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Three Mirrors

In this issue of The Cresset, we present three lectures delivered at the Seventeenth Annual National Conference of the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts held at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, October 19–20, 2007. The conference theme was, “Three Mirrors: Reflections on Faithful Living, The Legacy of Robert Shaw, Flannery O’Connor, and Martin Luther King Jr.” As the theme suggests, the lives of these three distinguished Americans are worth examining for reasons other than simple historical curiosity. These lives can serve as mirrors for our own; we can see in them what we hope to find in our own lives. As we read about how these three lived and did their work, we can consider how we might live out our lives and do our own work.

O’Connor, King, and Shaw were three immensely talented human beings, but the legacies they left are built on more than their talents alone. Their legacies are testaments to the integrity and the truthfulness with which they used their talents. Flannery O’Connor was a gifted writer, but she knew that for her writing to be truthful, she had to write about the world she knew honestly and not use creative talent as a means of escape from the limitations of her particular time and place. Martin Luther King Jr. knew that to achieve his dream, he had to speak the truth, even when it was a truth that even his friends were not ready to hear. And Robert Shaw knew that his work was to teach America to sing, and not just some of America, but all of it, even the poor and the colored and everyone else who had been left out of the arts community.

It would be too easy to dwell on the fact that these were not perfect human beings. We probably could scratch the surface and find any number of typically human personal failings. Sadly, we have grown accustomed to thinking about our public figures this way. The recent revelations that led to the resignation of the governor of New York are only the latest in the never ending cycle in which the media build someone up as a hero, only to tear him back down when it suits them. These constant revelations undermine our politics and culture by fostering contempt for anyone in public life. There are many good and decent people in public life doing good work: politicians, artists, even athletes and performers. But the media are prone to passing quickly over things good and decent. They would rather tell us about weaknesses and failings. It grabs more attention to force a governor out of office because of sexual indulgence, to expose an accomplished athlete as a cheater, to question the patriotism of dedicated community leaders.

And the media are, of course, giving us what we want. Generally, American democratic culture has never had much tolerance for heroes—for those who set themselves apart, as better, smarter, holier-than-thou. So the competition to sell newspapers, to grab ratings, and to draw eyeballs to web pages has spawned an industry ready to feed our petty democratic resentments. Coming soon to a television near you: the Schadenfreude Channel. Sex and Scandal, 24–7.

We hope that this issue cuts against that current. O’Conner, King, and Shaw are known to us today not because they have been singled out by the media as celebrities, made famous for nothing other than being famous. We know of them because they were talented people who lived faithful lives, lives that left legacies from which we all benefit. Our authors offer you these reflections on faithful living, on the decisions these three made to live a certain way, and of the good that came from their right choices. We hope that somewhere in these three mirrors, you will find an image of your own life.

—JPO
The annual Lilly Fellows Program Book Award honors an original and imaginative work from any academic discipline that best exemplifies the central ideas and principles animating the Lilly Fellows Program. These include faith and learning in the Christian intellectual tradition, the vocation of teaching and scholarship, and the history, theory or practice of the university as the site of religious inquiry and culture.

WINNER OF THE 2007 LILLY FELLOWS PROGRAM BOOK AWARD

Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University
By Thomas Albert Howard, Associate Professor of History, Gordon College
Director, Jerusalem & Athens Forum
Oxford University Press, 2006
ISBN: 0199266859
Hardcover: $135.00

In this fascinating work, Thomas Albert Howard examines the emergence of the German University as the "global standard" in the nineteenth century within the context of German political, theological, and philosophical history. Howard discerns that science, theology, and the ideals of the modern university developed in tandem, each being indelibly shaped by the other. Howard therefore not only uncovers this largely untold story of the way German universities and modern theology, as well as science and philosophy, developed, but he repositions critical developments in the relationship of religion to higher education to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany. This work is essential reading for anyone interested the contemporary conversation about Christianity and higher education.

FINALISTS

Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach: Living Out One's Calling in the Twenty-First Century Academy
Edited by John M. Dunaway, Professor of French & Interdisciplinary Studies and Director, Mercer Commons
Mercer University Press, 2005
ISBN: 0865549656
Softcover: $25.00

The Decline of the Secular University: Why the Academy Needs Religion
By C. John Sommerville, Professor of English History, Emeritus, University of Florida
Oxford University Press, 2006
ISBN: 0195306953
Softcover: $22.00

Spirit of Service: Exploring Faith, Service, and Social Justice in Higher Education
Edited by Brian T. Johnson, Chaplain, Gustavus Adolphus College, and Carolyn R. O'Grady, Associate Professor of Education, Gustavus Adolphus College
Anker Press, 2006
ISBN: 1933371013
Softcover: $30.00
Vocation through Limitation
Flannery O’Connor’s Life of Faith

“To call yourself a Georgia writer is certainly to declare a limitation, but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality.”

Flannery O’Connor

Even those with only a passing familiarity with Flannery O’Connor know that for her to say that she is a Catholic writer from Georgia is to say more than just biographical facts. It speaks to her core. She was born in Savannah, educated in Milledgeville, and as a young woman she was on her way up. She became a highly trained writer, attending Iowa’s Master of Fine Arts program, which was a leading program for young fiction writers in the 1940s and 1950s. She spent some time at the writer’s colony in Yaddo and was living with Sally and Robert Fitzgerald in Connecticut when she was diagnosed with lupus in 1950. This diagnosis led her to return to the South to live with her mother on Andalusia, her dairy farm in Milledgeville. But do not be misled into thinking that her illness is what forced her to call herself a “local” writer. Whether she became ill or not, she would have firmly believed that to be a writer, you had to write from somewhere, not from nowhere.

The fact that the “somewhere” for her was Georgia made O’Connor the writer we know today. She was convinced that a writer should only write what he or she knows about, and what she knew about was backwoods fundamentalist prophets, people whose faith ran so deep in them that it was in their blood. What she knew was life on a southern dairy farm and the particular types of pride that can come when people born there go north to get an education and come back, full of judgment and contempt for “the folk.” In some ways she got this kind of outsider education, too, but rather than contempt for what she saw around her, she had a sense of humor and irony about the disjunction. This sense of humor is laced throughout everything she has written, from the stories themselves to her occasional prose, and especially her letters. I always think of O’Connor as having a gently ironic relationship with her mother, Regina, who, like most of the people she lived in and among, had really very little idea what the literary life was like. I love the exchange between herself and her mother that she told the Fitzgerallds about in a 1953 letter:

My mamma and I have interesting literary discussions like the following which took place over some Modern Library books that I had just ordered:

SHE: “Moby Dick. I’ve always heard about that.”

ME: “Mow-by Dick.”

SHE: “MOW-by Dick. The Idiot. You would get something called The Idiot. What’s it about?”

ME: “An idiot.” (908)

This is just one example of many in which O’Connor lightly and lovingly pokes fun at her mother’s literary ignorance, reminding all of us of how strange of a bird she indeed was in the view of most rural Georgians she lived among. The gently ironic tone in this exchange can only come from someone who is both proud and humble. She was proud of being a Georgia writer, but she was also humble about it, a fact that came through her humor more often than readers seem to recognize. She wrote stories that show disdain for pretentious intellectuals like Asbury Fox in “The Enduring Chill” who think that they are above their hometown, their mothers, and even their own bodies. But she also expressed this mixture of pride and humility directly and indirectly in her occasional prose. Take this little throwaway remark, also from the essay I quoted above. O’Connor writes that:
I remember the last time I spoke to the Georgia Writers Association, the jist of my talk was that being a Georgia Author is rather a specious dignity, on the same order as, for the pig, being a Talmadge ham. I still think that that approach has merit, particularly where there is any danger of the Georgia part of the equation over-balancing the writer part. The moral of my talk on that occasion is that a pig is a pig, no matter who puts him up. (843)

As we laugh, we should not let that laughter lead us away from noticing that here O'Connor indicates what she always has believed about the writer: that she is primarily born, not made; that she has been given a gift and a responsibility to use that gift. That gift O'Connor most often called her "vocation."

The idea of a vocation, particularly a Christian vocation, is completely lost on most Americans. If there is one thing that can be said about American culture, it is that we think of ourselves as the architects of our own futures. In school we are taught to listen to and follow our desires and to develop our talents and then to find the best career to match up with them. But the Christian idea of vocation starts from nearly an opposite place. Its first and most important aspect is listening to God, who is primarily saying "follow me." The freedom we have to live out a specific calling follows after that and must be in step with it. Vocation is being called to do what you have been uniquely gifted to do—and then being gifted to do that to which you have been uniquely called. This is why O'Connor's quip about the pig is so revealing: pigs are born, not made. They are gifted with their "pigness," if you will, and if they try to be something else, well, you can imagine the slop that would ensue! In the letters that Emory University just made public between Betty Hester and O'Connor, Hester apparently compared O'Connor to a mystic, a comparison that O'Connor quickly rejected, telling Hester that "All I have is a talent and nothing else to do but cultivate it." She was a writer, which is a considerable talent, but that is all that it is. And she also had the time to cultivate it.

Flannery O'Connor. (Library of Congress)

Apparently Flannery O'Connor always knew that she was meant to be a writer. According to Sally Fitzgerald, a long time friend of O'Connor's, O'Connor had a journal she kept when she was twelve years old in which she spoke specifically about her calling to be a writer, a calling she saw as no less spiritual than any other calling. This should come as no surprise to those of us familiar with O'Connor through her letters and occasional prose. Read them and you will find a woman who knew that her calling was to be a writer from Georgia, and to be a Catholic writer from Georgia in particular. To be a Catholic writer was as much a part of that calling as to be a Georgia writer, and it meant seeing with the eyes of the church as well as seeing with the Georgia eyes that she was born with. The tension that sometimes comes from the desire to see clearly with both sets of eyes is what gives so much life to O'Connor's work.

The Limitations

But what does it mean to declare oneself a Georgia Catholic writer—to own it, vocationally? O'Connor knew that it meant primarily that you had
limitations, limitations adumbrated by each of the three descriptors given here “Georgia,” “Catholic,” and “writer.” I'll start with the noun first. To declare oneself a “writer” is to accept certain rules of the discipline, certain truths about it. O'Connor strongly believed in the idea of art as *techne*, that which is made by a skilled craftsman, not in art as some kind of mystical product born out of the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” or out of “automatic writing.” O'Connor strongly believed that no writer, no matter her locale, had the privilege of re-making the world according to her desires or according to some mythical powers of the imagination. The imagination, she was fond of saying, is not free, but bound. To be a writer is to be humble before the concrete world. She wrote that, “what the fiction writer will discover, if he discovers anything at all is that he himself cannot move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth. The writer learns, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium; and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them” (808).

The first thing to notice about this statement is that it is something that all artists know. Take Jazz, for instance. Jazz is an extremely creative art form, one that celebrates improvisational techniques in a maximal way. But those who practice jazz quickly will tell you that improvisation has no meaning outside of the discipline of the music—its rules, if you will. The best jazz artists transcend limitations only by staying within them.

O'Connor was also keenly aware that to declare yourself a Georgia writer was to run into the “southern” aspect of those limitations. She expressed the nature of these limitations when she was explaining why southern writers are known for their employment of the grotesque. And here I cannot resist repeating one of my favorite O'Connor quips. She noted that “I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (815). The grotesque appealed to her, because while she was not worried about the modern obsession with originality, she was aware that the writer’s vocation is to present her vision in a new way to her readers, to jar them into seeing something that they have never seen or have been violently ignoring.

But if you employ the grotesque as a Georgia writer, you are necessarily writing in a deep tradition of southern letters that you had better be aware of. She explained that “when there are many writers all employing the same idiom, all looking out on more or less the same social scene, the individual writer will have to be more than ever careful that he isn’t just doing badly what has already been done to completion” (818). In other words, the fiction that is already out there is itself a kind of limitation. What’s more, for the southern writer, O’Connor continues, “the presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down” (818). I doubt that O'Connor really thought of herself as inferior to Faulkner as this quotation suggests, but in calling her own work a mule-drawn wagon compared to the great steam engine of Faulkner's work, we can see again that mixture of proper pride and proper humility that characterizes the Georgia writer who knows that she is doing what she is called to do.

The final limiting adjective is the least understood and perhaps the most important to O'Connor, that of being a “Catholic” writer. O'Connor always began by defining what it meant to be a Catholic writer by insisting on what it was not—it was not being pious and sentimental, or using fiction to
teach dogma or to provide “instant uplift.” She most often said that being a Christian, but particularly being a Catholic Christian, means that you have a whole other set of eyes to contend with. All writers must be humble in the face of “what-is,” but the Catholic writer must also be humble in the face of the ultimate “what-is” which is called “revelation.” And the ultimate revelation is in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which she said was the fulcrum of all of her stories.

Many critics think of these two callings as at war with one another in some internecine way, as if either dogma must obliterate art or art must obliterate dogma. But O’Connor did not see it this way at all, because for her, to be a Catholic is just to have another freeing limitation to write from inside of. It was as if her Catholic faith meant that she did not have to manufacture the beauty and the significance of the lives of the people she wrote about because the doctrines of the church already did that. To reveal that beauty and significance she just had to be true to it. Though she believed her two sets of eyes to be in tension sometimes, she felt that that fact only enlivened the writing by the power of paradox.

It seems to me that in the end, most critics cannot understand how O’Connor viewed her calling to a life of faith and her calling to a life of writing as inseparable vocations. She believed that, because she was gifted by God with talent and called to use it, that to be true to her vocation as a writer meant to be true to her vocation as a Catholic. Obedience must be worked out through both. Consider this interesting formulation. O’Connor wrote that, “The Catholic fiction writer, as fiction writer, will look for the will of God first in the laws and limitations of his art and will hope that if he obeys these, other blessings will be added to his work” (812). Some Christians might consider this formulation to be blasphemous because O’Connor clearly evokes the passage “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you.” But for O’Connor, there is only obedience: the writer, being a writer, must first seek the kingdom of God as a writer, and that means particular “writerly” rules that a person can change no more than he can change the color of the sky. And it turns out that obedience to God and to the rules of writing good fiction have one thing it common: they mean limitations, but limitations that also come with considerable blessing.

Although O’Connor considered herself to be both born and called into them, one could say that the limitations outlined by the words “Georgia,” “Catholic,” and “writer” are entirely self-imposed. But no one will argue that one of her greatest limitations—her struggle with lupus—was self-imposed. The fact that O’Connor was ill almost all of her adult writing life is easy to forget, so little did she complain about her suffering or how it limited her. She did not try to hide it, but you do have to work to discover how much pain she was in. Her bones were literally disintegrating. She eventually had to use crutches, which she called her “flying buttresses.” Since she said so little about it, we can only guess at how frustrating it must have been for a writer with so much promise to be limited to working only a few hours a day. The fact that she bore up under the pain so well speaks volumes to her view of what she called, after Teilhard de Chardin, her “passive diminishments.”

In his book The Life You Save May be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage, Paul Elie provides a good picture of how O’Connor worked through pain, especially at the end of her life. As she neared her thirty-ninth birthday, she had to undergo surgery in Atlanta to remove a fibroid tumor, and the surgery reactivated her lupus, as was feared. When she returned to Milledgeville, she wrote her final story, “Parker’s Back” in the hospital. Elie explains that:

After beginning the story in 1960 she had set it aside, then come back to it and kept at it, a few pages at a time, until she had a rough draft which told the story from beginning to end. Now, as she went in and out of the hospital, she worked on the story any way she was able: writing longhand in a notebook; revising pages in a shaky hand; and, when she was discharged from the hospital, typing at her desk in Andalusia. “I have worked one hour each day and my my I do like to work,” she told Maryat Lee in May. “I et up that one hour like it was filet mignon.” (359)

This little quip O’Connor made to Maryat Lee says a great deal about her. She enjoyed her work, made what she could out of the time given to her, and kept her sense of humor through it all. Elie also points out
that Caroline Gordon had visited her at the hospital and recalled that, “She told me that the doctor had forbidden her to do any work. He said that it was all right to write a little fiction, though, she added with a grin and drew a notebook out from under her pillow” (361).

Thinking of O’Connor writing such a brilliant story an hour at a time while confined to her bed reminds me of the biblical Joseph. Joseph was a natural born leader, full of promise. You could say that he was born a leader as much as O’Connor was born a writer, a fact made plain by how quickly he rose to influence even after he had been sold into slavery by his brothers. But Joseph was unjustly thrown into prison in the prime of his life, and he stayed there for two years. Certainly he saw this as a limitation, and in human terms, it was. But there is no biblical evidence that Joseph ever saw this fact as outside of God’s will. He simply worked within his limitations, and was clearly used by God both in prison and after he was released.

O’Connor’s view of her own illness matches this view. She did not believe that God was punishing her or that he willed the illness, only that he allowed it, and that he would be faithful to her through it. And that through it, she would still fulfill her vocation. That through it, she might especially fulfill her vocation.

**The Gateway to Reality**

How is it that limitations are a gateway to reality? In what way can a writer who recognizes and embraces her limitations better fulfill her vocation than can a writer who refuses to? John Paul II was adamant that the primary vocation of the Christian—and indeed, of all persons—was to follow Christ. He even insisted that “without heeding the call of Jesus, it’s not possible to realize the fulness of your own humanity” (21). This phrase says a good deal more than it may seem to at first glance. It means that although we are all born human, to become fully human, we must heed the call of Jesus. Certainly this is a call to obedience, but it is more than that. For as one continues to study the thought of John Paul, one recognizes that he also thought of this process of “becoming fully human” as working in the other direction, too. That is, that as one becomes fully human, one realizes the calling of Jesus in our lives. Becoming human in this way means to recognize two things primarily. First, that we are the created, and not the Creator; and second, that our lives are a mysterious gift, not something that we fashion to our own ends. As I mentioned earlier, these two ideas could not be further from the minds of most people today, even most Christians.

To give just one mundane example, as a part of my work at Wheaton College I observe some of our student teachers as they prepare to become high school English teachers, so I am often in the local high schools. The banner I saw this semester in one of these classrooms is so typical that I almost did not notice it. The banner read, in bright letters, all capitals: **“YOU ARE THE AUTHOR OF YOUR OWN LIFE’S STORY.”** Even though it is all beyond clichéd, we Americans really do think—and we teach our children to think—that to be the best version of ourselves we must realize our dreams, that the higher we aim the better we can become, that it is “all up to us,” that “attitude determines altitude,” and that the “sky’s the limit.” We aim to transcend instead of to inhabit our limitations. We strive to float alone in the ether of the divine life, not to live together in the rocky soil of the human one. Ralph Waldo Emerson may have been America’s most seductive false prophet, entreating us to shout out loud: “I must be myself... I will so trust that what is deep is holy, that I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inly rejoices me and the heart appoints” (193).

While Emerson tells us that trusting in our own intuition is the best way to find the divine life, Pope John Paul II insists that this approach is the best way to miss it. When he describes how a Christian calling works, there is very little of the self-reliant soul to be found:

> We can learn how the Lord acts in every vocation (cf. Exodus 3: 1–6; 9–12). First, he provokes a new awareness of his presence—the burning bush. When we begin to show an interest he calls us by name. When our answer becomes more specific and like Moses we say: “Here I am” (cf. v. 4), then he reveals more clearly both himself and his compassionate love for his people in need. Gradually he leads us to discover the practical way in which we should serve him: “I will send you.” And usually it is then that
fears and doubts come to disturb us and make it more difficult to decide. It is then that we need to hear the Lord’s assurance: “I am with you. Be not afraid!” (16)

The reason why I have quoted this at length is because these are all steps that the character O. E. Parker takes—albeit in a roundabout and less obvious way—in O’Connor’s story “Parker’s Back.” While the story “Good Country People” is my favorite story, “Parker’s Back” is, in my opinion, O’Connor’s most brilliant one. Just as the South is Christ-haunted, so is my mind Parker-haunted, because the story keeps unfolding for me, and I cannot escape it. I cannot escape it because it is one of the most perfect parables and apologies for both the vocation of the artist and the vocation of every human being that I ever have read. And the fact that O’Connor was working on it as she was succumbing to kidney failure makes that much more of a remarkable testimony.

For those of you who have not yet had the opportunity to enjoy this story, I offer the following summary. Parker is a drifter who finds himself inexplicably married to a fundamentalist Christian named Sarah Ruth, who is pregnant. Before they were married, Parker had spent his whole adult life acquiring tattoos. He was trying to achieve on his own body the effect he had once seen on a man at a fair, whose body was covered with tattoos that seemed to him to coalesce into a glorious “arabesque” of color. Although he does not know why he does it, Parker always tries to please Sarah Ruth, so he decides to get a tattoo of the face of Jesus (how could she resist God, he thinks?) on the one place of his body that he had left blank: his back.

It is at this point that Parker becomes an unwitting example of what John Paul II said about how God acts in vocation. Right after he decides he would get a religious tattoo to appeal to Sarah Ruth, he is baling hay and has a “burning bush” experience. He feels that a huge tree is reaching out for him, which causes him to fall off his tractor and proclaim “GOD ABOVE.” He lands on his back, and the tractor crashes into the tree, and the tree bursts into the flame, burning his shoes in the process. He goes to the tattoo artist, and as he is flipping through the book of pictures of Jesus from back to front, he sees some sentimental images he has seen before: “The Good Shepherd, Forbid Them Not, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus the Physician’s Friend.” But his “wise blood” makes him keep going until he finds the face of the Byzantine Christ, with stern all-demanding eyes, and he hears a voice telling him to go back to that image, which he eventually chooses. With the tattoo on his back, he becomes an unwitting Jonah at the local bar, and he returns to Sarah Ruth, thinking that she finally will accept him. Of course, she doesn’t, because in her view the icon is idolatrous. But just as he stands outside the door, pleading for her to look at it, Parker sees a lance of light coming from outside of him as he speaks his full name aloud, giving his own body the intricate arabesque of colors he had seen on the man at the fair. The story ends with Parker crying under a tree, rejected by Sarah Ruth but also more whole than he ever has been. The story has all the elements of a man and his vocation: a burning bush, the Lord calling him by name, his being sent to give testimony to others, and trials that cause doubts. And at the end, what we have is a man called to be—quite literally—the face of Christ to others, in spite of the cost.

“The Parker’s Back” has all the elements of a man and his vocation: a burning bush, the Lord calling him by name, his being sent to give testimony to others, and trials that cause doubts. And at the end, what we have is a man called to be—quite literally—the face of Christ to others, in spite of the cost.
living canvas. O'Connor also considered the grotesque to be her vocation. It is her calling, as she would put it, to show "the face of good under construction" (830). Pointing at the beauty of humanity through fiction is necessarily grotesque because it shows how humanity, despite all its ugliness, all its commonness, is the place where God chooses to incarnate himself: we are, now, his hands and his feet, his body, his face. Second, in this story, the tattoo artist is really in the background. His glory is not in originality, it is in his skill in rendering the truth that even Parker, as "ordinary as a loaf of bread," is called to be the face of Christ in this world. The artist's vocation is to humbly figure forth the reality of our vocation, which is found precisely in our humanness, inscribed into our flesh, where we can either choose to participate in ways that animate Christ or turn our backs on that truth that will be seen in spite of our actions.

It is the fact that we reveal Jesus in spite of ourselves that interested O'Connor most, I think, throughout her career. So it is the final stroke of genius in this story that Parker gets the tattoo of the face of Jesus on his back. As I have argued elsewhere, O'Connor makes this move to emphasize the role that the eyes of others have to play of the face of Jesus on his feet, his body, his face. Second, in this story, the tattoo artist is really in the background. His glory is not in originality, it is in his skill in rendering the truth that even Parker, as "ordinary as a loaf of bread," is called to be the face of Christ in this world. The artist's vocation is to humbly figure forth the reality of our vocation, which is found precisely in our humanness, inscribed into our flesh, where we can either choose to participate in ways that animate Christ or turn our backs on that truth that will be seen in spite of our actions.

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Both the life and the work of Flannery O'Connor suggest to us that our limitations are a gateway to reality because our limitations keep us, or should keep us, from thinking that true living is found primarily in our strengths. True living is found in our weaknesses, because it is through those weaknesses and limitations that we best see our lives as the grace gifts they are and not as the creation of our own handiwork. Paul famously declared, after he pleaded with God to remove the thorn in his flesh—his limitations, whatever they were—that the Lord told him that "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12). While American Christians might be tempted to interpret that sentence as Paul saying that "God will pick up the slack in my areas of weakness," I think O'Connor knew better. O'Connor knew, as the theologian Marva Dawn would later put it, that God tabernacled in her weaknesses. Marva Dawn, who has struggled with physical limitations her whole life, has written extensively on this passage in 2 Corinthians and other passages that illustrate how God chooses again and again to display his power through human weakness, not in spite of it. She concludes that "even as Christ accomplished atonement for us by suffering and death, so the Lord accomplishes witness to the world through our weakness. In fact, God has more need of our weakness than of our strength... as the Psalms and Isaiah teach us, God's way is not to take us out of tribulations but to comfort us in the midst of them and to 'exchange' our strength in the face of them. By our union with Christ in the power of the Spirit in our weaknesses, we display God's glory" (47). I'm convinced that O'Connor knew that God tabernacled in her weaknesses just as he does in the ordinary, if a bit odd—and certainly all flawed—characters that populate her stories.
We can thank O'Connor for teaching us how it is that faithfulness means having both gratitude and humility. It means seeing our lives as a grace gift and our talents as pure bonus. It means recognizing that we are personally loved by God and given purpose by God, but it also means recognizing how small and insignificant we are in the grand scheme of things. The Christian faith is the only tradition that holds these two realities—of our human value and our human insignificance—in proper tension.

With this idea we can begin to see what is so important for our day in Flannery O'Connor's example of faithfulness. To give just one example, my current research leads me to study people who call themselves transhumanists. Transhumanists are kind of a kooky lot who specifically and aggressively turn to technology to try to overcome all limitations, with the expressed ultimate goal being to conquer all suffering and death. They even advocate cryonics—the practice of freezing someone who is declared legally dead in the ultimate hope of future resuscitation when technology permits. It seems that these ideas are finding resonance with more and more people, as the membership in the World Transhumanist Association has increased from two thousand to nearly five thousand in a mere seven years (Egan: 46). Though their beliefs seem to be an example of "be all that you can be" thinking gone haywire, their desires are actually quite typical of many Americans. Even though my father was in the US Air Force and I had no interest in the military life for myself, I remember being quite affected by the Army commercial I saw when I was growing up, the one in which a solider, with a cup of steaming coffee in hand, declared that "we do more before 9 AM than most people do all day"—as if doing more was being more. It took me a long time to get over that kind of thinking, and I still struggle with it. The ironic thing about transhumanism is also the ironic thing about our culture: if we have not learned how to find the true value in our lives as they are, what makes us think that extending them or overcoming all limitations is going to provide us with that meaning? There can be no doubt that our culture has replaced the search for the good life with the busyness and demands of a hyperproductive culture and the unrelenting consumer economy that drives it.

In this environment, knowing, as O'Connor did, that our limitations are a gateway to reality provides the real freedom that people, especially young people, are really looking for. If you know that faithfulness for you means to be the very best bricklayer you can be, then each day that is full of quality brick laying is full indeed. You are free not to worry that you have not written the great American novel, and you can receive the day in peace. O'Connor was too ill to write more than a few hours a day, and she died at a younger age than most of us will, yet her daily faithfulness left us with an incredible body of work. Quite simply, she did what she was able to do, and what she was gifted to do, and she did it well. What is even more to the point, in the midst of all her limitations—and I think, because of them—she did not consider herself to be above taking the time to write letters and to minister to people who asked for her help. Her limitations were, indeed, a gateway to a deep and abiding reality. May ours be the same for us.

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Works Cited


WONDER

*Amazing love! How can it be?* Charles Wesley

How did you do it?
Your disappearance
from glory, your break
into humanity?

Did you let the father
scoop splendor out of you
till you were hollowed out
like heaven when you left?
How did the scraping go?
And how much did it hurt?

Or did the spirit put you
under, tell you when you’d awake
you’d be good as new,
like the silk-spun skin
on a baby born that day?
No pain because you wouldn’t know,
not yet, what you’d let go?

How did eternity
squeeze itself into the folds
of fat in your thighs,
how did all that light
funnel itself into your bones,
how did your breath, this time,
fill your own lungs?

And how
did your open hands
furl into your tiny fists,
fists you’d never shake at the skies?

Julie L. Moore
A

mericans love lists. To a talk radio host, nothing can generate more arguments than a list. So in 2005 the Discovery Channel invited its viewers to participate in an online poll to name “The Greatest American.” Flannery O’Connor and Robert Shaw didn’t make the list. But Tom Cruise, Ellen Degeneres, Hugh Hefner, and ninety-seven others did. Placing in the top five was Martin Luther King Jr. Benjamin Franklin ranked fifth. Finishing fourth was George Washington. King was number three. Abraham Lincoln came in number two. And the title of Greatest American of all time went to Ronald Reagan.

Americans do love their lists, and this one is bound to spark some lively conversations. Heaven knows it is easy to quibble about who should be where on the list. Perhaps some of those on the list are questionable calls. Perhaps they should be replaced by others more deserving. Perhaps the list suffers from a presentism that puts some on the list merely because they recently had been in the news. (Lance Armstrong at number twenty springs immediately to mind.) Perhaps the applicant pool is simply too shallow and the pickings get very slim down around ninety, ninety-one, etc. Perhaps the list generates some healthy philosophizing about what exactly makes a Great American. At the very least, if this is their best historical judgment, clearly our fellow Americans can still use a few good history teachers. Perhaps academic historians like me should just lighten up and be glad the list sparked some conversations about American history or about what it takes to be a Great American, and that Paris Hilton or Britney Spears didn’t make the list.

And what about the surprising ranking of Martin Luther King, Jr? Any Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep in April 1968 would be shocked. Anyone who can remember the stories—some apocryphal, some not—of the celebrations that greeted King’s assassination in much of white America might be surprised to find him on this list at all, much less at number three. In my home town of Birmingham, Alabama, I could hardly avoid hearing some sickening celebrations. I’m sure my Little League baseball coach, who couldn’t quite fathom all the fuss over “just another dead nigger,” would be surprised to learn that King made the short list. Taking into account public opinion at the time of his death, its inclusion of King in some ways takes us by surprise.

In other ways, however, it’s not surprising at all. Given what some would bemoan as “political correctness,” no such list could dare leave King off. And given the Hollywood way we depict our civil rights history, King has to be not only in the cast, but the lead actor in a script that goes like this: Martin Luther King was a nobody until he was plucked from obscurity by people who decided he’d be the best leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, then he exploded on the scene and became a prophet to the nation, and America is such a good and moral country that we listened to him and fixed what was wrong, and we all lived happily ever after. If that’s the story line, he has to be on the list.

But let’s ask a different question: Would King have made the list if Americans had the slightest inkling of King’s radically prophetic theology? That is very doubtful given the right turn in our nation since the 1980 “Reagan Revolution.” Since then, American policy has largely been the robust Republican faith in military solutions abroad and in unfettered free market capitalism at home—two items of faith King vigorously opposed. Ironically, in an era during which the word “liberal” became a four-letter word, King was elevated to the status of civil religious saint by the national holiday commemorating his birthday. This annual public ritual uses important symbols to unify Americans under the myth that America eventually repented of its
racism, followed King’s Dream, “lived out the true meaning of its creed,” and finally became a nation where all men (and women) really are created equal.

Would that things were so equal; would that the nation were so unified. But anyone who has lived through the “culture wars” should know that the bar racial equality must clear is set at different heights, depending on whether one mentally lives in a red or blue state. Liberals set the bar rather high, looking beyond the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act for housing and economic equality. For this reason, among others, African Americans are twenty-five percent as likely as whites to tell pollsters that they believe the economic playing field is now level (Manis 403). Noting that these 1960s laws ended segregation and protected black voting rights, conservatives believe America has cleared the bar and, in the words of one of its spokes­persons, reached “the end of racism” (See D’Souza). Thus, conservatives, most of whom opposed and many of whom vilified King during his lifetime, recently have scurried over to the right side of history, and now celebrate his birth­day and claim that his Dream was theirs all along.

But only by a very selective reading of King’s writings and protest activities could conservative politicians commemorate (dese­crate?) his birthday by inveighing against affirmative action, as President Bush did in 2003 for example, while intoning out of context King’s famous line about all Americans being “judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Thus, conservatives have domesticated King by appro­priating the safer elements of his message—the “dream” of racial inclusion with which everyone but neo-Nazis or neo-Klansmen now agrees—while ignoring his radically prophetic message to America. A thorough reading of King suggests that rather than being voted the third greatest American, he deserves a higher title. In particular, King’s writings reveal him to be number one: The Greatest American Prophet. As I unpack this assertion, I will also attempt to clear away certain other common misconceptions about King.

King’s Role: African-American Prophet

How many times have you seen journalists refer to “slain civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr?” Doubtless this will always be understood as his most important role, but in his latter years he rejected the designation “civil rights leader” as too lim­iting. Especially was this the case after he “deseg­regated” his moral concern to include criticism of the Vietnam War. He often asserted that his primary role was that of a Christian preacher. “I am first and foremost a minister,” he told Redbook in 1961, adding, “I love the church, and feel that civil rights is a part of it. For me, at least, the basis of my struggle for integration... is something that began with a religious motivation” (Quoted in Cone 120).

His theological and educational pilgrimage took him through Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and the Boston University School of Theology, from which he plucked different emphases from which he eventually com­posed his prophetic Christianity. His essay, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” originally a part of his book Stride Toward Freedom, noted the young preacher’s progression from his family’s “strict fundamentalistic tradition” to the rational theological method of Protestant Liberalism to Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Christian realism” to the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch. As a fulltime pastor in
Montgomery, Alabama, King later noted that he had grown more interested in social ethics, which he viewed as a “return to concerns” he had developed growing up in Atlanta. He appropriated from Rauschenbusch an intellectualized expression of the black Baptist social consciousness he had known experientially as he came to maturity in a racially segregated South.

With his most important theological roots firmly sunk in the black church, King “grew up abhorring segregation, considering it both rationally inexplicable and moral unjustifiable…” Reading Rauschenbusch through African-colored lenses, he naturally asserted:

"Religion deals with both earth and heaven, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only of the vertical plane but also on the horizontal.... [T]he Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion. Such a religion is the kind that Marxists like to see—an opiate of the people." (King 1958, 36)

King was, however, more black than Baptist. His racial background clearly had more influence on his theology and ethics than his denominational tradition. “When speaking of King as a black Baptist,” argued James Cone, “it is important to note that the word ‘black’ was more important in defining his faith than the word ‘Baptist.’” His views of church-state separation, as evidenced in his acceptance of the 1962 Engel v. Vitale ruling against prayer in public schools, seems to reflect a historic Baptist emphasis. So did his use of young people as demonstrators in the 1963 Birmingham protests, where he accepted the reasoning of his associate James Bevel that children old enough to be baptized into church membership were old enough to act on behalf of freedom. Apart from these, however, finding legacies directly traceable to his Baptist roots is difficult at best.

African Americans, however, cobbled together a distinctive trans-denominational version of Christianity. Or we could understand it as a gumbo from a base or roux (a spirituality from African traditional religions) and various doctrinal ingredients from Evangelicalism, cooked together over the fire of racism, slavery, and segregation in America. Together their African background and their tragic experience in America drove them to appropriate the Evangelical ingredients they discovered in the Great Awakenings in the service of a prophetic consciousness convinced that God’s Kingdom meant justice “on earth as it is in heaven” or it meant nothing at all. Again, as Cone noted, “It was a black faith that emphasized God’s will to make right what white people made wrong, so that the rule of love would be established among all races” (121–22).

Like most pastors, King began his prophetic ministry within his own congregations. He called the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to a self-critical moral responsibility. Viewing self-criticism as a “sign of maturity,” King advised his congregation, “We must not let the fact that we are the victims of injustice lull us into abrogating responsibility for our own lives” (King 1957a). Later, once pulled into the civil rights movement by the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King reminded black Americans of their prophetic, even messianic, role in America and the world. Lewis V. Baldwin viewed this black messianism as “a fundamental component” of King’s thought. In a sermon on “The American Dream,” King asserted that “the Negro is God’s instrument to save the soul of America.” African Americans challenged white America to understand the “true meaning of American democracy” and called the nation “back to the noble principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Judeo-Christian heritage.” In one of his final writings, he argued that “the whole nation has for a decade given more inquiry to the essential nature of democracy, economically and politically, as a consequence of the vigorous Negro protest” (Baldwin 230, 234; King 1961; 1967a, 4).

Indeed, for King this prophetic role was to function in relation not only to the United States but to the entire world. He told black Montgomery that
because of their protests future historians would write that "there lived a race of people, of fleecy locks and black complexion, who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights, and thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization." Almost ten years later, embarking on his trip to Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, he told reporters: "This may be the most significant fact in the world today—that God has entrusted his black children in America to teach the world to love, and to live together in brotherhood" (King 1955, 1964; quoted in Baldwin 229).

As early as his 1960 book, Stride Toward Freedom, in which he explained the Montgomery movement, King saw in the prophetic strain of African American Christianity a "new spiritual dynamic" (later he would call it "a new soul force") by which blacks would "so challenge the nations of the world that they will seriously seek an alternative to war and destruction." King believed that their roots in both "white civilization and the nonwhite nations of the world" had qualified African Americans to serve as a bridge between the two groups. Color connected them to Africa, King explained, while education and upbringing brought African Americans under European influence. Hence, he argued, "out of the universality of our experience, we can help make peace and harmony in this world more possible" (King 1958, 224; 1968a, 318).

Thus the early civil rights phase of King's career was a product of his prophetic Christianity. His most famous writing, "Letter From Birmingham Jail," told ministerial critics he had come to their city "because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century BC left their villages... so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid." From the same prophetic tradition, however, came his decision—controversial to his friends as well as to his enemies—to denounce America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

In a 1967 sermon, he answered his critics: "I cannot stand idly by and not raise my voice against something that I see as wrong. Now there are those who say, 'You are a civil rights leader. What are you doing speaking out? You should stay in your field.' Well, I wish you would go back and tell them for me that before I became a civil rights leader, I was a preacher of the Gospel." He ignored expediency to speak out against the violence of American foreign policy when strategic silence on that issue might have curried favor with Lyndon B. Johnson, the president who had largely gotten onboard King's civil rights agenda. This opposition to the war, therefore, marked the purest prophetic statement of his career (King 1963, 290; 1967b, 7).

**King's Goal: "Beloved Community"**

Another contemporary misunderstanding of King pertains to America's fixation on his "Dream," best illustrated in the astronomical number of times the word is uttered like a mantra in typical King Holiday events. Still worse, America's overuse of this concept is exceeded only by our tendency to reduce its meaning to the mere idea of racial integration. Most politicians and pulpiteers who extol "the Dream" distort it into an oversimplified short hand for harmony between blacks and whites. In so doing, America transforms Martin Luther King, Jr. into a more sophisticated Rodney King or into the incredible shrinking prophet muttering a more theological version of the plaintive question, "Can't we all just get along?"

In 1963, it was a Dream "deeply rooted in the American dream." By his latter years, however, it was clear that the Dream grew out of a deeper, more radical concept of a Beloved Community. James Cone has accurately interpreted the Dream as a metaphor strategically designed to appeal to the material resources and moral capacity of white America, in essence shaming whites to practice what their patriotic nostrums preached. Just months after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Watts Riots both soured white America's already limited support for the civil rights agenda and moved the political goals of the movement in a more leftward direction. King himself even moved cautiously toward democratic socialism, as events between 1965 and 1968 increasingly convinced him that embodying the Beloved Community would require radical changes in America's soul as well as its social structure (Cone 67 and 223).

After Watts, with its some four thousand arrests and thirty-four deaths, King committed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to taking the civil rights movement to the
urban North. After Watts, he realized that the 1964 Civil Rights and the 1965 Voting Rights Acts would accomplish nothing for African Americans mired in urban ghettos. Urban blacks had long since enjoyed these blessings in the supposedly integrated North. Yet at Watts they protested segregated housing and discrimination in employment. Watts convinced King not only to take the movement north, but that its message must now focus on economic justice. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," King preached, "but if a man doesn't have a job or an income he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness."

Thus SCLC’s momentous 1966 campaign in Chicago targeted open housing and fairness in employment but elicited a response from whites fully as vicious and violent as any King had encountered in the South. Saying it was a sad day for Chicago when people called nuns “bitches,” he told reporters, “I have never in my life seen such hate. Not in Mississippi or Alabama” (Fairclough 105-7; King 1968b, 217).

In analyzing white America’s reactions to the mid-1960s civil rights legislation and its backlash against the black agenda after Watts and Chicago, King paradoxically despaired that the white majority had not truly been converted to the idea of racial justice but remained hopeful that the Beloved Community might still be an attainable goal. Indeed, King’s Beloved Community terminology refers to the actualization of the Kingdom of God, a society in which persons live “as children of God should live... [in] a kingdom controlled by the law of love.” King understood the Beloved Community to be based in Christian eschatology. Just as biblical scholars and theologians long had characterized the kingdom of God as “already, but not yet,” so King viewed the Beloved Community as a paradoxical reality, simultaneously “post-historical” yet also “right now, as an inner power within you.” Moreover, King’s goal of actualizing the Beloved Community required more than just “getting along across racial lines”; the radicalism of this goal required the creation of a society marked by love, economic justice, anti-poverty, and peace (Cartwright 165-7; Fairclough 35 and 138).

After Watts and Chicago, King marveled at the white backlash and the naïve belief that all the nation’s race problems automatically had been
solved. "I am appalled," he told a Montgomery mass meeting in early 1968, "that some people feel the civil rights struggle is over because we have a 1964 civil rights bill... and a voting rights bill. Over and over people ask, 'What else do you want?' They feel that everything is all right. Well, let them look around at our big cities." A month later he told a Los Angeles audience that after Birmingham and Selma, white Americans had taken "a stand for decency, but it was never really a stand for genuine equality for the black man. That will cost the nation something.... It's much easier to integrate lunch counters than it is to eradicate slums. It's much easier to guarantee the right to vote than it is to guarantee an annual minimum income and create jobs" (King 1968c; 1967a, 133; 1968d).

After Selma, King argued, the civil rights movement had entered a new phase. The earlier phase, which had focused on ending segregation and protecting black voting rights, had brought whites around to treating blacks with decency but not necessarily with equality. In his final book, Where Do We Go from Here? King wrote:

White America was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation, but it had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation, or all forms of discrimination. The outraged white citizen had been sincere when he snatched the whips from the southern sheriffs and forbade them more cruelties. But when this was to a degree accomplished, the emotions that had momentarily inflamed him melted away.... When Negroes looked for the second phase, the realization of equality, they found that many of the white allies had quietly disappeared.... But the absence of brutality and unregenerate evil is not the presence of justice.... Negroes felt cheated, especially in the North, while many whites felt that the Negroes had gained so much it was virtually impudent and greedy to ask for more so soon. (1967a excerpted in Washington 557)

King also blamed riots in the north on "white moderates who are more concerned about order than justice." White society created the conditions of discrimination, slums, unemployment, and poverty that led to the riots. "It is incontestable and deplorable that Negroes have committed crimes," King acknowledged. He added, however that these were "derivative crimes. They are born of the greater crimes of the white society." Riots were the product of a white power structure "still seeking to keep the walls of segregation and inequality substantially intact" while African Americans intensified their determination to break down such walls: "The white society, unprepared and unwilling to accept radical structural change, is resisting firmly and thus producing chaos because the force for change is vital and aggressive. The irony is that the white society ruefully complains that if there were no chaos great changes would come, yet it creates the circumstances breeding the chaos" (King 1957a; 1967c, 8-9).

The challenges of nationalizing the civil rights movement and the violent reaction of the North both depressed King and radicalized his prophetic prescriptions for America. In November 1966, King convened the SCLC staff on the island of St. Helena, South Carolina for a planning retreat. In a lengthy talk, King presented a radical reflection on the future of the movement. Human survival, he asserted, depended on solving the problems of "the inseparable triplets": racial injustice, poverty, and war. Their voices, he argued, should not be intimidated into withholding criticism of the Vietnam War. Moreover, accusations of communism should not silence their critique of capitalism. "Maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism," he suggested, noting: "If you read [Karl Marx], you can see that this man had a great passion for social justice. You know Karl Marx was born a Jew, [and] had a rabbinic background." He lectured them on the Hebrew prophets' early influence on Marx, before he later moved to a belief in economic determinism and rejected individual liberty. "Now this," he added, "is where I leave brother Marx and move on toward the kingdom" (Branch 2006, 552-56).

This informal talk eventually became the outline of King's final and most radical published writing, Where Do We Go from Here? King wrote: Can America pay close attention, not only to King's Dream Speech but also to writings from his last two years, even in con-
servative times like the post-Reagan era? In these writings King called on America to go beyond even Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty to a systematic attack on the problem. Citing multiple roots of poverty, King advocated a coordinated effort to address these causes simultaneously. Housing measures, he argued, fluctuating according to legislative whim, had been “piecemeal and pygmy.” Educational reform had stalled through lack of economic commitment, while family assistance had stagnated. He further argued:

At no time has a total, coordinated and fully adequate program been conceived. As a consequence, fragmentary and spasmodic reforms have failed to reach down to the profoundest needs of the poor. In addition to the absence of coordination and sufficiency, the programs of the past all have another common failing—they are indirect. Each seeks to solve poverty by first solving something else. (1967a, 614–16)

As a coordinated solution, King called for a combination of government jobs programs aiming at full employment alongside an even more radical remedy: a guaranteed annual income.

Elaborating on this proposal, King cited the conditions for a guaranteed income. First, rather than being tied to the lowest income level, it should be pegged to the median income. Second, the income must be dynamic, automatically rising as incomes rise as a whole. Without such safeguards, King argued, “creeping retrogression would occur, nullifying the gains of security and stability.” King also accepted the price tag estimated by liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith—$20 billion a year, the equivalent of what the nation was then spending on the Vietnam War (1967a, 614–17).

King the preacher thus compared America to Dives, the name traditionally given to “the rich man” who ignored the needs of his impoverished neighbor Lazarus in Jesus’ famous parable:

Dives didn’t go to hell because he passed by Lazarus every day and he never really saw him. He went to hell because he allowed his brother to become invisible.... Indeed, Dives went to hell because he sought to be a conscientious objector in the war against poverty. And this can happen to America, the richest nation in the world.... This is America’s opportunity to help bridge the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. The question is whether America will do it. There is nothing new about poverty. What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will. (1968b, 216)

Out of this sociological and homiletical analysis, King and his staff planned what would be the last protest effort of his life, the Poor People’s Campaign, which would attack economic problems by calling for “an economic bill of rights,” guaranteeing a job to all who wished to work and an income for all who were unable to work (1968e, 65–66).

King had become convinced that justice for African Americans would require “radical changes in the structure of our society.” In a posthumously published essay called “A Testament of Hope,” he challenged white America to recognize that “when millions of people have been cheated for centuries, restitution is a costly process.” Cumulative problems of inferior education, poor housing, chronically high unemployment, and inadequate health care all had originated in racial discrimination and each would require billions of dollars to correct. Desegregating public facilities and protecting black voting rights had been achieved at “bargain basement prices,” but “justice so long deferred has accumulated interest” and would be very costly (1968a, 314–15).

Recognizing blacks’ long legacy of discrimination, King fully supported affirmative action programs. In contrast to providing a proof-text for contemporary conservatives who quote him in their denunciations of affirmative action, King called for a federal program for blacks analogous to the GI Bill of Rights, which was indeed a compensatory program seeking to help veterans regain
an economic position they would have attained had they not been called into the nation’s service during World War II. As had been provided for veterans, such programs would enable blacks to buy homes without cash and at lower repayment terms. They would provide business loans or grant blacks special points in competition for civil service jobs. In cases of physical disability, medical care and long-term financial grants could be made available. Moreover, such government programs would contribute to a more favorable social climate encouraging preferential employment of the disadvantaged. Again the analogy of veterans’ programs would prevail, as after the war, King noted, “there was no appreciable resentment” of veterans. Instead, he argued, “America was only compensating her veterans for their time lost from school or from business” (King 1965, 367–68).

By the end of his life, therefore, King’s radical prophetic message was pushing America well beyond mere racial amity. Integration was only the beginning of the demands of racial justice, to which any real solution involved the much more difficult work of creating a reality very much like Jesus’ concept of the Kingdom of God.

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King’s Soul: The World

Impressed into prophetic duty by a 1955 bus boycott, King had graduated to prophet of a broadened American civil religion within eight short years. Winning the Nobel Peace Prize widened his soul to focus on a universal message of peace. King had long and often spoken of the interrelatedness of all persons: “As long as there is poverty in the world, no man can be totally rich even if he has a million dollars.” The Nobel Prize deepened his universalism and commissioned him “to work harder than I had ever worked before for ‘the brotherhood of man.’ This is a calling which takes me beyond national allegiances....” (King 1961; see also 1967c, Chapter 2).

In reality, however, both his understanding of the Kingdom of God (Beloved Community) and his black messianism had long since begun moving him beyond national allegiances. Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom, coupled with Paul’s Christian mission to the Gentiles, led naturally to the New Testament writings, virtually all of which see Christianity as a universal faith that transcends national and cultural boundaries. The Roman Empire’s uneasiness with and at times persecution of early Christianity sprung in great part from its proclamation of “a king greater than Caesar” and of a kingdom whose loyalties transcended those to Rome. Martin Luther King came out of this “subversive” tradition. The Nobel Prize merely deepened his belief that American blacks had a
universal teaching role. He thus told a Canadian audience that peace on earth depended on transformed loyalties:

Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world.... we must either learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools.... We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. (King 1967c, 68)

The message of the later King remained "deeply rooted" in the American civil religion. Despite America's imperfections, he continued to reflect African American Christians' long-held views of American exceptionalism. On 4 July 1965, he told the Ebenezer Baptist Church that God had commissioned America for a special task "for mankind and the world." With many racial groups and national backgrounds together in one nation, "America is the world in miniature and the world is America writ large." For King, America remained the testing ground for whether the entire world might learn to live in peace with its diversity (King 1961, quoted in Carson and Halloran 92). But King also broadened America's civil religion by pointing Americans beyond their own national loyalties. This led him into the dangerous thicket of the anti-war movement, where he displayed his greatest moral courage despite intense pressure to conform to super-patriotic support of all of America's military adventures. In the contexts of an ongoing war and Cold War anti-communism, King's decision to oppose the war jeopardized his status as a moral leader of the country.

For many reasons, almost all of King's advisors implored him not to involve himself in protests against the Vietnam War. Not the least of these was the certainty of alienating President Lyndon Johnson so soon after he had largely embraced the civil rights agenda in his Great Society and War on Poverty programs. Others pragmatically worried that a seemingly unpatriotic opposition to the war would alienate potential donors to his civil rights work. King's conscience, however, like his namesake Martin Luther, was "captive to the Word of God." He was also increasingly troubled that such an expedient silence showed both a lack of courage and a misunderstanding of his prophetic role. Thus, on 4 April 1967, King made his famous statement against the war at New York's Riverside Church.

Questioned on whether his role as "civil rights leader" gave him proper credentials for wading into a foreign policy matter, he began his address with seven reasons why the road from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church had led to the Riverside Church and his critique of America's role in Vietnam. First, he had come to believe that Johnson's commitment in Vietnam had "broken and eviscerated" the president's commitment to end poverty and racial injustice at home. As long as Vietnam consumed massive and valuable resources, he concluded, the nation would never invest enough of them to address the issues of the Great Society. Second, he was repulsed by the irony that black Americans were disproportionately fighting overseas, ostensibly to provide a freedom to southeast Asians that America had even yet not guaranteed to them. Third, America's reliance on violence in Vietnam undermined his calls for nonviolence in America. "I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos," he reasoned, "without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government." Fourth, his calling "to redeem the soul of America" required that America "can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over." Fifth, he reiterated that his Nobel Peace Prize had made more obligatory his work for universal peace. Sixth, at base his ministry was in the name of Jesus, who had embraced nonviolence enough to die for his enemies. Finally, speaking against the war grew out of his vocation of universal sonship and brotherhood. Thus, defying the patriotism at the heart of the American civil religion, he saw himself as "bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions" (King 1967d, 139–142).
King’s advisors accurately predicted that their leader’s opposition to the war would undermine his support among white Americans. Undeterred, King powerfully answered his critics a month later in a sermon at Ebenezer:

There is something strangely inconsistent about a nation and a press that would praise you when you say, “Be nonviolent toward Jim Clark,” but will curse and damn you when you say, “Be nonviolent toward little brown Vietnamese children!” (1967e, quoted in Branch 604)

Thus, by 1967, as he stepped up his criticism of the war in Vietnam, he suggested that African Americans “may be the vanguard in a prolonged struggle that may change the shape of the world, as billions of deprived shake and transform the earth in their quest for life, freedom, and justice” (1967c, 16–17). Again, in Where Do We Go from Here?, his most radical public writing, he warned:

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look at thousands of working people displaced from their jobs with reduced incomes while the profits of the employers remain intact, and say: “This is not just.” It will look across the oceans and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: “This is not just.” It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say: “This is not just.” The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: “This way of settling differences is not just.” (1967a, 630–31)

In their struggles for equality with whites at home, African Americans could not “ignore the larger world house” in which they also lived. “The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood. Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools” (1967a, 617 and 620). Fixing the world house, King advised, was where the civil rights movement should go from there.

Repairing the larger world house required systematic, interrelated attention to the “inseparable triplets” of racism, poverty, and war. First, racism must be understood as an international phenomenon perennially allied with economic exploitation and neo-colonialism. King did not view prejudice and racism as synonyms. All persons or peoples could be prejudiced against outsiders to their group, but racism included economic exploitation based on racial difference and could only be exhibited by groups with political or economic power. Ending racial exploitation within and among western countries, King argued, would aid in the contest with communism: “Nothing provides the communists with a better climate for expansion and infiltration than the continued alliance of our nation with racism and exploitation throughout the world” (1967a, 621–22).

Second, the United States and other wealthy nations must address the international problem of poverty, viewing it as a moral obligation to provide capital and technical assistance to underdeveloped areas of the world. He called for a massive, international Marshall Plan for Asia, Africa, and South America, with wealthy nations devoting two percent of their gross domestic products to the project for ten or twenty years. “No individual or nation,” he preached, “can be great if it does not have a concern for ‘the least of these’” (1967a, 622–23).

Finally, to fix the world house America must lead the world in finding an alternative to war. In King’s latter years his commitment to and passionate belief in nonviolence, having proven successful on the civil rights stage, deepened and was applied to Vietnam and international relations. He called on the United States and other nations to “pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means,” recognizing that peace was not only humankind’s distant goal but also the means by which to arrive at that goal. He mourned, however, that America’s leadership seemed to be moving in the opposite direction:
When I see our country today intervening in what is basically a civil war, mutilating hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese children with napalm, burning villages and rice fields at random, painting the valleys of that small Asian country red with human blood, leaving broken bodies in countless ditches and sending home half-men, mutilated mentally and physically; when I see the unwillingness of our government to create the atmosphere for a negotiated settlement of this awful conflict by halting bombings in the North and agreeing unequivocally to talk with the Vietcong—and all this in the name of pursuing the goal of peace—I tremble for our world. (1967a, 626--28)

Let us hear the real and radical Martin Luther King—once a prophet without honor, now a favorite son of Georgia with the world and the Beloved Community on his mind. If ever anyone held up a mirror to force the soul of America to see its own reflection, it was King. If we consider playing that dangerous prophetic role to be a sign of true greatness, then King’s third place ranking may be a little low.

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Robert Shaw  
Teaching America to Sing

Author’s note: Any lecture concerning the late conductor Robert Shaw must, of necessity, be about the music he wrote, arranged, and conducted. This talk was no exception. The reader is asked, therefore, to imagine sitting in a beautiful recital/lecture hall on the campus of Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, and listening to Shaw’s music sung by the Mercer University Singers, Stanley L. Roberts, conductor. After the music, the lecture begins.

The beautiful music you have just heard, sung by the Mercer University Singers with their conductor Director of Choral Studies and Interim Dean Dr. Stanley Roberts, is the American hymn “God is Seen,” music arranged by Alice Parker and Robert Shaw. The piece was chosen because it is but one illustration of Shaw’s ability to express, here in a simple musical idea, a profound concept of truth, of the basic goodness and even godliness in us all and in all that surrounds us. The words begin like this: “Through all the world below, God is seen all around. Search hills and valleys through, there he’s found....”

Shaw was arguably the preeminent choral conductor of the twentieth century. At the time of his death in January of 1999, he was Music Director Emeritus and Conductor Laureate of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Clearly his position with the Atlanta Symphony and earlier with the Cleveland Orchestra and the San Diego Symphony allowed him to explore the repertoire of the orchestral tradition, but it is generally acknowledged that the work he did with choruses afforded him the greatest adulation and admiration.

With Flannery O’Connor and Martin Luther King, Robert Shaw, was a Georgian for an important part of his life. All three were people of noble ideas and uncommon powers of communication. All three, each in their own sphere, and each in ways almost incalculable, changed human inter-

course and perhaps even the human spirit forever.

In an interview toward the end of his life, Shaw was asked why he chose to come to Atlanta in 1967. He commented that there were complicated reasons. One of the most compelling was the opportunity Atlanta was offering him to become its Music Director, and he fully intended to make that a full time commitment, believing, as he did, that “Musical culture is built by staying in one place. Unless you live within a town and deal with its educational and social problems, you can’t make a significant contribution to its cultural life. I’ve learned that you grow the best vegetables in your own back yard.” (Selected from Shaw’s writings by Nick Jones for the commemorative booklet produced by the Atlanta Symphony for the Robert Shaw Memorial Service.) Secondly, he knew the writings of Ralph McGill in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution—the so-called “conscience of the South.” Finally, all through his life he was committed to increasing the involvement of minorities in classical music and felt that the work of both McGill and Martin Luther King, whose father was pastor of an important African American church in Atlanta, would afford him an opportunity to engage the African American community in an important way there. The Atlanta Symphony position gave him the necessary podium—some might say pulpit—both literally and figuratively.

Shaw worked to bring more black musicians into the all-white orchestra and to have black persons invited to membership on the Atlanta Symphony board (Jones 1999a). One of his colleagues in this endeavor was the late Wendell Whalum, the conductor of the famed Morehouse College Glee Club. These were his heroes in humanity’s quest for racial equality and for equal opportunity. It was a quest in which he participated vigorously all his life.
His belief in racial equality and equal opportunity for all was tested early. He liked to tell one revealing story. The Collegiate Chorale, a large chorus of amateurs founded by Shaw in 1941, needed a site for regular rehearsal. One of the members of the chorus was a member of the staff of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, whose pastor was the most famous minister in the United States at the time: Norman Vincent Peale. The young Shaw described the chorus as one whose members included “every shade, shape and color of human flesh and... every species of human ideology, philosophy, occupation and religious custom” (Shaw 1994, 405). They were full of rambunctiousness, and Shaw was no stranger to profanity. When the leaders of the church got wind of all the commotion the chorus was stirring up, Shaw was summoned to meet with Dr. Peale. He was informed that the governing board of the church had decided that the chorus would have to leave the church unless all the Negroes (sic), Catholics, and Jews were eliminated from the Chorale, and, of the remainder, fifty percent of the membership had to come from the church rolls. Shaw pulled the two-hundred-voice chorus out of the facility immediately. Many years later, in 1986 to be precise, Shaw received a handwritten letter from Norman Vincent Peale, described by Shaw as a man in his nineties who had a “remarkable moral sense and mental acuity,” in which Peale admitted to an “insensitive and stupid mistake in connection with the fine organization you were developing…” Peale just wanted Shaw to know that “...I have ever been sorry about my lack of cooperation. I am sure you have long since forgotten all about it. But I never did” (405).

Incidentally, that was the second time Robert Shaw left the church. The first time was when he was substituting for his pastor father, who was in failing health, and whose Sunday morning services Shaw was asked to lead. One Saturday night, as the young Shaw “was holed up in his father's study” trying to get materials together for the next morning's service, the president of the Church Board came with the news that “the brightest and most beautiful girl youth leader of the church was desperately ill in the hospital. If the girl lived through the night, a special service of prayer would certainly be required.” Shaw writes,

I did not know the young woman and I had not had a lot of first-hand experience with death, (but) to my untrained eye... she looked drawn and moribund. —But she made it through the night....

I have a problem with public prayer. I can understand private meditation. I can even understand united congregational prayer. And I am sympathetic with the Quaker practice of congregational quiet and meditation until someone is “moved” to speak.

But I do not like to be prayed upon—with words which I have not chosen for myself. Nor do I like to pray upon others—with thoughts they may not be thinking, in manners which they might find uncomfortable, and for ends they might consider none of my business—And I am particularly uncomfortable praying publicly to a God who by all customary Christian definitions is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and whose eye is already “on the sparrow.”

We had reached the place in our mimeographed Order of Worship where it
spelled out Pastoral Prayer, and I began saying some of the things I have just said....

"If there is a God of limitless love and power then that goodness and power already is in motion. And what remains is the question of whether all human forces—medical, psychological, mystical—whether we are all doing all that is humanly possible to help this young girl win her battle..."

I was at the front door of the church going through that frightful ordeal where the churchgoer says "Lovely service" and the minister says "See you next Easter" when a middle aged man ran up the steps and said, "She made it. The crisis passed at eleven thirty-three!"—Exactly prayer time.—And the next Sunday there was a list "this long."—And the following Sunday I left the church.

I had enough sense to know that there are medical cures that... are absolutely inexplicable.... But I also had enough sense to realize that I would never be able to work within an institution willing to credit that I was in any way responsible for that cure. (Shaw 1994, 403-4)

My encounters with Robert Shaw started when in 1983 it was my good fortune to be invited to become a member of the alto section of the choruses he conducted in Atlanta. After singing for a season, I was invited to serve as his assistant for all the choruses of the Atlanta Symphony, for the choruses of the Robert Shaw Institute, and for the Carnegie Hall Professional Training Workshops for conductors and singers. I was fully engaged in this work until 1998. It is perhaps some small measure of my feeling and understanding that this was important work for me to do that I commuted weekly from my teaching positions at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and later from Boston University to Atlanta every Monday night to run the chorus rehearsals and to sing in the concerts and recording sessions. During concert weeks, I was often in Atlanta from Thursday evening through Sunday when the concert was recorded. I did this not only for my own professional improvement, but also for the fact that through the music Robert Shaw was making, I could learn and then pass on to my students his conducting technique, his ideas about music, his voracious appetite for score study and preparation, and his peerless capacity to infuse rehearsals and performances with his indomitable spirit and energy.

In those rehearsals, he worked relentlessly to convince all of us that our efforts were ultimately to illuminate the ideas of the composer, to probe the most profound ideas of the texts we sang, and to try to understand at the most intellectual level, the challenges presented by the musical score. The effort required nothing but the best we could muster. He was charismatic, confrontational, articulate to the point of eloquence, and doggedly tenacious. He accepted the challenge of teaching us to sing in a way that ultimately would serve the composer, the text, and the music itself, not the ego of the conductor, the whim of the performer, or the entertainment of the audience.

Shaw's Early Years

Shaw's beginnings were in the world of live radio. His first professional work was conducting the Fred Waring Glee Club. He had been spotted by Waring at Pomona College where Shaw was studying philosophy, English literature, and religion in preparation for a career as a minister. Waring dropped in on a rehearsal of the Glee Club.
blies; travelers sang in the car on family trips. Shaw himself was no stranger to family singing. He was born of a Disciples of Christ minister father and a church singer mother in Red Bluff, California, in 1916. He came by both music and religion from his family.

During the early 1940s, Shaw, tiring by now of the commercial music business and the limited repertoire available, organized a choir of twenty-five professional singers that was to perform every kind of music. This group was to become the Collegiate Chorale. Late in 1941, he began the practice of writing weekly letters to his choruses. By the time his career reached its end, there were hundreds of these letters containing everything from sermons, technical treatises, poetry, humor, and examples of his legendary attention to the details of the music. The letters were usually addressed “Dear People.” Always one who shared his insights and his experiences willingly, Shaw made copies of the letters available to anyone who was interested. I have most of them. (Most of these letters are included in Blocker 2004.) An overriding theme of the letters was his insistence that the musicians working with him dare to give no less than their all. He was interested in nothing less than perfection; he wanted only the best. He had an all encompassing belief that great music knows no cultural bounds, and he engaged his singers both intellectually and spiritually in the realization of one of the most noble of human endeavors—the creation of community through the making of great music.

Shaw said, “The making of music is the everlasting and inescapable act of creation. The life of music is reborn at every singing. It actually doesn’t exist on paper, but in time and sound. At each singing it seeks a new life.”

In those early years, works for chorus were commissioned of some the greatest composers of the time: Samuel Barber, Lukas Foss, Paul Hindemith, Leonard Bernstein, and others—a veritable who’s who of American composers in the twentieth century.

His jobs included Juilliard, the Cleveland Orchestra and the NBC Symphony and its famed conductor Arturo Toscanini. The story of Shaw’s preparation of the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven for Toscanini is often told: Toscanini told Shaw, “You know, I’ve never had a really good performance of the Ninth... sometimes the soloists are bad... sometimes the orchestra is bad... sometimes the chorus is bad... and sometimes I am terrible.” When Toscanini heard Shaw’s preparation he released this statement to the press: “I have at last found the maestro I have been looking for” (Mussulman 57–58).

In 1953, Shaw accepted the leadership of the San Diego Symphony, a summer community orchestra. There Shaw had the chance to work with his own orchestra, to develop his ideas about what the musical leadership of a fledgling orchestra required, and to hone his orchestral skills. He had an all-encompassing plan which incorporated workshops integrating study and performance with community involvement. Musicians, teachers, and conductors came from all over the country to learn. By March of 1958, it was finally clear that the part-time musicians in the orchestra were not up to the demands of the repertoire Shaw was insisting upon. After 1956, while still spending summers with the San Diego Symphony, he accepted an invitation to move to Cleveland from New York where he was to build an amateur chorus that would sing at least six times per year with the Cleveland Orchestra. In addition, he was to be prepared to step in at any time to conduct in Szell’s absence and to take charge of the educational series of the orchestra. By 1958 his whole focus was in Cleveland. He had left San Diego, and more importantly, New York City.
When I talked with Alice Parker last April as we sat in her studio in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, she remembered that Shaw was always two steps ahead of everyone else. He could do the things that Waring demanded easily, for instance, but he was already hearing other kinds of music and wanted to do more. At the same time, there was carping from the New York critics after the Chorale's first performances at Carnegie Hall, for instance, about a choral conductor lacking professional training who dared venture into unheard of repertoire. Despite all of this, all the major orchestral conductors wanted him to do the preparation for their choral-orchestral performances. He was also tiring of the pressure to record. By 1967, he walked out on a recording session with RCA. He just didn't want to be there, Alice Parker said.

A Conductor in the Largest Sense

Shaw was guided by strong convictions that had their roots in the evangelistic tradition of his father and his father's father. Some might rightly think of him as a minister of music. He wrote frequently about the relationship between music and worship—between art and religion. He loved the lyrical and flowery language of the King James Bible, and the music and the words that touched him deeply were "Wondrous Love" and "Amazing Grace." Shaw remarked, "These words are magic to me, and their melodies, shaped and worn by Niagaras and years of tears, are as perfect as anything I know in music" (Ziegenhals 1989).

Author's Note: Here the Mercer University Singers sing the arrangements of "Wondrous Love"—What wondrous love is this / that caused the Lord of bliss / to bear the dreadful curse for my soul — and "Amazing Grace"—Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / that saved a wretch like me — published by Lawson-Gould from the Robert Shaw choral series.

Shaw deplored televangelism and the electronic church, ridiculing the "fare emanating from what he calls Crystal Christ-o-rama, California, maintaining that there are not enough disposal plants in the country to handle TV Sunday morning effluence! No mystery no pain" (Ziegenhals). I can only imagine what he would have said if he had heard a performance of a church choir with orchestra only to discover that most of the choir and all of the instruments were on tape hidden behind curtains!

He found his challenge in great music and great texts. He loved pondering the great questions of existence, and when he wanted to express his ideas, words and their carefully defined meanings were available to him. An unabridged dictionary was always open on his piano. His language could be bawdy and his humor shady, but it was always clear that he could get the better of you in any discussion on almost any topic. He was intellectually curious and eager to share his moral mission with the world. He was a spiritual conductor in the largest, cosmic sense. Impatient with denominationalism, he was eager to declare music as "Flesh becomes Word."

In 1967–68, he was invited to be the Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony, a position he was to hold for twenty-one years. The orchestra began as a part-time ensemble and by the end of Shaw's life, the orchestra with him conducting had won fifteen Grammy awards; most of the choral symphonic repertoire had been recorded on the Telarc label; the orchestra had made its debut in Carnegie Hall; the orchestra with the chorus made its first European tour and played for Jimmy Carter's inauguration. In 1999 he was awarded the Kennedy Center Honor; in 1992 he was given the National Medal of the Arts, and he had honorary degrees and citations from over twenty-five colleges and universities. He had applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship in the early years, won it, and was to have written a conducting book as the final project of that Fellowship. That book never happened. The letters he wrote were a kind of substitute, I think.

Carnegie Hall invited him to lead a series of Professional Training Workshops starting in 1990. A chorus of auditioned singers would be assembled for whatever music was planned and Shaw would rehearse for the better part of a week and then do a performance. The experiences were astounding! These were preceded by a long tradition of summer workshops at Westminster Choir College in Princeton. In 1988 he began a Robert Shaw Institute at Emory University, and later its chorus rehearsed, performed, and recorded in France and then briefly in this country before Mr. Shaw died in January.
1999 at age eighty-two. These opportunities allowed people from all over the world to sing with Shaw and to hear live performances conducted by him.

**The Legacy of Robert Shaw**

A chronicle of the man's life—that's the easy part. The more challenging project is to try to draw some conclusions about his ideas and beliefs. It occurs to me that separating my comments into four categories might be helpful.

First, there is the music making.
Second, the pedagogy.
Third, the eloquence.
Fourth, the overarching philosophy.

Robert Shaw is well known for his interpretation of eighteenth and nineteenth century choral symphonic music. He was also a fierce champion of the composers and the music of the twentieth century. Any time a workshop or a concert or a symposium was organized with Shaw as the headliner conducting some great work, the response was nearly overwhelming. His national and international career as a guest conductor was very demanding, (France granted him its medal as “Officier des Arts et des Lettres”). However, none of this prominence kept him from nearly losing his job in Atlanta over programming. The problem was that in 1972 Shaw wanted to do a series of concerts focusing on the music of Charles Ives, and he insisted on an ambitious repertoire of contemporary composers. The Atlanta audiences were unaccustomed to such music from their symphony, and the orchestra's executive board requested his resignation. After a grass-roots campaign in his support collected 3,500 new subscriptions, cooler heads prevailed (Jones 1999a). Shaw hoped always to encourage and support minority composers and performers when possible. His intention was expressed in his first speech to the ASO Board of Sponsors when he said he would commit some portion of the concerts to “that sound of this moment upon which one has no right or means of exercising a judgment: the absolutely absurd, experimental, unconventional, uncensored, inconceivable, unbearable anti-music” (quoted in Jones 1999a).

He not only remembered but knew most of the significant composers of the century, and commissioned many of them to write works for chorus: Barber, Hindemith, Bernstein, Foss, and many others. When he died, Nick Jones, the ASO program annotator and a long-time member of the ASO chorus, wrote “he was an artistic conscience, prodding, encouraging, insisting, and, when necessary planting his feet and refusing to budge until the rest of us could catch up with him in the quest for excellence” (1999a).

To be in a rehearsal with Robert Shaw was “ennobling not diminishing of the human being” (Shaw 1991). I remember sitting in the rehearsal hall at Symphony Hall in Atlanta when the buzz of pre-rehearsal conversation would suddenly stop as the time approached for Mr. Shaw to descend the steps into the room. No one came late, no one spoke, and no one made noise. All were excited and eager, anticipating his arrival. His music-making was passionate, compelling, precise, probing, intelligent, and demanding of the best any of us could offer. We worked hard because he worked hard. We sang well because the music demanded no less. We would show up because it was unthinkable to miss the opportunity to be in the presence of someone who caused us to change for the better and who enabled us to do something together that we could not do alone.

Always interested in education and pedagogy, Shaw cared deeply about the amateur in the arts. He brought to the non-professional a process by which even the most rank novice could get inside the music. His idea was that we would never try to do too many things at once—only pitch and rhythm at the start; dynamics and text came later. Sometimes, much later. We had to work at singing good pitch. He used to say that our responsibility was to improve every pitch we sang every second that we sang it. We rehearsed precise rhythm endlessly, counting and count-singing until only the right music happened at the right time. His constant caution was that the right note at the wrong time was the wrong note, and we worked to try to figure out what the composer was trying to say first and foremost. The score was his guide. He marked with a green pencil everything he thought he wanted to hear: balance, dynamics, final consonants, pronunciation detail, and so on. He delighted in taking things apart and putting them back together again, all the while bringing us to a level we never would
have believed possible. He challenged us all intellectually, and he worked harder than anyone at getting it right. It is doubtless correct that he was the giant in choral music of our time. Carole Flatau of Warner Brothers wrote that “Robert Shaw didn’t invent singing in America. What he did was raise choral standards to new heights, with new sounds and new purpose.”

The letters written to the chorus from the 1940s to the year he died comprise a compendium of the ideas of Robert Shaw. Some of the letters include detailed analyses of the structure, the harmony, the text, and the composer’s ideas in the works we were preparing to sing.

Among these letters are discussions of the various disciplines he was trying to encourage in the singers. He was able to discuss principles of diction or the essentials of rhythm in ways that inspired all of us who sang to try to do better; to sing more accurately, to pronounce every sound of every syllable, to invest with him in the process. He said this about rhythm: “I can think of a couple of emphases that haven’t been emphatic enough up to now. The first is that little notes are just as important as big notes, that they have places and that they should be put in their places. Sixteenths and eighths and quarters are not just things that come between bigger things. They are not ‘introducings’ or preparations or pick-ups. I get a horrible picture, from the way you sing, of little bitty eighth notes running like hell all over the place to keep from being stepped on. Millions of ‘em! Meek, squeaky little things. No self-respect. Standing in corners, hiding behind doors, ducking into subway stations, peering out from under rugs, refugees...” (10 March 1964 in Blocker 16). Occasionally he would chastise. One of the letters was written within the lines of a menacing dagger’s shape (See Blocker 19)! Rarely would he praise. Here’s one such “letter” written after a performance of “Stabat Mater” of Dvorak:

Stabat pater fortunatus
Happy as a hippopatus
Up to here in muck and mire.
Hearing sounds beyond believing,
Angel voices Halloweaving,
Quel orchestrand WHAT A CHOIR!
(3 November 1998 in Blocker 280)

Not only did Shaw write these weekly letters to the chorus, he also collected his thoughts in a series of lectures, commencement addresses (delivered each time he received one of his many honorary doctorates), speeches, and sermons. In these, his eloquence and the depth of his thoughts about music were on grand display. At a baccalaureate address at Boston University in 1994, a presidential candidate (Ross Perot) who was in attendance greeted Mr. Shaw afterwards with the exclamation, “Robert Shaw, if I had your speech writer, I would be President of the United States!” What do you suppose he would have said had he known that Shaw wrote all his own speeches? In an address delivered to a convention of music teachers, Shaw spoke about music, order, sound, and time. One

Sometimes, usually after the Christmas festival concerts with the ASO in Atlanta, he would write “poetry”; a humorous kind of doggerel that delighted and amused us. One of those was a seasonally appropriate letter written in the shape of a candle. He wrote this on the Berlioz Requiem:

One rarely knows—with Berlioz—
From how he starts just where he goes.

It’s like—before you’re really seated.
From toes to ears you’re over-heated.

His tunes and chords are nicely tended,
But where they’ll end he just invented.

His texts are neat, no cloud appears,
When oops! You’re up to here in tears.

It’s strange to think that this sensation,
Alive, should lack appreciation.

‘Tis true... he’s not the straightest arrow,
—But Frenchmen dote on snails and marrow.

Our times must be just so abstemious
We need some other-lovin’ genius.

What Hector has
Is quel pizz-azz.

(16 April 1980 in Blocker 228)
short paragraph included this idea: “All of music is an attempt at communication between human hearts and minds; at the very minimum the creator reaches out to and through the performer, and both of them reach out to the listener” (Shaw 1955, 351). And slightly later in the same speech: “…the great music is the people’s music—the most human and universal music. Music is great not because certain self-appointed Custodians of Arts with a capital A have decreed it so, but because it calls out to something deep and persistent in the human thing. Music is great because it carries something so native and true to the human spirit that not even sophisticated intellectuality can deny or destroy its miracle” (351).

He gave a series of speeches on the topic “The Conservative Arts” which dealt with ideas like this: “…if man is to continue to inhabit this planet and grow in wisdom and dignity, the arts cannot be separated from ‘the people’—I mean Carl Sandburg’s ‘the people’ and Abe Lincoln’s ‘common man.’ In our funny, fuzzy world, the economic ability to rent a seat for a concert is no proof that any communication has taken place. And while the arts do address themselves to man’s keenest and most discriminating intelligence, and while also a large part of mankind has yet to experience and become responsive to the transforming powers of a Beethoven Ninth Symphony, the arts still are the major tools capable of teaching, training and eventually lifting the mind of man to his potential and proper humanity” (1981, 354). And this: “…I had to conclude to myself that ‘conservative’ was not necessarily a dirty word...if ‘conservative’ can mean literally ‘conserving, preserving,’ then... ‘What do the liberal creative arts conserve?’ Nothing—but humanity. The argument...is that the arts, and probably in direct ratio as to how liberal and creative they are, are the preservers and the purveyors of those values which define humanity...and...may prove to be the only workable Program of Conservation for the human race on this planet” (357).

Unfortunately, I know neither the date nor the source of the following words of Shaw’s, but I found the quotation so eloquent and moving that I memorized it: “In this time of political, economic and personal disintegration, music is not a luxury, it is a necessity; not simply because it is therapeutic, nor because it is the universal language, but because it is the persistent focus of (our) intelligence, aspiration and good will.”

For Shaw, “Art on the heroic scale…” on the scale of Beethoven, Shakespeare, Donatello, Bach, Dickinson, El Greco, Picasso, Melville, “...is the most pervasive, persistent, powerful affirmation of the life-force in the man-thing” (1981, 359).

It was clear to Shaw that “…‘the arts’ have a chance to become what the history of man has shown that they should be—the guide and impetus to human understanding, individual integrity, and the common good. They are not an opiate, an avoidance, or a barrier, but a unifying spirit and labor.”

And finally, from the same commemorative booklet assembled for Shaw’s memorial service by the Atlanta Symphony, Shaw says,

The Arts are not simply skills: Their concern is the intellectual Ethical and spiritual maturity of human life. And in a time when religious and political institutions may lose their visions of human dignity, they are the custodians of those values which most worthily define humanity, which most sensitively define Divinity and, in fact, may prove to be the only workable Program of Conservation for the human race on the planet.

Author’s note: The lecture ended with the Mercer University Singers singing a movement of the Rachmaninov “Vespers,” a work of special significance to Mr. and Mrs. Shaw. The author was invited to conduct.

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Bibliography


Making Up with Atonement

Charles Andrews

Cecilia's romance with Robbie Turner and then adapts her perception of their affair to fit a fictional tale of rape. The Tallis family are the wealthy owners of a country estate, and Robbie is the son of their housekeeper. These differences give rise to a class-based anxiety that partly instigates Briony's suspicion of him, a suspicion exacerbated by her own youthful infatuation with the boy and jealousy of her sister. The abiding theme of Atonement is whether falsehoods can be corrected by the sanctioned falsity of art and whether a tale told well can forge an atonement between people broken by lies. We encounter Briony in three stages of her life: girlhood, young adulthood, and as an old, retired writer suffering from dementia. In each phase, the need to express herself through words amounts to a desperate attempt at making peace with her family, a peace she seems ultimately to be denied.

This intense focus upon the value of written narrative seems somewhat out of place in a visual medium. Writing is an occupation that does not have much dramatic energy, and Wright strains to give it the sort of visual weight needed for the narrative. From the moment the title appears on screen, looking like old typewriter font and accompanied by the familiar mechanical tattoo, we are asked to face the written word, much as Briony must do throughout her life. Whereas McEwan's novel exhibited such elegant narrative control that it hardly seemed "writerly," the film takes great pains to establish this as a world of writers. Robbie (James McAvoy) at his desk composing his apology/erotogram to Cecilia (Keira Knightly) becomes a montage of exertion with the familiar tropes of balled paper and partial readings in voice-over. That is until Robbie, in a fit of exhaustion and perverse humor, types a message to Cecilia more suitable for Larry Flynt than for his demure object of affection. The particular anatomical word choice to describe his beloved is what remains shocking,
and Wright skillfully avoids having his characters pronounce the word. Instead, we see it typed across the full screen, inviting us to say the word silently to ourselves and making us complicit in the humorous vulgarity of the scene. Robbie’s vulgar message is mistakenly delivered to Cecilia by Briony, who reads the note herself and becomes convinced of Robbie’s sex mania. The humor and horror of this discovery is shared by the audience, and thus we are invited into the act of writing.

I should pause here to admit that I have never found this scene entirely convincing for the story. It announces itself as a narrative device and veers so closely to Alan Ayckbourn or Georges Feydeau style farce that it becomes distracting. Rather than just a surprising turn emerging from a distracted lover, Robbie’s mistaken message feels like a narrative trick imagined by a writer. In the film, Wright’s sleight of hand is well played, as his rapid editing removes our sense of space for Robbie’s room and thus allows us to overlook the intended letter sitting on the desk while the coarse joke goes into the envelope. Where the device avoids those farcical precursors is that the mistaken delivery does not in itself spark a row, but rather forces Cecilia’s hand, makes her more aware of her own feelings, and provokes her into inviting Robbie into precisely the sort of activity his eros-laden letter describes.

With the exception of these passionate moments, the first part of the film has little action, at least by comparison with the later scenes of hospital and war. Much of the intimate dialogue is filmed in close-up and even extreme close-up, with just Briony’s eyes, nose bridge, and facial mole in the frame. This framing allows for more emoting with less movement, and all three actresses playing Briony at different ages (Saoirse Ronan, Romola Garai, and Vanessa Redgrave) make use of this intimacy. Critics have generally been put off by the film’s first half because of its intimate setting and minimal action. But I would add that the largely uncinematic focus on writing is to blame for the staid tone of the exposition. By too honestly adapting the source material, Wright betrays the seething-yet-repressed emotion of the novel and the consequences for atoning for sin through art.

One danger in faithfully adapting a British novel set in a manor house is the unfortunate association with Merchant Ivory retreads like Howards End (1992) and The Remains of the Day (1993). If there is anything in Joe Wright’s film that keeps it out of Merchant-Ivory territory (besides the absence of Anthony Hopkins crisply muttering his lines), it is the prolonged tracking shot of the village of Bray-Dunes at the evacuation of Dunkirk that establishes Robbie’s feverish state amid the chaos of troops awaiting their return home. The camera glides from one awful sight to another: ghostly-looking wrecked ships, limping and bloodied men, a series of horses shot in their heads. In mechanical imitation of the horse killings, men pound the radiators of several automobiles, and we watch their life pour out. A Ferris wheel emerges in the distance, and men giggle on a broken merry-go-round like a carnival gone awry. The whole scene has the look of misplaced footage from Apocalypse Now where the horrors of war blur into surreal reality, and a few melting clocks and men with bowler hats for heads would not be out of place. Some of the credit for this scene may be due to screenwriter Christopher Hampton, who imagined a similar whirling scene in Phillip Noyce’s The Quiet American (2002) with Michael Caine reeling from a nearby explosion in a café. The horrible visual poetry of this tracking shot emblematizes the second half of the film which is more visceral, emotional, and cinematic than the scenes in the Tallis home. And this shot has no direct equivalent in the novel, though there are scenes of beach chaos among the troops. Wright and Hampton excel when they adapt the novel less dogmatically.

The weakest part of the film, however, may be the final framing device which takes McEwan’s gesture toward meta-fiction and turns it into an anemic afterthought. If you haven’t seen the film or read the book, you may want to stop reading here, since the only way to discuss this aspect of the work is to reveal plot spoilers. Vanessa Redgrave’s Briony tells us that her new novel is her last, and the events we have seen are merely her imagined resolution to the problem she caused as a child. The ending of the book calls the entire narrative into question in a section called “London, 1999.” But the film suggests that only the “resolution” between Briony, Cecilia, and Robbie is fabricated. To emphasize this point, Wright shows us Robbie’s feverish death awaiting counter-deployment, and Cecilia’s death by drowning, her body swept through an air raid tunnel in
cruciform. Cecilia’s real death with its martyr’s posture appears more contrived than the fictional reunion between the estranged sisters.

In the novel, too, this ending is unsatisfying. McEwan’s work initially struck me as a carefully crafted novel with a bit of half-baked postmodern trickery tacked onto the end. The “London, 1999” seemed like a narrative cop-out akin to the “it’s all a dream” ending that stopped being fresh somewhere around Dorothy’s return to Kansas. Critics like the Chicago Reader’s J. R. Jones have said that McEwan excelled at his ability to “question his own storytelling process without ever surrendering to the preciousness of meta-fiction.” I agree that there is no surrender such as we find in recent works like the tediously self-conscious detective fiction of Brock Clarke. But the kind of self-consciousness McEwan employs feels unprepared for by the 330 pages that precede it. Without becoming merely precious, an author might gesture towards the problems of storytelling throughout the work rather than waiting for the last twenty pages to unveil the artifice.

By making the sound of typewriting essential to the score, Wright tries to keep us immersed in the writer’s world. But, his equivalent to the “London, 1999” section—Vanessa Redgrave being interviewed on television in extreme close-up—merely explains away the primary scene of atonement between Briony and Cecilia. In the film, writing is ultimately a disappointment, since no true healing has occurred and even the writer herself is losing her mental faculties. The novel raises a deeper ambivalence by calling into question the very artwork the reader holds in her hands. To make up with Atonement, Wright’s film needs more attention to the betrayal of storytelling that McEwan deems so crucial. A more thoroughgoing interrogation of the act of storytelling could give both versions of Atonement greater fidelity to their aims.

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When Americans think of 1963, they immediately recall the images of that fateful ride in Dallas on a sunny November day. The death of John F. Kennedy was a national trauma, and though many other important moments occurred in that decisive year, it is the assassination of a dashing, young president that generally first leaps to mind. Among the other events of that year, probably the most iconic involved another famous American who years later also would end up being murdered. Just a few months before Kennedy’s demise, legions of the faithful stood in rapt attention as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his most famous speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, in August of 1963. It was a moment that over time magically transcended itself, becoming associated with a wide variety of ideas, feelings, hopes, and fears. Almost precisely a century after the Battle of Gettysburg, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Gettysburg Address (all from 1863), African Americans had shown up in Washington to cash a check, as King so powerfully expressed it. Though it was a daylong event featuring dozens of famous leaders and singers, the “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington probably exemplifies for most Americans today the heady optimism and the fresh innocence that marked the Civil Rights Movement at its best and brightest.

However, as numerous recent historians have argued, Americans have retained a somewhat laundered image of Martin Luther King Jr. We have forgotten the utter radicalism of many of his speeches, especially those attacking the United States government’s escalation of the war in Vietnam (and oddly, we rarely even remember King as protesting that long war). Additionally, we have chosen to forgive (and forget) his many personal foibles, about which much has been written. Some go so far as to argue that we have domesticated King—transformed him into a peaceful leader unstained by the rage and anger that characterized the “darker” side of Civil Rights activism, represented most frequently by Malcolm X and, later, the Black Panthers and the Weathermen.

These are broad generalizations, but they speak to some historians’ desire to recover the angrier and more radical side of the life and teachings of Martin Luther King—and of the Civil Rights Movement for which he is our most handy emblem. As such, King remains, and probably will remain, an object of debate and dissent for a very long time. It is worthwhile to recall the tangible black rage and violence that were, in fact, at the heart of the Civil Rights era. This rage was justified, according to some of the most influential recent accounts of that era. Furthermore, black rage has long historical roots in the writings of African Americans. Frederick Douglass remains the prototypical figure here, though his contemporaries often demonstrated far less tact and even more rage (see Martin Delany, for instance). Often the rage was manifested in slave insurrections: Nat Turner’s bloody resistance of 1831 and John Brown’s extremist plot to arm the slaves in 1859 have become the most legendary of these incidents, but there were many others.

In the twentieth century, the most devastating portrait of the psychic paralysis and rage of young black males appeared in Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940). Wright sketches Bigger Thomas, a young black manchild who awakens by the sound of an alarm clock to the horrors of his life of poverty on Chicago’s south side. The first several pages of the novel describe Bigger and his brother Buddy fighting a very large, black rat that has invaded their apartment, while their mother and sister Vera stand screaming on the bed. Bigger’s
disaffection and disillusion are immediately tangible as the story unfolds: “He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them... He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough” (10).

It is a landscape that fits perfectly with Mircea Eliade’s concept of the profane—and the sacred is nowhere to be found in the world of Bigger Thomas. By the end of the day, Bigger murders the beautiful blonde daughter of a wealthy Chicago businessman, shoves her body into a furnace, and saws her head off to force it inside the blaze. It is easily one of the most shocking and visually sickening scenes in any major American novel. The horror has been foreshadowed by the lines above. Something horrible was bound to happen as soon as Bigger acknowledged “what his life meant.” Notice how Wright insists with this phrasing that it is not about what Bigger thinks his life means. The meaning of Bigger’s life has somehow already been decided, and Bigger and young men like him survive only by denying the inevitable meaninglessness of their lot.

Cornel West has recently written from the perspective of the African American community, and in his important volume Race Matters (1993) he describes the “nihilism” that he believes has infected the black community, particularly in the major cities. He defines nihilism not in abstract philosophical terms; rather, it is “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (22–3). West argues that “No other people have been taught systematically to hate themselves—psychic violence—reinforced by the powers of the state and civic coercion—physical violence—for the primary purpose of controlling their minds and exploiting their labor for nearly four hundred years” (xiii). He describes the deep historical roots of the “justified social rage” of urban black males and claims that a “sense of powerlessness” and a “monumental eclipse of hope” have produced a cohort of our society that is on the very brink of not only self-loathing but even destructive violence against their white oppressors (3, 19).

Though the Civil Rights movement is often depicted as pitting the non-violent leaders like King against the more violence-prone and rage-filled leaders such as Malcolm X and the nation of Islam, in fact, opinions were much more fluid and variegated. For one thing, it would be wrong to suppose that a leader like King never experienced rage. However much we admire his most fiery speeches, or his masterly “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” we would be mistaken to overlook the symptoms of rage and anger that permeate these pieces. Moreover, 1963 saw the publication of several pieces that brought these feelings of rage before the American public in new and exciting ways that coincided with the angrier side of Martin Luther King. Most famously, James Baldwin’s brilliant essay, The Fire Next Time (1963) has become a classic of the form known as the African American jeremiad. Baldwin’s volume, like the March on Washington and the Dream speech of King, should be regarded as one of the crucial texts of this quintessential year in American history.

Baldwin’s volume is comprised of one brief essay combined with a much longer essay. The longer essay, “Down at the Cross,” is essentially composed of three parts: a lengthy memoir of Baldwin’s youthful turn to a Pentecostal church experience in Harlem; a fascinating depiction of his encounter with the Black Muslims and their leader Elijah Muhammad after Baldwin has become a well-known author; and a famous, benediction-like ending in which Baldwin’s argues that, despite all of the horror that has come earlier in the book, we must still maintain a profound and passionate hope in the meaning and purpose of America.

Baldwin’s autobiographical volume is shot through with racial tensions, marginalization, class issues, and the sheer historical abuse of the black man in America. He spends the vast majority of his time outlining and analyzing the terrible treatment that he and other African Americans have had to endure as members of an oppressed racialized class in mainstream American society. The section on the black church emphasizes the yearning for home and security in the bleak, frightening urban nightmare of Harlem before World War II, where he begins frankly by confessing his own “religious crisis.” But the church ultimately is unable to offer him the hope and redemption for which he is
searching. Evangelical Christianity is fully implicated in the materialism of the surrounding culture and the abuse and manipulation of its membership in the pursuit of financial “blessings.” In fact, the rage against the church’s inability to provide substantive hope is what brings this section to its rousing end: “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him” (47).

Similarly, Baldwin’s adult encounters with Elijah Muhammad and the Black Muslims does not provide spiritual sustenance. Rather, the Nation is programmatic and violent in its segregationalist views. Baldwin abhors the racist cast of the Nation’s view of white people as demonic and fallen humans, a laboratory experiment gone bad. His description of the dinner with members of the Nation, with Muhammad reigning supreme as the benevolent father figure, is mildly attractive to Baldwin, though it is simultaneously saturated with an ironic condescension. Finally, however, it is not for me, Baldwin says: “I felt that I knew something of his pain and his fury, and, yes, even his beauty. Yet precisely because of the reality and the nature of those streets—because of what he conceived as his responsibility and what I took to be mine—we would always be strangers, and possibly, one day, enemies” (78-9). In both cases, institutionalized religion remains powerless to extirpate the rage at the heart of the African American experience.

In short, most of The Fire Next Time is a lengthy articulation of black rage that is potent and frightening reading. If the book were to end there, it might have remained just another lengthy screed against the powers that be. And yet somehow, through an astonishing effort of his moral imagination, Baldwin ends his essay by rising to the level of benediction in finally endorsing with verve and passion the hope upon which America was ostensibly founded. In one of the great passages of twentieth-century American prose, Baldwin writes:

> I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand—and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time! (104, 105-6)

The language here is memorable and moving, after such a long litany of horror and hatred, in its insistence on bringing the reader face to face with such a brazen statement of American hopefulness. Despite having faced far more unimaginable prejudice and rejection than most people ever will, Baldwin still asserts the abiding mission of America and the comfort that such hope makes available. Somehow, it is still possible, indeed even compulsory, to continue to hope. Baldwin’s words feature a remarkable use of biblical and prophetic motifs, which bring to bear a particularly religious sensibility on the topic of American hope. For instance, several times Baldwin remarks on the “impossible” aspect of hope. This idea brings to mind the words of Jesus in similar regards, of the impossibility of the Kingdom of God—and yet, said Jesus, “what is impossible with man is possible with God.” Only within the context of the supernatural can we make any sense out of Baldwin’s directive that we must demand the impossible. It is important to recall in this context that Baldwin began his young adulthood as a Pentecostal preacher, and that much of his greatest writing takes the form of the jeremiad, railing against society’s grave injustices.

Furthermore, Baldwin insists that the achievement of the impossible must be regarded as a “perpetual” undertaking—a keyword bringing to mind some of Abraham Lincoln’s arguments of his First Inaugural Address (1861) and elsewhere, insofar as the finite historical America becomes transposed to the realm of the eternal. The perpe-
tuity of the American vision, say both Baldwin and Lincoln, eventually must "change the history of the world." Baldwin essentially ends this volume by insisting that we must long for the achievement of our nation, or else we must face the certainty of a judgment of God not unlike the cataclysms of the book of Genesis—this time, as the book's title reminds us, not by water but by fire. Thus, the final words of the book, not to mention its title, place the book's argument firmly in the biblical tradition of the jeremiad, meaning that we must look again to the very foundations of the vision or else be relegated to the growing decline that comes from the removal of God's good graces and the substitution of God's wrath. Put more simply, Baldwin demonstrates a powerful desire to continue regarding America as a story still unfolding, whose end is the promised land of hope—with "America" itself as the object-cause of desire.

But what precisely is this "perpetual achievement of the impossible"? How does Baldwin define it? And how will this vision of human community, whatever it is, contribute to "change the history of the world"? Baldwin never says. And yet such an evasion is not uncommon among some of the greatest visionaries of the American spirit. For example, here is the master of evasion himself, Abraham Lincoln, describing the sublime object of desire that made the Declaration of Independence such a special document:

I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this confederacy so long together. It was... something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future times. (213)

The American hope, for Lincoln, is somehow subordinate to a greater hope, a cosmic hope in which the American version is perhaps the great exemplar in human history. And this cosmic hope transcends language's ability to contain it. Even for Lincoln, the object of American hope is, to some extent, impossible: impossible to name, impossible to define, and impossible to embody completely.

Baldwin's visionary ending has certain affinities with Lincoln's famous effusions. And both Baldwin and Lincoln share a rhetorical burden that is in keeping with what Paul Ricoeur has called "the task of a hermeneutics of the Resurrection," which is "to reinstitute the potential of hope, to tell the future of the Resurrection." Though they do not speak necessarily in a Christian idiom, they both share a passionate desire to see the ideas of America completely fulfilled, and they both have founded their desires on a belief in the promise of America as cosmic reality. And yet Baldwin's goal of outlining the specifics of the future is clouded and partial. He is well aware, like Lincoln, that we all now see as in a glass, darkly. The future hope of America remains murky and indistinct, though it is clearly filled with the resurrection power of hopefulness that is beyond the good graces of mankind.

Vague though the object of our efforts might be, Baldwin remains passionate about it. Thus, for Baldwin, hope is transcendental and so is his view of American history. According to Baldwin's vision at the end of The Fire Next Time, American hope consists of the possibility of the impossible, and we must be passionate about it. Like its far more famous counterpart of 1963, King's "I Have a Dream" speech, this yearning for the possibility of the impossible constitutes the burden of Baldwin's message. And, also like King, he refuses to give up on the idea of America, the meaning and purpose of our nation, and the genuine hope that together, we Americans can stride forward toward a more fully embodied version of the beloved community. In this sense, Baldwin, though he has attained over the years a bit of a reputation for rage and anger (which are key elements of his prophetic vision), has a lot more in common with the radical message of Martin Luther King than he does with the increasingly separatist and inflammatory politics of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Instead, Baldwin was holding out for another country, a different kind of community, though he never lived to see it—at least in this life. ♦

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music

Still Haven't Found What You're Looking For?

JACQUI NAYLOR doesn't breathe, she sings. Her flexible alto employs none of the breathiness that currently defines jazz/blues/lounge singing. Neither is she “whispery,” “kittenish,” “world-weary,” or “resigned.” Naylor is rather world-enthralled. This San Francisco-based singer possesses a grounded and grounding peace that imbues her every performance with joy and warmth.

With today's emphasis on the sultry and sexy, female jazz vocalists are less honest. So many believe they are carrying on the tradition of Billie Holiday, when really they are coming more from Josephine Baker. It seems even in the most intimate moments one can hear the bustle and buzz of star time in the background. While this rapacity for glamour gnashes its teeth behind slick packaging, it is a relief to encounter an artist whose work can say not “look at me,” but “listen to this.” That “this” can include such well-worn standards as “My Funny Valentine” and “But Not for Me” is even more encouraging. Undeniably attractive, Naylor welcomes a listener into repose with the attention she gives to music over cleavage and legging. It is singers of such simplicity and unselfconsciousness who can truly claim the Holiday legacy: lost in reverie but speaking directly to you.

The first time I heard this artist was on a one-track freebie promoting a January 2002 gig in Oakland. Irving Berlin's “I Got The Sun in the Morning” came from her second album, *Live at the Plush Room*, and I found it stunning. A performance of such gravity, lightness, humor, and subtlety I had never heard before. Naylor's is a voice and vocal style that commands attention to every sound and syllable. From her mouth, the simple tune rises from happy-go-lucky acceptance to credo, from being thankful for what one has to considering the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. This remains a favorite track, and I've paid close attention to Naylor's career ever since. I have never once felt manipulated by packaging or performance.

Last November she released *Smashed for the Holidays*, her sixth CD on her own Ruby Records label. The “smashed” of the title does not refer to inebriation but to an artistic trademark of Naylor and her augmented trio, “acoustic smashing.” The move here is for Jacqui to sing a particular song—pop, jazz, holiday standard—while the band plays a different well-known tune behind her. For *Smashed* this meant “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” over Lynyrd Skynyrd's “Sweet Home Alabama,” “Santa Baby” fit to the groove of Led Zeppelin's “D'yer Mak'er,” and “We Three Kings” smashed with another Zep classic, “When the Levee Breaks.”

The disc is filled out with other less iconoclastic covers, including that of the Kinks' “Father Christmas,” and one of her best original songs, the hard-edged “Christmas Ain't What it Used to Be.” A delightful release, *Smashed* is nonetheless a placeholder—not quite product, but a crowd-stoking collection of imaginative performances that show her at her best, five of which appear elsewhere. Naylor the singer is in fine voice; Naylor the recording artist is at a crucial point in her career.

The previous release, *The Color Five* (2006), was unfortunately her weakest, due to conflicting themes and poor choices in material. It also contains some of the best, most affecting vocal performances of her career. Such is the conundrum.

First, the acoustic smashing thing was already over for me. Whipping together “Summertime” with the Allman Brothers' “Whipping Post” is brilliant; calling out “Love for Sale” over Bill Wither's “Use Me” was appropriately clever. The rest of the experiments are unsuccessful, including “I Still
Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" done to Miles Davis's "All Blues," the first time a performance of hers seemed to lack depth. Second, Five includes only five originals, only one of which (the sweet-hearted "Easy Ride From Here") distinguishes itself from her earlier material. Third, the covers are all over the place, from annoying to just okay. "Blue Moon" and "You Don't Know What Love Is" done true to form are nice. While setting the Kinks' "Lola" to a Hammond B-3 groove is unnecessary—and fun only once—doing Rod Stewart's "Hot Legs" in any way, shape, or form is just a bad idea. The album has trouble recovering from that second-track gaffe, and it is only when Naylor plays it straight that she comes up with some memorable and moving performances.

One is found in a song you thought you knew, REM's "Losing My Religion." Free of its hit-single associations, it loses its clenched-fist frustration (always offset by an interweaved tenderness) to be revealed as a prayer, and a three-way prayer at that: the singer opens her heart to allow Jesus access to her needs, while addressing the "you" that has occasioned those needs. To whom has she "said too much" (or maybe hasn't said enough)? Presented only with piano, classical guitar, and soft percussion, Yoon Ki Chai's violin explores the lingering implications of words like "dream" and "try" as they pass, dark octagonal leaves blowing by a chimney.

American Idol America is used to the phenomenon of "oversouling." Once reserved for awful renditions of the national anthem, oversouling is the larcenous habit of covering a lack of interpretive originality with meaningless melismatic mannerisms intended to evoke memories of "soul"—something the artist is not honest enough to have. A purely imitative display, oversouling is a cheap shot that plays to nostalgia and technical skill, not communication.

Naylor so rarely plays the soul card at all that it is a thrill to hear her put her incredible voice into an R&B ballad. What sounds like a soul classic revisited is actually a song from a few years ago by Brooklyn-based indie artist Dayna Kurtz. "Love Gets in the Way" is a chance for Naylor to wring from every line of a Memphis-flavored melody all the waste and waiting of a series of stabs at freedom and passion revealed as lacking in love. We should be thankful she got to the song before Joe Cocker, or we'd already be sick of it.

Naylor's voice is interesting. Some of this is accidental—its timbre, the way certain words are pronounced; the rest is what she does with it. There is a dry, quavery quality that suggests something more than vulnerability. A song like James Taylor's "Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight" (on Live East/West, 2005) becomes not a story about a feeling but a story about a song. For Naylor, a melody is mined not for its emotional potential alone, but for how she can express this potential with new ideas and trenchant phrasing. One can listen to her as well as through her.

Her first two albums, Jacqui Naylor and Live at the Plush Room, are composed of American Songbook classics. The excellent third album, Shelter (2003), introduced original material (written with pianist/guitarist Art Khu). Her songwriting is soft and joyful, swirling around such themes as friendship, children, and happy love. While she totally nails the "Cheese Puff Daddies" of a few of her songs, she rarely ventures into rancorous heartbreak or rage. There is a beauty in this woman that blows against culture's prevailing winds of no-change.

However, Shelter's greatest moments come from outside. Her rendition of the Rolling Stones' "Miss You" is not to be missed, managing to revel in its novelty without being untrue to the song's emotional purpose. Khu and Joseph Wilson wrote the soulful memorial "I Remember You." It is a song of peace, perseverance, and personal integrity, a song that feels more like a friend every time you hear it.

Live East/West is where acoustic smashing comes into its own. The presentations are understated, but Naylor holds her own against a heavy backbeat, especially on a Zeppelinized version of "Black Coffee." She fuses the Talking Heads' "Once in a Lifetime" with Weather Report's "Birdland," and delivers the all-purpose political commentary of "For What It's Worth" atop the groove of "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy." This last one really works, but it is the straighter moments that connect best: her treatment of "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow" is pure succor to adult ears, no longer a teenager's plea. Her sweet, soaring performance of Jimi Hendrix's "Angel" rivals Rod
Stewart's. While, considering the drama of the original, Naylor's "Me and Mr(s). Jones" is almost too subtle. Of the new originals, the standouts are "Thank You Baby" and "Don't Let the Bastard Get You Down"—good advice during the waning reign of Bush II.

These are four-star albums (with East/West edging toward five), and while you should neither host nor attend a Christmas party this year without Smashed in hand, these releases are the place to begin. Free of ennui and the need to sell herself, Jacqui Naylor comes off believably cool. Standing barefoot on stage, swaying slightly, she'll close her eyes above a satisfied smile. With every line Naylor invites you to be still, feel the breeze, the sun on your face—to, as she sings on The Color Five, "Sit and Rest Awhile."

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BACK TO THE LOOKING GLASS

Alice at eighty, undressing by moonlight
After a power outage that has visited
Her flat in Chelsea and erased all access
To its familiar furnishings: faucets, knobs,
All handholds—crosses the doddering floor
To stand at the armoire and assess the passage
Of years elapsed, this side of the mirrored
Doors that once opened to otherwhere travels
Under cat-inhabited trees; York and Lancaster
At war again through rivalrous Queens;
A lion and witch accidentally closeted there
From somebody else's wardrobe. Now moonlight
Moves serpentine over the figured carpet,
Disfiguring Alice as she turns full-frontal
In undress to the doors, that dislodge in token
Of recognition, giving their glimmer of inward:
Old dancing dresses lifting each other's hems,
Hung on the bony arms of hangers crooking
Their talons over the metal rod and sliding
To make room for Alice's unsteady entry:
One slipper, then the second slipper, cautiously
Over the moonslime of a century, into its cunning
Corridors where Mr. Dodgson waits with his hooded Camera and the urgent Rabbit with his pocket
Watch is saying "Hurry up, please, it's time."

Nancy G. Westerfield

First published in German in 1986 and in English in 1987, this fictional narrative by renowned New Testament scholar Gerd Theissen has become a classic among novels about Jesus. The difference between the new English edition and that of 1987 is the addition of an afterword in which Theissen explains the primary epistemological purposes of the book. I will return to these later.

The story centers on Andreas, a wealthy Jewish merchant from Sepphoris in Galilee. Andreas finds himself imprisoned by the Romans in Jerusalem because of a general round-up during a riot. In order to be freed, Andreas reluctantly agrees to become a spy for the Romans who are nervous about several groups present in Palestine at the time, including the Zealots, the Essenes, John the Baptist, Jesus, and their associates. As Andreas travels about the Galilee, he meets representatives of some of these groups, and at one point is kidnapped by some Zealots and kept in a cave where he meets up with his old friend now turned zealot, Barabbas. During the night, while others are sleeping, Andreas and Barabbas have a secret conversation in which Barabbas speaks of a man, Simon, who had left the zealots to follow Jesus. Through Simon, Barabbas has learned of Jesus' "eccentric" teachings on nonviolence and loving one's enemies, which Barabbas deems crazy in light of the injustice that pervades the land. Of course, this is the Barabbas who later is arrested and set free, instead of Jesus, by Pontius Pilate.

It is through conversations with other people, therefore, that Andreas learns about Jesus. He never talks to him and sees him only once—on the cross—after he is already dead. As Andreas moves about and meets people from all walks of life who have encountered Jesus and report his deeds and quote his words, he becomes more fascinated by and sympathetic to the man from Galilee. A scene that will remain a personal favorite is when Andreas shares a meal with a toll collector named Kostabar (who had replaced Levi). At one point, a band of marginal figures including a half-deranged person, a toothless elderly man on crutches, and a bunch of beggar children come near, wanting some food. The old man croaks Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-10; Luke 14:16-24) at Andreas and Kostabar, while the rest chime in with Jesus' teachings about giving rest to the weary. Kostabar listens to their words, then adds a longer ending to the parable of the banquet, after which the children shout defiantly that Jesus never provided such an ending, that Kostabar's addition is a lie. What Kostabar had said is actually unique to Matthew's gospel (Matthew 22:11-14), and most scholars do not think it original to the parable. Thus Theissen provides an illustration of developments in oral tradition. As stories were told and retold, they were altered and often expanded, even to the point of distorting almost beyond recognition what may have been the original.

Thus throughout the book is a smattering of Jesus' teachings, some of which Andreas includes in his written reports to the Romans in addition to providing his own sympathetic interpretation of the Galilean. One of these "reports" is called "On Jesus as a Poet," which focuses upon the parables, while another is "Jesus as a Philosopher," which compares Jesus to itinerant Cynics, who constantly challenge the status quo and roam throughout the countryside, villages, and towns with few belongings, no family, and without settling in one place. Andreas writes about Jesus in
a way that explains why he causes some agitation but nonetheless presents him as harmless to the Romans. He keeps quiet about things that would certainly upset the authorities, such as Jesus' "anti-family" statements (e.g., "Let the dead bury their own dead"), his direct undermining of state rule with utterances such as "Whoever would be first, let him be last and slave of all," or his attacks upon the Temple in Jerusalem.

These "political" dimensions of Jesus' teaching are very important to Theissen, and he states clearly in the afterword that one of the epistemological goals of the book is to stress that "Jesus' preaching can be understood only in the context of extreme social conflict. His message has great potential to change our life together as human beings" (182).

As Andreas journeys about Galilee, he encounters people whose village and family cohesions have been disrupted because of economic and political injustices that provoke some to join the Zealots, others the Essenes, and still others the band of Jesus' followers. In stressing these social and economic factors, Theissen is consistent with his scholarly work on the Jesus movement here. His endnotes and discussion of sources in an appendix equip the interested reader with tools for further study. Sometimes, however, there are mistakes, such as the notion that Zealots existed during the time of Jesus (it appears that the Zealots emerged later).

A second chief goal of the book is to underline the importance of Judaism for Jesus. Theissen writes that "Christian love of Jesus is... incomplete unless it also displays a deep appreciation for Judaism" (181). Theissen illustrates this appreciation through the Roman official Metilius, the original questioner of Andreas, who at the beginning of the book is deeply suspicious of Judaism but by the end develops a deep respect for the religion.

Another dimension of the book important to mention is Theissen's practice of inserting letters to a certain Dr. Kratzinger between each chapter. These letters are to a New Testament scholar who is suspicious of the whole enterprise. In fact, this fictional person is based upon the former prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger, who is now, of course, Pope Benedict XVI. The Congregation had once rejected a thesis Theissen wrote about the Jesus movement that argued it was primarily composed of radical itinerants. Apparently a Roman Catholic colleague had transformed Theissen's thesis into a popular book and had to answer for it to the Congregation, eventually satisfying its members. This event "inspired" Theissen to call his imaginary critic Kratzinger. Although these letters might have explanatory power for some readers, I found them to be distracting, and they interrupted the flow of the narrative. Just as I was being pulled into the story, another letter appeared offering explanation for the previous chapter. As they were essentially didactic in nature, they might better have been condensed somehow into an overall introduction or perhaps another appendix.

Although the subtitle of the book refers to the historical Jesus, Theissen's novel does not present the reader with a single historical figure, despite his emphases upon social justice and Jesus as a Jew. I do not think that many scholars today would dispute these two latter points, although they may argue about what kind of Jew Jesus was and what was the nature of his call for justice (on debates about these points, especially the former, see William E. Arnal, The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism, and the Construction of Contemporary Identity [London: Equinox, 2005]). Because Andreas never actually sees Jesus until Jesus is dead, the aim seems to be that a definitive picture of Jesus is not possible. In both the ancient world and today, understandings of Jesus are always filtered through the perceptions of the observer. A single historical Jesus cannot be found. However, it is fair to say that some views of Jesus are much better, or perhaps more accurate, than others. Jesus cannot and should not be turned into whatever one wants him to be, despite the many examples of such distortions throughout history. Thus Theissen's book serves to root Jesus in a dynamic social context without proclaiming or even arguing for a final picture of the historical figure.

The Shadow of the Galilean does not rank in my mind as an outstanding literary accomplishment, but it is compelling and interesting to read, and, most importantly, it attempts to keep Jesus on
the ground. Theissen is highly respected for his scholarship, especially his emphasis on understanding the social world of the New Testament. In this book, the reader is offered a glimpse of his considerable creative abilities and illustrations, at times, of his theological inclinations. But perhaps the novel’s greatest asset is the fact that it renders a considerable service by introducing some longstanding scholarly questions and issues about Jesus in an engaging and accessible way to a popular audience. Although historical work must continue on the figure of Jesus and his world, The Shadow of the Galilean is a good starting point for those interested in these ongoing questions.

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THINNING THISTLES

Like any of us hedging bets against uncertainty, they flower in waves, each plant reaching the height of summer repeatedly while its neighbor heeds another almanac. If Darwin’s right, the smallest plants will thrive escaping the blade every time I pass by, nectar sweet as barb is sharp, judging by the pollen heavy bumble bee, red admiral, buckeye, or the migratory monarch lingering here, fueling for the long flight. The stratosphere carries news of fires across the border. Not fooled by this seemingly placid afternoon, thistles stand guard as seeds take wing, sentries against the unforeseen.

Christian Knoeller
One year before his death in 1987, Joseph Sittler concluded an essay entitled “The Necessity and Embarrassment of Choice” with these words:

When the apostle [Paul] addressed the people of the Colossian congregation, having sharply reminded them in the early part of the letter about both their faith and their obligation, he used the interesting phrase “redeeming the time” (Col. 4:5, KJV). Now to know what in one’s time one ought to make an effort to redeem depends on what one finds damnation to be. Redemption is a meaningful possibility only in the presence of damnation.

I am not altogether sure that there is an absolutely clear, moral way to respond to many of the issues of our time. But I am absolutely clear that there is such a massive damnation existing in our time that if the church does not think and act on it, we will call down rightful judgment on ourselves.

Those familiar with the career of this distinguished Lutheran theologian will not be surprised that Sittler goes on to define this “massive damnation” as ecological catastrophe, which in his context (if not still in ours) was embodied most urgently by the nuclear arms race: “For the first time in mortal history we have the opportunity to annihilate God’s earthly creation.” When envisioning this possibility, Sittler poignantly depicts his grandchildren, on the eve of “incineration,” asking him what he had been doing while the buildup to catastrophe was taking place. “How awful it would be,” he says, “if I were to say that I spent my time simply talking about God” (1986, 107).

In many respects, this strikingly blunt and even disconcerting passage encapsulates much of what remains so fecund in Sittler’s theology. Across the course of nearly six decades of teaching at the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and in several hundred essays, books, and speeches, Sittler (1904–1987) honed a way of speaking (and a way of teaching church leaders to speak) that refused easy pieties in favor of unsparing description of the human situation as he saw it. The reason for this style is deeply theological: only in describing reality in all its stark frailty can the Christian speak of grace in all its surprising fullness, or “ever-expanding scope,” as Sittler liked to put it. Like Luther, his writings embody the maxim that a real theologian “calls the thing what it truly is,” because the speaking of truth and the preaching of grace are inextricable from each other. The Reformation’s powerful and ongoing witness to the centrality of grace was born from the existential terror of refusing to call damnation anything other than what it is. Likewise, while those of us accustomed to envisioning the state of “damnation” in more otherworldly terms may balk at hearing it applied to environmental destruction, one is hard-pressed to describe the pathos of the encounter that Sittler envisions between himself and the grandchildren whose parents have failed them without some recourse to the language of God-forsakenness.

Sittler’s lifelong theological engagement with environmental issues began in the late 1940s—decades before notions of “ecology” and environmentalism had seeped into public consciousness. His decision to focus years of his theological career on the ecological crises that were gathering in his time (and that have, by any sober calculation, only moved closer in ours) was not a matter of taking a system of prefabricated theological categories and applying them arbitrarily to a current “big issue.” Rather, what made Sittler a pioneer in ecological theology is the way his theology blends our
created kinship with God's creation with a doctrine of Christ's redemptive work that gives the church an opportunity to speak of this redemption on an appropriately massive scale.

For Sittler, the church is always at risk of making our language of redemption and grace too narrow in scope. While I may derive some temporary comfort from imagining (or witnessing to) grace as a kind of private transaction between myself and God, or perhaps between my fellow humans and God, this kind of thinking reduces creation to a dispensable stage upon which the guilty soul's inner drama plays itself out. Sittler was adamant in naming such a view of creation as "blasphemous," because for him it directly impugned the Bible's own testimony about creation as the site of Christ's redemptive work (as in Colossians 1:15-20). As he put it, "When millions of the world's people, inside the church and outside of it, know that damnation now threatens nature as absolutely as it has always threatened men and societies in history, it is not likely that witness to a light that does not enfold and illumine the world-as-nature will be even comprehensible." Such a witness, insists Sittler, "must be made in redemptive terms that are forged in the furnace of man's crucial engagement with nature as both potential to blessedness and potential to hell" (1962, 45). This means going beyond "simply talking about God," that is, taking refuge in such bromides as the assurance of individual salvation in the face of creation's ravaging (again, blasphemy) or the assumption that God simply will intervene to avert disaster in a miraculous fashion (which Sittler viewed as a most un-Christian quietism in the face of another's suffering, in this case the "other" of creation itself). It means understanding that Christian witness has a deep stake in how humanity uses its God-given potentialities to shape, or destroy, our fellow creatures. It also means locating the grace embedded in, not abstracted from, these activities.

Fortunately, Sittler was equally convinced that the church does indeed possess the "redemptive terms" necessary for speaking the amplitude of grace. If one cannot, as he says, speak meaningfully about redemption except in the presence of damnation, then the people of Christ can discern that the reverse is also true: when damnation looms as a live possibility for God's creation, there the Gospel-tuned ear can discern the strains of Christ's redemptive work at play amidst the cacophony of creation's suffering. A "works-righteousness" environmental theologian would have the church role up its sleeves and take the burden of salvaging creation wholly onto its own inadequate shoulders. The theologian of grace, however, invites us to follow our Lord and, in Luther's terms, to "become as it were a Christ to the other," not to create grace where it is not present but rather to respond to grace where it is found. For Sittler, this space of grace's dwelling is nothing less than the whole cosmos: "Unless the reference and the power of the redemptive act include the whole of man's experience and environment, straight out to its farthest horizon, then the redemption is incomplete." And the task of the church is to bear witness to the sheer size of grace's redemptive arc, and to fashion its work in creation accordingly. "When atoms are disposable to the ultimate hurt then the very atoms must be reclaimed for God and his will" (1962, 40).

What might this work look like? The core of Lutheran ethics is gratitude: works of love done for the neighbor in grateful response to the grace that God in Christ has shown to us. When we ask the question of how we might extend this response of gratitude to creation as our fellow creature, Sittler reminds us that discerning the presence of grace at work amidst the earth's resources helps us to refrain from the abuse of creation (which Sittler defines simply as "use without grace") and towards "enjoyment," that is, use that recognizes the earth's resources not as sources of divinity in themselves (as paganism would have it) but as sites of divine redemption (cf. Sittler 1963). To engage the particulars of what such "use with grace" would look like is the task of the whole planet, both within and outside of the church's walls; and indeed, there is reason to believe that our planet will soon need every scientist, economist, and world leader to be unswervingly fixed upon that mission. To speak the word of grace that is large enough to bring real gospel to the scene, however, is the task that our Lord has entrusted to the church. This is the indispensable role of Christian witness as it is given in baptism itself.

In a time when religious discourse on ecology has largely been dominated by voices lambasting the Christian tradition by assuring the church that its fixation upon Christ as the mediator of salvation can only lead to otherworldliness and disregard for
the earth, then the church might do well to revisit the witness of a theologian who spent a lifetime placing Christ exactly where the Bible does—at the alpha and omega of creation, inviting his disciples to join in the ongoing drama of redemption in which the "theater of grace" is as much the beneficiary of redemption as the actors working to care for it.

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WAKING UP IN THE HOUSE OF MEN
(for the Millers)

A warm but not a Spring morning, the sort of March day that drags winter just behind it like a dirty blanket,

and when I awake, killdeer peels—the first of the year—shower out of the sky.

I watch the Zumbro River as my hosts, a father and son finding their way back to dailiness,

make breakfast. Her absence still sits at table with them, but they will not cry today.

Here is a house of men who say grace; men who embrace, bravely and with resignation, their new ceremonies of ground coffee; men whose trust in God is as lumpy and as certain as morning oatmeal.

James Silas Rogers

Bibliography


The church has been compared to a ship, and the ideal of today’s shipbuilders seems to be either the tanker, holding as much as possible, or the speedboat, able to navigate sharply in a changing world. On the northwestern Minnesota plains, the rural parish I serve is a ship with a slow-moving rudder, more like a pontoon boat, and that is its beauty.

The rumors are true: rural churches don’t change quickly, which is an aggravation to new pastors like me, especially having imbibed stuff at the seminary about open systems, adaptability, and whatnot. Pastors love to complain about this sort of thing. You’ve heard the one about how many Lutherans it takes to change a light bulb. (“Change?”) I suppose you could add a rural twist by suggesting that we haven’t even made the leap to electric lights. I want to move forward, so the complaint goes, but they’re holding me back. I want to move the pews around, make the move from the green book to the red book, experiment with small groups, evangelize the neighbors, switch from Folgers to fair-trade, but everyone is too afraid of change. We’re stuck in the past.

Perhaps the problem, though, is with young buck pastors who think the church’s future depends on their cutting-edge visions and also with older buck pastors who have become bored with the basics and think it’s time for fresh air. These days, so much coming out of our denominational leadership is innovative and heterodox. Read Psalm 78:52 in most any translation and then compare it in the ELCA’s new ELW hymnal in which God’s people have become the people in order to avoid masculine pronouns. Thank God we have churches that don’t move so quickly, that don’t jump on every bandwagon. What has speed to do, really, with faith?

Rural churches are slow moving. Fine. That aggravates pastors, including this one. But don’t let anyone tell you these rural churches are closed systems. It is popular at seminaries, workshops, and synod assemblies to glorify the open system, the organization where change happens quickly and people adapt to new circumstances, and just as popular to boo churches in closed systems, where the constitution is out of date and the same liturgy has been used for thirty years.

I recall a professor at seminary asking us to brainstorm evidence of churches in closed systems. He gave the example of churches next to cemetery plots. I suppose to a sociological mind, a cemetery is a closed system, what with the dead just lying there and all, maintaining such a visible connection to our past. To the eyes of faith, though, a cemetery is the most dynamic thing in this world. Has not Christ promised that the dead will hear his voice and come out of their graves? If for this life only we have hoped, if a cemetery is indeed a closed system, then we are most to be pitied. One of my churches has a cemetery next to the building, and while to the eyes of this world it might look like a closed system, to the eyes of faith it looks like one big springboard.

Slow isn’t the same as stuck. There are plenty of ways rural churches look stuck in the past, but a person has to listen only for a while to get a sense of the open and future-leaning nature of the rural church. Just because we have a slow rudder doesn’t mean we’re not moving. My parishioners don’t seem to mind that I talk about sin and forgiveness.

It may be an old-fashioned paradigm—although it is at the center of our confessional and scriptural witness—but each week we confess our sins, and I absolve them in Christ’s name.

In the 1980s some were concerned that confession of sin was bad for a person’s psyche, and today we have more appealing, celebratory alternatives in our worship resources, such as a liturgical thanksgiving for baptism. But my people of...
the plains don't put up a fuss about having their sins forgiven. Perhaps Luther was correct that where there is forgiveness there is also life and salvation and that the Holy Spirit calls and gathers people through this gospel.

On their worship notes, my confirmation students indicate which part of the service was most important for them, and I have been surprised by how often they check Confession and Forgiveness. With these dusty words, it seems God is breaking down walls and calling his people together. It seems that sin really won't stand between us and the future God has given us. Are we moving slowly in this old world? Yes. But by faith we already live in the kingdom of God, where we are his new people, reborn each day in repentance and in his word. What has speed to do with faith?

The calls for change are shibboleth as much as anything. While each advocate for change has his or her own particular demands, the word change has come to be a general rallying cry, a vacuous charge aimed at unifying everyone who is discontent with the state of things. Here are the ingredients of this cocktail: a church that is declining in numbers and a culture that is commonly agreed to be in rapid flux. Shake and serve.

We want change because we see a church in ruins and think we need to fix it quickly. Youth are dropping out, churches are closing their doors, and so on—but do something to stem the flow!

Many years ago the church found itself in ruins, quite literally, worse than it is today by any measurable standard. The temple had been burned to the ground and the people were just returning from exile. The church needed something fast. Hostile neighbors were threatening every attempt at reconstruction. In the midst of this, two men did something quite old-fashioned. They prophesied. They preached straight-up law and gospel, and look what God did with their words. Haggai and Zechariah charged the people with ignoring the Lord's house, and they reproved them for their evil ways and deeds. But they also spoke the good news that the Lord was with his people and that he would make them prosperous and defend them like a wall of fire. An old paradigm if ever there was one, but "the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah" (Ezra 6:14).

The trying thing about all this is that God comes in his own time. He sends preachers in his own time. He gives the Holy Spirit and makes believers when he chooses. It's indicative of our lack of faith that preachers try everything and try to change everything rather than doing the one thing they're really called to do and the one thing that has power really to change anything: preach law and gospel; preach the forgiveness of sins.

And what changes will we see? Likely we'll see little change. We'll still look like a pontoon boat. But if we trust our ears rather than our eyes, then we'll trust that God has made us into a boat bound for the Promised Land, just as he has promised through his prophets, just as he continues to promise through his slow-moving, unchanging—and all too often impatient and unbelieving—preachers.

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Behind the Scenes at the Supreme Court


Jan Crawford Greenburg's *Supreme Conflict: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Control of the United States Supreme Court* follows membership changes on the Court from the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor in 1981 to the appointment of Samuel Alito in 2005. The author focuses on Presidential nominations, Senatorial confirmation, internal dynamics of the Court, and how membership changes alter that chemistry. Greenburg also explains the operations inside the court and the writing and issuing of decisions.

The author accomplishes these tasks with both scholarly and humorous results. She has produced one of the most insightful books on the Supreme Court in years, perhaps the most important since Woodward and Armstrong's seminal and controversial book, *The Brethren* (1979). Along with the tremendous quantity of information on the development of the current court, she manages to work in a surprising number of entertaining anecdotes. Overall, the flow of the book makes for an enjoyable read.

My first point of praise for the book involves the excellent detail and yet remarkably concise nature of the book. Greenburg interviewed everyone she could find who was remotely related to this twenty-four year time span. She interviewed every justice who was alive and agreed to talk to her (nine did so), along with every nominee, people on the short list for getting a nomination, law clerks, family members, and former co-workers. She also performed archival work, read diaries, asked for access to justices' notes, and looked through papers at presidential libraries.

It is difficult to get current and detailed information about the workings of the Supreme Court. It is an incredibly closed institution. The only product coming out of the Supreme Court is its decisions. Justices do not make public statements about the cases they are deciding. And, while justices do make speeches, they pride themselves on not discussing hypothetical situations or real cases the court is currently hearing and deciding.

In light of this, Greenburg presents remarkable details about every stage of the nomination process, as well as the phases of the decision-making process. Greenburg captures the uniqueness and oddness of the institution with a variety of details, both judicial and personal. The justices pass notes, memos, and decisions back and forth. In most cases, they do this instead of talking face to face with each other or having extended conversations in conference meetings. The reader is presented with details of decision writing and shown how the numbers in the majority shift back-and-forth from the first conference vote until the day the decision is issued. On several of the cases Greenburg writes about, these details were not previously known.

The author also does a nice job unearthing the truth about commonly accepted misperceptions of the Court. One commonly reported misperception is that as soon as Clarence Thomas joined the court, he fell in line with Antonin Scalia. Instead of making his own decision, he simply voted with Scalia. Greenburg reveals that in truth, it was Scalia who fell in step behind Thomas's opinions. The media called Thomas "Scalia's puppet," but Greenburg argues that the persuasion actually went in the other direction.

A second area of praise for the book is how Greenburg captures the dynamics of appointments. Greenburg points out the simple reasons a nominee can be eliminated: a single court decision making the White House think it would be a difficult nomination, lack of willingness to move to DC, or a lack of will to go through the now painful vetting process.
For example, the nomination of Anthony Kennedy took place after Robert Bork was voted down in the Senate, and the second nominee, Douglas Ginsburg, withdrew after admitting to drug use. Additionally, the public was still reeling from the Senate investigation of the Iran-Contra affair. The author writes,

Kennedy's confirmation in 1988 came only after a spectacular combination of strategic blunders and humiliating revelations that led a White House in the final months of Ronald Reagan's presidency to grab desperately on to the last confirmable man standing. Adamantly opposed by high-ranking officials in the Justice Department, Kennedy had stood by quietly as other prospects were destroyed or self-destructed. His president, wounded and weakened, had little choice but to send him out to the battlefield next, even while the carnage was still being carried away. Kennedy is living proof that despite a president's efforts to change the direction of the Court, politics—both in the White House making the nomination and in the Senate voting on confirmation—sometimes force a different path." (37)

Greenburg's book also includes a revealing look at the nomination process of another nominee, David Souter. Greenburg describes the selection of Souter over the now infamous (but at the time, simply a high quality government lawyer) Kenneth Starr. Souter was from the home state of John Sununu, George H. W. Bush's Chief of Staff. Sununu had Bush's ear, and he had connections to New Hampshire. Even though Souter's experience as a federal judge included only one day of full hearings and members of the Justice Department doubted whether he was a reliable conservative, he was chosen. It came down to Sununu, New Hampshire, and Bush's need for speed after Reagan's drawn out confirmation of Kennedy. Ultimately, the television show The West Wing got it right: an odd combination of factors influence Supreme Court nominations. Choices depend on the strategy of presidential selections, the personalities in the White House and Justice Department, political capital, presidential public approval, and current events.

The third praiseworthy aspect of Greenburg's book is her unveiling of the important role of personality in decision-making. Greenburg writes about how liberals on the court, such as Brennan and Marshall, pushed O'Connor to the conservative side of the case and about how the brash and sometimes rude conduct of Scalia and Thomas pushed her to side with the more moderate and liberal justices. With the replacement of Thurgood Marshall with Thomas, in one term O'Connor went from being pushed in one direction to the opposite. Connor's reaction to this push became obvious in some of the decisions she wrote after Thomas joined the court. Greenburg writes of O'Connor's decisions:

Rarely do justices repeatedly single out an author by name, and certainly not with that startling frequency. Instead, they often name the justice in a footnote or merely refer to the "majority opinion" or the "dissent. But O'Connor was brutal, paragraph after paragraph. She didn't disagree with Thomas on the outcome, but she delivered a stinging lecture on how he'd summarized the law. Justice Thomas errs in describing the history of habeas corpus law, she said. Justice Thomas quotes Justice Powell's opinion out of context, she said... On and on, eighteen times. (136)

After reading this opinion, Stevens and Blackmun quickly joined O'Connor's decision. Personality mattered to O'Connor, and she could bring other justices along with her.

In terms of personality, Kennedy cares about reaction from the public, while Thomas almost invites criticism and celebrates his solo approach (the more media criticism, the better). Each of these personality traits comes across in their behavior on the court. Kennedy enjoys discussing cases with his clerks extensively, weighing all sides. Thomas is not afraid to be the lone dissident; in fact, he seems to revel in it. Greenburg gives a concise yet thorough description of each nominee's personality. She wrote of one justice:
Breyer is very much like the classic absent-minded professor, but with a twist. When he arrived at the Supreme Court, employees noticed that he muttered to himself when he walked the hallways. He talked about his "umbrella jokes," which were so obscure they were over most people's heads. But he also brought infectious, almost boyish, enthusiasm to his discussions about the Court's work. He liked to talk, to hash things over. He joined the Court with high hopes of swaying O'Connor, a centrist he believed he could help guide a bit further left. (172)

Greenburg captures the personality of Clinton's other nominee with brevity as well:

That week, White House lawyers contacted two federal appeals court judges, including Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a diminutive intellectual powerhouse who had been a crusader for women's rights when she worked as a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union. Clinton had first met Ginsburg in the 1980s, when she gave a speech at the University of Arkansas Law School at Little Rock while he was governor.... Clinton hadn't spoken to Ginsburg since, but she had impressed him as a trailblazer who'd literally written the book on gender inequality when she taught at Columbia Law School. She offered theories that were inclusive, avoiding an "us versus them" approach, and Clinton thought the fractured Supreme Court would benefit from such a personality. (167)

In one paragraph, Greenburg sums up the career of the justice, why Clinton chose her as a justice, and the role her personality would play in Supreme Court decision-making.

As well researched and written as it is, Supreme Conflict has a few shortcomings. The first criticism is the largest: where are the political science models? Greenburg has written a compelling narrative of Supreme Court changes over a twenty-four year period. However, it is not serious academic research. She wrote as if she needed to recreate the wheel, when in fact, many models of appointments and decision-making are available in existing literature. Her book does not have a theoretical basis, and there is essentially no predictive value in it. She creates a captivating story but leaves the reader wondering how to make calculations about what to expect the next time there is an opening on the Supreme Court. As a journalist, she covers each of the ten Court openings as if they are completely unique events.

The most glaring omission in terms of Supreme Court predictive models is Segal and Spaeth's "Attitudinal Model" (2002). This model, in which ideology overwhelmingly predicts case outcome, is the primary means of Supreme Court analysis among political scientists, yet the author never mentioned it once. Other models are not included either; Malzman, Spriggs, and Wahlbeck's "The Collegial Game" (2000) in particular would have helped Greenburg model her personality details. Greenburg draws attention to O'Connor and Kennedy and their value as "swing" votes on the Supreme Court (a term both of them abhor) but does not look at the fact that they "swing" very seldom. Instead, she prefers to tell a story, leaving the formal modeling to academic circles.

And this leads to a second criticism, the question of audience. The target audience seems to be an intelligent reader who cares about the Supreme Court. However, in some ways, the book is written well above an average reader's level of knowledge of the Supreme Court, yet still well below what would benefit an expert. For instance, Greenburg wrote about cases without giving case names, years, or other specifics. While much of this information is available somewhere else in the book (in other chapters or footnotes), this might be a bit frustrating for many readers. Also, while there is excellent flow overall, sometimes the book lacks details, while at other times it provides too many. Another issue detracting from the book is that even though each chapter is set up to tackle one nomination chronologically from O'Connor to Alito, within each chapter there is significant lurching through time, with many references to past Court members and cases as well as to events that happened long after this nominee is seated on the Court.
The third major criticism of Greenburg is the amount of time she spends on descriptions of very childish behavior and other unnecessary details about Supreme Court members. Yes, the media covered Vice President Cheney’s use of the “f-word” in an exchange with Senator Leahy of Vermont and his reference to a writer for the New York Times a “major league asshole” at a campaign event, thinking the microphones were turned off. Routinely, Congressional leaders attack each other with insults. In general, while most people know politicians likely use this language or engage in such childish behavior, the members of the Supreme Court typically are placed on a higher pedestal. The details revealed in this book certainly knock down the pedestal.

Some readers might enjoy and take pleasure in the amount of personal detail Greenburg reveals. There are many unflattering details about most public personalities if a journalist searches hard enough. However, it is not necessary to know all these details, such as how they pass nasty notes and memos back and forth or how they criticize another member’s “curious letter from a new junior” in a memo to a third justice or that their law clerks gossip, both about cases and justices. An old saying calls attention to the fact that making laws is a lot like making sausage, and no one should see the process. The judicial decision process and the Supreme Court’s internal dynamics belong in that same category.

The last criticism is the book’s lack of in-depth policy analysis. “Analysis of change” is one of the elements to praise; however, there is relatively minimal analysis of policy change because of the changes on the Court. Readers are given introductory information on a variety of issues facing the Court over the last twenty plus years; however, it does not provide an in-depth analysis of policy change. Greenburg chose to do an intense study of the Supreme Court and how it changed over time, and to accomplish that she left out a lot of other elements, including the actual implementation of the policies and the public reactions to their decisions. However, the reason people care about the decisions is not for the decisions themselves, but for the policy impacts these decisions have on society.

She ends the book with broad predictions about the changes that Roberts and Alito will bring to the court: “George W. Bush and his team of lawyers will be shaping the direction of American law and culture long after many of them are dead” (302). Ironically, that is precisely what journalists wrote about Reagan’s appointment of Justice Kennedy, a justice whose first two terms on the Court Greenburg chronicles so well in a chapter entitled, “False Hopes.”

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Works Cited


Choosing a President
Soft Demagoguery and the Personalized Campaign

Peter Meilaender

It’s spring—almost, anyway—and the year is divisible by four, which means that young political scientists’ fancies turn to thoughts of presidential campaigns. Given the length of the current one, it can sometimes be hard to think of much else. Not impossible, to be sure—when a student representative from a campus dormitory contacted me last fall to ask whether I would lead a discussion of the primaries, I agreed, but took pleasure in adding, “But you have to understand that I haven’t really been paying any attention to the campaigns yet.” My professional interest is thus not unbounded, and with respect to campaigns in particular there is a great deal to be said in favor of apathy. Particularly, I might add, on the part of those under about twenty-five years or so of age, who—should their political interest be aroused, as fortunately rarely happens—are prone to irritating displays of folly. Hearing these people quoted on NPR—how do they always find the most obnoxious and self-righteous ones?—makes one appreciate the wisdom of Aristotle’s dictum that “a youth is not a suitable student of political science.”

Yet we happen to be in the middle of a campaign that, as it turns out, is actually pretty interesting. Certainly more so than most. And this is true of the races for both the Democratic and the Republican nominations. As I write this about a week into March, Hilary Clinton has just slowed the Obama coronation by winning the Texas and Ohio primaries, while John McCain has capped an impressive comeback by clinching the Republican nomination. What follows is therefore a reflection on what has been for me one of the most striking aspects of the campaign over the past couple of months—since I actually started paying attention, that is.

In considering this year’s campaign, one almost necessarily begins with Barack Obama. Where did this fellow come from? I admit that I never really thought he had a chance, thought his appeal would wear off as his lack of experience became unmistakably clear and as the success of the “surge” in Iraq made his main substantive selling-point—that he had always been against the war and would bring the troops home quickly—look increasingly wrongheaded. Clearly, I was mistaken. A number of reasons help to explain his continuing appeal. Voters are looking for a fresh face. Obama’s relative lack of experience and his brief tenure in Washington have thus proved to be advantages rather than disadvantages. His message of hope and optimism about the future is not only welcome in a time of war and economic hardship but also appeals to perennial features of the American character. The last American politician to sing this tune so persuasively and successfully was Ronald Reagan. Obama’s multiethnic heritage appeals to Americans wanting to move beyond racial and ethnic clashes, and the success of a black man symbolizes for many the hoped-for possibility that America may finally have overcome the heritage of slavery and racial discrimination. Obama’s own impressive political talents also help account for his success. Furthermore, he is one of the few prominent Democrats able to mention religion without appearing insincere or embarrassed.

But as important as any of these, I think, has been the fact that Obama is, apparently, a rhetorical maestro. I say “apparently” only because, as someone who doesn’t watch television, I never actually have seen Obama give a speech. I thus know his rhetoric only from snippets on the radio (a medium, curiously, in which he does not come across especially well) and through the press. But reports of his eloquence are so universal that I take everyone’s word for it. The extraordinary crowds that gather for his appearances testify both to his skill in delivering a speech and to the appeal of his message. At the heart of that message is change—the buzzword...
that all other candidates, of both parties, felt obliged to parrot after Obama's early and impressive success in Iowa. Change. And hope. Not red states and blue states, but the United States. And, of course, the now ubiquitous, "Yes we can!"

These catchphrases and slogans represent an attitude more than an agenda. I am hardly the first to point out that Obama's speeches contain relatively little of substance. Those who make this point generally follow it up by observing that his campaign's website contains position papers on a range of issues. The point, thus, is not that he doesn't have positions, but that they aren't what he talks about. The most striking thing about Obama's success is that he has achieved so much based upon so little. This interests me less for what it says or does not say about Obama than for what it indicates about our method of choosing a president. I was led to reflect on this while teaching a course this semester on the presidency, and in particular while reading James Ceaser's *Presidential Selection* (1979), one of the best books on the presidency and, for my money, a model of political science at its finest.

Ceaser's book examines how changes in our system of selecting a president have reflected different conceptions of what we hope to accomplish through that choice and of the kind of leadership we expect a president to provide. Among the chief traditional goals of the selection system, Ceaser argues, was the avoidance of demagoguery. He suggests that demagoguery takes two different forms: a "soft" kind, in which candidates flatter the populace and encourage the belief that the people already know what is best; and a second, more dangerous sort, in which candidates attempt to build support for themselves by deliberately playing up and stimulating divisions within the populace, such as class or racial tensions. One of the Founders' purposes in designing the Electoral College was to avoid both these alternatives. By placing the ultimate choice of the president in the hands of a temporary body for whose support no one could effectively campaign, they sought to make the selection of a president turn on a long reputation for impressive public service rather than on demagogic appeals. The development of the two-party system reinforced this restraint by tying would-be candidates to one of two broad and moderate party platforms, thus limiting the value of personalized appeals.

Ceaser locates the decisive transformation in this system in the Progressive era and especially in the thought of Woodrow Wilson. Wilson was deeply antipathetic to traditional parties, believing them incapable of producing the kinds of new, innovative, and inspirational leadership he thought essential to tackling the problems of the modern world while maintaining democratic legitimacy. He therefore sought to weaken the influence of parties over the selection of presidential nominees, hoping instead to free up possibilities for inspirational leadership by outstanding individuals who could go directly to the public for support, thus winning a popular mandate for their programs that would enable them to pull reluctant parties along in their wake. The main Progressive tool for achieving this was the presidential primary, which "democratized" the selection process by moving the choice of candidates out of the hands of party elites and giving it to voters.

As Ceaser points out, it took a number of decades for this new selection system fully to take hold, and it achieved real dominance only in the 1960s and 1970s, when the use of presidential primaries finally gained widespread acceptance. A key lesson of the Obama campaign, in my view, is the impressive extent of the new system's victory. His campaign throws into sharp relief the features of a presidential selection system based upon the primacy of the individual candidate rather than of party. Among those features: candidates self-select, rather than being chosen by parties; they thus bear heavy responsibility for launching and developing their own campaigns and raising their own funds; parties lose their ability to shape the defining issues of campaigns and thus to determine post-election governing agendas; campaigns turn heavily on the personalities and political skills of individual candidates, as well as on their ability to deliver the kind of popular inspiration for which Wilson hoped; campaigns become much longer, as candidates must seek to build the reputation and following that can provide the popular mandate for post-election governance no longer supplied by party affiliation; as a result, campaigns also become significantly more expensive.
Another feature of such a system is the loss of the institutional restraints on demagoguery that Ceaser describes and the Founders sought to establish. It is hard to read Ceaser's description of the "soft" demagogue in 2008 and not immediately think of the Obama campaign: Such a campaign relies on "the use of appeals that [play] up the personal characteristics of contenders in such a way as to stimulate a fascination with dangerous or irrelevant aspects of character, methods which today we might call 'image-building.'" My point in drawing this comparison is not necessarily that Obama is a "soft" demagogue. (Though I am not persuaded that he is not.) He may very well not be, and, indeed, Ceaser himself suggests that it can be difficult to distinguish soft demagoguery from the inspirational rhetorical appeals that statesmen may need to make in order to supply crucial leadership in difficult times. "Leadership in such instances cannot be distinguished from demagoguery by a clear standard." This very fact, however, defines the institutional problem inherent in designing a presidential selection system: Because there is "no institutional arrangement that is capable of distinguishing" reliably between leadership and demagoguery, the "institutional choice is either to place a damper on all such extraordinary forms of leadership or to open the system to them."

The Obama phenomenon shows clearly how far we have moved in the latter direction. The presidential selection system itself at this point exercises very little restraint upon the candidates who present themselves to us or the campaigns they run. For informative campaigns and good presidents we are dependent upon fortune, because the system does little to encourage particular sorts of desirable candidates, platforms, or results. Indeed, though Obama seems to be the most striking example, other candidates in this election season illustrate the point as well. Among the Democrats, only a thoroughly candidate-driven system could produce the relentlessly ambitious Hilary Clinton, with a carpetbagger's New York Senate seat and absurd claims to being the "experienced" candidate. And John Edwards is, if anything, a demagogue of the "harder" variety, with his tiresome and implausible rhetoric of class warfare. As for the Republicans, John McCain more or less came to national prominence as a "maverick" thorn in his own party's side, Mitt Romney's candidacy rested on very little political experience, and Mike Huckabee rode a fairly narrow populist and evangelical appeal as far as it could take him. Indeed, the striking thing about the Republican contest was that in a field of so many contenders, not one appeared to be a natural Republican candidate for president.

Our eventual choice of president thus currently has little to do with factors we might seek to affect through institutional design. It rests largely, rather, on... well, whoever wants to run badly enough. In particular, we have abandoned traditional checks against dangerous campaigns of the demagogic sort. Perhaps those campaigns will not materialize. Perhaps they cannot survive the long and grueling inspection that a campaign lasting more than a year generates. Perhaps the voters are indeed sufficiently wise to detect and reject demagogues of the soft and the hard variety.

Or perhaps we are just hoping that our luck does not run out.

As I write, it seems entirely likely—as likely as any other outcome in this strange election season—that Barack Obama will be our next president. And, indeed, he may very well be a fine one. If the first of those outcomes should occur, it will have a great deal to do with the sorts of candidates and campaigns that flourish in the current system. If the second should occur, however, it will be not because of, but in spite of that system.

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As a born and bred Calvinist working and teaching at Calvin College, I must admit up front that the invitation to review Brian Johnson and Carolyn O’Grady’s edited collection of faculty essays on faith, service, and justice in higher education has proven a pleasant, though not undaunting, challenge. Written from multiple faith, disciplinary, and pedagogical perspectives, the book holds together in its singular institutional perspective—all of the contributors are either faculty members or recent graduates from Gustavus Adolphus College, a college in St. Peter, Minnesota with strong historic ties to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The book serves many valuable purposes, including its demonstration of how one institution can work through a focused conversation about how these three big topics—faith, service, and social justice—can be viewed in such different lights even at one institution, depending on multiple layers of perspectives ranging from discipline to personal faith commitments to generation and culture.

For this Calvinist, the book is a fascinating manifestation of Lutheran academic engagement in contemporary American higher education. I will admit to my deep discomfort with Gustavus Adolphus’s resolute commitment to a diverse range of theological (or a-theological) perspectives among the faculty on campus. This openness emerges again and again as the Gustavus community’s primary commitment. To help adjust to this, I returned to my copy of H. Richard Niebuhr’s 1951 book, Christ and Culture, where he presents a typology of theological perspectives on how Christ relates to culture. Niebuhr characterizes my tradition as one that sees Christ as a transformer of culture, implying an ability to imagine Christ and culture as coming together through the work of institutions like colleges and universities through the gradual renewal of all things. My Lutheran friends, according to Niebuhr, see Christ and culture as fundamentally in paradox, making questions about how faith fits with higher learning more problematic. Where some Calvinist institutions, like mine, have attempted to present a theologically harmonious perspective to their students by requiring of their faculty not only a commitment to the Christian faith but also to the Reformed tradition of historic Christianity, Lutheran institutions like Gustavus Adolphus have been far more wary of such requirements. Indeed, faculty contributors to this volume alone represent a wide range of faith, including traditional Lutherans, a Buddhist, a Hindu, atheists, an evangelical, and Catholics. In his thoughtful essay on “Faith, Social Justice, and Service-Learning in Environmental Studies: The Struggle for Integration,” geographer Mark Bjelland highlights the Lutheran perspective well, while admitting that his response to the challenge of multiple faith perspectives in the college community “has been to broaden the reading list, to continually ask questions, to revel in paradox, and to occasionally reveal my own convictions” (82).

The book includes fifteen chapters arranged in three parts: “Analyzing the Landscape,” “Practicing what we Preach,” and “Getting to the Heart of the Matter.” In Part One, readers learn about
Gustavus Adolphus College and how it arrived at the place where big questions about faith and learning are safe to talk about. Part Two provides six case studies of how Gustavus faculty have integrated service, faith, and justice into particular curricular or programmatic experiences. And Part Three addresses larger issues such as faculty development, fear of disclosure in the classroom, and deep learning and also includes a chapter written by two recent alumnae. Johnson and O'Grady provide a nice bookend conclusion by offering curricular and programmatic suggestions that connect to specific questions earlier in the volume.

A necessary companion volume to Johnson and O'Grady's is one that came out of Calvin College in 2002, Commitment and Connection: Service-Learning and Christian Higher Education, edited by Claudia DeVries Beversluis and Gail Gunst Heffner. The two volumes address very similar topics and demonstrate two profoundly different ways that small Christian colleges can approach big pedagogical questions related to service, faith and justice. In contrast to The Spirit of Service, Commitment and Connection contributors feel no obvious tension in terms of questions of disclosure of faith; on the contrary, Christian faith is assumed. The difference here points to a complicating element to The Spirit of Service. The tone of caution and apology is so prevalent in every author's voice that it is readily apparent that no matter how many participate in this attempt to incorporate questions of faith into the campus dialogue relative to service and justice, the larger campus climate is not ready for it. In her essay "Faith, Peace, and Politics: Dwelling in Discomfort," political scientist Loramy Gerstbauer discusses her journey into the Gustavus culture after undergraduate years at evangelical Wheaton College and graduate studies at the University of Notre Dame. She admits to wrestling to figure out a place like Gustavus. “After all, what did I learn at Wheaton except that my faith extends to all parts and exercises of my mind and is not restricted to one academic discipline or vocational pursuit?” (118). And despite her clear commitment to an integrated life, spiritually, intellectually, and socially, Gerstbauer seems to conclude that she can and should keep her personal faith outside her teaching, research, and scholarship in order to avoid offending students or others who might not share it.

Perhaps my favorite case study came from Jenifer Ward, a professor of German whose chapter, "Ora et Labora: Prayer and Service in an International Study Abroad Program" went the furthest in pointing out the need for the inclusion of a faculty member's authentic self in any honest attempt to integrate questions of faith into the teaching environment. Ward accompanied several groups of students to Germany over a number of years, and constructs her chapter around seasons of the Christian year, beginning with Epiphany 1999, moving to Maundy Thursday 2000, and concluding with Pentecost 2000. Her experience of including herself in the practice of culpa, or communal confession and forgiveness, with her students, enabled her to experience a highly integrated teaching and learning experience. She admits that she was initially severely uncomfortable with the idea: “my scholarly and professorial self, on the one hand, and my Christian self, on the other hand, did not know how to be in conversation with each other” (147). Through the process of practicing culpa with her students in the context of a learning environment, she introduced parts of herself to each other. But Ward’s experience is the exception in the volume.

I recommend the book to academics whose intellectual milieu is perhaps vaguely curious and mildly tolerant of faith perspectives, but my guess is that many who have moved past fears of anti-intellectualism and have recognized many of the mantras and dogmas of a naturalistic perspective as requiring an equal zeal for another type of "religious faith" will find the fear of integration and disclosure simply anachronistic.

Jeffrey P. Bouman
Calvin College
Is there a distinctly Baptist view of Christian higher education? Samford University theologian William E. Hull ponders this question in his essay in *Gladly Teach, Gladly Learn: Living Out One's Calling in the Twenty-First Century Academy*. While Baptists in America have a long history of defending the separation of church and state, spreading the gospel through evangelism, and promoting Christian piety, they have never been major players, despite their many colleges and universities, in shaping the course of higher education.

Hull argues that whatever intellectual firepower Baptist institutions possess today has been borrowed from other Christian intellectual traditions. For example, Baylor University has drawn from the traditions of the established churches of Europe—Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed. Other Baptist schools, such as Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, have relied on northern evangelicals and their commitment to a Reformed model of Christian education centered on the “integration of faith and learning.”

The administration and faculty of Mercer University, a Baptist school in Macon, Georgia, has tried to walk a different path. During the 2003–2004 academic year the college’s Center for Faith, Learning, and Vocation sponsored a campus-wide conversation on teaching and the academic vocation. Mercer professor John Marson Dunaway has gathered essays written by six of the participants in this colloquium and has supplemented them with writings from seven authors who are not affiliated with Mercer.

*Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach* is not concerned with how Baptists might get a seat at the academic table or turn their institutions into top-flight research universities. Nor does the book address the best way to integrate Christian worldview thinking into the curriculum. Instead the spotlight is on the classroom and the curriculum. Despite Hull’s revealing essay about Baptist higher education, and the fact that six of the authors teach at a Baptist university, there is little that is distinctively Baptist about this book. We should thus treat *Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach* for what it is: an excellent and inspiring series of essays about Christian teaching.

One theme that runs throughout these essays is the belief that true education must transcend careerism. R. Kirk Godsbys, Mercer’s president, argues that a good teacher brings students to the “intersection of who they are and what they do” (3). If a curriculum becomes too wedded to professional disciplines or too focused on preparing students for careers, Godsbys writes, “there is nothing left to center our lives” (3). Gordon Johnston echoes this sentiment, challenging Christian teachers to cultivate the intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions of their students. This is a difficult task—one that most professors do not learn how to perform in graduate school.

There is also an indirect affirmation of the humanities in this kind of thinking about the curriculum of a college or university. True education comes when students—regardless of their major—see themselves as part of a larger human story. As Charlotte Thomas notes, the study of texts is the best medicine for society’s collective narcissism. Literature, history, religion, and philosophy have a humbling effect on students as they learn that even their best ideas often rest upon the works of those who came before them. This is a lesson that faculty and administrators need to learn as well.

The Christian academic is also called to community. But as David Lyle Jeffrey reminds us, academics are not always wired in such a way to engage in relationships outside of the office or study. This, however, is no excuse for living a life of scholarly quarantine. Christians in the academy must balance their general calling to love their neighbors and to be salt and light in the wider world with their specific calling to the solitude often necessary to sustain an intellectual life. Such balance, Jeffrey exhorts, ultimately will invigorate a faculty member’s scholarship, teaching, and spiritual life.
Engagement with the wider world, as Andrew Silver makes clear in his essay on pluralism, means that Christian professors have an obligation to introduce their students to a variety of new ideas and cultures—even if such exposure makes them uncomfortable. Understanding the “Other” is a means by which students can see the diversity of human creation and strengthen commitments to their own communities of faith and belief. Richard Hughes adds to this conversation about pluralism by suggesting that Christian pedagogy should be based upon the radical teachings of Jesus and the Lutheran theology of human finitude. Such an approach demands that students and faculty explore the views of those with whom they differ, resulting in a college community defined by diversity and academic freedom.

Christian teachers must also be committed to spiritual formation in their own lives. Jeanne Heffernan encourages professors to pray for and with their students and make every effort to integrate spiritual and theological truths into one's subject matter. This, of course, requires that the professor has a spiritual life to draw upon when he or she enters the classroom. Mary S. Poplin asks us to consider how the ancient practice of lectio divina might inform our academic work. A quote she uses from John of the Cross is worth repeating here: “It is by means of faith that the intellect is united with God... Faith darkens and empties the intellect of all its natural understanding and thereby prepares it for union with divine wisdom.”

In the end, Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach is one of those books that all serious Christian academics need to read, contemplate, and discuss. Though it may not fit Hull's call for a distinctly Baptist contribution to Christian higher education, it should encourage college teachers to bring faith to bear on their academic vocation.

John Fea
Messiah College
“He Ascended into Heaven”

(first published May 1969)

John Strietelmeier

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manners as ye have seen him go to heaven.

Acts 1:9-11

If our Lord had had a good public relations man, He might never have made the mistake of ascending into Heaven on a Thursday. For Thursday is a weekday, and we have a kind of informal understanding with God that if we keep Sunday mornings clear for Him, He will not interfere with the serious business of life during the rest of the week. We make an exception, of course, during Lent, when God is in trouble and needs a little moral support, but it all comes out all right on Easter, and after that everything should get back to normal. After all, we can’t be spending every evening in church.

Perhaps it might be different if Ascension Day actually said anything to us. But what practical value is there in being reminded of an event which, if you get to thinking about it at all, merely gets you to wondering? To a bunch of simple-minded Galileans it might have seemed plausible enough that a man could start rising up from a hilltop, zoom up through some clouds, and end up in heaven. But we are not simple-minded Galileans...

Of course, we believe that our Lord ascended into heaven. We say so every time we recite the Apostles Creed. But then, in religion we have to say a lot of things that don’t make any particular sense. That’s faith, which, as one man has defined it, is a “tenacious insistence upon the truth of the improbable.” With a little practice anybody can be a Christian. All you have to do is say what the book says, whether it makes any sense or not.

The book says that “he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.” The book says, “He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” So we recite what the book says and don’t ask questions. After all, as Damon Runyon once put it, a man who asks questions merely gets a reputation for asking questions. And that kind of reputation doesn’t help anybody get ahead in the world or the church.

And so, if we observe Ascension Day at all, we follow the ancient custom which dates all the way back to the very first Ascension Day. We sit gazing up into heaven—not quite believing and certainly not comprehending what we see. Why is this Jesus whom we thought we knew so well acting so strangely? Where is He going and why is He going?

A cynic might suggest that He went away to avoid being crucified a second time because, judging by what has happened these past two thousand years to His followers, this is man’s universal response to the presence of God in their midst, and, indeed, this is what men have consistently done to our Lord’s mystical body, the Church. For that reason, if for no other, we may dismiss any sentimental wishes that our Lord had remained among us with His visible presence. The chances are too great that we ourselves would be running
with the howling mobs that would be demanding His crucifixion.

The New Testament gives us two answers to the question of why our Lord went away, and these two answers are actually two facets of the same answer. There is, first of all, our Lord's own statement on the night in which He was betrayed: "It is expedient for you that I go away; for If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you." And the two men in white apparel tell the disciples: "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven."

These two testimonies agree in one. Ascension Day was not an end but a beginning, not a withdrawal of God from His world but the prelude to His coming in a new and more powerful way. For Ascension Day looks forward to Pentecost, to the sound as of a rushing mighty wind and the new baptism with tongues like as of fire. A new age was about to dawn, an age which we call the Christian Era but which we might more properly call the Age of the Holy Spirit. It had its beginning in the coming of the Holy Spirit. It will have its end in our Lord's return in glory and judgment. This is the age in which the Church, as our Lord's body, and we ourselves, as its members, fill up the sufferings of Christ, receiving from the Comforter that comfort in all our tribulation which enables us to comfort them that are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

For this reason, Ascension Day, unlike the other great festivals of the Christian year, does not invite us to come and see, but rather to go and do. It does not invite us to stand gazing into heaven; it reminds us to go, in the power of the ascended One, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. It does not invite us to try to catch one last glimpse of the Jesus who was taken up into heaven, but to prepare ourselves for the outpouring of that Spirit by whom men are called, enlightened, sanctified, and kept in the true faith.

And this is perhaps one reason why we are so reluctant to celebrate Ascension Day. The other great festivals are reminders of what God has done for us. Ascension Day is a reminder of what God intends to do in us and through us. Suddenly we are no longer spectators of the great drama of redemption, but participants in it. Jesus is taken up from us into heaven, and we are left behind to receive our baptism of fire, to go and make disciples of the nations, to fill up in our bodies the sufferings of Christ, to risk dungeon, fire, and sword for His Name's sake. It is not the sort of festival that readily suggests any such pleasant symbols as Christmas trees or Easter bunnies, but it is, like every Christian festival, a festival of hope. Perhaps, indeed, it is the most hopeful of all festivals, for it carries the promise that the same Jesus which was taken up into heaven will so come in like manner as he went into heaven.

To this promise we respond with Saint John and all the saints: "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."
C. Curry Bohm was born in Nashville, Tennessee and eventually moved to Nashville, Indiana where he lived for most of his life. In Brown County, he was affiliated with the Hoosier Salon, the Brown County Art Guild, and many other art organizations. He also received many regional and national awards during the course of his career and was active as an educator. He used an Impressionist style to depict his subjects, typically landscapes and seascapes.

The Brauer Museum of Art is proud to have six works by this artist in its permanent collection. This particular painting was a gift from Percy H. Sloan, a donor whose 1953 gift of works by his father Junius R. Sloan (1827–1900) and many other regional artists led to the establishment of an art museum here at Valparaiso University.

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Fredrick Barton

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