How I Saturday in the Suburbs
Bill Stadick

Credo
John Fry

Engaging My Opponent:
Spiritual Healing
for Broken Public Discourse
Nicholas Denysenko

“Can Two Walk Together
Unless They Be Agreed?”
Traditions, Vocations, and
Christian Universities
in the Twenty-First Century
Caroline J. Simon

Consolations
Gary Fincke

Tania Runyan’s What Will Soon
Take Place
Nathaniel Lee Hansen

Paul Schrader’s First Reformed
Charles Andrews

The Night the Beatles
Came to Church
Kurt Krueger

Making a Difference
Thomas C. Willadsen
Junius R. Sloan (1827-1900) was a self-taught Great Lakes Region artist whose paintings are thought to be the earliest depictions of life on the settled Illinois prairie. Sloan began his career as an itinerant portraitist and became the first resident portraitist painting the prosperous citizens of Princeton, Illinois. He moved to Chicago in 1864 as one of its early resident landscapists. Sloan was a regular participant in Chicago's important exhibitions, and in the 1870s he attained prominence among Chicago's older painters by being elected academician and vice president of the Chicago Academy of Design.

Sloan was among the nineteenth-century American landscape painters who celebrated the American homeland as an unspoiled paradise reflecting its creator. He painted scenes either in oil or watercolor of traditional untouched Hudson River country landscapes in the Hudson River School style. He also painted views of the pastoral Midwest. He painted everything worshipfully, as though in the presence of the harmonious beauty of divine order.

The Brauer Museum of Art is home to the collection of record of the art of Junius R. Sloan, comprised of more than 400 paintings, watercolors, sketchbooks, photographs, letters, and archival documents. This collection both chronicles an individual artist's life and offers a view of the historical developments in the nineteenth century. We at the Brauer Museum of Art are grateful to Percy H. Sloan, the artist's son, for donating to Valparaiso University in 1953 this collection of his father's work and establishing an endowment for maintaining and adding to the collection.


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ESSAYS

Nicholas Denysenko 4 Engaging My Opponent: Spiritual Healing for Broken Public Discourse

Caroline J. Simon 13 “Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?”: Traditions, Vocations, and Christian Universities in the Twenty-First Century

Gary Fincke 24 Consolations

Josh Langhoff 30 “A Distinguished Composition of Significant Dimension”: Kendrick Lamar’s DAMN. Reminds Listeners That the Pulitzer Prize for Music Can Go to Exciting and Unexpected Works

COLUMNS

Peter Dula 37 Hope and History: Three Views

Kurt Krueger 41 The Night the Beatles Came to Church

Joel Kurz 51 Addicted Selves

Thomas C. Willadsen 55 Making a Difference

REVIEWS

Charles Andrews 43 Too Much in the Garden:
Paul Schrader’s First Reformed

Nathaniel Lee Hansen 47 Revelation for Our Times:
Tania Runyan’s What Will Soon Take Place
whatever is **TRUE**

whatever is **NOBLE**

whatever is **RIGHT**

whatever is **PURE**

whatever is **LOVELY**

whatever is **ADMIRABLE**

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy
—think about such things.

*Philippians 4:8*
IN LUCE TUA
In Thy Light

Voice Recognition

The Cresset, according to its mission statement, is "a journal of commentary on literature, the arts, and public affairs, exploring ideas and trends in contemporary culture from a perspective grounded in the Lutheran tradition of scholarship, freedom, and faith while informed by the wisdom of the broader Christian community." This issue certainly takes its cue from the last part of the mission statement: "the wisdom of the broader Christian community." In addition to Lutheran voices—LCMS and ELCA varieties— in this issue you will find voices and perspectives from Baptist, Evangelical, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Orthodox, Reformed, and Roman Catholic traditions. It is an impressive chorus of Christian witness.

The opening two essays address the disordered dynamics of disagreement in contemporary culture. Nicholas Denysenko’s “Engaging My Opponent” (page 4) considers how a Christian spirituality of dialogue can revive the art of engaging with others with whom we disagree. He encourages us, with examples from history, to cultivate humility and stay open to dialogue. Caroline J. Simon’s essay, “Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?” (page 13), considers a key challenge for Christian liberal arts colleges and universities: “Liberal arts education is, among other things, an enterprise that thrives when faculty and students see those with whom they disagree as resources in seeking truth,” she writes. “Yet Christians...have, throughout history, acted as if like-mindedness is a virtue—and have often cultivated like-mindedness by shunning, expelling, or separating from those with whom they disagree.”

Simon’s insight applies, of course, to life beyond Christian institutions of higher education. In many corners of our daily lives, we prefer to seek out those with whom we agree and avoid those with whom we don’t. Conflict is uncomfortable, after all—but it is also inevitable. Thinking of it as a tool that can help lead us to truth may be a way to steer clear of an us-versus-them mindset. (One of the figures Denysenko references in his essay, Tomáš Halik, reminds us that “War is to be waged against one’s own moral failings, not against the dialogue partner” [page 9]).

Informed by Denysenko and Simon, here’s an approach for each of us to try next time we are mired in a disagreement. Rather than reflexively concluding how or why our “opponent” is wrong, let’s focus on the gifts they may be offering us. Perhaps the generosity required to undertake this exercise coupled with the attention required to make sense of the gifts—especially ones we think we don’t need—can help resolve the situation.

The qualities of generosity and attention can also help us grow in self-understanding and faith. Peter Dula’s essay, “Hope and History,” urges us to encounter others with whom we disagree in order to allow them to “draw us into questioning our most fundamental convictions. Not to abandon them or disown them, but to rethink them” (page 39).

If this sounds heavy or difficult, Kurt Krueger clarifies that it need not always be. In his column, he recalls watching the Beatles’s first appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show along with his church youth group and the pastor, his father. Pastor Krueger could have dismissed the request from his young parishioners to tune in during their Walther League meeting—surely it conflicted with his idea of how to spend that Sunday evening—but he didn’t. As the teenagers huddled around the TV to participate in this cultural touchstone moment, the younger Krueger recalls, “My kind, conservative father stood smiling and motionless, trying to understand what he was watching in the eyes of his church’s youth.” That openness and search for understanding may have indirectly led to some unexpected results (turn to page 41 to find out about those). But, almost to prove Dula’s point, Krueger writes, “Our core Lutheran beliefs and practices did not change.”

The many voices from different Christian denominations in this issue could serve as a reminder of all the disagreements in the world. Alternately, each distinct inflection and tone can remind us of the variegated, complicated, surprising, and gift-filled whole that stretches before us, beckoning.

—HGG
Engaging My Opponent

Spiritual Healing for Broken Public Discourse

Nicholas Denysenko

During the seven years that I studied and worked in Washington, DC, I became familiar with a notorious term: “The Beltway.” If you have ever attempted to drive in or around DC, you have probably been on the Beltway at some point. Highway 495 forms a belt around DC and cuts through Maryland and Virginia. To be sure, driving on the Beltway puts one at risk of a long delay, missing an exit, or having an accident; it is terribly busy, and my wife likened it to the Indy 500. A related term is even more notorious: “inside the Beltway,” a reference to the political gridlock that unfolds every day in our nation’s capital.

If my reference to business conducted inside the Beltway evokes feelings of anger or suspicion about the federal government, or if you are convinced that the devil is the father of the details conceived there, then you have a sense of the spirit of anger prevailing in our times. People are angry with elected officials for making deals that are not in their best interest. People feel alienated by policies and their underpinning ideologies that appear to favor other interest groups without accounting for their own wants and needs. People fear the advent of the unknown; they are afraid of immigrants who come here in search of work, and of politicians and activists who advocate for new policies that challenge their current way of life and conflict with their core values.

The anger, fear, and alienation experienced by many in our time result in a number of behavioral patterns. Among the most troubling patterns is the gradual disappearance of dialogue. Increasingly, vicious polemical attacks that have the primary purpose of demonizing the position of the other have replaced dialogue. The evidence of such attacks is everywhere, and the relative anonymity of social media has opened an entirely new arena where one can invoke riotous, scathing condemnations of others without even knowing their names or seeing their faces. In other words, the purpose of engagement in our time is to attain a personal triumph over one’s opponent. The spoils of victory for the one who seems to have the upper hand in such engagements is the humiliation suffered by the other. Too often the fumes generated by a graceless and boorish victory function as fuel that renews the cycle of anger, alienation, fear, and suspicion. It also intensifies that cycle. Today, this scene unfolds in digital spaces that seem tailor-made for brutal public trash talking.

Historians and sociologists have devoted considerable resources toward unearthing the causes of global anger and alienation. Economic evolution is certainly one cause, especially when industrial decline, outsourcing, and automation result in the disappearance of jobs. But it is not only the absence of jobs and economic instability that fuel anger and alienation. The “culture of separation” that defined modernity and afflicts post-modernity permeates all aspects of life, including citizenship, religion, and national identity (Bellah et al, 1985, 275-7). The spike in racial conflict, incidents of anti-Semitism, the polarized positions on immigration, suspicion and fear of Muslims, and an all-out cultural war on equal rights for LGBTQI people are also sources of anger and alienation, not only in the United States, but internationally as well.
Recently, the author and journalist John Judis demonstrated how President Trump fits into the pattern of creating a profile as an anti-establishment populist in his vow to restore manufacturing jobs and reform immigration. This movement had an echo on the left with Bernie Sanders (Judis 2016). Anger can become infectious and generate incredible and constructive energy; Americans witnessed this when students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, gathered to protest the gun establishment. A similar energy threads through the recent women’s marches that took place around the globe. However, working together to discover the truth is not an attainable objective when the intensity of polarized polemical exchanges reaches a fever pitch; the point is to publicly humiliate one’s opponent and to expose them as flawed so that one’s own position will be endorsed.

SIGNS OF HOPE ARE EMERGING FROM THIS dense forest of alienation and anger. For instance, we can find hope in a project that spurred a classically liberal sociologist from the University of California at Berkeley to take up residence among “right wingers” in Louisiana to learn who they were. In reflecting on her experience of dialogue, Arlie Russell Hochschild said, “Left and right need one another, just as the blue coastal and inland cities need red state energy and rich community. The rural Midwest and South need the cosmopolitan outreach to a diverse outer world” (Hochshild 2016, 232-3). Hochschild observes that her immersion into the daily lives of the people she studied taught her that left and right have much more in common than they know, and that commonality can serve as a springboard for cooperation. Her observation was possible only through a willingness to dialogue with others—an art that is largely lost in a culture that prefers division and separation for fear of the other.

A Spirituality of Dialogue with the Other: Look in the Mirror

A Christian spirituality of dialogue can restore the art of engaging one’s opponent if the engagement is truly dialogical.

Christian tradition acknowledges the harm caused by playing the blame game. Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount is filled with teachings that chart a path of discipleship rooted in pouring one’s self out for the sake of the other. Jesus commands us to forgive others. We are instructed not to judge others, nor even point out their faults. The disciple who casts his gaze on the faults of another will be exposed as a hypocrite, and not a disciple. The radical teaching of Christ requires that good must be returned for acts of evil. Discipleship compels the hearer to adopt Christ and his self-emptying love as the pattern of daily Christian living. Performing these acts is a mode of taking up one’s cross, and the ultimate aim—the telos—is perfection (Matt. 5:48).

Christians must navigate the tension between Jesus’s authoritative teaching from the mountain, which fulfills the Law of Moses, and the cultural ethos that claims “nobody’s perfect.” The hearer finds little comfort in Christ’s instruction to “enter by the narrow gate,” because the perfection commanded by Christ seems impossible to achieve. Worshipping the crucified and risen one who personifies discipleship is a far cry from threading his precepts into the fabric of one’s daily behavior. Yet the decision to forsake or ignore Jesus’s new commandments from the mountain leads Christians to respond to anger with wrath, and to strike one’s opponent with even more force than the blow thrown by the opponent.

Throughout history, Christians have attempted to apply Jesus’s teachings as rules for communal living and engagement with the other. These examples occur in a variety of contexts,
from Cappadocians monks in late antiquity to twentieth-century laity responding to dangerous ideologies.

One early example is the philosopher, bishop, and ascetic known as Basil the Great (330-379). In the Christian world, Basil is beloved because of the prayers attributed to him, his theological family ties (having an equally gifted brother and a saintly sister), his theological treatises that became the foundation for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and his ascetical writings. Instructive for our purposes is Basil's homily on humility. The context of this homily suggests that Basil was addressing people who lived in the late-antique city. Basil critiques those who indulge in the glory and honor that comes with political success:

But also because of political honors do men exalt themselves beyond what is due their nature. If the populace confer upon them a distinction, if it honor them with some office of authority, if an exceptional mark of dignity be voted in their favor by the people, thereupon, as though they had risen above human nature, they look upon themselves as well nigh seated on the very clouds and regard the men beneath them as their footstool. They lord it over those who raised them to such honor and exalt themselves over the very ones at whose hands they received their sham distinctions. (Basil, trans. Wagner, 476)

Basil proposes an ascetical practice that speaks directly to the kind of exaltation to which one enjoying a high rank might be prone. Recalling one's past errors can help one avoid the temptation to exalt one's self and treat others like a footstool. Basil employs hyperbole when he suggests that we are to demean ourselves, but the point of adopting this habit is twofold: to learn how to see good in one's interlocutor, and to adopt the pattern of Christ himself. Our descent into utter lowliness is not for self-torture. Rather, it is to follow the pattern of Christ, whose lowliness was in service to others. The two practices work together: we find fault in ourselves first to confront our own ugliness; only then is one able to see that the person one engages is, in fact, naturally good.

Cultivating the habit of humility is designed to be relational and dialogical. In a longer passage, Basil advises hearers to be modest in all ways of life, to avoid embellishment of speech, and to be "free from pomposity" (Basil, trans. Wagner, 484). Adopting a habit of modesty in the way that we talk and think of ourselves leads to new ways of dialoguing with others. Basil offers simple instructions: "Be obliging to your friends, gentle toward your slaves, forbearing with the forward, benign to the lowly, a source of comfort to the afflicted, a friend to the distressed, a condemnor of no one" (Basil, trans. Wagner, 484). He goes on to instruct his hearers to avoid even listening into a conversation involving gossip; adopting the check the foolish swelling of conceit. If you see your neighbor committing sin, take care not to dwell exclusively on his sin, but think of the many things he has done and continues to do rightly. Many times, by examining the whole and not taking the part into account, you will find that he is better than you. Such reminders as these regarding self-exaltation we should keep reciting constantly to ourselves, demeaning ourselves that we may be exalted, in imitation of the Lord who descended from heaven to utter lowliness and who was, in turn, raised to the height which befitted him. (Basil, trans. Wagner, 483)
habit of attending to one's own sin sharpens the senses of seeing others and dialoguing with them. One learns how to act with radical charity toward the other through practice, but the root of this action is pursuing humility and refusing to exalt one's self, reserving that praise and glorification for God alone.

Basil’s practical instructions for adopting an identity of humility re-emerge in the unique person of Paul Evdokimov, a lay theologian who was born in St. Petersburg in 1900 and immigrated to Paris in 1923 in the tumult of the Bolshevik Revolution (Plekon 2002, 109). Evdokimov received his doctorate in theology from St. Sergius Institute in Paris and assisted in hiding and defending Jews during World War II. While he worked as a director of residences, he was active as a writer and participant in local ecumenical dialogue. Evdokimov’s writings touch on numerous subjects, but it is his sense of tradition that is most intriguing. Responding to the abrupt, fast-paced changes of his times, Evdokimov proposed that lay people adopt a monastic way of life by applying the principles of the desert in their daily lives. Their participation in the liturgy has the power to shape a habit of service extending into the world, embedded in everyday life (Plekon 2002, 124).

Evdokimov wrote that the process of welcoming the Holy Spirit begins by coming to terms with one’s self. Knowing one’s self requires a deep journey within: “Our vigorous penetration into the darkness of our heart of hearts, though it is a formidable undertaking, gives us the power to judge ourselves” (Evdokimov 1998, 167). He acknowledges that this is a rigorous journey, so he advises that one should put on an “ascetic diving suit” because the goal is to “seize our perverted will” (Evdokimov 1998, 167). As the ascetic comes to terms with the perverted will, he or she is ready to ascend. Evdokimov describes the point of this ascent as a conversion, and the objective is to become a human who loves. The love he speaks of is crucified love, not emotional love. Adopting an identity of true humility is a process that is never complete—the one who is converted always identifies as a sinner (Evdokimov 1998, 168).

How does this relate to the way we engage others, especially our opponents? Embracing humility is the “art of finding one’s own place,” and accepting that place without hoping for praise or exaltation. Evdokimov refers to the humility of two New Testament figures: John the Baptist, who is content to be the “friend of the bridegroom,” and Mary, who is joyful in being the “handmaid of the Lord.” Evdokimov asserts that self-centeredness makes the universe revolve around the human ego—egomania is manifest when one refuses to bow before the other.

Evdokimov assures us that “no confusion is possible between humility and humiliation, weakness or spineless resignation. Humility is the greatest power, for it radically suppresses all resentment, and it alone can overcome pride” (Evdokimov 1998, 169-70). What’s more, Embracing humility is the “art of finding one’s own place,” and accepting that place without hoping for praise or exaltation.

Evdokimov’s reinvigoration of asceticism enjoys a strong coherence with Basil’s. Both the ancient and modern theologians call upon everyone to submit to brutal self-honesty: admitting one’s own sin and striving to see the good in one’s interlocutors is not the same thing as punishing one’s self. Basil proposes an ascetical practice designed to embrace humility because for Christians, exaltation is reserved for God alone. Accepting one’s place as not exalted quiets the passions of resentment—passions which are rooted in desiring exaltation, a temporal honor that comes with victory over one’s opponent.

If Basil and Evdokimov emphasize the ascetical process of embracing humility, Maria Skobtsova teaches us how to see our opponents as brothers and sisters in Christ. Mother Maria wrote in France in the first half of the twentieth century to reframe the way her fellow Russian
immigrants understood the experience of praying before icons. Her writing occasionally critiques the ossified ritual forms of the synodal period of the Russian Church—particularly in her famous essay that exposes the five types of Russian ritual spirituality as internally oriented (Skobtsova 2003, 140-86). Mother Maria's essay on the mysticism of Dialogue is dangerous: the fear of the unknown outcome of irreconcilable differences opens the door to opting for division instead. But withdrawal from dialogue enhances fear because it prohibits us from seeing and encountering the other, so the images we conjure of others are distorted.

human communion charts a new spirituality rooted in the public ritual acts of venerating icons during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. Knowing that Russians recognized the connection between the ritual veneration of icons and their prayer before icons at the altars in their homes, Mother Maria suggests that one should learn how to see the world as an iconostasis (a wall of icons and religious paintings that separate the nave from the sanctuary in a church) in order to revere the people with whom we interact on a daily basis with the same piety we offer to the saints on the icons in church and at our homes (Skobtsova 2003, 80-1). Mother Maria is quite blunt in her description of the requirement for the Christian: to revere with piety men who act inappropriately, drunken neighbors, and lazy students. These too are icons, she says, bearing the image of the same God as the saints whose icons we venerate (Skobtsova 2003, 81).

Mother Maria goes on to argue that this is the purpose of the liturgy itself, as she claims—rightly—that the liturgy is offered for the life of the world. Mother Maria refers to the ritual act of offering when the deacon (or priest) lifts up the bread and the cup during the Eucharistic Prayer and the priest says, "Offering You your own of your own, on behalf of all and for all" (Skobtsova 2003, 81). The point of participating in the liturgy is not primarily for the consecration of bread and cup into the Lord's body and blood, but for people to be transformed so that their daily lives would consist of service "on behalf of all and for all." This service is rooted, again, in Christ's own pouring out of himself, his taking on human nature in utter humility (Skobtsova 2003, 78-9). Like her contemporary Evdokimov and Basil of old, Mother Maria recognized the connection between adopting an identity of humility and engaging others with radical charity. Her example of seeing unpleasant people as icons is a way for us to sharpen our spiritual senses, to learn how to see one's enemy in a new way, and to act by loving them.

The habit of humility implies a willingness to dialogue, and dialogue is antithetical to the preference for division that pervades our contemporary culture. But dialogue is itself integral to Christian discipleship. The Czech Catholic theologian Jaroslav Pastuszak draws from Trinitarian theology to relate the Word of God (Logos) as intrinsic to human communication. When humans truly dialogue with one another, they have access to the divine perspective (Pastuszak 2015, 174-6). Obviously, dialogue can contribute to sustaining human life: building edifices, creating treaties, developing new medical technologies all depend on dialogue (Pastuszak 2015, 174). Pastuszak laments the postmodern tendency to make the material and spiritual spheres mutually exclusive: he claims that withdrawal into orbits such as religious and secular leads people to individualism, which breeds egocentrism (Pastuszak 2015, 168). A willingness to dialogue may result in encountering the other person's strangeness, but Pastuszak claims that participating in that dialogue permits the partner to encounter God in the other, and God in himself as well (Pastuszak 2015, 178).

The prospect of encountering strangeness in the other person seems reason enough to hesitate from joining the dialogue. It is a hesitation many of us experience if we are not prepared for how we should act, espe-
cially if dialogue is understood as a demand for capitulation to that otherness, or if one fears that fidelity to one's own principles will result in conflict. In other words, dialogue is dangerous: the fear of the unknown outcome of irreconcilable differences opens the door to opting for division instead. But withdrawal from dialogue enhances fear because it prohibits us from seeing and encountering the other, so the images we conjure of others are distorted.

Another Czech theologian, Tomáš Halik, hearkens back to the ascetical tradition when he says that war is to be waged against one's own moral failings, not against the dialogue partner (Halik 2015, 107). Halik and Pastuszak both argue that Christians should be willing to dialogue with secular humanists as well as people of other religions for the purpose of finding common ground. Their harmonic warning about the perils of Christian triumphalism used as a weapon against the other fits our thesis, as Halik says that this tactic is a secularization of the Church's eschatological vision (Halik 2015, 109). In other words, using Christian language to demonize our neighbors makes them into angels of darkness and us into God. Nothing good comes from this paradigm, and the triumphalists end up as idolators.

One might protest that the intent of dialogue has changed in our times. Rod Dreher recently commented about an invitation to a "pride prom" at Marquette University, which Dreher said was not a dialogue, but a "strategic move by heterodox/liberal people to establish a beachhead from which to dislodge and defeat orthodoxy" (Dreher 2018). The unknown outcome of dialogue can generate fear of danger. Basil, Evdokimov, and Mother Maria promote the urgency of dialogue and the habit of humility even in dangerous, life-threatening contexts. This was especially the case for Mother Maria, who was part of the French Resistance and died in Ravensbrück concentration camp. Her contemporary Dietrich Bonhoeffer also emphasized the urgency of dialogue during a time of grave danger. He was committed to maintaining transnational dialogue among all the Churches when fidelity to a nationalist Church was popular. Keith Clements asserts that Bonhoeffer promoted ecumenism as a way to work together to establish a new and just order (Clements 1999, 158). But Bonhoeffer himself offers the most important point about dialogue:

Peace is confused with safety. There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture. It can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to mistrust, and this mistrust in turn brings forth war. To look for guarantees is to want to protect oneself.

Clements says that this excerpt is quoted so often it has become something of a sacred text. It is relevant here because it is compatible with our thesis on the habit of humility. Learning how to humble oneself and approach the other with love will result in making oneself vulnerable to both the other and to God.

The witness of people such as Evdokimov and Bonhoeffer demonstrates that the Christian traditions of humility and approaching one's opponent with love comes to life in the flesh and blood of ordinary human beings. Evdokimov, for example, protected Jews during the period of Nazi oppression and devoted his life to serving underprivileged youth, many of whom were immigrants (Plekon 2002, 109-10). Bonhoeffer strengthened his commitment to ecumenical dialogue even though finding a quiet place within the nationalist and isolationist cells of the Church in Germany would have been safer for him (Clements 1999, 167-8).

The Christian virtue of humility has deep roots in tradition, beginning with Jesus himself and threading through each generation up until today. Humility leads the Christian to dialogue with the other, enabling the Christian to see the good in the other. These teachings depict a beautiful humanity, one that is able to live together in peace without erasing differences. Why, then, has this tradition essentially been ignored while the tendency to slander and humiliate one's opponent has ascended?

Let us turn again to scripture. Like the gospel of the cross, human humility is foolishness to the world because refusing to exalt one's self seems to
cede all competitive advantage to one's opponents. Jesus spoke clearly about the preponderance of narcissism. He recognized the egocentrism of the Pharisees, who "love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces" (Mt. 23:6-7). No institution or profession is exempt from this crisis of discourse—not even the Church. Institutions systematize incentives for advancement, stimulating competition among those who want the most "exalted" position. In these scenarios, the gospel tradition of humility simply gets in the way of systems that reward not only achievements (this is a good thing), but the sycophantism and competitive positioning that make it impossible for one to truly see the other. Turning to the gospel image of people who adopt Christ's utter humility as a pattern would stifle the system, just as Jesus's appearance and merciful acts in Seville threatened the religious order perfected by the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (the Grand Inquisitor knows that Jesus has "come to hinder us," so he threatens to burn him as the "worst of heretics"). For much of Christian history and in our own time of exalting in our opponent's humiliation, the holy tradition of Christian humility has become a heap of ashes. Adopting an identity of humility seems impossible because it has always been and remains countercultural—and it always will be.

There are two stumbling blocks that make people of good will pause before committing to humility. The first is the idea of submission: doesn't the habit of humility amount to submission to aggressors? On the contrary, humility does not necessitate forsaking one's own principles to avoid conflict. Humility cannot be translated as submission to verbal and physical aggression. Humility does not call for anyone to tolerate abuse. The radical humility of Basil, Evdokimov, Mother Maria, and Bonhoeffer is rooted in the cross of Christ. It is formed by the constructive and transformative power of God's kingdom. Refusing to respond to aggression with more aggression exposes the human decay caused by uncivil discourse. The one who abuses damages their own soul by covering the human faces of their opponents with the false masks of demons. Embracing the way of humility opens the door for the healing and transformation of those who harm themselves by choosing abuse over charity.

The second obstacle is the notion that only a chosen few are capable of perfect humility. There is a difference between impossible and hard, and Christians need to remember that the way of the cross is narrow. It requires both human effort and divine mercy. Different religious traditions agree that following God is a lifelong struggle, exemplified by Jacob wrestling God, by the excruciating battle against one's self reported by Augustine and Martin Luther, and by the tears described as drops of blood shed by Christ himself. Humility cannot be learned in a day, nor can one do it alone. It is a gift from God, and one spends a lifetime learning how to use that gift in the context of a community. It may be that the course of humility resembles the themes of Baptism, when a Christian partakes of Christ's Pascha, with Christ himself nailing our capacity to sin to the cross. Living out one's Baptism each and every day makes it possible to accept our state humbly and to see others as they really are.

**Embracing the way of humility opens the door for the healing and transformation of those who harm themselves by choosing abuse over charity.**

We have reflected on things that seem impossible. What is possible is for communities to commit themselves to cultivating a culture of humility and professing fidelity to dialogue. Our uncertain times generate fear of the unknown, and the absence of a Christian response to broken public discourse only adds to the layers of fear and anger. We need a new—or old—strategy to respond to increasingly intense attempts at annihilating an opponent. Adopting an identity of humility, patterned after Christ, and committing to dialogue with others does not require one to capitulate one's own position. As Evdokimov said, humility is not self-humiliation. Affirming the good that can be recognized when
one considers the entirety of the other makes it possible to transform an enemy into a friend, as Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said in a beautiful homily on loving your enemies. This spiritual response to the broken public discourse of our time could turn the tide and make peace flourish. In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther delivers the following teaching on the eighth commandment:

We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light. (Luther 2005, 321)

Luther’s teaching could become the norm, and not the exception, if Christians reintroduce a culture of humility and dialogue into public discourse. May it be so. ¶

Nicholas Denysenko is Emil and Elfriede Jochum Professor and Chair at Valparaiso University. This essay is adapted from his lecture given as part of the 2018-19 Distinguished Speaker Series at Christ College—The Honors College at Valparaiso University.

Works Cited


ONE TIME

Maybe it's good to know there's always another morning that could be different from this one: the sun barely lifting below the trees, and the boy across the street raking leaves. It's not his house but he's been here the past few weekends combing the grass with the precision of a barber, taking a step back every once in a while to admire his handiwork. He heaps as many leaves as he can into his hands and against his chest, ferrying them over to the curb. A few of them slip neatly from his grip and into the wind, settling down into a trail that he can follow on his return trip to the pile. But maybe it's also good to know that this is the morning we were given, that as the cold sun rises it covers us both like a greenhouse, the light playing tricks with our eyes so that we almost see the wind darting along each edge of crystal. Sometimes this is the way that it is, but I can't help wondering about that other time, and whether those leaves would have also been beautiful.

B.P. Miller
"Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?"

Traditions, Vocations, and Christian Universities in the Twenty-First Century

Caroline J. Simon

We who teach at Christian liberal arts institutions tend to underestimate their peculiarity. This disadvantages us when addressing the question of institutional vocation, the particular calling of Christian liberal arts colleges and universities. Such institutions, both Catholic and Protestant, often recruit students with the promise that the kind of education they offer will equip their graduates to do more than begin careers—their graduates will be equipped to discern and prepare for their callings. It is appropriate that such institutions will have reflected deeply on their own sense of calling. In order to answer this question of calling it is important to ask a related question: What good outcomes would be at risk in the world if all Christian liberal arts institutions were to go out of existence?

In order to highlight the peculiarity of Christian liberal arts colleges and universities, I want to share my own story in order to illustrate how strange an idea Christian liberal arts can seem to those on the outside looking in. First, though, I want to say a bit about the title of this essay, “Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?” Perhaps you recognize this as a quote from the Bible. In its original context in Amos, this question occurs in a list of negative rhetorical questions. The implication is that, of course, two people cannot walk together unless they are in agreement. And surely there is truth in that. People will not walk together for very long if they are going in radically different directions. But the natural follow up question is: agreement about what?

As a philosopher, when I think about the liberal arts, one of the first images that comes to mind is the two figures at the center of Raphael’s fresco The School of Athens. Plato and Aristotle are depicted as walking along together, disagreeing about fundamental questions. Plato is pointing up, toward the eternal world where he believed the perfect unchangeable Forms that constituted the only genuine realities abided. In contrast, Aristotle’s hand is extended horizontally, toward the physical and practical realities of the empirical world. The point of their walking together is to dialogue about their fundamental disagreements. Yet their disagreements, though profound, rest on a shared agreement that the quest for truth is possible and that it is facilitated when lovers of the truth who disagree with one another engage in philosophical disputation—disputations that will eventually, it is hoped, lead to fuller understanding on the part of both parties and, ideally, if not in fact, lead to convergence of points of view.

The history of Protestantism seems to give a different answer to this question about whether two can walk together unless they agree. Estimates of the number of Protestant denominations vary, but all agree there are hundreds—many would say thousands—of different kinds of Protestant groups. The majority of these came into existence when Christians within what had been a single group came to believe they could no longer stay together. Their disagreements about liturgy or
sacraments or polity or hermeneutics were too profound to allow them to remain in fellowship.

Often along the way, these denominations have founded liberal arts colleges, some of which have gone on to become universities. When there are splits within founding denominations, these educational institutions can end up feeling like adult children of divorcing parents. Can the institution avoid taking sides? Do these colleges and universities have an obligation to help their founding bodies think well and deeply about the contentious issues?

Those are interesting questions, but I am more interested in a mystery or tension that is more central to what defines a Christian liberal arts college or university. Liberal arts education is, among other things, an enterprise that thrives when faculty and students see those with whom they disagree as resources in seeking truth. Yet Christians, at least when they are gathered in congregations and denominations, have, throughout history, acted as if like-mindedness is a virtue—and have often cultivated like-mindedness by shunning, expelling, or separating from those with whom they disagree. I am left intrigued by this tension innate within Christian liberal arts institutions, and the particularity of their vocation.

**Christian Liberal Arts: Communities in which Christian Intellectuals Are Not “Odd Ducks”**

I have spent almost thirty years at Christian institutions of higher education, first as a faculty member and then as an administrator. But I came to my first tenure-track position at a Christian college with very little understanding of Christian liberal arts. I am what is now called a “first gen.” Neither of my parents had gone to college. When it came time to apply to colleges, they expected I would go but that I would figure out where to go, how to apply and, beyond a certain point, how to pay for college on my own. My father had gotten three $2,000 whole life insurance policies when his children were babies, one each to cash out for each child, in order to provide for our advanced education. My first choice was Judson Baptist College in Portland, Oregon, my hometown. A youth group leader at my Baptist church was teaching there. That is all I knew about Judson Baptist College, except that it had only been in existence for a short time. (At this point, a disclaimer is appropriate. There are many kinds of Baptists and many kinds of Baptist institutions. My references to Baptists in telling my story are not meant to imply anything about the attitudes and beliefs of most Baptists.) My backup school was Portland State University,
a comprehensive public university that was on the same metro bus line as my parents' house. I was accepted to both institutions, given a modest scholarship at Judson Baptist, and granted admission to the honors program at Portland State. My parents' strong advice was that I go to Portland State. They pointed out that they had paid taxes for years, and that some of those taxes were the explanation for why I could take my $2,000, live at home, and graduate from Portland State in four years without borrowing any money. Why would I choose to spend my $2,000 in my first year at Judson Baptist? If I did that, where would I get the money to finish?

HAVING NO GOOD ANSWERS TO THESE questions, I went to Portland State, although I was not very excited about this choice. After two years I transferred to University of Oregon, where I completed a bachelor's degree in philosophy. My teachers at both universities,—almost all of whom were competent, caring, secular humanist intellectuals—taught me to think critically, frame useful questions, read difficult prose, and write coherent essays. They taught me that seeking truth is an intergenerational endeavor that spans millennia. They taught me that in the realm of fundamental human questions, "new" does not necessarily mean "better." They taught me that Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes were at least as worthwhile as intellectual conversation-partners as many twentieth-century philosophers. Some of my teachers took a personal interest in my success. I got a good enough college education to go on to graduate school in philosophy at the University of Washington with a teaching assistantship that paid for my tuition and provided a modest amount of money to live on.

As an undergraduate, my university experience was almost all individualistic and often isolating. I never lived in a residence hall. I went to class, I read, I studied, I talked with professors during office hours. I hardly knew the majority of my classmates, though I talked with a few of them before class. The only student organization I participated in was Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship. I felt like an alien and a sojourner in the environment of the public university. Inter Varsity taught me to think of universities as places to do evangelism. My particular branch of the Baptist tradition taught me to view the university as a dangerous place full of sin and false teaching.

I began to feel equally alien among those with whom I attended church. My theological beliefs and central values had not changed, but very few of the people I worshipped alongside would have understood the questions with which I was grappling as a student, nor would they have interest in the authors I was reading. Well-meaning church members quoted the warning in the second chapter of Colossians about the deceitfulness of philosophy and prayed for my soul.

I was an odd duck. Eventually I became aware that there were indeed other living Christian philosophers, but actual sightings of these other odd ducks were rare.

By the time I had finished my Ph.D. and was applying for tenure track positions, I was in many ways more nervous about the idea of becoming a faculty member at a Christian college than I was about teaching at a secular university. While I was indeed an odd duck as a Christian in a secular intellectual environment, philosophers are all odd, each in our own way. I found most of my professors and colleagues in public universities were at least polite about what I believed and some were even curious about why I believed as I did. In contrast, I wondered how many faith statements at evangelical Protestant colleges would have at least a clause or two that I didn't interpret in exactly the same way as the powers-that-be at those places would prefer.

As events transpired, I was offered a tenure track job at Hope College, an institution founded by Dutch Calvinists in the mid-nineteenth century. Hope College did not have a faith statement but sought to hire faculty with a mature understanding of and commitment to the historic Christian faith. They asked me for a statement about my Christian faith as part of the application materials; their provost and president asked me follow up questions about my faith during my campus interview.

I do not remember anyone asking me whether I understood what a Christian liberal arts college was. That was fortunate for me, because I spent
many years after arriving at Hope College trying to figure out what a Christian liberal arts college was and why students would go to one. Frankly, during my first years, I found Hope College confusing. Hope students were paying thousands of dollars more per year than they would have paid to attend a state university. I came to understand

Students, whether Christian or not, were required to take at least two religion courses. These courses were serious academic studies of biblical and theological topics taught by people who combined professional rigor with Christian belief.

and appreciate the attraction of the residential environment Hope provided. Students knew and cared about one another. They formed lifelong friendships. The quality of the teaching was consistently higher than at a public university. Faculty also knew their students and mentored them both intellectually and personally. Those would be reasons for choosing a residential liberal arts college, but why Hope in particular? After a year or so of teaching Hope students, I found most of them were bright but not highly academically ambitious. I hypothesized that many of them had chosen Hope College because they wanted a residential environment and a decent education but that their lack of academic drive had probably meant they had not been able to get into elite private universities.

That sounds like a jaded hypothesis, but I think I came to that conclusion because my own past had taught me to expect that the point of choosing a Christian college is that it would provide a sheltered environment. Hope College didn't look like it was set up to do that. Students didn't sign a behavior code, nor were they required to attend chapel. Hope did have rules against alcohol on campus, but drunkenness was all too frequent at parties held at houses students rented off campus. There were hours that students of opposite sexes were prohibited from being in one another's residence halls, but from conversations I had with students, I gathered this did not curtail premarital sexual activity among many of them.

The intellectual environment was also not protective. While faculty members were required to be Christians, and there were faculty development activities that encouraged thinking about integrating faith with learning, there was no shared understanding among faculty of when, if ever, faith should enter the classroom. Some faculty proudly declared they taught exactly the way they would teach at a secular institution. Others said they let students set the pace for how and when faith entered in. If students raised questions from a Christian perspective, those questions were treated with respect—but given that not all students at Hope were Christians, many faculty were reticent to be what they thought of as “pushy” or “preachy.” Other faculty included in their syllabi Christian authors who would not usually be included in the same types of courses at secular universities. Some designed all or many of their courses to be taught from a Christian perspective. However, the most widely shared intellectual value among Hope College faculty was a commitment to openness. Few, if any, thinkers, perspectives, ideas, or topics were seen as inappropriate to be brought into courses at Hope. I am sure my Baptist youth group leader would have been just as concerned about the health of my soul if I'd attended Hope College as he was at my choice of Portland State.

Freedom to sin and occasions to be led into error would have stood out vividly to my Baptist youth group leader in contemplating what was going on at Hope. What would have been much less visible to him would have been the freedom to pursue Christian faithfulness as a choice—a choice that almost all faculty and staff made and that many students made; a choice reinforced by aspects of the environment I have not focused on up to this point. Students, whether Christian or not, were required to take at least two religion courses. These courses were serious academic studies of biblical and theological topics taught by people who combined professional rigor with Christian belief. The required humanities classes included
Christian authors such as Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Calvin, Luther, Pascal, and Kierkegaard. A required interdisciplinary capstone course invited students to consider how the Christian faith could inform a person's life view. A well-staffed campus ministry program provided an array of very well attended chapel services four times a week, as well as small group bible studies. The union of Catholic students hosted an on-campus Mass conducted by the local parish priest. Hope College was a place where to be a Christian was not to be an odd duck.

For me as a Christian philosopher, Hope College was a rich environment for pursuing questions I would have been unlikely to tackle as a faculty member at a secular university—at least in the same way. I had colleagues in my own department and in many other departments who were pursuing projects from Christian motives and from Christian perspectives. These colleagues were shaped by a variety of different Christian traditions. I learned a lot about Catholicism by overhearing my Catholic colleagues argue with one another and reminisce about growing up Catholic or converting to or from the Roman Catholic tradition. Likewise for Lutheranism, Methodism, Episcopalianism, Quakerism, Pentecostalism, and various forms of Calvinism. These colleagues provided a wide array of potential role models for pursuing disciplinary questions from Christian points of view. They were also generous informants for me when I was grappling with questions that crossed disciplinary boundaries and needed to track down reliable sources or test my understanding of areas outside my home discipline. In innumerable ways, Hope College allowed me to make progress on my own quest to become liberally educated and to grow as a Christian humanist.

There was also plenty of debate about how to interpret and carry out Hope College's mission. Eventually I got so interested in these debates that I proposed to James Kennedy, at that time a colleague in Hope College's history department, that we collaborate on a project exploring the history of the religious identity of Hope. That project became the book *Can Hope Endure? A Case Study in Christian Higher Education*. One way of interpreting the thesis question of that book is whether Hope College was a counterexample to the general pattern noted by historian George Marsden. He notes that the religious identity of Protestant colleges and universities very often attenuates over time. Marsden's historical work on higher education accentuates the fact that although almost all private universities and colleges were founded with religious missions, their typical trajectory eventually moves in secular directions. By the mid-twentieth century, many religiously-founded liberal arts colleges had jettisoned religious requirements for their faculty and begun to see such requirements as interfering with the freedom of inquiry needed for the pursuit of truth—especially scientific truth.

Hope College had looked as if it was moving in this direction in the 1960s. During that decade, it moved quickly from an ecumenical impulse that led it to hire its first Catholic faculty members to an interfaith impulse that led to hiring its first Jewish faculty members to a view held by some search committees that whether a candidate had any religious beliefs was irrelevant, or, at best, much less important than her or his promise as a teacher and scholar. In the early 1970s, Hope's board of trustees deliberately hired a president who would restore the hiring of faculty who were Christians to a top institutional priority. From the 1980s until today, Hope College has arguably succeeded in pulling off something rare: paying due regard to its Reformed foundations, being firmly committed to remaining ecumenically Christian in its hiring policy, and allowing the degree of academic freedom needed to be a high-quality liberal arts college.
Whitworth University, the institution where I now serve as provost, has arrived at a similar, though not identical, nature and composition through a somewhat different historical path. Whitworth describes itself as a Christian liberal arts university with Reformed, evangelical, and ecumenical strands in its “DNA.” In elaborating on its educational environment, Whitworth’s website asserts: “While some Christian universities limit discussion or exploration of certain ideas, our professors encourage students to ask tough questions and search fearlessly for answers wherever they may be found. And while many institutions reject any role for faith in the pursuit of truth, Whitworth lifts up Christian conviction and intellectual curiosity as complementary rather than competing values.”

I want to turn now from autobiography to theory. I want to address the nature of Christian liberal arts institutions conceptually. One document that informs Reformed Christianity and my own thinking about the liberal arts is the Belgic Confession. The second article of that confession says:

We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God. Second, God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God’s glory and for our salvation.

This idea of God’s “two books”—the created order and scriptures—is not just a Protestant idea. The Catholic scientist Galileo, for example, defends his scientific investigations in “Letter to Princess Christina” by asserting that God’s “two books” do not contradict one another, when rightly understood. I agree; all truth is God’s truth. This allows me as a Christian teacher/scholar to be confident that rigorous and open intellectual inquiry is fully compatible with commitment to God’s written and incarnate Word. This confidence is a hallmark of Christian liberal arts education.

My view of higher education is also shaped by Augustine, especially the broad picture of two cities that Augustine sets out in his book *The City of God*. Augustine draws the distinction between the Earthly City and the City of God. Citizenship in one or the other of these cities is determined by the primary focus of one’s love. The Earthly City contains structures focused on the temporal human flourishing of those whose primary love is for temporal things. Earthly cities are based on power, and if they are functioning well, they restrain evil, give incentives for outwardly virtuous behavior, and keep the earthly peace. The City of God has a citizenship spread through time and space. To be a citizen of the City of God is to love God more than temporal goods and to have the love of God order all one’s other loves. Outwardly, citizens of the City of God appear to be citizens of particular earthly cities, and, in a certain superficial sense, they are. But in a deeper and more important sense, citizens of the City of God are a pilgrim people, sojourning among the cities of this world but not really “of” them.

Both the idea of two books and of two cities are clearly dualisms. But they differ from the dualism of my 18-year-old self and my particular Baptist upbringing, because both books and both cities are good gifts from God. The book of God’s created order does not lure us into error, if rightly understood. Similarly, Augustine’s Earthly City is not inherently evil or dangerous—it is a genuine but limited good. Augustine tells us that Christians should obey and respect the laws of the earthly cities they inhabit, unless those laws contradict divine law. Christians, insofar as they love God more than anything else, are law-abiding out of respect for the role of human law in maintaining the earthly peace, not out of fear of temporal punishment or desire for earthly reward.

Decades of experience in Christian colleges and universities have convinced me that academic institutions, whether secular or Christian, are Earthly Cities. They are structures designed to motivate those who love temporal things by the disbursement and withholding of temporal rewards. As an institution, a university is a not-
for-profit organization that has to make ends meet and remain financially viable. As an institution, it hires people, occasionally fires people, tenures some faculty and denies tenure to others, promotes (or refrains from promoting) people based on perceived merit, and sets strategic priorities. As educational institutions, Christian colleges and universities treat students as if their motivations are shaped by temporal rewards and punishments—grades, rules, and sanctions. They award degrees based on fulfillment of academic standards. As institutions, they are shaped by the exercise of power and by giving and withholding temporal goods. This is just as true of colleges and universities that call themselves Christian as it is of secular ones. These markers of earthly-city-hood are evidence that there are no academic institutions that are pure embodiments of the City of God.

Yet, academic institutions give rise to realities that outstrip their institutional nature. Among the goals of all academic institutions is the goal of creating and sustaining an academic community. The ideal form of a scholarly/learning community would be a group that people voluntarily joined because of a common love for non-temporal goods. That love involves becoming more fully aware of, shaped by, and expressive of the True, the Good and the Beautiful. This would involve teachers and students believing in the intrinsic value of the life of the mind and spirit. Faculty and students would be dedicated to the free exchange of ideas, to creativity, and to growth in knowledge, delight, and human flourishing. I believe the goal of creating and sustaining an academic community should be the central goal of any academic institution; all other institutional goals should promote this end.

To the extent academic communities approximate their ideal form, and focus on the quest for more than temporal rewards, they are more like the City of God than like Earthly Cities. Course grades, academic awards, and professional promotions are not primary motivators. This is true of both Christian and secular academic communities; secular academic communities often do connect with the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. As a Christian, I see this as an aspect of God’s common grace. I was a beneficiary of that grace as bestowed through the education I received at Portland State, University of Oregon, and University of Washington.

A liberal arts education, whether Christian or not, uses the best of what humanity has produced in its quest for the True, the Good, and the Beautiful to shape minds and hearts. A liberal arts education equips students to reflect on what

Christian liberal arts education helps students learn how to apply the past's wisdom to solve the world's most pressing problems, and how to develop a worldview that connects faith with reason and knowledge with experience and creativity. is worth doing with their lives and how they can serve humanity. It prepares students to deal with complexity, change, and unscripted problems.

A Christian liberal arts education does not put any of the resources of the liberal arts aside, but brings to those resources a perspective on both the glory and limitations of human nature. Practitioners of Christian liberal arts thank God for the ability to come to greater, and less misleading, understandings of God’s book of Creation. But practitioners of Christian liberal arts also acknowledge that human intellect cannot know even the natural order exhaustively and that human hearts do not love goodness, truth, and beauty perfectly. As Pascal says, “The last function of reason is to recognize that there are an infinity of things that surpass it.” Christian liberal arts education embraces the best products of varied cultures as gifts of God. It welcomes students into a community of truth-seekers who acknowledge human limits and our dependence upon grace through Christ. Christian liberal arts education helps students learn how to apply the past’s wisdom to solve the world’s most pressing problems, and how to develop a worldview that connects faith with reason and knowledge with experience and creativity.
experience and creativity. It seeks to motivate and enable students’ lifelong quest for the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, explicitly acknowledged as God’s gracious gifts.

Christian colleges and universities seek to nurture a Christian academic community. A community of Christian scholars and learners knows that when they grow toward understanding and embodying the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, they are receiving God’s grace. While a secular academic community may understand many of the same truths and espouse many of the same values, they are blind to their God-relatedness. Communities of Christian scholars and learners will be interested in exploring many subjects secularists would ignore or construe very differently. Theology and biblical studies are obvious examples, as are the sub-fields within many disciplines that are constituted by thinking through the implications of the Christian faith for particular disciplines.

A community of Christian scholars and learners knows that when they grow toward understanding and embodying the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, they are receiving God’s grace.

Self-conscious pursuit of knowledge of God and God’s created order, and recognition that whatever success they have is a gift from God through Christ, are distinctives of Christian academic communities. Yet this gift is always contained in earthen vessels. In this case, the earthen vessel is institutional life, which is an aspect of the Earthly City. Because Christians are at times more focused on temporal rewards than on the love of God, we are as much in need of institutional rewards and sanctions as non-Christians are. We do not yet fully live into our citizenship in either the City of God or an ideal scholarly community.

An aspect of the vocation of Christian colleges and universities is to learn to live out this dual nature, both as institutions where temporal sanctions help keep good order and as communities that are self-conscious occasions of grace. While aspiring to be guided by the Eternal, we must come to terms with the fact that we do not currently abide in heaven. We can neither lean totally on our Earthly-City-hood nor pretend to abide fully in the City of God. Christian colleges and universities must continually strive to negotiate the tensions of this dual nature in a way that nurtures a thriving Christian teaching and learning community.

The Vocation of Christian Liberal Arts Institutions

Having highlighted the peculiarity of Christian liberal arts education with my own story and having said a bit about the nature of Christian liberal arts, I want to end by examining more fully the topic of what Christian liberal arts colleges and universities are for. What is our calling? What unique good would the world lack if all Christian liberal arts institutions were to go out of existence?

The first answer to the question is what I have just been talking about. We would lose residential communities of Christian scholars and learners who self-consciously seek truth, beauty, and goodness as gifts of God’s gracious provision for us. As Wheaton philosopher Arthur Holmes used to remind us, we would lose a natural setting for the doxological aspect of education. Praising God for knowledge and creativity is part of the vocation of Christian liberal arts. Novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson puts this point somewhat differently. She fears that as the legacy of the Reformation impulse fades, we will lose our “passion for disseminating as broadly as possible the best of civilization...and at the same time honoring and embracing the beauty of the shared culture of everyday life.” What is likely to take the place of this legacy is career preparation, narrowly construed, and an uncritical, dehumanizing, and reductive view of what it is to be human. Robert Zaretsky, in his 2015 Chronicle of Higher Education article, claims this has already happened. He says, “The academy has long been a place where we
live for examinations, not where we examine our lives.' Liberal arts institutions, certainly Christian ones, are exceptions to this generalization. Helping students lead examined lives and discern their vocations should be hallmarks of Christian liberal arts education.

The second answer to the question of what we would lose if Christian liberal arts were to go out of existence leads me back to my title question: Can two walk together unless they be agreed? One way of distinguishing among types of educational institutions is by examining the nature and degree of the shared agreements that allow their participants to cooperate in collaborative intellectual endeavor. At some secular institutions, there is almost no institution-wide agreement, even about such a fundamental issue as whether there is truth that is the goal of inquiry. Such institutions are held together by a set of procedural rules. Their common life as universities is almost wholly Earthly-City-hood. As a result, their intellectual life is very fragmented. What do those who walk together on faculties at secular institutions agree about? Very little beyond the conviction that the administration is made up largely of dimwits.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are Christian colleges and universities that require all faculty and staff (and sometimes all students) to assent to a statement of faith or to the authority of the Roman Catholic magisterium or to key theological and moral teachings. Somewhere in the messy middle are Christian colleges and universities that are more similar to Hope College and Whitworth University. The messy middle is inhabited by colleges and universities that aspire to be communities of truth-seekers who acknowledge human limits and dependence upon God's grace made possible through the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, yet do not codify this shared purpose in credal statements or behavior codes.

One of the goods that Christian liberal arts colleges and universities can provide that secular liberal arts colleges have no interest in providing is producing two types of graduates that I will call Critically Reflective Committed Traditionalists and Seriously Faithful Selective Adherents to Christianity. Let me explain what I mean by these terms.

In Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults, sociologists of religion Christian Smith and Patricia Snell identify six categories for understanding the religious stances of emerging adults. Their six categories range from those who appear to take religion most seriously to those who are completely irreligious. I want to focus on the two categories at the most religiously serious end of their spectrum, what they call Committed Traditionalists and Selective Adherents. Smith and Snell characterize Committed Traditionalists as active, knowledgeable, articulate practitioners of a traditional religious faith (166). They characterize Selective Adherents as those who have had a traditional religious upbringing but hold some different opinions from what their family's religious tradition taught them (167). Smith and Snell say that Selective Adherents "do what they want religiously" (295) and they appear to take this as evidence that they lack religious seriousness. Committed Traditionalists, as characterized by Smith and Snell, wholeheartedly and unreflectively adopt their religious tradition's beliefs and practices. Selective Adherents pick and choose, and, as characterized by Smith and Snell, they choose what to keep and what to discard on the basis of what they find convenient or what best suits their preferences.

I have certainly met people, some of them college-age emerging adults, who fit Smith and Snell's descriptions of Committed Traditionalist and Selective Adherents. But I also know many
Christians who are more critically reflective than their Committed Traditionalists and many Christians who are more seriously committed than their Selective Adherents, yet also do not embrace all of the beliefs and practices of their denomination. These adherents are selective, but they are not rejecting and retaining beliefs on the basis of convenience or whim. Their selectivity is based on critical reflection as they make every effort to be faithful to their tradition. Thus the term, Seriously Faithful Selective Adherent (SFSA). Both Critically Reflective Committed Traditionalists (CRCTs) and SFSA are people who believe the Christian faith has an intellectual content that matters. SFSA emphasize that the history of Christian thought is a repository of both truth and error. Both groups can and should embrace the belief that intellectual engagement with those who interpret Christian traditions differently is an effective means toward sorting truth from error. CRCTs have engaged in critical reflection about the teachings of their religious tradition and have retained their agreement with those teachings because they have found them intellectually defensible. Critically Reflective Committed Traditionalists and Seriously Faithful Selective Adherents are beneficial to one another’s intellectual and spiritual growth. SFSA raise questions that CRCTs need to grapple with in their quest to be critically reflective. At the same time, CRCTs can help guard SFSA from hastily concluding that some disputed point of doctrine or practice should be jettisoned or reinterpreted.

Critically Reflective Committed Traditionalists and Seriously Faithful Selective Adherents are, arguably, the kinds of believers that the Church of Jesus Christ most needs in order to guard it from its most dire present threats. These threats are, on the one hand, too facilely splintering in the face of doctrinal or moral disagreement and, on the other hand, staying in fellowship with one another only by evacuating Christianity of almost all of its intellectual content.

The Christian faith is a living collection of traditions that have, over the history of the Church, benefitted again and again from Critically Reflective Committed Traditionalists and Seriously Faithful Selective Adherents. A few examples I would cite are Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Thomas Aquinas, Hildegard von Bingen, John Calvin, Blaise Pascal, Jonathan Edwards, George Fox, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Christian ethicist Oliver O’Donovan urges us to seek ways of addressing serious disagreements that affirm and renew our communion with one another, instead of rending the fabric of our fellowships. In order to do this, we need to engage others with a willingness to learn from each other and with a hope that we can stay in fellowship as we seek to resolve our disagreements. In this way, we can explore and resolve important tensions within our Christian traditions. Pursued prayerfully and with grace, such attempts to reach resolution of serious disagreements can transform our experience of disagreement. We can continue to walk together even while we disagree. Christian liberal arts colleges and universities have a calling to model this kind of disagreement, for the sake of their students, for the sake of the Church, and for the sake of the world.

Caroline J. Simon is provost and executive vice president at Whitworth University. This essay is adapted from a talk presented at the Lilly Fellows Program Regional Conference at Georgetown College in 2016.

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DOVE STA MEMORIA

Modern graphologists can tell when an ancient scribe didn't know what they were copying, since the ink thins mid-phrase, the meter breaks mid-beat.

As Joseph's brothers, loving a remembered truth, formed a grove of bodies in the palace hall, somewhere within, in a closed room, a drooping scribe readied his pen to copy the Battle of Kadesh. Perhaps, decades later, he would copy their story too, knowing nothing of the strange symbols pressed into the papyrus, nothing of the foreign boy—his coat and his beauty, his favor before God, his arrogant dreams—nothing of the great irony that a Hebrew became vizier of Egypt.

Filling the scroll anyway, he loves the way the letters gather like villages along the Nile—as he draws a moist finger along his eyelid irritated by dust—loves not knowing if he marked a sentence end or the beginning of a new chapter altogether, with the thicker stroke that follows the wetting of the reed.

Matthew Porto

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1 From Italian poem "Donna me prega" by Guido Cavalcanti (c 1255-1300). The words can be translated as "where memory is" and in the context of Cavalcanti's poem refer to the place in the mind where love is located.
Consolations

Gary Fincke

From day to day, second to second, the self preserves itself, clinging to that instrument: time, the instrument that it was supposed to play.
—Walter Benjamin

1

Far more than one early morning Facebook post pleads, “Send thoughts and prayers,” and because so many readers are alone or anxious or accept the power of such comfort, dozens of comments begin “dear God” and “prayers sent,” phrases as familiar as passing traffic, they are erased by a gibberish of wind and starlings awakening, every teeming tree chattering what sounds, at dawn, like an invisible babble of relief. Upstairs, a door slams, the skylights open to crosswind, ceiling fans spinning sluggishly. Even this early, the fans are as helpless as the cardboard ones provided by the church my father once required, no excuses. They opened and shut like accordions, pictures of Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount, blessing the loaves and fishes, healing the sick, or kneeling in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. All summer, they were scattered along each pew where new hymnals, one Sunday the year I turned fifteen, were distributed, all of them purchased, I learned through opening and shutting as many as I could during the following months, to honor the memory of somebody’s loved one. Those hymnals also contained a table that listed the dates when Easter would occur for each of the next sixty-five years. The last of those dates, which back then seemed impossibly far away, was 2025, embedded in an April for which science has prophesied worldwide coastal flooding, the city in which I was reading those forecasts abandoned like a shopping mall where, after dark, a dread of cars idles without headlights.

2

Because my mother died on New Year’s Day, because I visited to comfort my father, who refused to move any of her things, I saw how Christmas had stalled at gifts unwrapped but not opened, how her medicine had been arranged by frequency: Crystodigin, Diaranese, Almodet (once daily), Cytomel (three times per day). They supported her weak heart, and I lifted the vial of Percaset (as needed, for severe pain, no refills) and wondered at the gaps between the demands that had been screamed by my mother’s heart. Beside it was Nitrostat (as needed, for chest pain), those pills that the foolish in movies always grope toward as they collapse while still one room from relief, the urgency of those labels convinced me that my mother would surely have understood they represented a hierarchy of help from which she would not emerge.

During my visit, I learned that my father had been taking blood pressure medicine for years, keeping that need closeted as if it were shameful. By then, I had issues of my own that required tablets I took, twice daily; capsules I swallowed, as needed; and vapor I breathed in the lapsed-lung darkness, lying back like Proust, whose life I’d learned for my job. His asthma, however, bedded him for years. He didn’t take Theolair, Optimine, Ventolin. He insisted, finally, that a huge black woman was chasing him. So she had caught him. So my father strained to speak, trying, “Well, did you sleep good?” to unmuzzle the morning, and I answered him, “Good enough” as if the truth
might trigger prescriptions, as if accidentally we might talk, as needed, swallowing to save our faulty selves, carefully speaking from the confluence of our altered blood.

After dinner that night, my father led me outside. The falling snow was nothing but an hour's cover. When we walked across my father's yard, the grass returned where our shoes pressed. "There's my sky," he said, and not knowing what he expected, I answered, standing in his driveway, "It's clear all right." I stared upward, thinking my father was planning to tell me about the ancient names for the stars or the tales they inspired about people who suffered and changed and ascended while somebody left behind handed his story down to another generation. The two dippers and Orion were all I could remember and locate, and I waited for him to show me where he believed my mother was, how one cluster of stars had reformed, at least for him, to suggest a melodrama of hope. The two of us stood with the night in our lungs. We breathed a sentence of silence until he said, "Venus and Jupiter," directed me low in the sky where there were so many lights I could nod, certain they were among them.

Her cries enhanced by the dorm wall echo, the student sitting in the stairwell weeps. A step above stands the boy who must have shown her that love is as perishable as groceries stamped with shelf-life warnings. She raises her hand to her face. Without skipping a sob, she lets me climb. Wary at public sorrow, the boy holds his stance.

She didn't lift her head, I tell my colleague later, even when I paused like an eavesdropper. My colleague says "aboulia" as if I should recognize a strange, ancient word for that tableau. He's spent much of his lifetime studying the obsolete and archaic, certain there are words that fit so exactly to feeling they transcend the narratives for ambivalence, anxiety, and angst. When he's satisfied he has me puzzled, he says, "Think of how she's sitting there like you say. It shows loss of volition." He waits a beat and adds, "Loss of will," grinning as if he owns the word that would define my bald neighbor coughing up mucus beside the hybrid sapling he carried to the hole I'd dug for what he insisted would flourish faster than sumac, swelling to shade my new house, what, statistically, he is unlikely to witness despite his latest experimental cancer therapy. Or my father, his knees ruined to the threat of buckling, crawling backward down the stairs to the flood-prone basement for the years-old jars of my mother's preserves that speak one version of eternity.

Once, in May, a tractor near where I lived in Western New York vanished beneath the earth, a farmer too early into the onion fields. I stared at the John Deere, large and green, as it rose from the mud, heaved up by pulleys. Those of us watching were told that the farmer, as his tractor sank, had stood, riding until his shoes had touched the soil, becoming, he'd said, a temporary Jesus, walking away from the disbelief of drowning.

One of my students, fifteen that spring, had lost an eye in a farm accident several years earlier. The empty socket had been stitched closed; her hair always hung across nearby scars like cloth. Nobody knew whether or not she would receive an artificial eye or plastic surgery. I was told that she'd been piggyback riding her father, her thin legs still pale in early May, hugging his neck in shorts and T-shirt, a model for the joy of family farming. The story another teacher told me included these details: her father's black Harvester had flushed birds and turned over two nests of mice before it bucked and tossed her. I didn't ask him how he knew that.

That summer, a boy my older son's age tumbled under the harrow that trailed his father's red New Holland. A minister said, "Remember the eight years of joy that child has brought," as if the dead boy were that farmer's pet. After the service, the one-eyed girl followed her father, whose shoulders were so hunched he appeared to be dragging her.

In September, the girl with one eye said she loved unhappy endings because everyone deserved misery. By then, my last year as a high school teacher, I was a ghost who left the school before I re-entered my body and walked home to my wife and three children who had not been injured, their tragedies postponed. To walk off
dissatisfaction, some afternoons I chose a longer, indirect route home. A few times, I passed tractors idling near fields to be harvested. Twice, farmers crouched beside them as if in thought.

A woman I once met had, seventeen years earlier, lost a swimmer while lifeguarding at a summer camp. Hand-over-hand, a boy had edged to deep water along the dock. No matter the reason, he'd lost his grip and gone under while she'd scolded a boy for running, adding a minute between her whistles for buddy checks. "Last warning," she'd said to the running boy. "Don't let me see that again."

Often, she said, her dreams were whistles and screams. Always, there was water-with-shadow, a still life framed by memory's limits. She woke with what felt like heavy weight yoked by her arms. Twice each night, she rose to check the breathing of her children who slept paired in two rooms. A trilling in her ears insisted that she evaluate the pillows, examine the chests for the relief of rise and fall.

What I didn't tell her was that I'd practiced CPR, once, on a dummy called Mike Muscles, bringing him back from the dead with my hands and breath. Imagine yourself watching a boy dragged from a swimming pool, the instructor had said. Imagine the work of your hands on his chest was the only way to resurrect breath.

After that woman had walked away, I evaluated how hungry I was, sometimes, for a story to spew at acquaintances, believing that sort of appetite was widely shared. For once I said nothing. There is never shame in the inability to comfort.

I have been reading about scientific fraud, cases of men and women altering their data to make it fit their hopes for success. The well-known obstetrician, for example, who published a research paper in the British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, claiming that a 29-year-old woman had given birth to a healthy baby after he had successfully relocated a five-week-old ectopic fetus into her womb, a report that raised the hopes of women prone to pregnancies that start outside the uterus and end in miscarriage. Patient records, however, had been tampered with, suspicion resting upon the obstetrician. Moreover, colleagues knew nothing about the case he was referencing, and the mother could not be found. The doctor had falsified everything. One other patient, in fact, was already dead when he claimed to have operated on her.

Six miles from where I live, a skeleton has been unearthed from the bank of the Susquehanna River, each day regaining more of itself from six fillings and the evidence of wounds. The newspaper publishes photographs of the long-missing woman, interviews with her mother. It's the end of uncertainty, she says. The end of miracles, she adds, when the story continues on an inside page. Beside that report, the newspaper runs a photograph of a woman displaying one thousand origami cranes she owns in order to bring fulfillment of wishes. Which makes me think, for a moment, that there is some reason to forgive the scientists who have altered data, the researchers with their "golden hands." Absolve the man who marked mice with the ink of false verification. Pardon the doctor who beat probability with a simple shift of answers. For they do the work of our wishes. For they bring miracles and divine intervention. There are so many God signs in science we need a library for likely fraud, space enough for enormous paper flocks to dream among, those frail, paper birds so securely settled, they will not startled.

The pet cemetery near Stroudsburg was the kind of place I walked with a notebook, a grant supporting me across Pennsylvania. I copied down inscriptions that read like parodies and wondered what anyone driving Route 80 would think of Edgar Friedell paying somebody to inscribe Bambi Was My Baby on a headstone. I thought of how I was spending Pennsylvania's money, believing I could find poems or stories daily by starting my car. I remembered the fat anthologies I carried, the number of fellowship winners like myself who filled up American highways until
they found one place that convinced them they were alone in a particular inspiration. I walked down past Our Lost Little Girile and My Sweetie and stood on the shoulder of the highway the way, as a boy, I had often done to hitchhike before I thought about poems and stories or even how much one of those drivers could have made me pay for accepting a ride, and I kept guessing how I looked to every man or woman who might be watching for hitchhikers, wanting to heave that notebook across all four lanes of Route 80, one more tax dollar symbol, wishing for Edgar Friedell to show up with flowers so I could ask him how he'd done it—how he'd loved something enough to sign his name.

Thirty years ago, shortly after I began teaching at a university, one of my students died in a campus accident. Afterward, I rewrote, in cursive, a few lines from her workshop poem about the possibilities of love, listening to the imagery for desire with intricate loops and decisive slants. Her setting is a garden dedicated to St. Paul and tended by two ancient nuns who, each day, inspect the light altered by arrangements of decorative trees; who prune, monthly, the rose bushes to allow kneeling before the raised right hand of a smiling Mary. Pausing, I remembered it had been years since I had noticed a nun. Because they have abandoned their habits, I decided, and remembered how they rode the streetcar in pairs; how they gathered at the museum where I was transfixed by dinosaur bones, mummies, and animals stuffed and mounted.

My student's sixteen lines were a gospel of surfaces, touch after touch where nerves nearly breach the skin. They detailed blossoms that flourished like sacrifice; they added topiary that shadowed erosions from frequent storms, the nuns often singing. I recalled Soeur Sourire, the Singing Nun, her song about Dominique relentless on the radio, her Ed Sullivan minutes, how I followed her brief career, discovering she had left the order for a woman, nothing certain by then but the pull of desire.

The priest who blessed my wedding fied the church for a woman who had spent seven years as a nun. Soon Sister Smile killed herself, nuns becoming improbable as faith. My student, at last, shifted to the white statue of the garden saint, her blessed hand smooth from centuries of kisses, her poem ending in an astonishment of prayer.

One Saturday afternoon we rode the nursing home's elevator down to the chapel, where I guided him to the stained-glass window he'd donated, twenty years before, in memory of my mother.

My father, his collection of canes arranged against a wall, accepted, at last, the walker and the nursing home. Ninety, he shuffled and imagined intruders and thieves who believed stealth obsolete in the room of the deaf. Hourly each night, he struggled to the bathroom in darkness, sure he would welcome them, wolves come to rescue him from the wheelchair, from the hospital bed, the catheter's humiliation of extended care.

One Saturday afternoon we rode the nursing home's elevator down to the chapel, where I guided him to the stained-glass window he'd donated, twenty years before, in memory of my mother. After the window had been installed, he'd driven me thirty miles to see it, asking, when we'd entered, "Which one? Guess." When I chose flowers and doves, a setting suggesting what he expected of paradise, he was pleased enough to say, "Good" and wave me close to read the inscription.

When those birds and lilies caught the low sun, they seemed transfigured by eternity. "Look," I said, hearing the light of expectation in my voice. My father stared and waited as if he were listening for me to go on, but I kept my sense of accidental symbolism to myself. He leaned on his walker so close to the identification plaque that he laid his hand upon it. "See?" he said, "to Ruthy," as if that inscription were a miracle.
A lifelong friend has retired to South Carolina. Last spring, while we crossed the bridge to return from a resort island restaurant, my friend’s wife, driving slowly, said, “Here is where the accident occurred,” describing carelessness, inattention, and a driver texting while veering over the median and so much as murdering a woman she knew well, the husband injured but recovering, by now, for several months. “Because she was driving,” my friend said. “Because, like me, he sees poorly at night.”

The following morning, that crash survivor, unannounced, joined my friend and me for golf. I shook his hand when we met. Although I carried my knowledge of his secret misery like an extra club, the truth is I prepared, if needed, a sentence of consolation, that for three and a half hours I thought I was being asked to prove who I was and became, at best, another retiree come south in winter, easily forgotten. Afterward, over beer, I told my friend I felt like I was spying in a changing room.

This year, visiting again, I learned that widower never played another round with anyone my friend knew, that he’d moved to another state to be close to his children or to be far from the source of suffering, as if distance were a way to peace, a door to bolt against the visitor who never leaves, who does its laundry late at night and leaves crumbs for which no one confesses.

There is light, this evening, an hour later than yesterday and strange, like the unexpected eye within a whirl of wind. For most of my life, I’ve judged myself so terribly I’ve spent whole weeks in hell. Language seems unable to define the certainty of delayed darkness except the German torschulusspanik, meaning fear of transience, how, each day, I wear that melancholy like a truss, just a bit distracted as the evening seems a false start toward traditional joy. Not as challenge, but as consolation.

Gary Fincke has published thirty-one books of poetry, short fiction, and nonfiction, most recently The Out-of-Sorts: New and Selected Stories (2017). He has been twice awarded Pushcart Prizes for his work, and cited fifteen times in the past eighteen years for a “Notable Essay” in Best American Essays. He has just retired as the Charles Degenstein Professor of English and Creative Writing at Susquehanna University.
RESPONSIVE READING OF THE SADDUCEAN CREED,
(after my friend responds to my assertion that "I don't believe in angels")

I believe in the Old Testament angels who came to earth
    and had babies with the ladies

I believe in the short-armed God whose reach
    concedes his grasp

I believe in the adder's eggs
    hatching into prophecy

and a blessed dark spider who spins
    the double-decker web by my door

I believe in the woman whose seven resurrected
    husbands will ignore her forever

and the neighbor who mows my lawn
    as he would have his mown

and his barefoot neighbor who sets
    our bushes on fire each fall

I believe in their thick-tongued leaves
    magenta with flame

what he tells me of his wife, her angelic laugh,
    her thin, gossamer hair, and how she is gone

David Wright
“A Distinguished Composition of Significant Dimension”

Kendrick Lamar’s DAMN. Reminds Listeners that the Pulitzer Prize for Music Can Go to Exciting and Unexpected Works

Josh Langhoff

When rapper Kendrick Lamar won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in April, heads exploded. Not only was his album DAMN. the first hip-hop work to win the award; of the seventy-one previous Prizes, sixty-eight had gone to classical composers, and the other three to jazz artists—Wynton Marsalis, Ornette Coleman, and Henry Threadgill—who sometimes used techniques from European classical traditions. DAMN. seemed a world away from this milieu. A chart-topping rap album, commercially successful and critically acclaimed, it had recently been nominated for the Album of the Year Grammy. (Lamar lost to Bruno Mars.) A Pulitzer victory for music this popular was unprecedented.

Public reaction was swift and vehement. Recent Pulitzer winners and finalists, most younger than forty, congratulated the rapper on Twitter. Lamar fans were ebullient, although many agreed with the anonymous Economist columnist who grumbled that the rapper’s previous, sprawling, jazz-influenced album To Pimp a Butterfly was more deserving. People who didn’t care about the Pulitzer proclaimed loudly how little they cared. And a small chorus of classical defenders and rap haters called the award a joke, accusing the five-person jury of political correctness and quoting certain repetitive lyrical excerpts to demonstrate Lamar’s aesthetic bankruptcy. I wonder whether these skeptics had the same problem with the 1945 winner Appalachian Spring, in which Aaron Copland subjected audiences to seven straight repetitions of “Simple Gifts”—a tune he didn’t even write!

The most cogent argument against Lamar’s victory was economic. At its best, the Pulitzer has drawn attention to lesser known classical musicians trying to scrape together a living. A Pulitzer can help drum up commissions and sell albums; it serves as a job reference for young composers and reintroduces the catalogs of veterans. Lamar’s album had already been heard more than any Pulitzer winner since Appalachian Spring. Surely he didn’t need the publicity or the accompanying $15,000.

The most compelling argument, though, is that he deserved it. On a purely musical level, Lamar’s gift is to clearly communicate sophisticated rhythmic ideas. In this, he’s unmatched by any Pulitzer winner not named Stephen Sondheim (who won for drama, not music). Like Sondheim,
Lamar is a master technician who uses his skill to precisely convey the expressive meaning of his words. On DAMN., he builds the song “FEEL” from a repeated nine-syllable phrase rhythm—“I FEEL like a chip on my shoulder / I FEEL like I’m losing my focus”—that begins on different beats from one bar to the next. The key word “feel” lands on a different accent each time, creating the disorienting impression of an onslaught of unexpected feelings. In other songs, Lamar has his producers build instrumental tracks around his vocal cadences, ratcheting up their elaborate composite rhythms to thrilling effect. Besides his composing prowess, Lamar is a great performer, charismatic and comfortable enough in his own voice that he can alter it from song to song and still seem himself. He excels at what classical critic Kyle Gann called “imagism,” the ability of composers to create indelible musical moments that stick with listeners. (Pop fans call these moments “hooks.”) Lamar’s most indelible moments have become protest chants, they’re used to sell movies and headphones, and I’ve even heard him quoted in presentations by Lutheran pastors. His music insists that America learn to reckon with it.

America’s most prestigious music award began as an afterthought. In his will, noted yellow journalist Joseph Pulitzer provided for a music scholarship, along with awards for journalism and literature; Columbia University first handed out these awards in 1917. In the early 1940s, Columbia’s music faculty lobbied to change the scholarship to a prize encouraging American composition “in its larger forms”; that criterion would later change to “a distinguished composition of significant dimension.” (No big band sides or parlor songs need apply.) William Schuman’s second Secular Cantata won the inaugural Prize for Music in 1943. Since then, most of the Prize’s juries have included one or more previous winners, which until recently ensured a certain self-reinforcing homogeneity in the winners’ pool: lots of big neo-romantic orchestral pieces and operas; plenty of thorny academic serialism; and a whole lot of white men. The list of vital American composers who failed to win the Prize before they died is disquietingly long, nearly as long as the list of critics who have denounced the whole enterprise.

Still, the winners’ circle contains some great, exciting works. No one thinks a Pulitzer Prize-winning piece represents the year’s best music, except for the deciding jury and maybe the composer’s parents. (When interviewed, winners tend to marvel at how they submitted their work to the jury on a whim.) Rather, the winning music generally seems like the sort of music that wins Pulitzers: serious and skilled, forward-thinking but rarely crass about it, and invested in the notion that American music should be identifiable as such. This partly explains why Lamar won. His music strives for Art with a capital “A,” yet there’s nothing too outlandish about it. His lyrics don’t openly endorse murder or Communism like those of, respectively, DMX or Boots Riley of The Coup, both of whom have made albums musically superior to DAMN. Rappers don’t get more “distinguished” than Kendrick Lamar; and, as with his Pulitzer-winning peers, this sometimes dulls the immediacy of his music. But if you’re looking for distinguished music that isn’t dull, you might try the following sixteen champions, listed in roughly ascending order of preference. Each is strange and indelible in its own way.

George Crumb, 1968
Echoes of Time and the River

Attending a Crumb performance is like stumbling upon some bizarre ritual you weren’t meant to witness—the musicians wander around the stage and chant, misusing instruments in ways their builders never intended. Listening to a Crumb recording, then, is a bit like hearing a movie from the next room. Fortunately, he’s a skilled enough composer that his violent string glissandos and stoic percussion parts remain compelling, even when the music consists mainly of dying echoes, as it does here. See it live if you can.

Ornette Coleman, 2007
Sound Grammar

Though his sax and trumpet melodies often drew on the blues, showtunes, and orchestral standards, Coleman could also be the catchiest atonal composer on the planet. This late-career live
album doesn't even rank among his ten best, but at the time it succeeded as a miniature career summation, and featured a weird lineup of Coleman, two bassists, and drums (played by his faithful son Denardo). Whenever Coleman sits out, the sound becomes murky; fortunately, he doesn't sit out much, and his laughing streams of melody remain captivating as ever.

Charles Ives, 1947
*Symphony No. 3 "The Camp Meeting"

Ives's fourth symphony, a gargantuan logistical nightmare that also contains some of the century's most purely beautiful orchestral writing, was only published after his death and so didn't win the Pulitzer it deserved. But his third is no slouch—a matter-of-fact collage of familiar hymn tunes, it veers into unexpected places while always maintaining its sturdy pace, as though wary of being dragged down by nostalgia or sentimentality.

Henry Brant, 2002
*Ice Field*

Another piece from the "it probably helps to be there" file, Brant's own gargantuan logistical nightmare—one of many in his Ives-inspired catalog—features a series of room-rumbling pipe organ improvisations, a jazz drummer, two pianists playing mostly tone clusters, and an orchestra whose sections play from different areas of the concert hall. As Mark Twain said of *War and Peace*, the composer "carelessly neglects to include a boat race." He does include some fabulous orchestral writing, though—lovely passages of crystalline majesty, the violins slashing like icebergs into a ship's hull.

Steve Reich, 2009
*Double Sextet*

Stephen Sondheim once described his shows' affinity with Reich's minimalism: "What we're both interested in is vamps, and that's what we've spent our lives writing." In its driving piano rhythms, vibrant tone colors, and song-like melodies, *Double Sextet* is Reich's most Sondheim-y work; you can almost imagine it framing a scene of (the Pulitzer Prize for Drama winner) *Sunday in the Park with George*. Its middle slow movement feels obligatory, but the fast movements are some of Reich's most immediately appealing music.

David Lang, 2008
*the little match girl passion*

This harrowing choral setting of Hans Christian Andersen's two-page story sounds simple on first listen, winnowing the music down
to a few notes in various stark combinations; but on further inspection, you realize how the different voices intertwine their rhythms with increasing complexity and beauty. Church choir directors should consider excerpting the movement “Have mercy, my God” for Holy Week—I think it’s doable.

Henry Threadgill, 2016
*In For a Penny, In For a Pound*

Threadgill’s unusual quintet Zooid (the composer on sax and flute, along with guitar, cello, tuba, and drums) represents something genuinely new. Nominally a jazz band, the group improvises using serial techniques developed by Viennese composers a century ago; but where that Viennese music could sound sternly eggheaded or expressionistically heartbroken, the members of Zooid skip right along, mining their assigned notes for whatever novel combinations they can find. The resulting music doesn’t have any melodies to speak of, and it doesn’t sound much like jazz—or like anything else, really—but somehow the band produces an endlessly listenable series of grooves.

Charles Wuorinen, 1970
*Time’s Encomium*

The first—and so far, the only—totally electronic Pulitzer winner sounds very much of its time, as though Wendy Carlos had written an atonal score for an avant-garde remake of Disney’s *The Black Hole*. Like most of Nonesuch Records’ releases from the 1960s and ’70s, *Time’s Encomium* is also extremely cool—a constantly shifting collection of blips and zaps, screeches and hums, all ricocheting off one another and around the speakers with a sense of playful foreboding. Heed Wuorinen’s liner notes: “Those who like complex and rapidly unfolding music should listen first to Side Two.”

Samuel Barber, 1963
*Piano Concerto No. 1*

Barber obviously loved the Romantic piano concerto, with its fast-slow-fast ritualism and opportunities for quick-fingered nonsense, but here he mostly embraced the form as a chance to pound a lot. The two fast movements are gloriously fun, even silly, full of obsessive rhythmic figures and one cacophony after another. The slow movement is pretty enough.

Caroline Shaw, 2013
*Partita for 8 Voices*

Like Lamar, Shaw won her Pulitzer at the young age of thirty, and if the two composers share anything, it’s their probing delight in all the different sounds human voices can make. These four movements for a small choir are exuberant, jumping from speech to song to heavy breathing and beatboxing, with the singers sliding through their different vocal timbres as nimbly as they plow through the score’s very catchy notes.

John Luther Adams, 2014
*Become Ocean*

Not to be confused with the more famous John Coolidge Adams, whose 9/11 memorial *On the Transmigration of Souls* won the prize in 2003, John Luther Adams writes tributes to natural wonders that, in their ability to subtly change the temperature of the room, verge on ambient music. The ocean proves his ideal orchestral subject, as he layers swirling quintuplet eddies atop ominous bass undercurrents and moves from
placid stillness to roaring crescendos. Fun fact: the piece is a palindrome—the notes read the same forwards and backwards—but it's hard to pick up on that when you're listening.

**William Bolcom, 1988**
**12 New Etudes for Piano**

These are mostly jaw-dropping technical flourishes, although one—the “Nocturne”—would lay under the fingers of most casual pianists. No less than in his Pulitzer-shortlisted epic Songs of Innocence and Experience, Bolcom’s piano music tries to devour the entire twentieth century, with special appetites for stride piano and anatomically driven effects (knuckles and forearms get their own workouts), but it all sounds cohesive, in the manner of an expensive fireworks display.

**Julia Wolfe, 2015**
**Anthracite Fields**

Wolfe’s thrilling, unpredictable rhythmic writing places her in a league beyond most classical composers. In this five-movement choral meditation on Pennsylvania’s coal industry, she takes delight in jolting the audience: in some places interrupting long, straightforward harmonies with moments of sheer sonic terror; in others, letting choir and sextet swing with the authority of a jazz combo.

**Elliott Carter, 1960 and 1973**
**String Quartets No. 2 and 3**

Few composers have betrayed less interest in their music’s artfulness than Carter, whose string quartets resemble fascinating dinner conversations among four strong-willed people who refuse to find common ground. The instruments burble and sputter, hardly ever settling on long, sustained tones together; the effect is invigorating and demands total attention, even if afterwards you’re not sure what just hit you.

**Aaron Copland, 1945**
**Appalachian Spring**

You don’t need me to tell you to listen to this iconic ballet—just take the 1945 Pulitzer Jury’s word for it! “Although there are many clichés of contemporary music to be found sprinkled through the score...the effect is of music clearly understandable by conservative theatre-goers as well as by those interested in modern music.” And let us not forget: “Above all, it is an entirely satisfactory vehicle for the dance,” because “the music never intrudes.” Ironically, Copland revised his unobtrusive score into a stand-alone orchestral suite within days of winning.

Appalachian Spring has obtruded on American life plenty since then—anyone who hears it can’t stop humming it, and Copland’s simple (borrowed) melodies and polite dissonances have taught generations of film composers what “America” sounds like. It’s not the quintessential piece of American music; as this survey alone demonstrates, no such thing exists. But in its ambitious scope, its melding of modernist technique with populist utility, and its obsession over what “being American” means—all qualities shared with the work of Kendrick Lamar—it’s quintessential Pulitzer music.

Josh Langhoff is a church musician living in the Chicago area. He is also the founder of NorteñoBlog, a mostly English-language website devoted to Mexican music.
DESERT PARABLE

A dragonfly kites to the corner of the room,
its body a silver pin, tissue wings a desert's vellum,
a parchment scribed with the short story of rain.

High desert's named by what there is not
there, a stucco emptiness, mapped
by bare arroyo, arid canyon.

A nothing filled with sage and piñon,
yucca, shaggy olive, succulent, by crows
aloft on updrafts, tattooing themselves on clouds.

Brief rain arrives to succor brittle bark,
demands, do much with little,
as one leaf does little with its gathered light.

Jen Stewart Fueston
ALLOWANCE

Here I am,  
a ten piece puzzle.  
Anyone could do it.  
A brick church congeals  
over there; rain berates  
a window. A beautiful  
man at the door  
is the last piece,  
I say to myself.  
His fingers move  
like currency in a foreign  
economy. I'd be  
the coffee grounds clinging  
to the bristles of his broom,  
the violet static  
of his closed book—  
I wasn't made with a piece  
of self-love, which is all  
it comes down to, our parcels  
of wind, this vision  
of another life clattering away  
like a god's favored horse.

Michael Schmidtke
Hope and History: Three Views

Peter Dula

TA-NÉHISI COATES ANNOUNCES HIS distrust of Christianity early in his 2015 book, *Between the World and Me*. He writes:

I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas... We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God. And so I had no sense that any just God was on my side... My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box (28).

With his invocation of the universe's moral arc, Coates places himself within a long history of reflection. "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice" was a favorite line of Martin Luther King, Jr., so much so that it is engraved into his Washington D.C. memorial. Barack Obama took it for his own when he had it woven into the Oval Office rug. But the line is actually much older than King. Its original version comes from Theodore Parker, who said, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

So we have four different people using and modifying this quotation for distinct purposes. I think clarifying the differences can help us understand Coates's influential book and, at the same time, help us untangle Christian hope from other versions of hope, or untangle good theology from bad.

Let's start with Theodore Parker. He was a nineteenth-century abolitionist preacher. He got kicked out of the Unitarian church for his skepticism about the Bible (which shows you how long ago that was). He hung around Massachusetts Transcendentalists like Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the Alcotts. I appreciate his modesty concerning the arc. I admire the tension between acknowledging that there is no evidence for the arc's direction or length on one hand and, on the other, his assurance that what he cannot see with his outer eye he can see with his inner eye. But you can imagine Coates reading this and just being bewildered. "You divine it by conscience?! You're just making that up." I confess considerable sympathy with Coates here. If there is such an arc and if it bends the way Parker thinks it does, that would have to be known from revelation. Parker is right that it can't be simply read off history, but "divine by conscience" isn't, theologically speaking, much of an improvement.

Obama's version is distinctly different. He turns it into a statement about history, not "the moral universe," but I think that is a fair translation, mostly because I am not sure I know what the moral universe is. The mysteriousness that pervades Parker's version is gone. And unlike Parker, Obama thinks it can be read off of history, in particular, off of *American* history. Not only that, it is now something that is in our control. Not only can we see it, we can help it bend and those of us who voted for him nine years ago participated in bending it.

I think Obama's version is Coates's central target. I have found it useful to think of *Between the World and Me* as a kind of companion counter-volume to Obama's 1995 memoir, *Dreams from My Father*. Both are the coming-of-age stories of young black men coming to terms with race in America by becoming writers. But they end up in very different places.

Not just in his memoir, but in speech after
speech, Obama presented his story, his rise from childhood poverty to the Harvard Law Review and the U.S. presidency, as evidence that racism is not essential to the American story, to what Coates calls the Dream. Racism for Obama is not inscribed at the founding. In Obama’s version of the story, America is founded on the conviction that all humans are created equal and deserve an equal share of power in governance. American history is the story of progressively making that vision a reality by overcoming the obstacles of slavery and patriarchy. He identifies that progress with history’s arc.

**I don’t think the arc of history bends toward justice. But I don’t think the arc of history bends toward chaos. I don’t think history has an arc. History has thousands of arcs.**

For Coates, on the other hand, Obama’s American creed of liberty and equality does not exist alongside slavery and the genocidal dispossession of Native Americans; it rests, as it were, on top of them. The distinction is absolutely essential to understanding the difference between Obama and Coates and the difference between liberalism and radicalism. The liberty and equality enjoyed by whiteness did not exist in spite of the oppression of people of color but because of it. The material prosperity that is constitutive of the Dream requires the exploitation of the those marginalized by it. People of color haven’t been benignly left out; they have been actively and necessarily excluded.

I’m not going to try to tell you who is right in that debate, Coates or Obama. My own story, as the son of a white woman and an African man, has far more parallels with Obama’s than Coates’s story. But my historical and philosophical commitments place me with Coates. I don’t think the arc of history bends toward justice. But I don’t think the arc of history bends toward chaos. I don’t think history has an arc. History has thousands of arcs. Some of them have bent asymptotically toward justice. Some haven’t. Some looked like they did and then crashed and burned. Others had the opposite trajectory.

But where do my theological commitments place me? Doesn’t the Bible make repeated claims about the arc of history bending towards justice? Doesn’t the Bible—from beginning to end, from the promises to Abraham and then to Moses and up through the prophets and all the way to John’s Apocalypse—repeatedly and consistently understand history as the field upon which God’s purposes are enacted, culminating in a time when they are decisively disclosed?

Well, yes and no. I think the better way to say it is “the arc of God’s purposes in history bends toward justice.” Here I want to turn at last to the King quotation and point out something that places it in contrast to Parker’s and Obama’s and in the company of the prophets.

One thing that is immediately obvious, perhaps most obvious, is King’s ability to constantly keep hope and despair in tension. Like almost every page of the prophets, King never relaxes this tension. Success and failure, light and dark, cross and resurrection, Friday and Sunday are always held together. He puts it most famously and pithily when he said, “We must hew a stone of hope out of the mountain of despair”—a line that comes right after he quotes Parker again in a 1967 speech. He does this over and over. It is one of his most characteristic ways of speaking. The arc of God’s purposes in history, he seems to say, bends toward cross and resurrection. But he never lets resurrection crowd out the cross or the cross crowd out the resurrection. He is situated firmly in Holy Saturday.

Most often in Between the World and Me, Coates seems to understand even King’s hope as false hope. But Coates never makes the common, easy, conventional criticism of Christian hope—that is, if God is in control, then humanity is relieved of responsibility, that God’s guarantee of the future means we don’t have to worry about the present. He doesn’t make the political critique of Christian hope, he makes what I think of as a psychological critique. In contrast to the false hopes and blind faiths of white, black, and Christian Dreams, Coates offers questioning. Here he is describing his education at Howard:
I began to see discord, argument, chaos, perhaps even fear, as a kind of power. I was learning to live in the disquiet I felt in [the library], in the mess of my mind. The gnawing discomfort, the chaos, the intellectual vertigo was not an alarm. It was a beacon (52).

I think those three sentences should be engraved in granite above the entrance to every university library in the country. I think this is at the heart of Coates's rejection of Christian hope. He thinks Christian hope is a way of avoiding the discord, argument, and chaos, and if he loses that, he loses what he calls "a kind of power," a writer's kind of power. He loses his beacon. For him, such discord is the pulsing energy at the heart of his existence, and to trade in those questions for Christian answers would be a kind of death.

So we may be surprised, but shouldn't be, when, toward the end of *Between the World and Me*, Coates turns a quizzical eye on his own relationship to the church. In the third and final section of the book, he reaches out to the mother of Prince Jones, his friend from Howard, killed, like so many other innocent black men, by the police. Reflecting on his impressions of her, he writes,

I thought of my own distance from an institution [the black church] that has, so often, been the only support for our people. I often wonder if in that distance I've missed something, some notions of cosmic hope, some wisdom beyond my mean physical perception of the world, something beyond the body, that I might have transmitted to you. I wondered this, at that particular moment because something beyond everything I have ever understood drove Mabel Jones to an exceptional life (139).

Here Coates, for the first time in the book, revises the quotation with which I began. He takes back the part about "retreat," realizing that the church may not necessarily be an escape. Here it is narrated as the exact opposite, as something that pushed Mabel Jones into the world and not away from it, into her own kind of disquiet. Here, ten pages from the end, by acknowledging the possibility of "something beyond the body," Coates questions his materialism, too. Moreover, his encounter with Mrs. Jones also prompts a revision of his early disdain for the civil rights movement's nonviolence. Gazing at her reminds him of "the pictures from the sit-ins in the '60s":

Have you ever looked at those faces? The faces are neither angry, nor sad, nor joyous. They betray almost no emotion. They look out past their tormentors, past us, and focus on something way beyond anything known to me. I think they are fastened to their god, a god whom I cannot know and in whom I do not believe. But, god or not, the armor is all over them, and it is real (142).

If you or I as Christians hear that with a sigh of relief—Whew! He's let us off the hook—we have entirely missed the point. The point, rather, is this: we, or at least many of us, are to come to Coates the way Coates comes to Mabel Jones, allowing him to draw us into questioning our most fundamental convictions. Not to abandon them or disown them but to rethink them. James Baldwin wrote, "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers." It is also the purpose of theology. The arc of history doesn't exist. The arc of God's purposes does, and it bends toward justice. But justice is an abstraction. We can be more precise. The arc of God's purposes in history bends toward the cross. That sounds like an answer, but it is an answer that lays bare a host of questions: How is that justice? How does that fulfill the promises that pervade the Old Testament? Shall we understand those promises to have been revealed as metaphors for the cross? And, if so, shouldn't we also think of the second coming as equally metaphorical, but of a mystery that we cannot understand rather than a future firmly in our intellectual grasp? I don't know about you, but those questions provoke in me what I imagine Coates means by intellectual vertigo.

Peter Dula is associate professor of religion and culture and chair of the Department of Bible and Religion at Eastern Mennonite University, where he presented a version of this essay as a chapel talk.
BELL-SOUND

The quality of doubt, the conditions of belief,
the voice of one who hears the voice of God.

Not silence—soundless pageantry. As many gods
as persons claiming to represent those gods.

If voices and bodies are interchangeable,
we must be inside a myth. A second definition

of the noun priest: a mallet used to kill fish.
Visions pass, or are misremembered.

Armor becomes ornament, wood becomes wire.
You prefer a slice to the loaf, your lover
to the crowd, in the valley of speech. In the vision
of that valley. The fable in which that vision occurs.

The anvil resting on the altar. The spell passing
through parrot-colored glass, touching the spine

of the book in which I read of God's javelin,
an annunciation, wide as a feather, narrow as a nest.

Christopher Lee Miles
The Night the Beatles Came to Church

Kurt Krueger

I remember the night the Beatles came to the basement of my father's church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It was February 9, 1964, and I was a high school sophomore.

This was the time of the Cold War, a simpler time when the good guys (us) and the bad guys (the Soviets) were clearly identifiable.

My fifteen-year-old self was aware of Sputnik and the space race, the assassination of a young president, and the emergence of rock'n'roll, but pretty much unaware of the race wars that were brewing in Detroit and Los Angeles and, to a lesser degree, in my hometown of Milwaukee. And I had only a vague awareness of a war heating up in a place called Vietnam.

During my high school years, our youth group met every other Sunday afternoon or evening in the church basement for Bible study and fellowship, sometimes staying at the church, sometime leaving church for an activity.

Our core beliefs and rules for daily living came from the Bible. That, and Martin Luther's Small Catechism.

Our church youth group was part of the Walther League, and at the beginning of every youth group meeting, we sang the official Walther League song, which began: "Walther Leaguers, Walther Leaguers / One and all are we / Serving Jesus Christ our Savior / Who has set us free."

Walther League events were a lot of fun for us, though always safe and predictable.

In the spring and summer we went horseback riding or played miniature golf; sponsored car washes to raise money for mission work; and went swimming in the waters of Lake Michigan, frigid even in August.

In the fall there were hayrides, and helping with the church's Fall Festival, also known as Halloween.

And during the long Milwaukee winters there was bowling, caroling to shut-ins, and, in the church basement, board games, shuffleboard, and square dancing. Other kinds of dancing were not allowed, especially slow dancing or "hug dancing," which could lead to who knows what.

Throughout the year, some of my wayward Walther League friends would go to Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) dances on Saturday night and come to our church the next morning displaying the green "CYO" stamp on the backs of their hands as hard evidence of CYO dance attendance.

I think my father saw the CYO-stamped hands but was not bothered by these minor displays of religious rebellion. However, it was made clear to me that the pastor's children would never attend a CYO dance—or any other dance, for that matter.

This was also a time in our Lutheran church when Hollywood movies were looked upon with suspicion—with the exception of The Ten Commandments in rerun, and maybe a Doris Day or Disney movie.

While not considered demonic, rock music was also looked upon with suspicion. The closest my high school, Concordia Milwaukee, got to acknowledging rock'n'roll music was in Latin class when we were required to translate Beatles song titles into Latin: "I Want to Hold Your Hand" became "Volo ut teneat manum tuam."

So it really shocked me when my kind but conservative father, Pastor Krueger, said "Yes" when several girls in our Walther League group asked if they could please watch the Beatles during our youth meeting because they had wanted to stay home from church that night to watch the Beatles on Ed Sullivan but their parents insisted that they go to Walther League even though they would miss seeing the Beatles and all their friends would be talking about seeing the Beatles on TV.
the next day so it was really important and could they please watch the Beatles.

So on Sunday evening, February 9, 1964, my father asked me and my best friend, Carleton, to go across the street to the parsonage and bring the Krueger family TV to church. There was no TV at our church in 1964.

We brought the TV down the steps to the church basement, balanced it on a folding table normally used for potluck dinners, rustled up an extension cord, plugged in the black-and-white TV, turned the channel selector to the CBS station, and adjusted the rabbit ears.

A few minutes later Ed Sullivan introduced the Beatles, and the sounds of hyperventilating adolescent girls shrieked out of the tiny, tinny TV speaker.

We could not hear the Beatles, but the otherwise reserved girls and guys in my youth group, kids with German and Scandinavian surnames like Reichert, Ziebell, Hildebrand, Ziege, Hanson, and Mueller, fixated on the TV screen, fascinated by the images and sounds of an emerging pop culture, a culture that Walther League activities like hayrides, miniature golf, and bowling would struggle to compete with.

My kind, conservative father stood smiling and motionless, trying to understand what he was watching in the eyes of his church's youth.

I THINK MY FATHER HAD AN INKLING THAT THE Beatles's appearance on Ed Sullivan marked the beginning of an important change for the young people in his congregation and for our close-knit ethnic community. Little by little, things changed for my father and our church. A few years after the Beatles's appearance, my father's sideburns grew a little longer.

Instead of forbidding dancing, my father's church school was soon sponsoring grade-school dances, with a sufficient number of parent and faculty chaperones to discourage hug dancing. And my brothers and I were not dissuaded from growing our hair a little longer, in imitation of the mop-heads from Liverpool.

Even later, in his next parish, my father, who was careful not to make political statements from the pulpit, persuaded the church elders to sponsor an extended family of Hmong refugees displaced by the Vietnam War. And when he became a district president and visited his African-American churches in Milwaukee, he was drawn in by the call-and-response sermons, and the music he heard, swaying awkwardly to the beat of bluesy gospel hymns. (This, according to my mother.)

Maybe I'm not connecting the right dots here, but it seems to me that a lot of things started to change after the Beatles came to our church basement.

Our core theological beliefs did not change. We clearly understood that we were saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ as revealed in Holy Scripture. We believed that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. That He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. That no one comes to the Father except through Him.

When some of my Walther League friends left the church, those of us who stayed confessed with Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Our core Lutheran beliefs and practices did not change, but for many of my generation, February 9, 1964, is as good a date as any to mark the beginning of the cultural shifts that have shaken us and taken us, for good and for ill, from “I Want to Hold Your Hand” to way beyond “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.”

Kurt Krueger has been a Lutheran teacher for forty-six years. A 1970 graduate of Valparaiso University, he is currently interim president of Concordia University in Irvine, California.
Too Much In the Garden:
Paul Schrader’s First Reformed

Charles Andrews

In his book Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (1966), the Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton asked, “Why does the Church insist so much on ‘turning to the world’ with acceptance and positive assent?” This was a central concern and puzzlement for Merton, especially given his religious vows that made him feel at times like a “guilty bystander” rather than an active participant in the world. Merton’s explanation for why the Church preaches an acceptance of and positivity toward the world was that it “senses in the crisis of modern man the ultimate danger of man’s refusal of himself. Whereas conservative Churchmen are still afraid that the modern world presents a moral danger by its incitements to joy and its affirmations of humanism, freedom, and earthly delights, the Church, in her wisdom, realizes that the greatest danger comes from the power of negation that is latent in this great and powerful society of ours.”

This provocative and surprising claim—that modernity is less plagued by hedonism than by asceticism—is a central theme in First Reformed, a film in which Merton’s life and works make several crucial appearances. Written and directed by Paul Schrader, First Reformed focuses on the pastor of a small, historic church in upstate New York that now survives only by tourism and the largesse of an affiliated megachurch called Abundant Life. Reverend Toller (Ethan Hawke) lives alone, suffers from indeterminate physical and mental illnesses that he medicates with whiskey, and provides the film’s voiceover narration by way of a journal he is writing as a form of prayer and contrition. Toller is a veteran with great sorrow in his past, but he is further shaken when a parishioner named Mary (Amanda Seyfried) asks if he will meet her husband for some pastoral counseling. Mary’s spouse, Michael (Philip Ettinger), is an environmental activist who has fallen into terrible despair over the irreversible effects of climate change. Mary shares his convictions about the need for human efforts to heal the planet, but she is disturbed by Michael’s despondency and by his suggestion that she terminate their pregnancy to spare their child from experiencing the impending ecological cataclysm. From their initial counseling session, which quickly becomes a political, philosophical, and theological battle, Toller emerges feeling “exhilarated”—but several dark twists follow from this meeting, sending Toller into an ever-deepening spiral of despair. How Toller grapples with his intensely Kierkegaardian sickness- unto-death becomes the bulk of the film, which is visually striking, emotionally gripping, and theologically complex.

The theological debates about righteous action and coping with despair make for an entrancing film, and Schrader handles his material in a style designed to give viewers the strange experience of both meditation and uneasiness. Nearly every shot is static and carefully composed,
and long stretches are very quiet but punctuated by bursts of violence and visual extravagance. What Schrader accomplishes in *First Reformed* is a mode he theorized in 1972 in one of the classic works of film criticism, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. In that book, which Schrader has updated and republished in connection with his film, he attempted to explain how certain filmmakers could use a slow, deliberate style "to express the Holy." Unlike religious epics such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956), which Schrader calls "over-abundant," transcendent films use stillness, patience, and austerity to make viewers engage with the divine. Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1954) is a prime example in Schrader's theory, and, with its alcoholic priest in crisis, is also a crucial model for *First Reformed*. Films in this style, at their best, use "boredom as a scalpel," Schrader says, to cut away what is extraneous from our lives and to allow holiness the chance to move in.

**How people of faith might think about our environmental crisis is the film's subject, but its bigger mission is transcendental: how do we find God in the deepest wells of failure and despair?**

Despite theorizing this style, Schrader has not until now attempted to make such a film himself. As he told Adam Kempenaar and Josh Larsen of *Filmspotting*, "I am too attracted to empathy, action, sex, and violence in film." His career to date is not entirely disconnected from *First Reformed*—many critics have noted its affinities with Schrader's scripts for *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980)—but the kinetic thrills of cinema predominate in his previous work. Viewers might be forgiven for failing to identify any holiness, for instance, in his sexy remake of *Cat People* (1982). But after a conversation four years ago with Pawel Pawlikowski, director of *Ida* (2013)—an austere and poignant film that clearly qualifies as transcendental—Schrader realized that the time had now come for his own attempt at the transcendent style. He embarked on a re-education in the form, watching two dozen of its best examples and lifting his favorite elements for use in *First Reformed*. (Among its pleasures for film buffs is the wealth of cinematic references: the opening titles come from Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy*, a third act encounter with barbed wire is from John Huston's *Wise Blood*, etc.) It is a remarkable feat that a film this erudite and patient can be so enthralling.

In addition to its relationship with Schrader's film theory, *First Reformed* is very personal in its exploration of Christian Reformed culture. Schrader was raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in a strict Calvinist household that forbade him from going to the movies until he was eighteen. As an undergraduate at Calvin College, he chanced upon an Ingmar Bergman film festival playing at a seedy local theatre, and this initiated his extraordinary cinematic education and career. In his earlier work Schrader touched on his upbringing, usually to attack it. His porn-industry thriller *Hardcore* (1979), for example, is a nasty dig at his pious family—"a young man's 'F-you' to his father," as he recently described it.

Now in his early seventies, he returns to Christian themes with greater maturity and an unexpectedly generous eye. With nearly every character, *First Reformed* avoids simplistic caricatures of the theological positions it portrays. Toller is a committed man of faith, not a closeted atheist, and Pastor Jeffers of Abundant Life (Cedric Antonio Kyles, a.k.a. Cedric the Entertainer) preaches a prosperity gospel but never devolves into mere hucksterism. How people of faith might think about our environmental crisis is the film's subject, but its bigger mission is transcendental: how do we find God in the deepest wells of failure and despair? The film gives no easy answers, but it invites viewers to experience its journey toward the Holy.

In one key scene, Jeffers counsels Toller about his predicament, insisting that by wanting radical political change through the effort of an outspo-
ken church, Toller is not "living in the real world." Toller responds by invoking lessons he has learned from reading Thomas Merton, and Jeffers counters that Merton was a monk who lived in Kentucky and wrote books: "that's not the real world either." Jeffers tells Toller that he is "living too much in the garden." Even Jesus, Jeffers says, did not spend all of his time in the garden of Gethsemane, but sometimes went to the mountain top and sometimes went to the marketplace. Jeffers does not say that Toller should ignore his concern for the planet, only that he should incorporate that concern into a life which is more full and rounded than the one he currently inhabits in his empty house with his books, bottles, and pen.

WHAT TOLLER CHOOSES TO DO IN SPITE of Jeffers’s counsel spring-loads the film’s second half, an explosive, sometimes fantastical set of events that are especially shocking after the quiet, conversational first half. Without giving too much away, I would suggest that the ending of the film stages the logical outcome of Toller’s asceticism and ultimately explodes its logic. The final shot, borrowed perhaps from Vertigo, opens the possibility of transcendence through an unforeseen grace that meets Toller in a very dark place, much like a Gethsemane full of thorns. “Gethsemani,” incidentally, was the name of Merton’s abbey in Kentucky, and part of Schrader’s suggestion may be that “living in the garden” cannot be reduced to only one meaning. The “power of negation” Merton found so alluring during his day seems all the more pressing in our current time of planetary crisis, but succumbing to that negation and believing it to be an end in itself cannot be our way. In a garden of sorrow we may experience abject despair but also a path to the Holy.

Charles Andrews is professor of English at Whitworth University.
HOW I SATURDAY IN THE SUBURBS

*I am taking part in a great experiment—whether writers can live peacefully in the suburbs and not be bored to death.*

Louis Simpson

From my deck, I work today’s impossibly blue sky as a sports analyst might work his monitor by finger-circling any spot through which—bam—Christ might return as promised or the double moves Michael et al might make to thwart demonic advances. Yes, in fact, this is how I Saturday while Neighbor A and his circular saw whine-screech a shed into existence and Neighbor B push-mows around an offspring who’s springing, up and down, up and down, up and down, on a rapture-ready trampoline.

And when again it doesn’t end, the world, I head inside, ignite the TV and sitcom away another day, wondering if tomorrow the sky will get less boring, more biblical.

Bill Stadick
While there is no shortage of admonitions for what poems should do and be, one essential goal of a poem surely is to help us readers see in new ways those things we know well or think we know well. Our vision is sharpened, our understanding expanded. This goal is no less daunting when the poem’s subject matter is familiar to us, and perhaps even more daunting when the poem overtly addresses the religious.

Poet Tania Runyan has cultivated a reputation of engaging with biblical texts and leading readers to view these rich gardens in new ways, noting all of the flowers and plants we couldn’t quite name before. Her first collection, Simple Weight, examines the Beatitudes. A Thousand Vessels gives voice to women of the Bible. Second Sky explores the life of St. Paul. In each of these works, she accomplishes the aforementioned goal.

Now, in her fourth collection, What Will Soon Take Place, Runyan coalesces the strengths of her earlier collections into her most compelling and well-crafted work to date. She writes with the confidence and skill of the accomplished poet taking on her biggest poetic challenge. If the biblical book of Revelation is a wild, imagistic, and complex work comparable to a cross-continental road trip, she is surely the poet/driver to lead us on its difficult and wonderful journey.

What Will Soon Take Place opens with a thoughtful foreword discussing Runyan’s own faith journey, as well as her apprehensions about Revelation. I must confess that I, too, have avoided reading Revelation much (if at all) for the reasons that Runyan identifies. I survived a period of rapture and “End-Times” hype in the evangelical subculture of the late 1990s and early ’00s. (I’m reminded of those charts neatly outlining the sequence of final events.) Nonetheless, the foreword effectively serves as a prelude, situating the poems and her own place with them.

The book, arranged in three sections, follows the sequence of the biblical text. “Angel over Patmos” introduces us to the beginning of Revelation and features poems addressed to each of the seven churches, among other topics. In “Locusts on the Earth,” the second section, destruction and violence become predominant. “And They Sang a New Song,” the last and briefest section, transitions to hopefulness being made manifest.

As might be expected, there are many allusions to biblical names, places, and images, and yet, as a reader who is moderately familiar with Revelation, I was still able to follow the individual poems and the book’s trajectory. Runyan’s approach is such that the poems aren’t so highly subtle and allusion-saturated to the point that a reader unfamiliar with Revelation will be confused. If anything, her book has the effect of driving me to that strange section of scripture.

Part of what makes the book accessible is that—just as in her earlier books—Runyan freely mingles elements of scriptural narratives with...
details from the contemporary world, including snippets and details from her life. In her vision, the past, the present, and the future mix and interplay with one another. In fact, this mingling of varied timelines and autobiographical details is one of the most distinctive characteristics of her poetry. Take, for instance, the first lines in the opening poem “Patmos,” whose name derives from the location where St. John received his visions: “No cave, cleft, or ocean shattering bluff. / The only trumpet ‘Hot Cross Buns’ / / blattering from my daughter’s open window” (19).

What Will Soon Take Place is a dense collection, but dense in the best senses of the word. It possesses a depth of thought, a complexity that counters the oversimplification of “End Times” theology. It confronts violence, suffering, materialism, and, in sum, confronts the varieties of brokenness in a fallen world waiting for complete redemption. The first poem in the second section, “The First Horse of the Apocalypse,” features a speaker lamenting the violence and suffering in the world: “I am trying to believe that God / doesn’t will destruction, that out of love / he allows our terrible freedoms / / to gallop across the globe” (41). “The Sun Shall Not Strike Them” tackles sexual abuse, raising the perennial questions about suffering in a world created (and sustained) by a good God. Yet as Runyan writes in her foreword, Revelation was written to comfort believers in the early church who were enduring persecution. Despite the “darkness” of her book, the poems do not neglect hope; rather, the darkness never has the final say.

Part of the power of the book derives from Runyan’s wry humor, just as in her prior collections. For example, she uses one of the common End-Times’ bumper stickers as the epigraph for “Philadelphia” (one of the seven churches John addresses): “Warning: In Case of Rapture / This Car Will Be Unmanned” (32). The poem traces her unease with the pleasures of the moment coupled with the knowledge that Jesus might appear at any moment. Chronicling the nascent stages of her faith in that same poem, she writes, “Persecution was Charles Darwin on the bio study guide. / Depeche Mode. The Mapplethorpe exhibit in L.A.” (32). On a somewhat lighter note, “The Marriage Supper” opens with a comical couplet: “Ours tumbled from a bag / onto a hotel bed at one in the morning” (85). I would press further, moreover, and argue that her humor is often what makes the book’s subject matter bearable. (See the poem “A Premillennialist, Amillennialist, and Postmillennialist Walk Into a Bar.”)

As a further example, take the book’s shortest poem, “The Book of Life”:

Jesus saunters up to the mic, 
opens the book, and stares at the audience.

Silence. Exactly how narrow was this road?

Too many to list, he says, and slams it closed. 
Come on, guys.

Let’s get the hell out of here. (84)

One of the pleasures of the poem is the wordplay in the last line, the way it can be read as a statement of departure, but also read in a secondary meaning to remove hell from the lexicon.

Another major characteristic is poems written from the angles of other individuals, whether in the direct first-person persona poem, or the third-person version with the camera pointed at an individual. Runyan’s earlier collections exhibit this characteristic, and here, in the world of Revelation, she channels the voices of others, such as in the poem “A Road Worker Confronts the Third Horseman of the Apocalypse.” Or in the case of other poems, the focus is on particular “characters,” such as the church-nursery worker of Sardis, Runyan’s depiction of a committed and faithful person: “She sprays the nursery toys with water and bleach, / erasing snot and drool from stacking rings, / wiping board books crimped by toddlers’ teeth” (31). Then there is the stunning “The Great Harlot Takes a Selfie.”

From a more technical angle, Runyan structures the majority of her poems with regular stanza lengths: unrhymed tercets and quatrains. The book even features a few sonnets, those formal poems a brief return to the formal poetry in portions of Simple Weight. Regardless of the poems’ technical
characteristics, they all exhibit mastery of the line and the well-placed line break. In addition, she is a poet whose work can be appreciated by dedicated poets and fans of poetry, as well as by readers perhaps not well-acquainted with the medium.

One of my favorite poems is the penultimate "The River of Life." She imagines herself and her husband seeing one another once the world has been remade:

At the end of it all I find you on the street.
*That you? I ask.*
Yes, you too?
We touch His name on our foreheads.
*Well.*

You take my hand, but our fingers
slip like feathers.
*No longer given in marriage, you say.*
*Oh, I smile. Right.* (89)

That opening line drops us right into the new heavens and the new earth. Lines one and two of the second stanza show the sweet newness of the couple reunited, and in depicting this reunion, Runyan uses a straightforward but powerful simile— their fingers "slip like feathers." This image captures the sweetness, but also the strangeness of this "new world."

Finally, I'll close with a brief anecdote from a recent conference. While I was browsing through books in the exhibit hall, a woman standing close by, who was also looking through the books, held up a copy of *What Will Soon Take Place* and said, "I just heard her read from this book. It was amazing." I told her that she was absolutely correct. 

**Nathaniel Lee Hansen's chapbook, Four Seasons West of the 95th Meridian, was published by Spoon River Poetry Press (2014). His website is plainswriter.com.**

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7. In a separate section entitled "Works Cited," list alphabetically by author (and, within author, by year of publication) all items that are cited in the text. Provide complete bibliographical information, including author's first name, publisher, and place and date of publication. Examples:


THE NIGHT THE PASTOR’S WIFE LOSES HER SALVATION

The girl climbs the eucalyptus tree to hear the rustle of vampire bats the night her mother realizes something is wrong. The thought occurs like a slow spreading stain. The mother calls her parents then drives past fields choked with strawberries to get to their parsonage

where they pray The Four Spiritual Laws as she kneels on their lime green carpet and cries. The girl scrambles down the tree. She knows monsters prowl the woods foresting their house at night and only she can stop them: needles, steel, mirrors, hot water, she sleep with her arms crossed. Down the hallway

her brother cries that butterflies assault him. Her father hunkers in his study and writes sermons: We crucify our flesh and walk in the spirit. Her mother repeats after her parents: We receive Christ by faith, as an act of our will. The girl memorizes: stones hurled across rooftops, a sprinkle of mustard seeds.

Her brother cries: Butterflies, all over me. Her father writes: Be sober and vigilant. Her mother says: I’m sorry. Her parents say: Don’t you know nothing can help us escape God’s love?

Jill Bergkamp
Addicted Selves

Joel Kurz

It was a late Sunday afternoon in autumn, gray and heavy instead of bright and beautiful. I had hit the road after finishing parish duties and was traveling several hours south to visit my mother. Feeling drained and rather out-of-sorts, I decided to make a quick stop at a vintage audio store just in case a long-sought-after CD was waiting for me in the bargain bin. I walked inside and heard lyrics which hit me with grit and brought an ironic laugh: “Been working for the church / While your life falls apart / Singing hallelujah with the fear in your heart / Every spark of friendship and love / Will die without a home” (Arcade Fire, “Intervention”).

I bought nothing and soon left with that truth to ponder. No less than a minute later, I got out of my car in another parking lot to be greeted by a man who had been walking toward me. He asked for anything I might be able to give, so I gave him the lone dollar in my wallet. To my surprise, he said emphatically, “You’re God!” I corrected him and told him I’m just a person trying to put some goodness and love out there, however small. As he walked away, he replied, “But that’s exactly what I need!”

Shortly before noon, early this past June, a distraught young man in a torn t-shirt and cut-off shorts came to the church door to see me. Once in my office, he told me about the torments of hell he’d been through the past few days after leaving a treatment center and holing up in the woods. I listened and prayed, made phone calls and took him to meet with a crisis counselor. He was exhausted and vulnerable with nowhere to go. The homeless shelter was closed, the treatment center was full, and no motel would take him without an I.D., so I told him he could shower and sleep at my house. On the way there, he asked if I could stop and let him get some cigarettes with his own money. Before going in, he asked me what I would do if he came out with beer too. I told him he couldn’t stay at my house if he added to what was already in his system, but he’d have to decide once he was inside. Soon he was back at my window saying, “They won’t let me get anything without an I.D.!” To which I responded, “Take that as a sign!” He gave me his money and told me which cigarettes I should buy.

He took a few deep drags before heading inside my house. I showed him what I had to eat and drink, got him a towel, and fixed up the couch before leaving.

When I came back less than four hours later, I found it strange that the garage door was open. Once inside, I heard music blaring and saw him staggering around in the wreck of a living room. He was totally unhinged and admitted to walking the mile or so to the nearest convenience store, where a woman bought him the bottle of vodka now empty and on my floor. I told him detox couldn’t wait until tomorrow and that we had to go to the E.R. now. He complied but swung between guilt, self-hatred, and the ache to be better. We talked to his mom on the way to the hospital, and she assured him of her love. It didn’t take long for belligerence to break out with the medical team, but after being restrained on the floor by a security guard, he stayed relatively calm and eventually told me I could leave.

He never made it to detox. Two days later, on Pentecost Sunday, he showed up in my office fifteen minutes before service. He told me that he’d spent that Friday night in jail and the night before in the woods but that he’d come to hear me preach. I told him about the Holy Spirit’s essential strength in our places of weakness, prayed with his ragged self,
and finished vesting while he went to find a pew. While preaching later and seeing him long for any words of life I could give, I added a recounting of the hymn “Come Down, O Love Divine” I had learned in Baltimore more than twenty years earlier from a homeless street alcoholic who had once been an accomplished organist on his way to a Ph.D. My new hearer nodded his whole upper body as I cited these words from six hundred years earlier:

Seek Thou this soul of mine, / And visit it 
with Thine own ardor glowing ... / O let it freely burn, / Till worldly passions turn 
/ To dust and ashes in its heat consuming ...
/ Let holy charity / Mine outward vesture be / And lowliness become mine inner clothing— / True lowlines of heart, / Which takes the humbler part, / And o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

After the service, he asked me if I could take him to a town half an hour away—where he’d been through treatment before and found strength. My time was limited but I told him I’d do it. We stopped first at a gas station so he could get his duffle bag which was stashed behind a dumpster. In that brief time, another man showed up, heard us talking, and said he needed a ride to the same town. “Hop in,” I told him. On that short ride, conversation swung between homelessness, hopelessness, drug use, prison, and the thirst for anything better than they’d known. My agonized brother in the front seat told me again that he’d been clean of meth for six months, adding this time with lit-up eyes, “I love meth!” Before I could think, I said, “But it doesn’t love you; it only wants to destroy you! You’ve got to keep conquering that love, including for alcohol.” My passenger in the backseat backed me up.

It took some doing to get my friend into the E.R. and encourage him to stay. The staff there knew him well. I left uncertain of his fate, wondering whether he’d bolt or wind up back in jail. I called his mother and gave her an update. She broke the silence a few days later when she called and told me that he was in the treatment center and that she was cautiously hopeful once again.

What do needs, wants, and addictions say about who we are? It can be so easy to shake our heads disparagingly at substance addiction, all the while lauding the devotion of a workaholic or sports fanatic. Could there possibly be another way to think about addiction which takes us beyond what detracts and destroys to what forms who we are and informs what we do? I’m convinced there is.

Addict (from the Latin addicere) was originally a legal term designating delivery by court sentence, thus the meaning of “being bound to or given over.” Whether it’s gambling or gaming, sex or excess, those truly addicted know the power and powerlessness of being controlled by something else. We can be bound to that which numbs and destroys or to that which engenders and enlivens. It is possible to sculpt a life that recognizes and resists addictive pulls in order to be bound-up in something more grand and generative and good. The film The End of the Tour depicts the author David Foster Wallace telling the visiting journalist, David Lipsky, that he lives without a television because he would want to watch it all of the time. So strong was the pull of televised entertainment on him since childhood that Wallace knew a TV in his home would divert him from the greater compulsion to write.

Reflecting on such realities in his book In Search of Stones, M. Scott Peck noted a distinction between the alcohol he habituated himself to at the end of an intense day—to take the edge “off my consciousness” (43)—and the tobacco he was addicted to and knew full well every time he went more than a couple of waking hours without it, experiencing “the feeling that rats are gnawing at the inside of my rib cage” (44), even as he juggled the mental devastation of losing concentration and being unable to think. Differentiation between habituation and addiction is a helpful tool for self-evaluation when thinking of our relation to substances, but, as he went on to address, one must also recognize the addictions to money, power, control, and violence which “are destructive not only to the addict himself but practically lethal to the society around him” (46).

St. James was aware of this deadly “friendship
with the ways of the world” and traced the source of quarrels and dissension to the warring passions within (4:1-4). So what remedy did he propose? Just three verses later, this admonition: “Submit yourselves therefore to God”—which I offer could be phrased “Addict yourselves to God.” Similarly, St. Paul expressed that those who have been raised with Christ have died to self and have a life wrapped up in him—one which involves putting to death the destructive passions and putting on the virtuous, especially love (see Colossians 3:1-15). Seen this way, a Christian’s life is about taking up as much as about giving up; about addicting ourselves again and again to the new reality we have been brought into by our incarnate, crucified and risen Lord.

Amid the wreckage of all the destructive addictions plaguing life, baptismal and eucharistic faith calls the adherent recipients—individually and collectively—to examine themselves anew in the light of Christ; to address and adjust the addicting entities within the daily pattern in each sphere of life. Small wonder, then, that the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (which Jesus assumes will be integral in the lives of his followers, Matthew 6:1-18) direct us to our deepest and fullest selves, in stark contrast to the shallow and escapist alternatives.

Concluding his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul praised the household of Stephanas for having “devoted (addicted in the KJV) themselves to the service of the saints” (16:15), right after urging that all be watchful, stand firm in the faith, be strong, and do everything in love. What is that but a call to embrace the varying vocations and common faith with renewed zeal and fervor precisely because of God’s love for each and every person. The agony and victory of the cross exist at the center of such life.

Even though my life was not fully coming apart at the seams that gray autumn day, I knew myself to be drained and near empty while “working for the church”—trying to live a life addicted to God and the ministry of the saints. I stopped for a music-fix for the same reason Dr. Peck took the edge off his consciousness with a drink: plumbing

Amid the wreckage of all the destructive addictions plaguing life, baptismal and eucharistic faith calls the adherent recipients—individually and collectively—to examine themselves anew in the light of Christ; to address and adjust the addicting entities within the daily pattern in each sphere of life.

the depths in service of healing and getting past what corrupts is grueling work. Arcade Fire, the man in the parking lot, and my Pentecost weekend companion remind me that every spark of goodness and love really do need a home of belonging to flourish and thrive... and that we all need the Holy Spirit to dwell within.

Joel Kurz is pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Warrensburg, Missouri.
CREDO

say I am: otherwise agnostic, a believer
only when in unison
words are sung-said
beside another, stranger or
familiar, not alone

—nonsense, maybe, but
if it's a symbol, to hell with it—

grace looks like

bread, wine, we

John Fry
I did not recognize the name on the phone message. The chaplain at the county jail called because an inmate wanted to talk to the manager of the local Presbyterian Church franchise location; that would be me. I called back and spoke to the chaplain.

"What can you tell me about him?" I asked.

"Twenty-seven years old. Grew up in the area...looks like he's gonna be here a while. That's about all I can tell you."

It's pretty easy to visit someone in the county jail. Aside from a few times each day when shifts change, visitors can drop in at any hour.

I stopped late one Wednesday afternoon. After locking up my coat and clipping the badge to my shirt, I walked down the long, echoing hall to Pod B. The guard said it might take a while for the inmate I was visiting to get to the station. There were three meeting areas, each with a plastic chair facing a similar arrangement on the other side of thick glass. I waited.

"Sorry it took me so long. I was in seg. Thanks for coming, Pastor John."

"Actually, my name's Tom, just call me Tom. What's going on?"

"Nothin'. I'm in seg."

Silence.

"This is all new to me, what's 'seg'?"

"Segregation. I had an...incident...with another inmate. So I've been in seg for six days, four more to go."

"Then what?"

"I get out, and back into the regular part. For the rest of my sentence...I hope."

"How is seg different? Is regular better?"

"They only let you out for one hour a day in seg."

"Wait. So I'd call this 'solitary confinement,' wouldn't I?"

"They just call it seg in here."

"But they let you out to see a visitor, obviously. Seg sounds boring. I think I'd go crazy."

"Yeah it's pretty rough."

"What do you think about in there?"

"Nothing. Everything. I can't describe it."

"Does anyone else come and see you?"

"Nah. I got a brother in town, but he's got his own shit. I wish my girlfriend would come, but they picked her up. She's on the women's side now."

"How's the food in here?"

"It's food, I guess. I've lost twenty pounds since I been in."

Silence.

"What's your connection with the Presbyterians? I'll visit you no matter what, but there's forty-four other churches in Oshkosh, how'd you choose us?"

"You're the one downtown by the bus station aren't you?"

"Couple blocks away. There's two churches that are closer."

"Don't you have the breakfast?"

"Yeah, that's us. Fourth Saturday of every month, serving eight to ten. Pancakes without preaching."

"I been to that once."

"I don't remember you. Was I there?"

"I was the guy with the big scar across my face."

I looked more closely. There had been a guest months before who had a wide, dark bruise from
his left jaw to his right ear. The exact size of the baseball bat that broke his jaw and nearly caused him to lose sight in one eye. I imagined looking under the bruise, at the face across the glass from me. “I remember now! I didn’t recognize your name because I never knew your last name.

Now I’m with you.”

He smiled sheepishly, boyishly. “That was me with the scar.”

“I remember, it was impressive, distinctive even. How long are you in for?”

“Dunno. They say I might could be out by spring, but I don’t know.”

Silence.

“What do you do every day? How do you pass the time?”

“Like I said, in seg all you can do is think. That gets pretty old.”

Silence.

“Would you say the breakfast at church is better than breakfast here?”

A wide smile dawned across his face. “Oh, man, there’s no comparison!”

“Excellent!” I say, taking out my pen and paper to make a note. “I can’t wait to tell the congregation that the food we serve is better than the Winnebago County jail’s! They’ll love hearing that!”

“Yeah, the food was all right. But there were flowers on the table.”

“That was Diana’s idea. She thought it would be more welcoming if we put flowers on the tables. She takes a lot of pride in that.”

“And the scrambled eggs; they were just right. They’re always either runny or rock hard here.”

“That’s Jimmy; he’s our egg man. He brings his own pan from home. Last month he forgot his spatula and had to use one we had at the kitchen. We teased him about how attached he was to it. He’ll be thrilled to hear what you said about the eggs.”

“Pastor John? Tell them, tell the whole church, they’re doin’ a good thing. A lot of good things. It’s not just the food. It’s...everything you people do.”

“I’ll tell them. I can’t wait to tell them. Thank you.”

Thomas C. Willadsen has been a Presbyterian minister for more than twenty-five years. He has been a Cresset contributor for nearly as long. He has served congregations in Minnesota, Maryland, and Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where he currently lives. His book OMG! LOL! Faith and Laughter was published by Gemma Open Door in 2012.
B. P. Miller is the associate poetry editor of Ninth Letter as well as a current MFA candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His writing appears in The Carolina Quarterly and Cellar Door Magazine.

Matthew Porto is from Long Island, New York. He holds an MFA in poetry from Boston University. His work has most recently appeared in Crosswinds, SWAMP, Strange Horizons, and in the anthology A Packet of Poems for Ezra Pound, published by Clemson University Press. He is currently working on a Ph.D. in creative writing, poetry, at Texas Tech University.

Michael Schmidtke was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. They received an MFA from Eastern Washington University. Other poems have appeared in Stirring, The Swamp, Tin House (Online), and Ruminate.


David Wright teaches creative writing and American literature at Monmouth College (Illinois). His poems have appeared in 32 Poems, Image, Ecotone, Poetry East, and Hobart, among many others. His most recent poetry collection is The Small Books of Bach (Wipf & Stock, 2014). He can be found on Twitter @sweatervestboy.