Prayer Meeting,” for example, by the
black poet Jay Wright, from his Selected Poems.

Second, you have a right to some informa­
tion, and a person who has taught for a long time
has it. The average layperson may not, and if
dragging some off the Web, may not know if it
counts. “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,”
Robert Lowell’s oft-anthologized elegy for his
cousin dead in World War II, is a poem I’ve used
in a different setting, with university scholars
from a variety of fields, meeting monthly in our
nondenominational Faculty Christian Forum. Eggheads all, including medical scientists, an
economist, a church historian, a biblical scholar,
and a political scientist, these people hack into
texts as into a lobster: dig around noisily all at
once to get the meat of the thing. They need to
be gently led to think less carnivorously—about
how a poem sounds, for example.

Information, therefore: A recent U.S. poet
laureate, Robert Hass, loves the way the Lowell
poem begins (please read aloud): “A brackish
reach of shoal off Mádaket.” Strange, but no
stranger than a hymn launching “From Green­
land’s icy mountains.” Hass recalls his pristine
encounter: “Everything about the sound of the
poem seemed gorgeous on first reading. ‘A
brackish reach of shoal off...’ sounded like an
impossible Russian word, sluggish and turbu­
 lent; the Indian-Yankee ‘Madaket’ bit it off with
wonderful abruptness.”

Enjoy the taste (one good reason for fresh­
baked bread at Communion), and let that enjoy­
ment accompany you as in Lowell you find an
abundance of Larkin’s seriousness and Frost’s
crafty lostness—amid Melville’s Ahab and his
Nantucket whalen; echoes of Exodus, Psalm
130, Joel, and Matthew; and the shrine of
Our Lady of Walsingham northeast of London. All
lead up to Lowell’s famously inscrutable last
line: “The Lord survives the rainbow of His
will.”

So a parish needs an experienced student
of modern poetry to tell readers when not to
worry. The benighted don’t need a room blazing
with fluorescent information; they do need can­
dles placed where the poem’s furniture has an
edge. Yet the leader ought to have lots of light,
for dark unpredictable questions, even though
andlepower carries risk. That is, the leader has
to shut up. The informed leader provides the
poem, has the group read it twice, and then
keeps on shutting up. Years of practice enable a
simulation of willing silence, an effort almost
heroic.

The last point is that the experienced
reader not only knows the difference between a
poem and a lobster but between a poem and a game. These distinctions are important, especially in the carnivorous denominations, where eating and drinking in the sanctuary are part of the Sunday ritual. A poem is not something you dig into and devour, nor is it hide-and-seek for some hidden meaning.

Modern poems with religion in them are, paradoxically, like the ancient pagan river and palmy plain of Heber’s hymn—places missionaries could not help admire, though they may not have availed themselves of Christian freedom to sojourn there at attentive leisure. Yet for persons who claim “wisdom from on high,” such places are surely especially refreshing.

From Dogwood, faithfully yours,

C.V.

God’s Backside (Exodus 33:12-23)

Show me your glory, Lord, old Moses cried;  
He was on a roll, had God on the assent.  
*Ah, well, my glory—you would die*  
To dust. *I know your name; there be content.*  
No, please: enigma name, strange words on stone—  
How can a people worship such a God?  
We trip in shadows. Make your glory known,  
At least to me—I fade to lead them on.  
So God passed by, and Moses, God-hand hid,  
Glimpsed mercy and compassion, steadfast love,  
But got full view of wrath, laws, punished sins—  
The vengeful, fearsome, just backside of God.  
Still pleading, on another rocky place,  
We burned to bear God’s glory, see God’s face.

Debra Rienstra
Jennifer Voigt reads about film in Denver and writes for The Cresset alternately with Fredrick Barton

Browsing the film criticism sections of even excellent general bookstores is often a lesson in disappointment. Even well stocked shelves are a testament to a general ignorance of the power and importance of cinema as an art form. Volumes by Siskel or Ebert or both tell us what might be pleasurable to see, and we may find a biography of Leonardo DiCaprio (heavy on the photographs), but those same shelves can be hard pressed to give us anything that tells us why we take pleasure in a good movie or what in those images transmits that pleasure—or how they simply transmit meaning, for that matter. The absence of such information can be frustrating, but for those of us who look there are a number of recent and arresting volumes available, mostly through small and university presses. A brief summer reading list follows.


Though Arab and French critics write extensively on Arab cinema, this is not a well-known subject in this country. But what is exciting about this book is that its subject is still in its infancy, for as Shafik notes, of all the countries of the Arab world, only Egypt was making films before the end of the colonial period. Just as enticing is Shafik’s attempt to trace the roots of Arab cinema through Arabic musical, literary and fine arts traditions.


The Western is the film genre that will not die. Even almost ten years after Kevin Costner’s last stand in Dances With Wolves, Westerns continue to be made (albeit on a limited scale), and as a genre the Western remains a provoking, academic subject. Back in the Saddle Again is a collection of essays written from the perspectives of various methodologies, all of which demonstrate the continuing relevance of Westerns. Though many of the essays address such subjects as race and ethnicity, and the development of a post-war American identity, the most fascinating and fresh piece in the collection remains Jane Marie Gaines and Charlotte Cornelia Herzog’s exploration of how masculinity is constructed through costuming in Westerns. The Crowded Prairie examines the Western as a mirror of American political upheaval and cultural change within a limited span of time—the forty years between the Depression and the Bicentennial.

The questions these books and Westerns themselves raise are often questions raised by the Ken Burns documentary, The West, which sees the American West as a construct of a combination of American ingenuity, imagination, heroism, and political struggle. The West, according to this film, is less a region than an expression of American ideals. An excellent companion to these books is Atlas of the New West, with articles by Patricia Limerick and Charles Wilkinson (University of Colorado at Boulder, ISBN O-393-04550-1) which attempts to find a new perspective for understanding the American West as real place rather than the battleground for opposing sides of American political issues.


For B. Ruby Rich, the very compiling of a collection of her essays in Chick Flicks is a political act, meant in part to revive an earlier dialogue about cinefeminism which she contends has been corrupted by the Academy’s adoption of feminist film criticism. The Academy has divided and conquered when it comes to cinefeminism, she stresses: “This book has been prompted by my conviction that the present landscape of feminism and film has been deprived of its own history, substituting a canon of texts for a set of lived experiences long since forgotten, shelved, or denied by those who went through them.” In a sense, this book is an Our Bodies Ourselves of film criticism. Rich’s article “Anti-Porn: Soft Issue, Hard World” appears both in Chick Flicks and in Films For Women. While this book is by no means a recent publication (the British Film Institute first published it in 1987), it focuses on women as an audience for films, and women’s readings of women’s representation of women on film. Brave Dames also focuses on the representation of women on screen, as well as in television and in novels. It lacks the depth and the overt ideological convictions of the other two books; however, it is a work of feminist activism published by an imprint of a major publishing house (Random House)—one of publishing’s rare occurrences.


Ever feel as if Hollywood serves up the same meal with every new release? Couldn’t you just might skip all three of the upcoming Star Wars movies? Using the overboard media coverage of the death of Diana Spencer as a jumping off point, this book explores the reasons behind why Hollywood has become so repetitive.


The conventions of documentary film find their way into almost all other film genres, yet, as Rothman writes in this rather basic but astute collection of essays, “the field of film study has only recently begun to show significant interest in documentaries.” Films created for “entertainment” purposes as varied as This is Spinal Tap, My Own Private Idaho, Thin Blue Line, and Life is Beautiful utilize documentary conventions either overtly or subtly to manipulate their understanding of “truth.” But audiences subsist on a diet in which documentary is scarce and often misinterpret fictional films that appropriate documentary’s ways of conveying meaning. The understanding of documentary is critical to understanding the cinema as a whole.

My Year of Meats, by Ruth L. Ozeki (Viking, ISBN 0-670-87904-5)

Ruth Ozeki, a documentary and dramatic filmmaker, here blends a fictional story about a documentary filmmaker with documentary “footage”—information about the mass production of food in the United States—to create a novel whose narrative develops like that of a documentary film. Read as a companion to Rothman’s work, it demonstrates the problems inherent in the documentary process—one that requires the compiling of factual information, but is also both creative expression and propaganda. ✷

People care about Vincent van Gogh. Whether scholar or amateur, people care passionately about van Gogh. Gauguin and Seurat, van Gogh's post impressionist contemporaries, may be interesting to us as important figures in the history of art, but unpacking their artistic legacy has not produced the kind of missionary zeal one can easily detect in writings about the life and art of Vincent. A poignant state of affairs—that an artist who sought the key that will solve the puzzle of his strange life, and powerful art. to the powerfully innovative paintings van Gogh realized in the last year of his life, and argues that they are not the product of frenzied delusion, but are perfectly consistent with the artistic problems and human themes that had occupied van Gogh throughout his life.

The overall thrust of Erickson's argument is eminently sensible. But there are points where Erickson's book bears further scrutiny. From a purely procedural viewpoint, it would have served Erickson well to position herself more clearly with respect to Cliff Edwards' book *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989). Erickson does refer throughout her study to Tsukasa Kodera's *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity versus Nature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), effectively refuting his thesis that van Gogh could not have become the painter he did and remain Christian in any sense. Mysteriously, she does not mention Edwards' book after her initial, selective quotation from *Van Gogh and God* in her introduction. This is odd, given the fact that several of the dominant themes in *At Eternity's Gate* are already present, if not fully developed, in *Van Gogh and God*. The importance of the van Gogh family's unorthodox interpretation of their Dutch Reformed tradition, which forms the substance of Erickson's first chapter, is part of Edwards treatment of van Gogh's early religious formation. The themes of pilgrimage and self-sac-
rificial servanthood, derived from van Gogh's knowledge of the Bible and amplified by his admiration for John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Thomas Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, themes that are absolutely central to Erickson's interpretation of van Gogh and dominate her second chapter, also make an appearance in chapters one and four of Edwards' book—though more as metaphors than as core values for Vincent's entire life. Even the opening apparatus of Erickson's book echoes that of Edwards' *Van Gogh and God* boasts an appreciative foreword by Henri Nouwen; Martin Marty supplied the appreciative foreword for *At Eternity's Gate*.

It is puzzling to note those points of contact between Erickson and Edwards, and not have them clarified. Erickson mentions in her acknowledgments that she began her research on van Gogh over a decade ago, probably before the publication of Edwards' book. It is doubtful, then, that those parallels are the result of unacknowledged dependence; more likely, they are the result of independent investigations that substantiate the claims of the other. If this is the case, noting the general consensus between two studies that otherwise have different arguments would have further confirmed Erickson's thoughtful analysis. Beyond such procedural formalities, *At Eternity's Gate* tacitly and interestingly engages one of the major interpretive tensions at the heart of the history of art. What is the relationship between an artist's life and artistic oeuvre? What should be properly privileged in the interpretation of that relationship—an artist's words, or her art? Vincent's career, tracked by his extensive and markedly candid correspondence, resulting in an art without stylistic precedent, pointedly forces the "art and life" question into the foreground. Anyone wishing to come to grips with van Gogh's legacy must also come to some conclusions about the interpretive priority of biography or oeuvre; of words or images.

The earliest account of van Gogh's art, written by his sister-in-law, Johanna van Gogh-Bongor, privileged the life over the art. The resulting interpretation presented a sentimentalized view of Vincent's art as a result of the sad trajectory of his life. Later historians of art have bracketed van Gogh's life in favor of his paintings, and focused more narrowly on artistic concerns. How did Vincent learn the rudiments of painting? What were his debts to earlier artists? What connections did he have with contemporary artists and movements? In these studies, Van Gogh's life and letters serve purely utilitarian ends—they tell us where van Gogh was, and when; they tell us who he met and what works of art he likely to have seen; they tell us what pictorial problems interested him.

Richard Kendall's catalogue essay for the recent exhibition *Van Gogh's van Goghs* demonstrates the merits of this approach, giving the viewer a dispassionate overview of van Gogh's development as an artist, paying little attention to the material in his letters that ranges beyond such matters. The overall form of Kendall's catalogue, however, as well as the title he chose, point to the difficulty of keeping van Gogh's biography out of his works. Rather than using the traditional format for an exhibition catalogue—each work numbered and independently discussed, each entry beginning on a separate page, the catalogue proper prefaced by discrete essays that lay out the artist's life and times, the history of their critical reception, and perhaps the results of technical analysis of the works—Kendall chose to write a narrative of Vincent's art. The catalogue is a story. Even apart from their maker, Van Gogh's images compel a kind of biographical understanding. More telling than the form of the catalogue, is its title: "Evangelism by Other Means: Van Gogh as a Painter." Such an introductory tag leads one to expect some discussion of van Gogh's interest in "Evangelism" whether religious or artistic, and indicates that Kendall assumes some sort of continuity between these realms of Vincent's life.

Yet nowhere is that continuity discussed, much less defined. This is a curious title for an essay that so assiduously avoids coloring our view of van Gogh's art by connecting it to his inner life. When van Gogh himself is politely ushered out the front door, he sneaks in through the back.

Erickson's study acknowledges the force of van Gogh's biog-
on poets—

Sharon Bryan
published her third collection of poems, *Flying Blind*, in 1996. She had the good fortune to read at Valparaiso University two years ago and meet their impressive students and faculty. She is currently working on new poems and a memoir.

Albert Haley
serves as writer in residence at Abilene Christian University. He is the author of *Exotic* and winner of the John Irving First Novel Prize. His short stories have appeared in *The New Yorker, Atlantic, Rolling Stone, Image* and elsewhere.

Gordon Marino
directs the Hong/Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College, where he teaches philosophy. His poems have appeared in *Atlantic Monthly, The Christian Century, and Commonweal*, among others.

Debra Rienstra
teaches English at Calvin College. Her work has appeared in *Perspective* and *The Christian Century*.

Paul Willis
teaches English at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. His poems have appeared recently in *Poetry, Slant, Christian Century, and Best American Poetry 1996 (Scribner)*.

on reviewers—

Lisa DeBoer
 teaches art history at Calvin College and was formerly a Lilly Fellow at Valparaiso in the Christ College Humanities program. In the coming year, she will take up a position at Westmont College, California.
RECIPE FOR COMPLAINT

She forgot to empty the dishwasher.
I should be getting the roast in the oven
but—dear God. The roasting pan is still
greasy from last night. She didn't even
start the washer, let alone empty it out.
That's my sister. She wouldn't have a square

meal to call her own if I weren't here
to bring her attention back to earth.
The way she wanders around the house,
looking out the door to the road. Now
that he's come back, it's worse. She sits
there in the living room with those moony

eyes, lapping up those stories of his
about lost coins and mustard and leaven—
the same ones he told me last time.
As if she's ever baked a real loaf
in her life. I'll see if I can't get
a good rise out of her.

Paul Willis