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Valparaiso University

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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*

**Frames of Reference**

**Early in November** I was walking south across the Wabash Avenue Bridge in Chicago when I passed two young women who were trying to take a selfie. It was one of those spectacular fall days—the sky a brilliant blue, bright sunlight glinting on the Chicago River and bouncing off the buildings rising up along the riverbanks. As the two leaned back, one stretched her arm out in front of her as far as possible, her fingers straining to angle her phone and snap the photo. I stopped and asked if I could take the picture for them. They both looked at me with vaguely perplexed stares, as if I had offered them a potato or a pine cone.

"I thought you might want..." I stammered, gesturing to the sky and the river and Lake Michigan in the distance—things they clearly couldn't capture from one arm's length. One of the women shook her head just a bit, declining my offer. "Oh," I said, suddenly embarrassed. "OK, then." I continued across the bridge, surprisingly disheartened by the exchange.

As I walked, I thought back to places I've traveled where I had to ask a stranger to stop for a moment to snap a photo of me, sometimes alone and sometimes with friends or family. I remembered times and places where people asked me to take a photo of them, handing me their camera or phone, sometimes pointing out something in the background they wanted to be sure to include. These requests required mere seconds and little real effort. But in every instance I could remember, the act of enlisting a stranger to perform this small favor—or the experience of being enlisted myself—made me feel more connected to a place and to people I encountered there. Maybe someone at some point had brushed past, ignoring my request (or maybe I had done the brushing past), but I couldn't think of a time when that had happened. I was glad about that. I was a little sad for the young women on the bridge, though. I wondered if they would someday study that photo and wish they had captured more than what appeared in that tight frame.

This is probably why I have so enjoyed "A Closer Look," the photo essay that begins on page 12. These photos are decidedly not selfies; each portrait of a veteran is an obvious collaboration between the subject and the photographer. The photographers—all students in the Introduction to Digital Photography class at Valparaiso University—have attended carefully to their subjects, choosing a frame and a setting that communicates important truths about the individuals they are portraying. While selfies fill up space on our phones and social media feeds, these portraits open up space, allowing us to gaze and contemplate and appreciate.

The photo essay by Valpo students is just one treasure in a trove of artwork in this issue. On page 4, David Zersen highlights the work of artist extraordinaire P. Solomon Raj and considers some of the questions Raj's art raises, especially in the season of Advent. And on page 30, John Ruff reviews the recent "Nebraska" multimedia exhibit at the Chapel of the Resurrection.

In the hustle and bustle of this busy season, it may be hard to find the time or space to contemplate art. But art can open up time and space in a way that revives and re-centers us. Spend a few moments with Raj's *Women on the Via Dolorosa* (page 9) or Lee K. Johnson's *Loretto* (page 33). Maybe—just maybe—these creations can do us the favor of connecting us with something outside of ourselves. Perhaps they can help attune us to the brilliance all around.

—HGG

Advent-Christmas 2018
Seeking the Holy in Everyday Themes
Observing Advent with the Art of P. Solomon Raj

David Zersen

A recent glimpse at the Wall Street Journal wine catalog shows how far marketers will go to twist the meaning of the Advent season. For just $129, you can buy a "Wine Advent Calendar" that offers twenty-four bottles, one per day, presumably to celebrate the "seasonal themes" of relaxation, inebriation, and personal fulfillment.

The Wine Advent Calendar is about as far as you can get from how Christians should prepare for the Christmas celebration. In truth, Advent is a time to observe very different seasonal themes, what Bernard of Clairvaux described in the twelfth century as the "three comings of the Lord": his historic coming in Bethlehem, the coming of Christ to us personally, and his coming again at the end of time. Often we need to push ourselves to get past the first coming in order to contemplate the second two.

The appointed gospel lessons for this year, (Year C in the lectionary), require careful thought if the faithful are to consider more than the historic coming of Jesus. Fortunately, art can sometimes help bring together the seemingly disparate themes of judgement, repentance, and hope that appear in the texts. The work of P. Solomon Raj allows us to see the meanings of the lessons in new and personal ways; his art addresses basic questions raised by these Advent readings, such as, "Who and where are the forgotten people in God's world? Where can we discover the power of God's dawning reign?" and, "What signs of hope can be found in the midst of suffering and evil?"

The image on the cover of this issue, Baptism of Jesus, is a case in point. Luke 3:1-6 and 7-18, the second two gospel lessons this Advent, tell the story of John the Baptist preparing the way for the Lord. Raj's image helps viewers to consider questions about the meaning of this event: Who is this John? How could humble Elizabeth (Lk. 1:39-45, fourth lesson in the lectionary readings) know that the birth of her son would prepare the world for a new era? How could John know that he would be sent to a remote area to summon the forgotten people to look to Jesus as the fulfillment of God's long-treasured promise? And how could John know that baptism, not just in water but in the Spirit, could set pasts aside and introduce new life?

Raj is a prolific visual artist who, at ninety-seven, is regarded as the elder statesman of living visual artists in the Far East. He is also a Lutheran pastor, professor, musician, playwright, poet, and philosopher whose insights can quickly take us beyond any initial assumptions we may have about him or the stories he depicts in his work. A large collection
of Raj’s artwork recently acquired by the Brauer Museum of Art at Valparaiso University—currently the largest collection of his work anywhere in the world—highlights the artist’s exploration of biblical themes and invites viewers to ponder the questions that arise for them out of these distinctive visual portrayals. (The Brauer will feature a major exhibition of the collection in fall of 2020.)

Raj, who lives in Vijayawada, a city of about a million residents in the southeast Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, once told this author, “I don’t want to tell viewers what my art means. I want them to ask questions about it. If they see Jesus portrayed in a compromising or controversial setting, I want them to ask: ‘Who is this man? What’s going on here? Why is he embracing an ‘untouchable’ person? Why would I want to know more about him?’” (Raj 2015)

Throughout his life, Raj has attempted to find ways to share the gospel within the Indian context, and then ultimately with others around the globe. Raj himself was born a Dalit, an “untouchable,” which, according to a Hindu perspective, does not allow ascent to higher caste stations. (Although the caste system has been outlawed in India for decades, it still culturally conditions many people.) Raj has therefore always been moved by the ways in which Jesus affirms marginalized people—women, lepers, outcasts, public sinners, and even Pharisees who repent.

In the current state of world affairs, as women worldwide have asserted themselves in the #MeToo movement, as caravans of refugees seeking asylum from violence and persecution slowly make their way toward the southern border of the United States, and as many others around the globe face loneliness, poverty, and oppression, Raj’s art has a renewed poignancy. It conveys to all who are undertaking quests for political, economic, and social justice that Jesus shares their concerns. Raj’s work speaks to the fact that these everyday struggles for many are holy issues, and they should be viewed as such.

This page: P. Solomon Raj (b. 1921). Behind the Barbed Wire, 1986. Woodcut on paper, dimensions and location of original unknown.

Born in 1921 as Pulidindi Solomon Raj in Naggipudi, a village in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, Raj is a third-generation Lutheran, the son of Lazarus, a Lutheran mission schoolteacher, and Naome, a Bible teacher for women. He first studied to become a teacher and then a pastor. He taught Christian education at Luthergiri in Rajahmundry, developed a media ministry for the Christian Association for Radio and Audio Visual Service in Jabalpur, served as a chaplain at Andhra Christian College, and taught intercultural communication at Selly Oak College in Birmingham. He earned five academic degrees, culminating in a Ph.D. from the University of Birmingham. Throughout his life, he maintained a passion for drawing, and he served as artist-in-residence at Bethany College (KS), Luther College (IA), and Lenoir-Rhyne University (NC).

Raj married Mary Saronjini, a Lutheran schoolteacher, in 1946, and they had six children. The couple traveled to many countries, including Germany and Japan, where Raj studied woodblock printing; Indonesia, where he studied batik making; and the Philippines, where he studied music. In 1994, he founded St. Luke Ashram in Vijayawada, where he taught music, dance, drama, and art to children and adults. He has written ten books in English, eight in Telugu (his native language) and more than fifty articles in several languages on topics like the relationship of art and culture, poetry and hymn traditions, missiology, storytelling, dance, and inculturation (the adaptation of the way Church teachings are presented to non-Christian cultures) versus enculturation (the process by which people learn the dynamics of their surrounding culture and acquire values and norms).

As Raj grew older and it became difficult for him to do the physical work involved in carving wood blocks or dipping batiks in colored baths, he found other creative outlets. In 2014, he published in Telugu his own poetic translations of hymns by the seventeenth-century theologian and hymnodist Paul Gerhardt, as well as forty Greek hymns accompanied by a chronological history of hymnody.

Raj and his work have been the subject of numerous dissertations and articles. His work has been exhibited in nearly fifty shows worldwide.
Raj's life shows how a creative mind and nimble fingers can express the Christian faith. His son Augustine remembers how, on a family picnic on Kondapalli Hill decades ago, his father picked up a piece of soft wood and began to carve it with a penknife. Gradually it took on the shape of Moses with one hand pointing to the sky. Solomon called it "The Prophet" (P. A. Raj 2014).

One can discover many similar projects in Raj's studio in Vijayawada, some complete, some never finished, in a variety of media: bronze sculptures, wood icons, and hundreds of carved blocks used to print images of both secular and biblical themes. Most of Raj's work, however, involves Indonesian-type batiks and Japanese-type woodblock prints, both of which require great attention to detail and many hours of preparation.

Batiks are one-of-a-kind pieces, some requiring the application of five or six colors. Some of Raj's creations are true masterpieces. Through the years most have been sold to buyers around the world, and while there is no record of their current location, digital photos of many document their existence.

P. Solomon Raj (b. 1921). The Refugees, undated. Woodcut on paper, 12 x 24 inches (image), 24 x 33 inches (paper).
Wood-block prints require even more preparation than a batik. While monochrome prints require a carved block, polychrome prints require a carved block for every color that is to be applied. Although many of his prints are part of a series, Raj did not always use a numbering system, so in many cases there is no way of knowing how many prints were produced or whether any prints of a given image still exist. Fortunately, the Brauer's collection now has hundreds of prints, some of the same image, available for viewing and study by museum visitors as well as artists, students, art historians, and theologians.

Many of Raj's batiks and prints allow a biblical story to speak to contemporary situations. He frequently focuses on two themes: inculturation and liberation. (In an attempt to define inculturation, a famous Anglican priest in Ceylon once wrote, "The Gospel comes to us as a potted plant. We have to break the pot and set the plant in our own soil" [Niles 2014].) Raj carefully attends to both the plant and the soil in which he plants it.
Two of Raj’s wood-block prints that explore the theme of inculturation have powerful political and social significance. One deals with the terrible events of 1947, when the Muslim state of Pakistan was separated from the Hindu state of India. Trainloads of murdered Muslims were shipped into Pakistan as trainloads of murdered Hindus were sent back into India. Boldly, Raj created a work of art that had an Indian soldier guarding the side of the fence in which the new Pakistanis once had their home. The Pakistanis longingly look over the fence. But in the background of the Muslim Pakistanis is a man with a crown of thorns on his head! Who is that man? Why is he standing with the Pakistanis? What is going on here? The image is powerful, and although it might have been dangerous for Raj to circulate it in India, it clearly seeks to promote reflection and discussion.

Another image that embraces the inculturation theme seeks to have an ancient Middle-Eastern Jesus reach into a contemporary Indian context (page 7). Refugees in the image are displaced, lost, disenfranchised—a type of Holy Family away from home. But in the midst of this monochrome blockprint, a man with a crown of thorns embraces the outcasts. Who is this man? Who are these people? How do we feel about this? These are the questions Raj the pastor hopes his “parishioners” will ask.

As a Dalit, Raj knew that Jesus’s powerful message of acceptance had to be explored carefully in a Hindu context. And in a society that still has many rigid social expectations, Raj wanted to explore the liberation that the gospel allows. Specifically, he explores the many ways in which Christians can be free in a series based on the Gospel of Luke, Liberation in Luke’s Gospel, (P. S. Raj, Liberation in Luke’s Gospel 1996).

Raj wants to ask how stories in Luke’s gospel can raise questions about current challenges in relationships and in society—questions not just for India but for every country. For example, Raj depicts women whom society regards as nobodies

Many of Raj’s batiks and prints allow a biblical story to speak to contemporary situations. He frequently focuses on two themes: inculturation and liberation.
and shows how God loves them still; he shows prisoners who are wrongly incarcerated, and reminds us how we can call for their release. His work shows depressed and lonely people who are pleading for an embrace. “What is their plight?” the artist asks the viewer, and, “In what way is their bondage a matter of our own making? How are we thus also ensnared? What can be done to set people free?”

Raj’s commitment to portraying a new role for women stems from his desire to challenge social stereotypes. On one print, Ruth, the gleaner, is shown rejoicing because God has freed her from her desperate situation as a single woman in an old covenant setting. In another (page 9), women in beautiful saris accompany their liberator to the cross. The power of love perfumes the room when a woman anoints Jesus’ feet; women beautifully bedecked in Indian garments rejoice in their acceptance at the wedding feast. In yet another (page 10), Hagar is comforted by a loving God even though she has been cast out by Abraham.
These images and many others show the value of women in the eyes of God, not only in Hindu culture but also in a world-wide context in which today’s #MeToo movement has the potential to be a righteous and holy quest.

The artwork of P. Solomon Raj asks profound questions for both Christians celebrating the season of Advent, as well as others, whatever their heritage or faith tradition, who want to discover the holy in their everyday life. The crooked is being made straight and the rough places plain wherever the man with the crown of thorns appears. The crises in our world do not introduce the end of time, but new beginnings for the disenfranchised and those without hope. A lamp is being lit for those who, like Elizabeth, are alert to new life about to be born for and in us. And for those with eyes that see, the art of Pulidindi Solomon Raj helps us discover what many miss in Advent: a faith that liberates captives and an insight that makes even the common and humble holy.

David Zersen is president emeritus at Concordia University Texas. He is co-editor of Planting in Native Soil: Studies in Gospel Inculturation (2014).

Works Cited


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The midterm project for Valparaiso University's Art 163, Introduction to Digital Photography, requires students to research a photo collection of historical prominence, write a photo analysis of an image from that collection, and then, drawing upon their research and analysis, make their own series of photographs. This assignment often manifests as a portrait project. It may take the shape of traditional portraiture, which focuses on what a person looks like, or environmental portraiture, which focuses on the relationship between a person and their surroundings.

Taking a photo is the instant you snap the shutter—it entails very little on the part of the photographer. Making a photograph of a person is different. It involves thoughtful questioning and careful listening and looking in order to determine the best way to visually portray a particular subject.

During the 2018 fall semester, students in Art 163 made photographs of military service members and veterans. A selection of thirty-four images produced for the midterm project became an exhibit for “War and the Human Heart,” a wide-ranging, multimedia event happening at locations around the country to mark the centenary of Armistice Day. (The event’s organizer, Jeffrey Gettleman, envisioned a combination of performance and visual art to highlight veterans and to pay homage to the signing of the Armistice—the event that marked the cessation of hostilities in World War I. The exhibit at Valpo accompanied a memorial concert at the Chapel of the Resurrection on November 11).

Some of our students photographed total strangers; we paired each of them with a veteran they had not previously met. Other students requested the opportunity to photograph family members or friends. Regardless of how long the photographer and subject knew each other, the process of looking and listening allowed each student to know, see, and understand their veteran more fully. For some, the act of making this portrait will inevitably deepen their existing relationship.

Aimee Tomasek, associate professor and chair
Liz Wuerffel, associate professor
Valparaiso University Department of Art


Mark Lindsay, senior master sergeant, Instructor Flight Engineer, United States Air Force. Ten years active duty and ten years air force reserve. Three years at Mather Air Force Base, Sacramento, California. Seventeen years at McCord Air Force Base, Washington. Photo by Carlee Lindsay.

Captain Aaron J. Morley, United States Army Reserve, Battalion S-1, 337th Military Intelligence Battalion. Currently stationed at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. Previously at Fort Jackson, South Carolina; Fort Benning, Georgia; Fort Hood, Texas; Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; and Ali Al Salem Air Force Base, Kuwait. Deployed to Kuwait from 2016-2017. Photo by Sophie Hecht.

Dan Pelzel, United States Army, eight years active duty. Dan was deployed multiple times and spent significant time overseas. Photo by Chloe Crain.

Chuck Litzkow served in the United States Army for thirty-five years and now works for the Portage Fire Department. Photo by Ashlynn De Young.


FIRST HYMN

Heaven said: waters split, stars open up
your mouths and scream, animals shed your skin,
be naked. Heaven said —behold, the blood
is paid, the crushed hand, healed, the gouged
eye scooped back in the socket. The fruit remains
uneaten on the trees. Fields sweated into rivers,
dust settled, while angels blinked their thousand
wings, each feather a star, a pupil pointed in wonder
toward earth, the dim, celestial marble where the first
hymn had ended. Rocks cried out. A child was born.

Arah Ko
The irony about the Interfaith Festival of Gratitude is that to make this wonderful, inclusive event a success, I am at my most autocratic. A week before the festival, someone asked me what I would do if a group I wasn't expecting appeared wanting to make a presentation. I said I would count to ten slowly, take a couple of cleansing breaths, and say something like, “Ooh, sorry. We've got a really full program, but I can definitely plan on you for next year. Sorry, but that's as inclusive as I can be at this point; I hope you will attend anyway...”

The congregation I serve, First Presbyterian Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, hosted the Thanksgiving gathering in 2007. At the planning meeting, a Lutheran colleague shared, “For Lutherans, Thanksgiving is a non-liturgical holiday.” I asked what that meant, and he threw his hands in the air and said with obvious glee, “Anything goes!” I took those two words as my marching orders and tried to find smaller faith traditions in Oshkosh who might be willing to participate. I wanted to get beyond “the usual suspects.” I wanted more diversity than Methodists, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians. It was frustrating. (I shared some of my experience in this publication in an essay titled “Herding Cats,” way back in the Advent 2009 issue). The day before the event, when I was desperate to get the names of the participants for the bulletin—they had missed the deadline for publicity long before—I realized that I was frustrated because these other traditions did not behave like Presbyterians. They were not fitting into the five-to-seven-minute time slot I had allotted for them, in my building, at the time I had chosen. The very traditions I had hoped to include in order to celebrate diversity were really hard to find because their leaders have “real” jobs, so they cannot come to the planning meeting at 2:00 on a weekday afternoon. (Perhaps this means that clergy hold surreal jobs? Yes, I believe we do.) Some of the smaller groups are not listed in the phone book because they do not have a building. Some of them have to drive to other towns to gather for worship. I felt like I was standing on
the steps of my church screaming, “Hey, minority believer, you’re welcome here!” The more I yelled, the crazier I looked—and the less welcoming I seemed to the very groups I wanted to include.

In 2008, no one volunteered to coordinate the Thanksgiving service until about two weeks before Thanksgiving. A Roman Catholic priest decided that his congregation would host the event. His office staff contacted some clergy and asked us to participate. Each of us was given a part to read from a standard, Roman Catholic non-eucharistic Thanksgiving service. I arrived on time, put on my robe and stole, sat in the second row, read my part, and did not feel I could complain openly because I had not lifted a finger to make anything else happen. The event did not feel ecumenical; I thought of it as “add Protestants and stir.”

I decided that next year the service would be held at the Grand Opera House. The Grand is a beautiful building, a downtown “anchor.” The city purchased it about thirty years before when it was in disrepair. (Oh, let’s be honest, it was a pornographic movie theatre.) The city restored it and now it is a public utility. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Grand is nobody’s sacred space; it is everybody’s civic space. I reasoned that people of all faiths would feel welcome there. It was a brilliant idea...whose time would have to wait. In February 2009, the Grand was undergoing renovation and found to be in a very dangerous state. It was condemned, and only prompt and generous action by the state of Wisconsin and citizens of Oshkosh saved the Grand from the wrecking ball. It re-opened in September 2010, just in time to start planning for Thanksgiving.

I phoned the Grand’s executive director. He told me that there’s never an act booked the night before Thanksgiving, so the building was available. He also waived the standard rental fee. We’d still need to cover the cost of the lighting and audio staff, and pay to have the piano tuned.

I had a place I could afford. Now I needed to find the faith leaders—the very problem that drove me crazy the first time around. Where does a pastor go for advice? To another pastor. I called my colleague at First Congregational Church, Carol. She gave me three bits of advice that were quite helpful.

First, she said the event should be called a “festival.” This not only made it feel more, well, festive, it freed faith traditions to put anything on stage at all. Together we decided the event would be called “The Interfaith Festival of Gratitude.”

Second, Carol said almost cryptically, “Three Cups of Tea.” She was referring to the book by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin about Mortenson’s peace-building efforts in Pakistan and Afghanistan. She said, “You’ve got to sit down and get acquainted with people. Listen. Build some friendships first.” I saw immediately that she was correct. Every day I get letters promoting events, and unless I have some kind of personal connection with the organization who has done the sending, I recycle them.

Third, First Congregational had offered a small Muslim group use of their kitchen and fellowship hall for large events. Over the years Carol had gotten acquainted with their leadership. She offered to send an email to her contacts there. It read, “You will soon receive an email from my friend Tom Willadsen. I give him my seal of interfaith approval.”

I spent October and November that year totally caffeinated—not from tea, but coffee. I met faith leaders at Starbucks, Planet Perk, and The New Moon. (The New Moon is my favorite. You walk in, take a whiff, and know that it’s a safe place for liberals.) I met faith leaders, drank coffee, and we got acquainted. At the first Interfaith Festival of Gratitude, twelve different faith communities took the stage, representing ten religions. It was a stunning show of diversity in Oshkosh. More than 200 people attended on a night when “wintry mix” was falling. (When I was a lad, and we walked ten
Girls from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community Oshkosh sing at the Interfaith Festival of Gratitude.

Two moments stand out from the first festival. Khurram, the president of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community Oshkosh, announced as he began his remarks that his group had purchased a building that morning. (The idea of Muslims purchasing a former funeral home had been controversial. The neighbors were worried about traffic; apparently, the presence of Oshkosh West High School across the street left no room for Muslims and their cars. The pastor of a Lutheran church down the block was concerned about drainage. Oshkosh has been hit by some flash floods, and it seemed that converting a funeral home to a mosque might make that worse somehow. He shared this in a spirit of Christian love and concern.) The only applause at the first Interfaith Festival of Gratitude that night was when Khurram announced that the sale had gone through.

The other moment that stands out for me came at the very end of the festival. Everyone who had been on stage at some point that evening was invited back on stage to sing “Let There Be Peace on Earth.” I envisioned “A Smothers Brothers Moment.” In the confusion of so many people on stage, the Sikh priest, who was wearing a spectacular, royal blue turban, wound up sharing his song sheet with the father of the Latter-Day Saints bishop. “Let me walk with my brother in perfect harmony,” indeed.

Afterwards, a member of the Islamic community went out of his way to thank me for my work coordinating the festival. I told him it all just happened naturally. He held the program out to me and said, “We couldn’t have done this.”

“No,” he continued. “It’s not the same when we...”

I suddenly saw what he meant. I felt like a fish that had just realized he’d been swimming in water his whole life. My friend helped me see that I am The Man. I am the pastor of a Mainline, downtown church. I’m white, male, straight, well-educated, married, and a father. I’ve been president of the Rotary Club. Harris helped me see what I now call my “Bland Credibility.” In my heart I believe I’m
still the fifteen-year-old class clown from Peoria. I simply do not recognize my own status, or privilege, until someone points it out to me.

Now that I have a name for it, I use my Bland Credibility to bring people together. I love doing this, but it gets better—my church pays for the coffee. And once a year, I get to exercise my inner autocrat all in the name of building respect and inclusion.

The Seventh Annual Interfaith Festival of Gratitude took place at the Grand Opera House in Oshkosh, Monday, November 21, 2016. I made some changes to the standard program. The presidential election had revealed a climate of fear and distrust. I began by telling those in attendance that we were going to work on infrastructure: we need to build bridges of understanding, rather than walls of fear.

It is never easy to select a night during the week of Thanksgiving for the festival. Past festivals were on “Thanksgiving Eve,” and groups showed up Thursday night. Many people indicated that Wednesday is not a good evening for them. Some travel on Wednesday, or welcome guests who have traveled to Oshkosh that night. One person told me, “I can’t come on Wednesday; I have to thaw the turkey.”

“Bring it with you,” I replied, “and put it on your lap.” She was not persuaded.

We had hoped to serve food prior to the festival, but the county health code specifies that we could only serve food prepared in a commercial kitchen. The mosque stepped in and offered to host a potluck. While pork and alcohol were forbidden, traditional Pakistani food proved to be a big draw.

The prior year we tried Sunday night, but lost the Latter-Day Saints because of family night. This year the Packers were playing on Sunday night. I checked with Khurram about this, because his community would host the potluck. Suddenly we realized that one thing that Christians and Muslims have in common is that no one in Wisconsin can

Members of Ambassadors for Christ, the choir from a Pentecostal fellowship of refugees from central Africa.
Penny Paiser-Wilson, Dilip Tannan, and Rajinder Singh perform a song at the Interfaith Festival of Gratitude.

compete with the Packers! So Monday night it was.

I spotted Ben's challah at the potluck before I spotted Ben. I like Ben; he works and plays well with others. Minutes before the prior year's festival, I saw him in the auditorium wearing his kippah and tallit, the traditional Jewish head covering and prayer shawl. The synagogue had indicated that they would not be taking part in that year's festival, but when I spotted him, I asked, "Ben, could you get on stage and be Jewish? I'll put you...let's see...after the Baha'is." He came to the podium and chanted a blessing in Hebrew.

Ben was wearing his kippah and tallit at the potluck. In the mosque. There was so much food that an additional table, exclusively for desserts, was set up. People kept coming; it was hard to count, but we estimated that 140 people came to the potluck. A stunning turnout! I had to leave early to drive across town and get ready for the festival.

I checked in with the stage hands at the Grand and gave them a program with rubrics explaining what each act would require on stage. They were most eager to see Taiso, a Buddhist priest who would begin the festival with a guided meditation structured around his striking a bell. I said, "That really resonates with you—ooh sorry." Later I told Taiso that I put him first because he sets a good tone. Fortunately, I got the puns out of my system before taking the stage.

Dilip Tannan, the Hindu representative, brought two additional musicians with him. I never know whom to expect; he is the Bonnie Raitt of the interfaith community in Oshkosh.

This year the Packers were playing on Sunday night. I checked with Khurram about this, because his community would host the potluck.

Suddenly we realized that one thing that Christians and Muslims have in common is that no one in Wisconsin can compete with the Packers! So Monday night it was.

This year he was joined by Penny Paiser-Wilson on flute and Rajinder Singh, a Sikh priest who plays tabla drums. Dr. Tannan played his harmonium and sang one of Mahatma Gandhi's favorite devotional songs in Gujarati.
The choir from a new Pentecostal fellowship of refugees from central Africa was scheduled to sing. None of the members of the fellowship had ever been to the Grand before, so I led them on stage as they arrived. I showed the program to their leader, Pastor Shadrach, saying, “You’re between the Jews and the Muslims. Ooh, in some parts of the world that’s probably not such a good place…” 

“Tom,” he reassured me, “we know Muslims in America are good people.” Later I am somewhat relieved to learn that the sheep of his flock have fled tribal, not religious, wars.

For the eighth year in a row, a group of Muslim girls recited a poem in Urdu. Many of us have watched these young women group up. This year they were joined by four much younger girls, and they were lovely in their Pakistani clothes.

A group of Hmong folk dancers from a high school shared two delightful and elegant dances. Hmong is the largest minority group in town, and their leader helpfully explained the significance of these dances to the audience.

One of the surprising benefits of the festival is that it brings Lutherans together. Lutherans abound in Wisconsin, but they don’t always talk with one another. This year, representatives of three Lutheran congregations formed a choir. They sang “For the Healing of the Nations.” They added verses to this song to include Friends, Hindus, Eckists…every tradition taking part in the festival. It was a very thorough hymn.

The Latter-Day Saints were in fine voice this evening. Their choir included people of all ages; they even signed.

Each year the festival concludes with all the participants taking the stage and singing “Let There Be Peace on Earth.” This year, there was a benediction of sorts: Jan Tache, the daughter of the song’s composers, sent us this message in her email that gave us permission to sing the song:

I am very happy that you are including “Let There Be Peace on Earth” in your annual Interfaith Festival of Gratitude. It is the kind of program that brings people together—something that is sorely needed—and is the reason why the song was written in the first place by my parents. I wish that there were more festivals like the one you have created in Oshkosh.

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 lives in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.
PASTORAL

Under the ark of sanctuary the elders testify of a time of paths leading down to Catahoula
down to Hickory when rivers ran high with rains.

Praise god we have our baptistery they say but I have seen when they pass through the
waters the knowledge with them.

When they pass through the river they are not swept over for they know the river
even the rivers know their names.

A pale pool behind the pulpit is a slight adumbration.
Nothing of the flow nothing to wash our sins away.

We stand in the midst of them a pale adumbration.
We are a pale adumbration of our forebears who lived always just beyond the river.

In this land they saw the storeroom grow empty.

Once a child was brought to the water.

He was immersed in the nearness of their place in the nearness of their time in the
nearness of kinship.

Our elders shed tears for him for on the far bank a rain had washed a drown sheep
captured in a snag of trees ebbing in rushing water.

Brent House
Aimee Tomasek takes a photograph most mornings while walking her dog and posts it on Facebook with the caption, “Another Beautiful Day in Paradise.” Where is this paradise, you ask? Tomasek lives outside of Kouts, a farm town that sits on the northern edge of the Indiana cornbelt, population around 2,000. Tomasek, who is associate professor and chair of the art department at Valparaiso University, has an eye for places like Kouts; for places like Avery, Wisconsin, where she grew up; for places like Clarkson, Nebraska, where her ancestors homesteaded. In the photos she takes of people from Clarkson, you can see in their faces how relaxed they are, how they are comfortable, confident, and unapologetically themselves. This is because the person behind the camera is not a stranger. She's a friend; she's family. She knows them.

The seed for the exhibit “Another Beautiful Day in Paradise: NEBRASKA” was planted sometime last spring, when Tomasek took it upon herself to find a way to display recent works of painter Lee K. Johnson, whose art was introduced to her by a colleague and friend, Eric Johnson, dean of the College of Engineering at Valparaiso University and Lee’s son. The elder Johnson is a distinguished painter, now retired from teaching, who, after working in acrylics for many years, has returned to oil painting. The works Tomasek chose for the exhibit include large, bold abstractions in oil along with a selection of smaller pastels, all inspired by landscapes near where Johnson was born and raised.

Tomasek approached Brian Johnson, dean of the university’s Chapel of the Resurrection (no relation to Lee or Eric), to see if the Chapel could host it. Brian Johnson embraced the project, in part because the Chapel staff had chosen the theme of sacred spaces and places as a liturgical focus this year.

Tomasek herself has been taking photos of Clarkson, Nebraska, since the early 1990s and chose a selection of those photos to round out the exhibit. Then late last spring, Tomasek enlisted two colleagues with Nebraska roots to do some writing for the exhibition—senior research professor of theology Frederick Niedner and recently retired English professor Edward Uehling. Finally, she recruited a current Valparaiso student writer with a connection to Nebraska, Grace Biermann. On Sunday, September 20, those writers gave a public reading in the Chapel. It was a beautiful day in Valparaiso, and the Chapel of the Resurrection turned out to be the perfect sacred place at which to get a rich dose of Nebraska and Nebraskans, in words and in images of surprising power and beauty.

The first thing I noticed in Johnson’s abstract paintings is how the topography twists and rolls, and how alive the landscape looks from top to bottom. My favorites remind me of a passage early in Willa Cather’s great Nebraska novel, My Ántonia, where her narrator, Jim Burden, remarks how in frontier times “the whole country seemed somehow to be running.” Later he remarks how he felt “motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buf-
falo were galloping.” Johnson’s landscapes gallop for me, with the Nebraska prairie animated and spiritualized in the bold, undulating strokes and in the vividness and variety of his palette. I love the oils, especially “Elba: Across the North Loup River.” And whoever thought you could represent Nebraska in pastels? Johnson does it. If you look closely at the paper, you will see how sometimes the surface is bare and the texture of the paper breaks through, perhaps to remind us how delicate and vulnerable the marks we make upon the earth really are.

It was great looking at those large abstract paintings by Lee K. Johnson—no farms or fences visible, just all that tectonic energy in vivid color—as Frederick Niedner began the program on September 20 by revivifying 100 million years of Nebraska geological history in his essay, upon which he then laminated 10 million years of human history, as if to correct the record for those of us who “drove through Nebraska once” and think “there’s nothing there.” It proved a great prelude to the local history Niedner wrote of tiny West Point, Nebraska, and Niedner’s personal history there. West Point is a little town on the Elkhorn River in eastern Nebraska, seventy-
The land and the way you work both on it and with it to make a life inexorably shapes you. It gives you hard hands and sometimes steals your fingers. It strengthens your muscles and bends your back. It makes you watch the sky and stand around after church comparing with your neighbors how many hundredths of an inch found their way into your rain-gauge last evening. It makes you cherish a host of smells and aromas, including that of a newly plowed field or freshly cut clover, the fleeting "petrichor," that earthy scent of rain as it first falls on dry ground, the tool shed’s mingled smells of old wood, gasoline, and oil-soaked soil, and even the inescapable, fragrant odor of manure—the smell of money, as many a farmer has dubbed it. Visual pleasures abound as well, from the at-attention formation of a healthy cornfield to the fleeting waves a breeze creates on a field of oats ready for harvest. You never forget the sights or the smells, and no matter how far from the farm you eventually wander, dry grass and hard ground tighten your gut into an anxious knot that only an all-day soaker can relieve.

—from "Grown Up Along Flat Waters" by Frederick Niedner
five miles northwest of Omaha. Niedner moved to West Point as a boy when his father accepted a call to be a pastor there. In West Point, Niedner writes, “nearly everything in that community centered around two sources and shapers of life, farming and the church.” Niedner’s essay “Grown Up Along Flat Waters” does justice to both, though it is the former—farming and farmers, Earl and his wife, Julia, in particular—to whom he gives his deepest and most affectionate attention. Niedner celebrates in words the same virtues in the same sort of people Tomasek is drawn to with her camera. Niedner’s Gravel Schmitty, both in his name and in his generous spirit, belongs to a Nebraska pantheon of strong humans who hardened their hands and bent their broad backs working that land while serving others. In his writing, Niedner’s tone is nostalgic, his mode elegiac, and the effect he achieves in certain lyrical passages is stunning. His passages on the sights and sounds of life on the farm will take your breath away. I will long remember and be grateful for the privilege of listening to him read on that Sunday afternoon.

How would it feel to follow Frederick Niedner in a public reading, before a hundred or so people in a huge chapel, with my parents there, some of my teachers and classmates, but mostly strangers? I don’t know, but I wonder if I could be as composed as young Grace Biermann was, or as brave or as accomplished. Biermann, a sophomore majoring in English and humanities, has childhood memories of Nebraska that are more recent than Niedner’s. In her writing, rural Nebraska is the backdrop for a girl’s first experience of romance and heartbreak; it is the setting for a wedding and a funeral. There is pain and confusion frankly expressed, but also moments of great pleasure and comfort; one description of utter exhilaration Biermann experiences while driving with her cousin and her sister in an all-terrain vehicle across a bumpy field is pure Cather. And how about this passage—which starts “back east”—from “Second Person, Past Perfect”:

There are too many trees here. You are not opposed to trees in their own right, but there are certainly too many here. Imagine, on some country roads you cannot even see the sky. You need to see the sky. You got a taste of the sky when you were young, and went west for the first time in your short life. You had not known until then how little air you had been breathing. But then you clambered out of the stuffed, stifling car and stood there on the gravel of the old lane, and smelled the air, pungent with cattle. There was so much air, so much sky, and as you stood there and looked around you, you could begin to feel the soaring freedom of it, of nothing but that sky and the rolling hills. You could breathe, you could shout, you could fly.

Biermann’s participation in the program, and the publication of her work in the book, makes this project all the more special for having been so multigenerational. The program would not have been complete without her contribution.

I went to the exhibit for the first time by myself, and have gone several times since,
looking for signs of Willa Cather's Nebraska in the artwork on display. As I read and reread the childhood memories of Niedner, Biermann, and Uehling, Jim Burden's memories of life on the prairie and in the little town of Blackhawk kept surfacing. Edward Uehling's father in "Decoys" will forever be for me a real-life version of Jim Burden's grandfather. And I will never again read about Jim Burden and his Bohemian friend Antoina out loose on the Nebraska prairie and not be reminded Uehling's boyhood adventures with his Estonian friend Uno. If I couldn't have had my own happy boyhood, I might have taken Edward Uehling's, or at least borrowed several chapters from it. In "Decoys," he makes it that appealing, to have such a father and such a friend, and so much free time in that wild, beautiful place to fully enjoy being a boy and a good man's son. "Paradise" is right—it is neither an exaggeration nor an ironic use of that word in "Decoys."

Uehling's "It Comes With the Territory" is a different kind of thing; it more clearly anticipates or acknowledges Paradise Lost. It is really good writing about hunting, this time for pheasants, not ducks. It's also a wonderful account of companionship, though with much more time for the author's solitary musings. More than in "Decoys," hunting is a pretext for an extended meditation, maybe the most beautiful writing of Uehling's I have ever read, all about paying attention and about learning to see, and learning to be present, and grateful.

I am grateful to Aimee Tomasek for putting the book and exhibit together, and for giving her Nebraska to us with such a richly human face. It was a rare achievement to bring such words and images into that large sacred space of the Chapel of the Resurrection. Tomasek had it right. It was "Another Beautiful Day in Paradise: Nebraska."

John Ruff is professor of English at Valparaiso University.
The clay hills south of Gothenburg and beyond Farnam have never failed to startle me with their various beauty. On particular days in the early autumn, a softness of their color and texture steals my resolve, makes me dreamy, has me almost stepping out of my skin and into reminiscences of favorite occasions. Under such a spell I am likely to recall, for instance, an early September Sunday afternoon in my fourteenth year when three friends and I rode bicycles through five miles of Platte Valley to the canyons. “Wiggins’ Canyons” we called them and the gravel road that wound through them for a hike. This softness may rob me of a detailed appreciation of the present, adult moment, but I am repaid with a single, almost tangible remembrance of lying on a hillside by myself (I cannot recall where my friends had gone) and gazing at the blue gray cedars patterned on distant hills, then looking up to a wash of clouds rimming a piece of horizon, and finally, directly above, wondering out of time at billowed clouds and sky a depth of blue beyond imagining. The sun warmed me, the earth warmed me; I was solitary and alive. At last it was the chill of late afternoon wind, its moan as sharp edged as its feel, that brought back the facts of Sunday in September and stiffness in my legs and the ride home before dark.

—From “It Comes With the Territory” by Edward M. Uehling
IF WE WERE ALL ONCE ANGELS

There was a time you frolicked in the cloudy field,
Held up by a long, hot glance of the sky, aquamarine and elegant,
Neither wet nor dry, but both, as heaven is.
There was a time you had a vast and graceful musculature,
More horse than human, like the vast tree of childhood
That spends all of your life getting cut down,
But remains in your mind in a gold engraving of fire.
There was a time you were not him or her.
In divine gratitude, you were created
Because that's why you were born: so that your talents
Could be also, to join the talents of others.
You were not bitter or lost. You did not drink. You were not afraid.
And when you opened your hand, you marveled at its fortune.
Did I say it was not the hand you have now?
How the angel hand was radiance?
Remember? How your talents were to be developed in accordance
With grace? How when you looked in a mirror
It was not just your face?

Kim Bridgford
Absurdity at Work
Boots Riley’s Sorry to Bother You

Josh Langhoff

SORRY TO BOTHER YOU is a workplace comedy where work threatens to engulf life. “If you lived here, you’d be at work already!” reads one nightmarish company ad. Written and directed by Boots Riley, an Oakland-based rapper, bandleader, and activist, it’s also a dystopian sci-fi fable and an agitprop manifesto, consistently goofy and sporadically funny throughout its 110-minute running time. Few comedies have been smarter about how work tries to stick its grubby mitts into every aspect of our lives, and even fewer acknowledge how often we welcome the intrusion.

The movie follows brooding young Cassius “Cash” Green (Lakeith Stanfield, who wore the straw hat in Get Out) as he joins Oakland’s telemarketing industry, where he skyrockets through the ranks like Bay Area rents. When we first meet Cash, he’s living in his uncle’s garage with his fiancée, the perpetually vibrant Detroit (Tessa Thompson), who somehow turns everything she touches into art. Desperate for money, Cash lies his way through a call center interview. The cynical manager catches the lies but offers Cash a job anyway, seeing in his desperation a worker who will follow the job’s most important rule: “Stick to the script.”

After Cash struggles through several frustrating days of failing to sell encyclopedias to strangers, Cash’s wizened cubicle neighbor, played by Danny Glover, gives him a piece of advice: “Use your white voice.” “Not Will Smith white,” he explains, offering a useful taxonomy, and not simply nasal like a Richard Pryor bit, but carefree and privileged—what white people “wished they sounded like.” Overdubbed by the very white David Cross (Crane in the Kung Fu Panda movies), Cash’s new voice succeeds wildly. “Spin Doctors—classic!” he banteres with one customer, liberated from the script. “Tim, I wanna chop it up more but I gotta get to my squash game. Will that be Visa or Mastercard?”

In these early scenes, Riley excels at spotting hilarious absurdities among the world of the working poor. It’s one of the skills that has made his rap project, The Coup, so relatable for more than two decades. Riley has claimed improbable turf in the world of rap music: he’s a funny communist. Coup classics like “Cars & Shoes,” an uproarious litany of the ways Riley’s car is falling apart, find visual analogue in Cash’s three-toned Toyota Tercel, whose windshield wipers move only when its passengers tug a rope. The call center’s dynamics are awkward in the fashion of Office Space and NBC’s The Office—and closer to real life than many managers would like to admit. At one motivational pep rally, a vaguely psychic supervisor tells the call team, “You gotta know when to bag ‘em” (like a corpse) “and when to tag ‘em” (“Tagging is when you claim that money,” he says. “It’s a sale. Chaching! Like when they put the tag on the body at the morgue to identify it. That’s mine”).

When the new, chipper team leader starts babbling about “synergy” and “social currency,”
Cash asks the only question that matters: “Does that mean we get paid more?”

It does not. Cash soon finds himself recruited by union organizer Squeeze (Steven Yeun), and before long the staff is staging protests and striking outside the building. In the meantime, the bosses promote Cash upstairs, where he becomes a “Power Caller,” selling various kinds of government-sanctioned evil for much larger commissions. Cash is torn. On the one hand, he loves his work. Having finally found a job at which he excels, that pays him enough to bail his uncle out of debt and move from the garage, he also finds himself crossing his friends’ picket line with the help of police swathed in riot gear. His friends call him disloyal and encourage him to use his Power Caller leverage to advance their union cause. Meanwhile, Cash’s new boss has far more sinister designs on his rising star.

Riley has his Marxist theory down cold, but his words vibrate with populist life. He makes other political art seem like a humorless, mealy-mouthed sham, whereas he alone sees the endgame and spits the truth.

In the wee hours of the party, Lift unveils for Cash his nefarious scheme, which twists both the ethical laws of capitalism and the human genome. Cash finally meets a line he can’t cross.

Severa months ago, my neighbors down the street posted a yard sign reading “We Back The Badge.” Recently, right above the sign, they started flying a “Don’t Tread On Me” flag, complete with a rattlesnake and everything. It turns out you can buy a vast assortment of “Thin Blue Line”/“Don’t Tread On Me” mash-up merchandise on the internet. I keep hoping these displays are conceptual art pieces about the American paradox, but they probably aren’t.

Many Americans crave revolution but don’t understand how it works. In his landmark study of race relations, *An American Dilemma*, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal described how we feel compelled to break laws that seem unjust, while demanding ever-stricter laws for other people. It’s the old conundrum: “No one can tell me what to do,” flying right above “There ought to be a law.” When people wave that defiant rattlesnake flag, who exactly do they think will tread on them? The “Don’t Tread On Me” motto is a promise to bite the heel of big government. But surely anyone defying a government’s laws should expect a visit from the jackboot of government law enforcement agents. Those agents will wear badges, they’ll be armed and coercive, and they won’t care about a “We Back The Badge” sign.

Magical thinking muddles our politics. Indignant thoughts and yard signs don’t change unjust systems; neither does internet griping or affected civility. (*Especially* not affected civility.) Direct action is the only thing that does; the more direct, the greater the consequences. On this point Boots Riley remains gloriously unmuddled. No matter how lovingly he portrays everyday absurdities and relationship nuances, the razor’s edge of the people’s Revolution looms in the future.

In *Sorry*, the call center workers unionize only after goading the police into a violent, night-long riot. The movie ends with a team of disfigured WorryFree slaves breaking into dazed Steve Lift’s mansion; it’s unclear whether they plan to seize the means of production or simply take their revenge.
Detroit (Tessa Thompson) and Cassius Green (Lakeith Stanfield) in a scene from Sorry to Bother You.

For Coup fans, this is nothing new. Every Coup album contains a song or two in which Riley unflinchingly (but wittily) raps about mass movements of armed citizens, from "20,000 Gun Salute" to "5 Million Ways to Kill a C.E.O," "My Favorite Mutiny" to "Guillotine." Hearing these songs is about as discomforting as reading James Cone's Black Theology and Black Power, and just as refreshing. Riley has his Marxist theory down cold, but his words vibrate with populist life. He makes other political art seem like a humorless, mealy-mouthed sham, whereas he alone sees the endgame and spits the truth. He'd do well in U.S. politics if he could just lose the communism.

As Sorry grows darker, its tone grows less certain. Riley and editor Terel Gibson don't always lead their scenes to payoff—jokes fall flat, or they hold reaction shots a beat too long. The climactic riot uses quick-cut visual confusion to suggest chaos, but it's so chaotic we lose the narrative tension, and therefore the horror. Riley has acknowledged the influence of Alex Cox's 1984 absurdist sci-fi comedy, Repo Man, where the L.A. sets seemed patched together with chewing gum and scenes trailed off more often than they didn't. (Probably coincidentally, two of The Coup's funniest songs celebrate dastardly repo men.) So these awkward stagings may have been deliberate, but they clash tonally with the plot's central conflict, blunt as a police baton: capitalism leads people to stark decisions that carry dire consequences.

Overstuffing Oakland with ideas and throw-away gags, Riley labors mightily to humanize the place, and largely avoids making his characters the sum total of their decisions. His greatest success is Detroit, played by Tessa Thompson. She seems to represent Riley's ideal of how to live under late capitalism. Thompson shrewdly underplays, centering a character who could have vanished into quirkiness. Her advice for Cash is unfailingly correct. She performs her day job, spinning a sign that reads "SIGNS" in front of a store called Signs, with aplomb. Her giant earrings, bearing paired slogans like "TELL HOMELAND SECURITY" and "WE ARE THE BOMB," are fabulous. (No surprise, you can buy replicas online.) Being flawless is more pressure than any female character deserves, so I wish Riley had emphasized Detroit's concessions to her own white voice, used during her gallery show and dubbed by Downton Abbey's Lily James. No one can stay totally pure. But if we're going to let capital define our lives, it might as well be on our own terms.

Josh Langhoff is a church musician living in the Chicago area. He is also the founder of NortenoBlog, a mostly English-language website devoted to Mexican music.
PORTRAIT OF THE ADDICT AS ESAU

I was very hungry. I was in the open country four days hunger tightened me until I hummed the sparse song of my prey and that was hunger. I held a wild goat down by the hair and watched his eye a black bar splitting through a dilated sun occlude because he came to the stream where I was. Came looking for supper. That's one answer to the question what does hunger cost. Another:

Sun at midday pricking stars in Jacob's tent. The smell of food. If I could ask my prey about the moment hunger overcame the cost of hunger. Leaving Jacob's tent. How would prey leave if it could go on living after it encountered me? I give up my birthright. More. Inheritance. My blessing. My skin. I am leaving Jacob's tent. The sun's hand on my face like it's a stranger's.

Jesse Bertron
Poet Christian Wiman began his journey into faith about a decade ago, when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. His story, however, is not your cliché near-death conversion. Rather, Wiman’s turn to Christianity was a slow, yet long-time-coming move toward the questions and desires that most consumed him. His loneliness, despair, and yearning for something he could not articulate did not so much lead him to finding God as it did to recognizing God’s absence, which is a form of finding. He Held Radical Light delves into those desires that landed him where he is today. From the very beginning, Wiman sets a tone of yearning and wonder, claiming, “Poetry itself—like life, like love, like any spiritual hunger—thrives on longings that can never be fulfilled, and dies when the poet thinks they have been.”

Wiman tells his “conversion” story in his essay collection My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer. In He Held Radical Light, Wiman revisits his faith narrative and many of the same themes he has addressed before, but he does so in a surprisingly different form, one that keeps his narrative fresh and layered. Where My Bright Abyss consists of many essays, this new book comes as a narrative that focuses on particular moments and anecdotes, all of which include a poet Wiman has known. We see him grow from a lost but ambitious college student to editor of the inimitable Poetry magazine to a well-known speaker on faith and art to his current position as a professor at Yale Divinity School.

He Held Radical Light is not for the faint of intellect. While My Bright Abyss was certainly thoughtful and aimed for an intelligent audience, Wiman’s new book requires even more from his readers. Here, they will find not only the kind of existential and theological questions Wiman has raised and attempted to answer before, but also thorough literary analysis tied to dense theology from the likes of Karl Barth. Coming in at one hundred fifteen pages, the book covers a lot of ground—all fat has been trimmed. Understandably, the book gives no space for lazy or distracted reading; every page requires one’s full attention. Those who do not enjoy serious discussions on literature where he is today. From the very beginning, Wiman sets a tone of yearning and wonder, claiming, “Poetry itself—like life, like love, like any spiritual hunger—thrives on longings that can never be fulfilled, and dies when the poet thinks they have been.”

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Still, I expect a few systematic theologians might turn up their noses at the book, however much beautiful language, keen insight, and sound literary criticism it contains. I can imagine some labeling Wiman’s book as watered-down, or perhaps even self-indulgent in its musings. It is easy for me to imagine such phrases because some breeds of theologians use them quite liberally, asserting that rigorous theology (Lord, forgive those who say “real”) should follow the academic formula: introduction, outline, thesis stated by the third page. Anything less
is insufficient. Wiman, however, is not aiming for this kind of “sufficient” theology (he would wince at such a phrase), but he is writing theology. *He Held Radical Light* simply goes about it in a different form, fit for Wiman’s existential and artistic purposes. He does not sacrifice theology for the sake of memoir. Rather, he allows

Wiman addresses despair a hundred times, noting its inevitability and seeming inescapability. But he does not champion it. To write at all, he believes, is to rage against despair.

Wiman risks being wrong, risks saying that one can be wrong, risks a conversation not well-suited for a dinner party or book launch.

theology to open up his own story, and the way he tells his story opens theology from an angle dogmatics cannot. We see a similar approach in the work of Frederick Buechner, Henry Nouwen, C.S. Lewis, and others. What is most ambitious about Wiman’s book, though, is that it does not only bring together theology and memoir. He also throws poetics and literary analysis into the mix. Oddly enough, this experiment works.

When Wiman struggles to articulate a conviction or question, he opens a poem, interrogates it, and cherishes it. The reader-response that follows laces the language, reflection, inquiries, and narrative into a surprisingly striking tapestry. The book includes many outstanding, theologically rich poems that unpack or illustrate Wiman’s points, a small anthology of the poems that have shaped him. One poem, Philip Larkin’s “Aubade,” acts as a refrain a few times throughout the book. Wiman uses the poem to discuss art’s possible dangers, the complications of poetry, and despair, among other things. Wiman’s statements on these topics would stand on their own, but they would not dance. They need the poem’s chilling music.

*He Held Radical Light* is a book of many risks. Wiman writes theology in a form open to criticism from systematic theologians, but he also makes more theological claims than many artists would be willing to venture, claims that some writers would passionately argue against. (In a story detailing his first academic conference, he notes how heated and personal the arguments about Wallace Stevens became.) Wiman dares to suggest how God appears in other poets’ work and the theological implications of poetic choices and approaches. It is indeed risky business to state opinions and convictions about art and the divine at all, given that many artistic and spiritual circles often consider shrugs the sexiest and most self-actualized approach to such questions.

Wiman operates in that difficult and dangerous space between dogmatics and pure mystery. He leaves room for mystery—demands it, in fact. Yet his arguments suggest that not only is babbling in the face of mystery a form of irreverence, but complete silence is as well. Opening ourselves to questions too large for our language does not mean language is a lost cause. That is despair. Wiman addresses despair a hundred times, noting its inevitability and seeming inescapability. But he does not champion it. To write at all, he believes, is to rage against despair. Wiman risks being wrong, risks saying that one can be wrong, risks a conversation not well-suited for a dinner party or book launch. But in the words of poet Jane Hirschfield in her poem “Sentencing”: “Think assailable thoughts, or be lonely.” *He Held Radical Light* is decidedly not lonely.

LIKE WIMAN’S LIFE, HIS BOOK IS POPULATED by other writers. They are, in fact, what hold the narrative together. Every section describes Wiman’s interaction with a poet who changed him. Through these moments, he tracks where he was personally, artistically, and spiritually at the time. The book builds a community of poets, an antidote to the romanticized solitary artist. Yes, there is loneliness; none of us can escape it, including Wiman. What he can do, however, is remind fellow artists that they are not in fact alone.
Wiman finds common threads between these artists, but he also shows their differences in how they tackle the same questions and artistic struggles—ambition, inspiration, etc. As is his style when talking theology, Wiman does not attempt to give a neat definition of what a poet is or should be. Rather, He Held Radical Light delights in particularity. Wiman does not attempt to define a poet, but show her. And she is shown in love—tenderness for the flesh and blood whence the words came. This posture is both incarnational and ecclesial, which of course shapes the theology; Wiman's theology does not exist in a vacuum but is tied to the humans who embody it.

This embodied and relational approach builds a strong emotional core, as one would expect from the writer of My Bright Abyss or any of Wiman's poetry collections. Of course, the stories from his own life and other poets' lives bring palpable joy, humor, and grief to his meditations. (If the chapter on Craig Arnold does not wreck at least a small part of your heart, I suggest checking for a pulse.) But additionally, and perhaps more interestingly, his careful readings of the poems also pierce. Wiman writes about his selected poems with an attention and passion that is nothing short of contagious. I dare any good reader, even one who disagrees entirely with one of his analyses, to walk away from any of these poems indifferent to their language. Wiman animates both the poets and poems, giving more life to both.

Wiman dedicated He Held Radical Light to the late poet Donald Hall, a dear friend who died three months before the book's release and who appears throughout the book in loving terms. As a whole, He Held Radical Light is a book of love—love for poetry, for poets, and for God. No word comes without a human voice, and no poet appears without her music. God appears with and through both. And while Wiman brings difficult theological concepts to the forefront of these stories and readings, he also gives the sense that God (or God's absence) cannot be kept out of it all. As A.R. Ammons' "Hymn" notes, "You are everywhere partial and entire / You are on the inside of everything and on the outside." The divine haunts and illuminates every line and poet. As I read about these people

Wiman does not attempt to define a poet, but show her. And she is shown in love—tenderness for the flesh and blood whence the words came. This posture is both incarnational and ecclesial, which of course shapes the theology; Wiman's theology does not exist in a vacuum but is tied to the humans who embody it.

Wiman has loved and marveled at their individual wisdom, faith, and words, Gerard Manley Hopkins' "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" comes to mind: "for Christ plays in ten thousand places / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces." He Held Radical Light shows the reader delighted and tormented faces, voices singing grief and praise. In those, the reader may find truths that even poets themselves could not articulate.

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THE UPPER ROOM

The upper room

is a basement dive. I'm lured down
three metres below street level, through ruins,
razes and raises of twenty centuries, by happy hour,

and two-for-one chicken wings. Muted dayglo girls
grind on MTV, fail to lip-sync with disco-folk
blaring from speakers hung at each end

of the long tacky bar. I order arak. Between tracks
traffic on the one-way system rumbles above
the ancient architecture, the faded glory. Windows

opened once to almighty storms, goats, Zion,
blind-frame leatherette booths and fairy lights.
Erased from all guidebooks, this place passed over

in favour of hip and airy. Farewell dinners a thing
of the past. Its modest seedy threshold crossed
by the jaded or tourists in search of some shade.

Ben Egerton
The Restless Self and the Wayward University
Joseph Clair's *On Education, Formation, Citizenship, and the Lost Purpose of Learning*

Kevin Gary

The English philosopher Roger Scruton contends that a university ought to be a place where a student, within its walls, is given a vision of the purpose of life, and with this a conception of intrinsic value. The world outside, beset by utilitarian ways of seeing, is incapable of providing this. In this age of commerce, Scruton fears, "We are in danger of making every purpose a material one—in other words, as Newman saw it, in danger of allowing the means to swallow the ends" (Scruton, 2015, 26). Joseph Clair, in his book *On Education, Formation, Citizenship and the Lost Purpose of Learning*, fears the whale of commerce might swallow up the liberal arts altogether.

The university, Clair laments, has lost its way—driven more by economic than moral or spiritual purposes. He views contemporary liberal education as having sold its birthright for a mess of potage. Its greatest champions, touting liberal education as the best preparation for an ever-changing world of work, unwittingly cede ground to economic justifications as the supreme arbiter of what is most worthwhile to study. To repair this situation Clair turns to the life and thought of Augustine, illuminating how Augustine's existential journey from materialist careerism to a passionate faith in Christ provides a model and an instructive guide for how to restore the liberal arts and imbue the modern university with a moral and spiritual center that it presently lacks.

Clair’s book is part of a larger series that aims to make clear Augustine's significance to contemporary thought. By this standard, *On Education* is a compelling read. It brings fresh air to Augustine's remarkable life. In just 120 pages, with Augustine as his guide, Clair diagnoses the disarray that afflicts the modern university, making a case for liberal education grounded in moral and spiritual purposes. Towards this end, he examines how a proper education rightly orders human love and desire, presents an apologetic for a kind of reading that edifies the soul, examines how we should conduct ourselves as vigilant citizens amidst a sea of interests competing for our affections, and offers a preliminary sketch of a way forward in light of Augustine's vision.

A central focus in Clair's account is learning how to read for transformation. His argument echoes what Søren Kierkegaard describes (fourteen centuries after Augustine) as primitive reading. More than fodder for critical thinking, texts in this tradition are regarded as sources of profound wisdom. The primitive reader has the capacity to read such texts for moral and spiritual transformation. The supreme example of this kind of reading is on display in book VIII of the *Confessions*. Moved by a child singing, "take up and read," Augustine is prompted to pick up the Apostle Paul's epistles; he reads the first passage he opens, and his life is transformed at that very moment. Augustine renounces
the carnal pursuits that had consumed him and embraces faith in Christ.

In essence, the central pedagogical question Clair examines is what prompted Augustine's epiphany, and how do we educate our students for this kind of transformation? Why, at this moment, did the of words of Scripture move Augustine's heart, where previously he found Scripture to be simplistic and childish, especially when compared to the elegant prose of Cicero? Augustine's liberal learning, rather than preparation for this kind of reading, was an inoculation against it. Rather than spurs for moral improvement or occasions for contemplation, Augustine was trained to value texts insofar as they entertained and sharpened his oratorical prowess. Through this process, he became a skillful rhetorician, yet this myopic focus on career advancement and status left him, as he so powerfully illuminated, spiritually aimless and restless.

It was not until Augustine read Cicero's *Hortensius* that he glimpsed an alternate way of being. Rather than status and materialistic pursuits, Augustine discovered in Cicero's exhortation the wonder of philosophy. This was, for Augustine, an experience of authentic contemplation. By comparison, Augustine's studies and career up to this point seemed utterly shallow. Newly awakened by Plato (via Cicero), Augustine pursued this new path with zeal. Yet while he achieved a glimpse of God's grandeur, he found himself incapable of sustaining this contemplative posture. The ascent heavenward was too much for his defective will. "From the Platonists, Augustine says, he [glimpsed] the moral-spiritual goal of divine contemplation, but not the way there" (22).

Clair tells us that rather than despair, Augustine recognized the humility that contemplation and study required. Herein Augustine arrived at a distinct insight: more than we obtain or grasp the truth, the truth is given to us; we receive it. This humble orientation and receptivity stand in sharp contrast to the utilitarian and instrumental approaches that dominated Augustine's learning. Clair also contrasts it with reading for self-examination (the Socratic model) and reading for self-creation (the Romantic model). For Augustine, reading was an act of self-reception wherein one receives and finds oneself through reading the right kind of texts.

Receptive reading, Clair argues, is a balm against the self's penchant for distraction and fragmentation. The act of reading (especially Scripture) unifies the self. We are made up of words, and we find ourselves through words. Good texts hold up an edifying mirror that illuminates the soul work that needs to be done and the actions taken toward that end. The self, afflicted with sin, is an "opaque...knotty tangle of desires" (79). "The way to find this wisdom is by inserting oneself—and the memory of one's life—into the grand narrative of God's story given in Scripture: by reading oneself into Scripture" (79). Grammar and secular texts are but a preparation for this higher kind of reading.

Good citizenship, Clair argues, is nurtured by such receptive reading, as it cultivates vigilance and "awareness of all the subtle forms of lust for mastery at the level of the individual's soul and society." Becoming good citizens, Clair argues, "has to do with becoming good readers: those who inhabit great books and whose identities and loves are formed through the imaginative reception of inherited visions of the good life and good society" (98).
An essential prerequisite for receptive reading, Clair continues, is a proper ordering of the soul, moving in three directions. The first is reigning in our desires for pleasure and trivial distractions, cultivating a capacity for deep attention. Through this process, we acquire the intellectual and moral virtues study requires. The second direction is "ordering our love for God...." This is required lest intellectual endeavors become vain pursuits. The third aim involves directing "outward ordering of affection for other human beings" (104). Without such careful ordering, notes Clair, "disordered desire and the perils of self-love haunt liberal education at every stage..." (49). Christian liberal learning must guard against the dangers that constantly beset liberal education: trivial curiosity, prideful domination, and status-mongering.

**INFORMED BY AUGUSTINE, CLAIR OFFERS** three major recommendations for colleges and universities today: securing patrons, instituting a great books curriculum that nourishes the soul, and installing teachers who are able to inspire moral and spiritual growth, as well as intellectual. More important than scholarly production, teachers of great books should be adept at guiding students to read them for moral and spiritual edification. Rather than simply dispensing knowledge, such teachers should be skillful at making plain "the richness of texts for the human tasks of living, loving and finding meaning." (115).

In response to the question of which books should be studied, Clair offers the following Augustinian-informed criteria: "The question of what kind of love is being formed and shaped and produced in the reader is the question and basis for judgment of any text. This is the form of literary criticism that Augustine invents in *The City of God*" (91). This strikes me as a valuable lens—one that is largely absent from today's general education conversations.

The overarching question (which Clair answers in the affirmative) is this: can Augustine's receptive reading (with our loves properly ordered) be restored today? Can students be taught to read texts (not just Scripture but Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Simone Weil, or W.E.B. Du Bois) for personal transformation? While I am deeply sympathetic with Clair's Augustinian vision, I wonder if it goes far enough. The kind of reading Augustine modeled was situated within a quasi-monastic context—nurtured by a robust communal life centered on the practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It is this formative context which primed and sustained Augustine's receptive reading.

By contrast, the average undergraduate (outside the classroom) receives a very different kind of formation—one that tends to work against reading altogether, let alone contemplative or transformative reading. The academy itself is often at odds with this kind of reading—conditioning students to read texts pragmatically (and often quickly), deconstructively, or with a posture of detachment. The forces against receptive reading operate both within the academy and beyond. While Clair's plan offers some headway in addressing the obstacles present within the classroom (through edifying texts and inspired teaching), it does not speak to navigating the larger culture that forms (or malforms) the desires of students.

The directive that teachers should select texts based upon what kind of love a text promotes is a starting point for a rightly ordered liberal education. Such texts, with inspired teaching, might occasion epiphanies of love rightly ordered. However, without the right kind of community formation and habituation, the transformation Clair hopes for will be short-lived. Perhaps some students will find their way into communities of virtue, but this should not be left to chance.

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**Work Cited**

DANCE OF THE FALLEN STARS

The beacon flashes yellow-bright
above
the grass disappears
darts in
the boxwood hedge
shines a faithful call
like Portland light
signing to those
afloat
toward
its harbor
The light flames yellow-bright
beside ash bark
circles reappears in
swaying limbs
winks for a partner
like a hearth fire
murmuring come
to
me
The lights glow and glow
around
the leaf tips appear waltz
together
glide skyward
like winged stars
blinking gleaming
back
to heaven

Elaine Wilburt
I want to tell you a story about a certain city—it is the city that is imagined in the creation of two laws that Moses gives to the Israelite people in the book of Deuteronomy. In the latter half of this text, in Deuteronomy 22:23-27, Moses says to the people:

If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

But if the man meets the engaged woman in the open country, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. You shall do nothing to the young woman; the young woman has not committed an offense punishable by death, because this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor. Since he found her in the open country, the engaged woman may have cried for help, but there was no one there to hear her cry.

The logic of these paired laws is fairly straightforward. In both cases, a man comes upon a woman who is engaged to be married and he sleeps with her. In the first case, the man comes upon this woman in the city, and it is assumed that she consented to his sexual advances, because otherwise she would have cried for help. In this case, the man and the woman both suffer the penalty of their sins because it is assumed that both were willing participants. In the second case, the man comes upon the woman outside the city walls, and in this case, only the man must suffer the penalty of this sin, because the woman may well have cried for help, not consenting to his advances, but there was no one there in the open country to hear her cry.

Clearly, there are horrifying implications to this set of paired laws—about the way they adjudicate innocence, about the way they punish adultery with the death penalty. But there is also a salient difference between these two laws, and this difference tells us something about the kind of city Moses imagined for the people of God.

Why is the law in the city different from the law in the open country? Because if the woman is in the city, there are people there to hear her cry out—but if no one was there to hear her in the open country, how would they know if she screamed and fought? Moses insisted that we must, in this latter case, believe what she says, take her at her word.

The difference between these laws, in other words, is about the kind of community Moses hopes for in this imagined city—the cloud of witnesses who is there to hear a woman cry out, to rescue her or to bear testimony on her behalf in a court of law. This law leverages the life of woman—a woman who cannot bear testimony for herself—on the willingness of the men of this city to hear and to respond.

But what if there is no one in the city who will hear her cry? What if that city is like our city, where women who cry out are shamed, disbelieved, threatened, and destroyed? What if that city, like our city, refuses to indict those who perpetrate violence against the vulnerable, refuses even to disqualify these men from positions of power and authority, and instead brings women alone out into the city square to be shamed and stoned? We see one such woman in the gospel of John.

Deuteronomy 22: A Tale of Two Cities

Ashleigh Elser
men of the city bring her out to Jesus and explain that she has been caught in the act of adultery, and that she must suffer her due punishment. There is no man next to her in this story—her partner in this crime is not by her side. Perhaps he was a young man with a bright future ahead of him, and the men of the city decided to give him a second chance. Perhaps he was a city official with a good name and a good reputation behind him. Perhaps his fellow men took pity on him, empathized with the way this might destroy his life and his reputation. After all, boys will be boys, and no man should have their whole life ruined for a such a small indiscretion. No man who has made a name for himself in this city should be taken down by a nameless woman.

In September, during the tumultuous weeks leading up to the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court, the president of the United States tweeted something I heard repeatedly as the nation considered the allegations of sexual assault brought forward by Christine Blasey Ford: if Kavanaugh sexually assaulted Ford in the way she says he did, she would have cried out, she would have reported it, she would have gone immediately for help. The implication here is quite like the law in Deuteronomy: she did not cry out, and therefore she is condemned.

What do we do when the men of our city cannot or will not hear the cries of women? One thing women do—one thing women have done—is learn to keep our cries to ourselves.

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, one in five women in the United States will be raped in her lifetime—and still, many women who summon the courage to report their experience are assumed to be liars, trying to ruin the reputation of someone who doesn’t deserve to have his name dragged through the mud. One in five women, and we still refuse to believe them; we still refuse to acknowledge what this tells us about men, or we are still surprised when men rush in to defend one another against the dangers that these charges present. If one in five women in this country is raped over the course of their lifetime, one in how many men has raped a woman? Is it any wonder that we are not ready to see clearly just how pervasive this all must be for those statistics to be true?

We live in a city plagued by violence—violence against black, brown, trans, queer, and cis bodies whose testimony is not believed unless the men of this city have ears to hear it—and what do so many of these men hear in these cries? An attack against men. A threat to their lives and to their reputations and to their well-being. A threat to the codes of silence that keep some people safe and others in danger. A threat to the way things have always been in this city.

This semester I am teaching a class called Women, Violence, and Power. Sixteen brave and brilliant young women sit around a table with me three times a week and read story after story in the biblical canon about rape, domestic abuse, and gendered violence. Women in the Bible are raped by strangers and by family members, women are raped by gangs and cut into pieces, women are taken by Israelite men as spoils of war, or taken as the right of Kings. God is largely silent in these stories, as are the victims of these crimes. These stories are often less about the pain and suffering of their victims than they are about how this violence impacts men: those accused of these crimes or those disgraced by them. In our class conversations, we wrestle with these texts and ask what it means that communities of readers who call these words the words of God think of these stories as sacred. How can such narratives of violence teach us anything about God?

In one such story, in chapter nineteen of the book of Judges, a Levite man comes into the city with his concubine, and when, in the middle of the night, he is threatened by violence, he throws her...
out the door into the street as a trade-off for his own safety. She is raped throughout the night by a gang of Israelite men. Those men did not hear her cry, nor did the Levite man and his host, who were sleeping soundly inside. When the man tries to leave the house in the morning, he is surprised to find her dead on the threshold. My students read stories like this with fear and trembling and anger, and I hear in their voices the words the disciples say to Jesus elsewhere in the Gospel of John: this is a hard word—who can hear it?

Alongside these stories, there are declarations about the character of God. "God is in the midst of the city," the psalmist writes, and from him no truth is hidden (Ps. 46:5). God has heard every cry, has borne witness for those who could not bear witness for themselves. The first human being to give a name to God is a slave woman, oppressed and sexually abused by her master. She calls out to God and says: "You are the one who sees" (Gen. 16:13). Later, the psalmist will call God the one who hears. That these violent stories have been recorded and set down in this canon is a sign, perhaps, that God hears these cries and remembers with those who cannot forget.

In the difference between these two laws, in these violent stories, and in the cries of so many victims whose voices go unheard, there is an invitation to those who dwell in this city: he who has ears to hear, let him hear. 

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LATE JANUARY, RURAL INDIANA

Beneath the river birch
a plump blue jay
pecks at frozen ground.
I'm thinking about
how I watch too much TV lately
and that Gary Snyder is still alive
and how I never want
to be where I am even when it's where,
many years before, I longed to be.
Now the snow comes and
I'm thinking about
my boyhood in New York,
the taste of sweat and snow
on my upper lip
coming in after sledding,
the smell of my father's
bitter Food Club instant coffee,
how some dinner scrap
always seemed to fall
beneath the burner, smoke
under a sauce pan of boiling water.
Vickerman Hill being impassable
in the lake effect storm,
my grandma could not get into town;
someone would need
to stop at Shibley's
to pick up a half-gallon of 2%
and the Evening Telegram.
I would stand in front of the fire
after my father turned a log
with the poker and the embers
flared new warmth.
Careful, he'd say—
because sometimes a spark
would shoot out from a hidden place
through the iron grate's ashy curve.

Daniel Bowman Jr.
Counting Matters
When Elections Are Poorly Run, Citizens Lose

Jennifer Hora

As a political science professor teaching American government and institutions, perhaps my favorite lecture to give each semester builds to the amazingly simple theme of "counting matters"—that is, the system you choose to count the votes impacts the outcome.

In Porter County, Indiana, this abstract elections concept became all too concrete during Election Day 2018 and in the weeks that followed. My students at Valparaiso University were privileged—if that is the right word—with a local case study in the importance of election implementation and counting. Porter County was the last county in the state—and seemingly the nation—to report any and all election results. Several failures during Election Day contributed to that dubious distinction, but the makings of the fiasco were in place long before November 6.

Early in 2018, the three-person Porter County Election Board voted to shift election oversight from the Porter County Voter Registration Office to the Office of the County Clerk. The move made sense from a public administration standpoint; the Voter Registration Office is awkwardly led by five people while the clerk's office has a single executive, so this move promised more streamlined decision-making and improved accountability. Moreover, the clerk vouched for the ability of her office to run the election correctly.

While this move seemed to be administratively advantageous and theoretically sound, the particulars of this situation were devastating. The county clerk herself cast the deciding vote in a two-to-one decision to transfer responsibility for elections to her own office. It is awkward, to say the least, when a person votes to give herself more power. Adding to this situation, the county clerk who would now oversee elections was herself on the November ballot as a candidate for county auditor.

The organization of voting in Porter County has been (and clearly now will continue to be) criticized for being unwieldy. The county has 133 precincts; each precinct is staffed by five people, for a total of 655 on-site poll workers. (In addition to these poll workers, numerous regular county employees also work elections in some way. For instance, the Porter County Sheriff's Office delivers absentee and early-voting ballots to the correct precincts on Election Day.) Poll workers start with set-up at 5:00 a.m., staff precincts from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., and then finish their day only when all the rows and columns total—optimistically 7:00 or 8:00 p.m., but often later. The means the county has to find 655 individuals willing to work a fourteen-to sixteen-hour shift twice a year. Other states have handled this challenge by hiring more workers and dividing the day into two eight-hour shifts. But this challenge is just the tip of the iceberg.

In November 2018, Porter County elections failed on at least four counts. The failures snowballed, leaving votes uncounted and unreported for sixty-six hours after the polls closed.

The first failure happened early on November 6, when at least twelve polling locations in the county remained closed after the official opening time. Lawyers for the Democratic Party went to court that morning to request that poll hours in those precincts be extended so voters had the full twelve hours to cast their ballot. A judge approved that request for twelve locations.

The second failure, and by far the largest structural one, was the failure of the County Clerk's Office to have absentee, vote by mail, and early voting ballots ready in a timely manner for the Porter County Sheriff's Department to deliver to each of the 133 precincts.

This led to failure three: a lack of clear
communication from the clerk's office to poll workers explaining what to do now that Plan A—for poll workers to open each double-sealed envelope and feed each ballot through "the machine"—was impossible to carry out. Some poll workers reported that when they tried to call the office for direction, they were only able to reach a voicemail box that was not taking messages. (By this point, poll workers had been on duty for thirteen hours, and many had not had a break all day. Remember, too, that these 655 Porter County residents receive just over $100 for their election service.)

Failure four: any ballots cast outside standard format are, by definition, provisional. Absentee ballots not delivered by the required poll closing time are outside standard balloting format. Standards require provisional ballots be counted at a later date—November 16 for this election. This meant that voters who troubled themselves to request an absentee ballot or get themselves to an early voting location would not have their vote included with the next day results (and, to be honest, most citizens and media outlets are mainly interested in results reported on election night or the following morning).

As I write this, the situation in Porter County has not reached the level of the 2000 Florida debacle, nor even the 2018 Florida debacle—yet. Nevertheless, this seems unprecedented in modern times. Yes, the 2018 election saw high turnout for a non-presidential year; according to the New York Times, 51 percent compared to Indiana's normal midterm turnout of approximately 40 percent. However, turnout was up for the May 2018 primary, and as early as October indicators suggested that election officials should expect high turnout in November, especially in states with competitive U.S. Senate races, which Indiana had.

Over the past decade, thirty-seven of Indiana's ninety-two counties have shifted to using Vote Centers, which means these counties have fewer polling places, but these polling places are more centrally and conveniently located and have more and better-trained staff. Vote Centers are receiving favorable feedback from both election officials and voters in the counties that have made the shift. Some Porter County residents have encouraged this shift, yet the county's election decision-makers have yet to embrace this proven voter reform.

Even considering this election's higher-than-usual voter participation, Porter County could do more to encourage voters to go to the polls. Indiana hovers perennially near the bottom of the list of voter participation in presidential elections. The state came in dead last for voter participation in the 2014 midterms. Leaving so many voters with the feeling that their ballots did not count in this election will hardly help this situation.

Questionable counting leads to broader questions: were these votes secured? (The FBI's Division of Elections was called in to answer this one.) Is there integrity in the system? Does my vote even matter? For the United States Senate and House of Representatives races, that last question has already been answered with a resounding NO. These two top-of-the-ticket races were called early on election night, as uncounted votes from Porter County languished in ballot boxes.

As much of a problem as this was for voters and poll workers, it is important not to forget the dozens of Porter County candidates who were waiting anxiously for election results. Their future work and routines hinged on these results. Will they be sent to work in the statehouse starting in January or not? Do they have a seat on a board or commission requiring evening meetings? Do they need to hire a babysitter so they can work longer hours? Can they declare victory? Or should they reboot for next time?

Counting matters. Timely results matter. Citizens of Indiana have a right to be outraged by this miscarriage of democracy.

Jennifer Hora is associate professor of political science and international relations at Valparaiso University.

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THE LAMB

In the photo a soldier's carrying a lamb, because in the world the soldier carried the lamb. You may wonder if he took the lamb from the village. He didn't. He carried it home to the villagers when it was lost—like a shepherd, although he wasn't one and didn't know the place. Far from his own country, he was more lost than the lamb, although he didn't feel lost, as if the hut could be his home. A deed anywhere is the same. Nothing's better than being good: a truth he traveled more than miles to know deeply, gently holding the lamb the same way he cradled a gun.

Joseph Chaney
THE CORPUS CLOCK outside the Taylor Library in Cambridge, England, is a mesmerizing moving sculpture. The clock was a gift from the late physicist Stephen Hawking, who famously authored the book *A Brief History of Time*. The main feature of the clock is an eerie, metal, Locust-like beast called the *Chronophage* or time eater, who keeps time by chomping away at the seconds while producing the grinding sound of time being consumed. The clock expresses Hawking's view that time measures the relentless movement of all that exists toward entropy. Entropy is the essential feature of the second law of thermodynamics, which states that everything moves like heat's movement from lively warmth to deathly cold. And to cut off any cut-rate metaphysical/religious comfort, Hawking famously declared in 2011 at Google's Zeitgeist Conference, "Philosophy is dead." Entropy is not a theory; it's the law.

Across the street is the King's College chapel, where on every Christmas Eve the service of Lessons and Carols presents a very different interpretation of time. In that service, time is not savagely consumed. Rather, time moves toward consummation, carried along by readings and music that tell the story of the incarnation, where, from heaven above, God entered into the thick of human history. The truth of God's incarnational movement is captured in the arresting phrase, "And it came to pass." I want to juxtapose the phrase, "And it came to pass" with Thomas's post-Easter doubt in order to contemplate the meaning and significance of Jesus' post-resurrection greeting, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19).

Thomas doubted the testimony of the others because they reported a foreign—by which I mean freaky—understanding of the meaning of resurrection. Whatever Thomas thought the word
resurrection meant, it would have drawn from two dominant understandings, roughly speaking: the Greek and Jewish versions.

The Greek version was that resurrection, if it was desirable at all, was nevertheless impossible. It was the stuff of myth because there is no conceivable escape from the underworld. When myth conceived of an escape, it was in the story of Orpheus, who, in deep anguish because of the death of his beloved Eurydice, put his sorrow into a song. This music moved Hades, the god of the underworld, and his wife, Persephone, to offer Orpheus the chance to reclaim Eurydice with the one stipulation that Orpheus not look at Eurydice until both had departed the underworld. But Orpheus, moved by passionate impatience, turned back too soon, and Eurydice was lost forever.

The Jewish understanding of resurrection was defined by a long dispute between the Pharisees and Sadducees about the meaning of Elijah and some scattered passages in the Psalms and Ezekiel. Jewish thinkers agreed that if there was a physical resurrection, it would take place at the end of history. This would most likely have been Thomas’ view, although that view would have been complicated by the raising of Lazarus, the surprise appearance of Moses on the mount of Transfiguration, and Jesus’s promise of Paradise to the thief on the cross. The point is that nothing prepared Thomas for the kind of resurrection reported to him by the others.

Thomas doubted the testimony of the others because they claimed that flesh and blood had suffered a gruesome, disfiguring death and had returned, within time, with a transfigured glorified body. Thomas doubted this notion of resurrection and so needed to test the truthfulness of the testimony. And he made clear that the wounds would tell the truth because bodily wounds, the kind that crucifixion inflicts, unambiguously distinguish delusional wish-fulfillment from a fulfilled promise. If Christ’s wounds were healed, the meaning of death would be altered, and Thomas could believe the prophet Isaiah’s claim that “by his wounds we are healed” (Is. 53:5).

Before submitting to Thomas’s test, Jesus greets Thomas by saying, Peace be with you. The greeting stakes a doxological claim that the peace that was “in the beginning” before time, and “ever shall be” at time’s end, “is now” in the broken middle between beginning and end. “Peace” is the term that captures the changed meaning of time, that changes our coming and passing. Time is no longer necessarily measured by the Chronophage’s movement to entropy. The alternative time measures our movement toward fulfillment and is existentially experienced as the peace that comes of the presence of the one who is called “The Fullness of Time.” Jesus is our peace because he did not come to stay, nor did he come, see, and conquer. He came as the Lamb of God, who willingly came and passed to take away the sin of the world.

Last Christmas Eve I had the privilege of attending the Lessons and Carols service at the chapel of King’s College in Cambridge. During the service, I found myself contemplating the phrase “And it came to pass” while enjoying the coming and passing of readings and music. After the fourth reading, the choir began to sing John Tavener’s setting of William Blake’s poem, “Little Lamb.” The music triggered an immediate rush of repressed sorrow because, eighteen years earlier, I had put this piece of music on a playback loop to help me through a rough patch in my life. Repeatedly listening to this piece of music sustained my hope that this grief that had come would pass, like the words and music come and pass and come together in an experience of beauty. I wanted to believe with Thomas that by Christ’s wounds we continue to be healed.

On Christmas Eve, in a setting where so much wartime sorrow had been met with these readings, prayers, and music, I was struck by the sadness and joy of Christ’s birth. The Lamb of God had come to pass in order to sustain the wounds that would heal us from the tyranny of the time-eater. The Lamb of God came to pass so that his little lambs might likewise come and pass and rest in his peace.

David K. Weber is lecturer in theology at Valparaiso University. This essay is adapted from a sermon he gave at the university’s Chapel of the Resurrection on April 8, 2018.
“Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” a song first recorded by Judy Garland, was introduced in the 1944 movie musical Meet Me in St. Louis. Garland’s character, Esther, sings it to comfort her upset little sister Tootie, played by Margaret O’Brien.

The song was poignantly recontextualized when Judy Garland performed it live for World War II servicemen at the Hollywood Canteen, a club that offered food and entertainment to soldiers, many of whom were preparing for deployment.

The first two stanzas sing an encouragement to remain optimistic despite the present trouble, and the bridge invokes a hoped-for reunion. It’s the last stanza (heavily edited in later versions to make it more upbeat) which tells the truth:

Someday soon, we all will be together, if the fates allow
Until then, we’ll have to muddle through somehow
So have yourself a merry little Christmas now

“Muddle through…” That really captures it for many of us this season. A melancholy song resonates because this time of year often provides palpable reminders of the fact that, in spite of our efforts to keep up, many things are not as we believe they ought to be.

The last weeks of the semester present challenges aplenty, keeping students and faculty up late (or early) in order to accomplish all of those things that are necessary for success. Hopes for holiday family reunions remain partly (or fully) unfulfilled in the constraints imposed by distance or death. If we can make time to be together, it may come at the cost of stressful preparation. Sometimes it seems that for every emotionally satisfying sight of Christmas delight in the eyes of little children, there are as many angry words exchanged between folks who love one another but don’t really understand one another anymore.

The first Christmas was filled with just as much trouble. In a sermon given for Christmas, Luther imagines:

Joseph had to do his best, and it may well be that he asked some maid to fetch water or something else, but we do not read that anyone came to help. They heard that a young wife was lying in a cow stall and no one gave heed. Shame on you, wretched Bethlehem!

Clearly, Joseph and Mary are muddling through.

Then Pastor Luther goes on to anticipate that his hearers believe they would have done better by the season:

There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: “If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby! I would have washed his linen.... You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem....Why don’t you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor...what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself.

Appearances to the contrary, the point is not to shame his audience into greater acts of service. The insight is this: that Christ comes into a world that is full of frustration and failure. His very birth
is such an occasion and his whole life and ministry will be a full and continuous engagement in the predicament of a creation where the best humanity can offer is to somehow muddle through.

Luther concludes with an appeal to pay attention to the smallness and ordinary nature of the birth of Jesus:

Let us, then, meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies. I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, the majesty of Christ, but rather his flesh.

It’s not in our successful efforts to achieve the perfect paper or ideal course review that we find our hope. It’s not in a family gathering where all things go impossibly well nor in the strength of our resolve to not miss beloved ones who are no longer with us. It’s in Christ’s embodied commitment to the muddled predicament of human existence that we find the source of joy for this season.

Have yourself a merry little Christmas.

James A. Wetzstein is university pastor at Valparaiso University. This column originally appeared on www.valpo.edu/chapel as a weekly devotion for the Chapel of the Resurrection.

Work Cited


**On The Poets**

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