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As a VU Speech and Telecommunications major, Al Seib was introduced to and given his only formal training in photography by the late George Strimbu of the VU Department of Art. Now Al Seib is a Los Angeles Times staff photographer with photographs also in Time, Newsweek, Life, US News & World Report, and Sports Illustrated and three time winner of the Times Mirror editorial award. On February 16, the VU Alumni Association will give Al Seib a Distinguished Alumni Award at the opening reception of the Past Student/Present Alumni Exhibit in the VUMA.

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God’s in Trouble Again

One of our illustrious predecessors, John Strietelmeier, is alleged to have said in a Lenten homily that ordinarily we go to church only once a week, but that in Lent we go twice, because God’s in trouble and needs our help. If that is true, he’ll have to get in line.

Here in the chill of the Midwest, February is a grim month. And the news we hear from everywhere else doesn’t seem to lighten it any. Leaving aside the weather—which would be rash, if not positively a sign of mental collapse—trouble looks like our middle name. Though our governor looks swell on the TV broadcasts of the national governors’ meeting, our political scene is a shambles, though so far we have not shut down governmental services rather than have difficult conversations about the state budget.

We’re having a hard time in Indiana deciding just how many casinos and gambling boats will dock on our shores, and some hardy souls are trying to pass legislation forbidding gaming interests from forcing communities to hold yearly referendums on the subject. After rejecting casinos twice, one won’t have to go through the process again, a sort of “two strikes, you’re out” policy I could get behind. More locally, lots of people in our region don’t want the Chicago Bears for the price of another tax, though some of their neighbors say it would be the salvation of Gary. Municipal salvation based on the sales of football jerseys and hot dogs just doesn’t sound like a society with the right idea, somehow, any more than does funding a state education program with lotto tickets.

Our state legislature just voted to institute the chain gang in our state. And we keep hearing about what to do with “criminals,” a group growing even faster than fast food franchise holders. Hearing the increasing frenzy of the calls for more prisons, more toughness, more sentences, more executions, I wonder what has happened to the Biblical words about prisoners and prisoners. Even Christians manage to forget very quickly those lines of the Christmas hymns that celebrate the coming of Jesus to set the criminals free. Not a very Christmasy concept, presumably.

The larger political arena appears to be given over, at present, to a group of people whose talent for snarling equals only their capacity to snap at one another’s heels. The group of candidates in the campaign for the American presidency promises no improvement of this situation. This group of suits, produced by public relations offices staffed by eager and fast-moving young people, makes one long for Machiavelli, whose prose at least was distinctly more elegant.

Around us in larger and wider circles are the manifold evidences of people in trouble. Corruption, greed, rampant lust and villainy among those who claim to be leaders. News that the gap between rich and poor is wider. News that our economy slows or heats to dynamics that have nothing to do with whether a working person can afford a house payment, or even a month’s rent.

Far down beneath the ice that covers our ground at the moment, bulbs will before long begin to spout and grow. And far below the surface of what we are seeing in front of our eyes in the media, there seem to be tiny signs of another spring for, of all things, a new liberalism. Or, some say, a new version of Christian socialism, coaxed into existence by a realization that liberalism’s history of bad relations with Christian faith might not be all there is to say about that combination. Christians who are socially liberal may at present be few in number, but numbers have never been requisite for influence. It will not do for conservative Christians, or neo-con Christians, to keep up their familiar critiques of “outworn” or “failed” liberal policy. Old news. It is true that we have seen the end of the pale version of liberalism which had something of its day in the US when FDR managed to nudge us toward Social Security and numerous other benefits of civilization which few would now be willing to abjure. But the end of this version of liberalism merely helps us to assume a position from which to recognize, indeed bring on, the new. There will come a new life out of the ashes of this old world too.

Lent is a season when it is relatively easy to know that you are in trouble. External evidence is not lacking for a conviction that all is not right with the world.

Except that . . . the world has been and is loved. It has been entered into. God, beyond any expectation at all, has declared that, like us, he is in trouble. Grief, loss, conflict, betrayal are gathered into God’s knowing, and God knows them, as we do, from experiencing them. In Lent, Christians
and relentless task of understanding how the brokenness came about, and then in that understanding, making a—very fragmentary—redemption of sorts. Cresset Book Review Editor Tom Kennedy carries on a conversation with world-renowned detective fiction sovereign, P.D. James. Kevin Lindamood gives eloquent voice to the silence of the poor, and Pastor Dave Kehret gives us the rare chance to see in print what usually is reserved only for those who can hear his *viva voce* art in the sermon. Our columnists and poets too describe in their own ways the darkness of the season, each a point of light for insight and capacity for reflection.

May that light continue to be a part of your Lenten journey this year. God knows the darkness is powerful enough to put it to the test.

Peace,

GME

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**ELEGY**

Bright September morning when they brought you out of the sky early. Three days before your birthday, David, and you’ll never see twenty-seven.

When they said two shots
I thought of foot races, someone’s false start and everyone else begins again. You always beat me to the back porch,

but suddenly you lay cold on some slab while the earth kept turning and still I don’t know what to do about your birthday this year.

You taught me algebra. You studied the galaxies. You said time is a fourth dimension. Then you left me behind.

Only two years younger, David, and I raged at never catching up.

Mother whispered your name when you’d gone. She’d had no intention of giving birth to one whose mind would so far outgrow hers. So young when she dug in and gave us her botanist’s world.

Now I am older than you both have ever been. The night sky still revolves around the same fixed point, but I can’t see well. Some dark flower is blooming near, sadly sweet,

and I wish you were here to tell me what it is.

**Meridith Brand**
DETECTING: AN INTERVIEW WITH P. D. JAMES

Thomas D. Kennedy

TK: Let's start by talking a little about *Original Sin* and we'll try not to give away the ending. There are a number of themes you address in the novel: the distinctions between revenge and justice, the relationship between justice and belief in God or what is justice like without God, questions of moral necessity and moral certainty, moral dilemmas, the difference between law and morality. When the novel concludes, these deep and troubling philosophical questions are unresolved. That's not what most readers expect from mysteries.

PDJ: No, they don't. But I think these questions are adumbrated throughout the novel. In the novel you can see how these questions (or rather the shadows of the questions) are there already in some of the conversations and the attitudes of characters. For example, the discussion between the two younger detectives Daniel and Kate on capital punishment. And the perpetual questions of justice and revenge.

TK: But, don't mystery readers expect something a little less philosophical; do they hope for this sort of discussion, or do you think they read it as interruption?

PDJ: I think a great many of them may not expect this. I honestly don't write to give mystery readers what they expect; that's the last thing that would have occurred to me.

TK: What do you hope to give mystery readers? 

PDJ: Well, I don't think of giving them anything, because what I do is to write for my own satisfaction the best book that I possibly can write with the inspiration that has come to me, making no compromises or concessions to anything. And if in the end I feel this is the best I can do—it may not be the best other people could have done, but this is the best I can do with this material—then I hope that that is going to please my readers.

I think most of my readers are very perceptive and they value good writing and they value quality. They like their mystery; they want a puzzle and so they should. Why shouldn't they? And I provide them with a puzzle. If they didn't like it, I wouldn't change what I wrote. All my writing life I've taken good care (it's rather cowardly in many ways I suppose) that I've never had financially to rely totally on my writing. Therefore, although in the beginning writing was important to me and was important to me financially, I'm relieved from the temptation of having to always give mystery readers what they want. I can give myself what I want and what I need as a writer. And I'm very, very fortunate that it does seem that many millions of mystery readers are quite happy to have this.

TK: The moral issues raised throughout *Original Sin* come up because they are important to you and you think they should be important to your readers?

PDJ: They are dear to me as a writer, but they also come up because they are natural or relevant to the book

Baroness James of Holland Park is better known to millions of readers as P.D James, as in "Do you have the new P.D. James, yet?" She is the author of more than a dozen novels, which have been translated into a dozen languages. Her careers as hospital administrator, as well as administrative assistant in both police labs and criminal policy departments in government, have provided her with foregrounds for her crime novels. But her knowledge of human frailty seems based on more than mere experience, perhaps bred in the bone. Professor Thomas Kennedy, who interviewed her last summer at her home in London, is chair of the Department of Philosophy at VU, and is also the Book Review Editor of The Cresset.
and the characters and the plot. And that raises the question of how much the author is totally in control of the book and characters and plot. The issues seem to me to be an essential part of the book and that story. I don’t think that they are superimposed on the story because they are of interest to me. I hope that they are an essential part of the story. But they are of profound interest to me.

TK: These moral issues appear in The Children of Men; they appear in your earlier novels as well.

PDJ: Yes, indeed. I think when something keeps occurring in a writer’s work, we know it is of huge importance, profound importance, to that writer.

TK: I don’t know whether you are familiar with the British philosopher Mary Midgley’s work. In Can’t We Make Moral Judgments? she makes a number of references to some of your mysteries and, this may be a confusion on her part, but I think she faults you for being too morally ambiguous. For example, she writes, “I have the impression that P.D. James takes these amoralist manifestos [professions that one can step outside morality and live as if there is no moral goodness] fairly seriously, and that she is anxious to get them a serious hearing by showing the people who speak them as honourable and high-principled characters.” While noting that these moral concerns arise again and again for you, her sense is that you are not speaking clearly with a moral voice in the novels, that you seem to be advancing the cause of those who think moral talk is just a sham. Is that a fair concern on her part?

PDJ: I don’t think that I set out to speak with a clear moral voice. I think that it is wrong when reading a writer’s work to think that the views of a particular character represent the views of the writer. The moral questions I raise in my novels are profoundly ambiguous. That is what I am trying to point out. Mary Midgley is a very fortunate woman if everything is clear to her, fortunate indeed if she knows what moral view she takes and is convinced it’s right.

But as a writer, my position is more ambivalent. In Original Sin, the moral necessities as they appear in war become an issue. How am I as a writer to judge this matter of what is morally necessary in wartime? If I had been a young man in bomber command would I not have bombed Dresden? Thousands of women and children were killed, horribly killed. Yet, I think I would have been up there bombing Dresden. Happily I hadn’t got to make that kind of decision. So your moral philosopher who criticized me because I am not morally certain, as I say, how can I be morally certain, what is she expecting me to say?

TK: Some people might make just the opposite criticism of The Children of Men, claiming there is too much moral certainty there, that The Children of Men offers a very conservative, very traditionalist critique of contemporary British society and contemporary Christianity.

PDJ: Yes, though not only British society.

TK: That sort of critique assumes a good deal of moral certainty.

PDJ: Yes, I think one can be morally certain that some actions are wrong. One has some moral certainties—that cruelty is always wrong, for instance, deliberate cruelty to a human being or animal is wrong, the deliberate infliction of pain is wrong. I think one can and does have some moral certainties.

Children of Men is, in many ways, I think, a Christian fable. It says that we are in need of divine grace and if we are going to change, what is going to change us is Love. The end of the book is very ambiguous because there you have the new Warden of England with much more power than the old Warden had in his hands. Theo takes power and he has the ring on his finger and he doesn’t take it off. We could have another example—and history is full of them, isn’t it?—of a person who starts off with good motives, but is corrupted by power, corrupted by the necessity of doing certain things.

TK: I’ve read this novel with students the last four semesters and what has typically been the case is that at the end of the novel, my students are much more pessimistic about the future than I am. I think you’ve written it with enough ambivalence to indicate grounds for some hope.

PDJ: Yes, I agree. The ambivalence is with Theo’s final act; he’s faced with the temptation of absolute power, but there’s his love for this woman and for the child which has just been born.

TK: I think Theo knows himself better than the previous Warden does, and that self-knowledge, the awareness of one’s moral weakness, is salutary for the future.

PDJ: I am also interested in Xan because he is regarded as evil; he’s regarded by Julian as evil. And certain things he does I would regard as evil, I think. But he takes responsibility when the world is falling apart and civilizations are descending into absolute chaos. He takes responsibility, he gets the country to be reasonably stable under incredible conditions. And he’s not going to get any lasting glory for it. He’s not going to have future generations
putting up statues to him. There aren’t going to be any future generations. He’s enjoying the power and he admits that; he says once you’ve got it, you can’t let it go.

You only have to look among some of our politicians to realize that power is extraordinarily seductive. So Xan is enjoying that power, yes. But one can say that is more estimable than Theo was when he began by standing aside and saying, “It’s nothing to do with me. I’m going to have my wine and my music and my literature and that’s it. And I’m not involving myself in this.” That’s the dilemma. As well as the question of how much we are entitled to expect of other people. In the book, you have the Five Fishes, who put their own lives and safety and the safety of others at risk. But do they have a right to expect—it’s a whole argument in one of the chapters—a kind of heroic virtue of others? It is a very relevant issue, very relevant, indeed, to Europe under German occupation, for example. Can we, for example, expect people to shelter escaping German Jews when they know that they risk torture? You yourself may be prepared to do that, but can you expect it of other people?

So these are the sorts of moral questions that, as I say, lead me to believe that I don’t have the moral certainty that would enable me always to say, “This is right and this is wrong.” I think that is why ethics, which is obviously your subject, is so absolutely endlessly fascinating. And I think it is less fascinating if people feel that they can just take a view and say, “Well, such and such is the moral certainty that this writer ought to express.”

**TK:** One of the interesting things in the study of ethics is trying to identify genuine dilemmas and ambiguities and dispel false ones. I read The Children of Men as a study of moral character and I am fascinated by how Theo evolves and why he evolves the way he does. Reading with a special eye to the development of moral character seems appropriate to all of your novels.

**PDJ:** It’s interesting too, in Original Sin, that no matter what we feel, what we think we know about ourselves and how much in control we feel we are, we may find ourselves in situations where we come up short and the presence of laws doesn’t help us. How far am I entitled to say that this law is an unjust law and therefore I am justified in refusing to obey it and I will refuse to obey it even at some cost to myself? Then how far does that slide into the attitude which a lot of people seem to have—“This is an unjust law and I won’t abide by it.” These become laws which they can with impunity break with no risk to themselves at all when really what they are saying is, “This doesn’t happen to suit me; this happens to be inconvenient to me, this law, so therefore I will invent moral reasons to justify disobeying it.” Something like this happens, I think, with terrorists such as the animal rights movement, where some actions may not arise from any affection for animals, really, but the need of the human race to court danger, or to be part of a close knit group, or to be against the establishment and majorities. The cause varies, it may be nationalism or whatever you like.

**TK:** One of the most interesting and, I think, profound insights in Original Sin comes in a very brief discussion of Adam Dalgliesh’s response when he visits the chapel and he’s trying to understand the religious believers who are there. He realizes that perhaps if there were greater humility on his part he might come understand and to love. You seem to make a suggestion that character may be a precondition for understanding.

**PDJ:** Yes, you see, he is the son of a rector and he was brought up in a religious family. So, in a sense, he is a reverent agnostic, I think, a feeling that he wishes he could really believe and wishes that he could be part of this faith which has obviously meant so much to his parents. It is a faith in which he’s been bred, so there’s never been a total rejection of it. He has a huge respect for the faith, and yet an inability to make, I suppose, an intellectual assent to it. I think that is a position that a very large number of people, in fact, hold.

**TK:** But here Adam seems to recognize that the problem isn’t so much an inability to give intellectual assent, but a moral problem. He recognizes that, for himself, for whatever reason, an essential humility before God is lacking.

**PDJ:** Yes, I think he does. And it’s an interesting kind of humility; I think that if he had gone into the chapel with the kind of attitude that makes somebody kneel down and say, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner,” he’d have got it. If you go in with the old mind working away and thinking that you are willing to place yourself at the disposal of the creator, in a sense—“Here I am a poor creature and a poor thing. I’m just coming as I am”—you would be better off. But that he is not able to do. And, I suppose, he doesn’t really believe, in the person, in God, at all, but that is not unrelated to the question of humility.

**TK:** Is it possible for the Church to minister to contemporary people?

**PDJ:** I think that it does minister to contemporary people, often very effectively. I’m not sure it gives the moral leadership that it should give or that it possibly could
give. It doesn't speak with a very clear voice. And it has great opportunity to do so because I don't think we want politicians to help us see what's right or wrong; it's not their job. People expect it from the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal of Westminster. Therefore they are in a position where they can say, "This is what is wrong."

TK: The last three novels Original Sin, The Children of Men, and Devices and Desires are explicitly religious titles. Are you concerned that your novels may be too explicitly religious?

PDJ: No, no, I'm not, because as I say, I just write what I feel that I need to write and what I what to write. I've been criticized in The Guardian not for being too religious but for, as they say, "writing too well to be writing detective stories."

TK: That's right. I think it was The Guardian reviewer who said that you are limited and constrained by the mystery novel.

PDJ: I don't think I am. I don't see that Original Sin would have been a stronger novel or would have had a stronger, as it were, moral basis if it had been written without the detection. I am fascinated by the process of the detection because it sets moral questions within a pattern and a framework. Human intelligence tries to seek out the truth of the situation. So detection seems an especially good framework within which to place an action, not artificial at all.

Fiction is an artificial form anyway. Every novel is a highly artificial form, every novel in which the writer tries to make sense of his or her experience and to put it down in logical and compelling form. You can look at Pride and Prejudice, or, I think, the supreme example is Jane Eyre. In Jane Eyre there are these extraordinary coincidences, but still it's a great novel. Nowadays some people would say, "Well, yes, it's a great novel with interesting ethical and moral issues, but why on earth did she have to set it within this gothic story of a love affair with this man and a mad wife and the fire?" But those things are intrinsic to this novel. The detective story is the framework of my novel; it satisfies me to work within that framework.

TK: Why did you start writing mystery novels?

PDJ: I suppose because I enjoyed reading them and I thought I could do it. I love the construction, probably because I love a novel to have a beginning and an end. I've been fascinated by death, but I think that the main reason at the time I began was that I had fairly high artistic ambitions and I thought detective fiction would be a wonderful apprenticeship. And then I came to believe that you don't have to use it as an apprenticeship and then reject it and say, 'I'll go on to higher things.' You can use the structure. The classic example, really, in a way, is LeCarre and the espionage novel. LeCarre is a very fine novelist. It's quite unreasonable to say to John LeCarre, "'Why do you write about the way men organize themselves into their clubs and their concerns and international problems? Why on earth do we want to write spy novels?" I think critics who say this really are very limited in their understanding of the novel. Why shouldn't we use it to understand ourselves? And obviously what we are fascinated with, in Le Carré's case, is treachery, personal treachery.

TK: You've mentioned Jane Austen and George Eliot. In interviews you've frequently mentioned Wilkie Collins' The Moonstone as another important influence upon you. Who else has influenced you in writing mysteries?

PDJ: I don't think they all inspired me to try mysteries. Dorothy L. Sayers is a very different one from Austen and Eliot. I think I've been mostly influenced by Austen, Sayers, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh. They are very different novelists, but I can see their influence.

TK: Where do you see Greene's influence?

PDJ: I think in the religious aspect, although he was writing, obviously, from the point of view of a convinced, if unorthodox, Roman Catholic.

TK: You've written both the detective fiction and The Children of Men, two very different types of novels. Why The Children Of Men? Why that after the great success and accomplishments of your detective fiction?

PDJ: Well, I suppose this is example of what I said earlier, that I write to please myself, because I would have earned very much more money if I had written another Adam Dalgliesh instead of The Children Of Men. But when I had got the idea, I just wanted to write that novel, so I wrote it. I was well aware that my readers who love Adam Dalgliesh, who always want Adam Dalgliesh, would not want this book, necessarily. Likewise, my editors; they admired it, but still from a commercial point of view they worried about The Children of Men. But I read not long ago about the extraordinarily dramatic fall in the sperm count of western men and it is a staggering fall, 30% in 30 years, absolutely astonishing. And indeed one knows in one's own experience the friends who are desperate to have children
and can’t. So I had this idea—I wondered what sort of England it would be, what sort of world it would be, if in 25 years this catastrophic event would suddenly and mysteriously befall the human race and it became infertile. That’s probably impossible in reality, but working it out imaginatively was the challenge.

**TK:** That story theme came to you after reading an article in the newspaper. How do stories typically come to you?

**PDJ:** Usually through a certain place, a setting. *The Children of Men* is the only one which wasn’t really inspired by a setting, but of course the setting came almost immediately as soon as I had the idea, because I thought I must set it in Oxford. Indeed, Theo lives in my own house in St. John Street in Oxford because I wanted a contrast between a world in which nobody heard the cry of a baby or the sound of a child’s voice for 25 years and a city which had echoed to young voices for so many generations, since medieval times.

**TK:** Who are your favorite contemporary writers?

**PDJ:** Oh, that’s very difficult to say. I like the women writers on the whole, I think probably more than the men. I haven’t got any out and out favorites. I find—it’s distressing in a way—that I’m reading fewer novels and much more nonfiction and biographies. Biography, letters. The last two books I bought were a biography of Kingsley Amis and a biography of John Keats. I reread a lot of novels—perhaps because I’m seventy-five years old I don’t know—but there is a huge backlist of great novels which I have yet to read. And I’m much less willing to give a writer a lot of time to win me over; I’m not so proud of this because it shows a lack in myself. But a new novel has got to be awfully good very quickly to hold me, to make me feel that I want to spend much time on it. I think that Martin Amis is undoubtedly a top-form novelist, but he’s a novelist without humanity, I think, and that makes him repellent, however technically good he may be. We have got to the time when novelists distance themselves too much from the true concerns of contemporary life. David Lodge is one of a few novelists who deals with the working world.

**TK:** Are you currently at work?

**PDJ:** I’ve just got the idea for a new novel, but it’s got to come together. This is going to take months and months of research.

**TK:** Inspired by a place?

**PDJ:** No, for the first time this isn’t. Very rare that it’s not. This will be another London novel, but partly why I’m stuck with it is because I haven’t got the place. Until I’ve got the place it won’t come together. This was inspired by an idea that came, like *The Children of Men* was inspired by an idea. But nearly always it has been a place. *Devices and Desires* started on the coast of Suffolk. When I was there I was just looking out to the sea and feeling that I could have stood in that same spot a thousand years ago and looked out at exactly the same sea and then I turned my eyes north and saw this huge nuclear power station. And immediately I knew I’d got a new novel about the past and the present and the effect of the power station on the community.

**TK:** How do you write? Do you set the mornings aside for writing?

**PDJ:** I try to get up very early when I’m actually writing a book and do some work. I’m best in the morning. I write by hand and I dictate onto tape and have a secretary come from 2:00-5:30 and she types a first draft. I like the feeling of writing by hand. My work is very carefully plotted, which I do before the actual writing begins.

**TK:** To what extent have you been involved in the TV adaptations?

**PDJ:** Oh, very little. I’m going to be more involved in the new one because the last one they did was such a disaster. The same company is going to do *Original Sin.*

**TK:** Have you viewed all the adaptations?

**PDJ:** Yes. I’ve seen them all at least once.

**TK:** Does that affect how you understand Adam Dalgliesh?

**PDJ:** Not in the slightest, not in the slightest. Because the actor is in no way like Adam Dalgliesh, not at all. He’s probably Adam Dalgliesh to millions of people all over the world, but he isn’t to me.

**TK:** A couple of the recent adaptations we’ve seen here have been quite disappointing to me, particularly the sorts of endings where Dalgliesh becomes sort of athletic super hero.

**PDJ:** Oh, absolutely! It’s ridiculous! It’s absolutely nothing like the book. If I’d known that was going to happen, of course, I wouldn’t have let it be done. I made a big fuss, but it was too late. But I said that I didn’t want them to...
do *Original Sin* at all unless this time I have a written understanding that they are not going to alter the plot. They have got to do the book.

Yes, television is very remarkably superficial. The BBC production of *Persuasion* recently, because of the American market—that’s their excuse—they have to have the lovers kissing in the street. People didn’t do that in that time! You would never do that, it made it absolutely wrong for the age.

TK: What are the moral responsibilities of the novelist? Are there any in particular or are there just the moral responsibilities of any human being?

PDJ: That’s a very good question. I think there is a moral responsibility of the novelist. It’s not enough to say, “I want to produce the best novel I can and there are no other considerations.” There can be other considerations. How far are you justified in drawing your characters directly from life if what you do hurts other people? Are there any subjects you shouldn’t deal with? I think that in some novels the treatment of sex is gratuitously pornographic. I am sorry to say that I think that increasingly writers deal with sex much more explicitly and in much greater detail with much less understanding of the nature of human love.

I think there’s a great deal of responsibility about certain plots. I would never write a book in which a bomb created by the IRA exploded in the London underground. Not because I think the IRA has actually needed me to give them any bright ideas, but that’s just a plot I wouldn’t do. I don’t ever describe one human being torturing another. I can’t read that and I don’t want to write it. Whether that is moral or only my sensibility, I’m not sure.

I think every novelist has responsibilities and we all have to think about it for ourselves. I remember when Salman Rushdie first published, we were all expected to write a strong letter of support, and I refused to sign it because it said though I didn’t write the book I am, too, involved in it. But I said, “Of course I’m not involved in it, I am only responsible for what I write and what I choose to publish, not for what he chooses to publish.” I think he had every right to publish because the novel was within the law of this country, which gets back to that question we mentioned earlier “How far is the law the ultimate test of what is right?” But it’s his responsibility, not mine. I think we just have to decide as individual writers what our moral responsibility is.

TK: When you look back at your novels, which do you take the greatest pride in?

PDJ: Oh, that’s very difficult. I think probably of the detective stories, *A Taste For Death* and *Original Sin*. Possibly *Devices and Desires*; though I’m not entirely certain about the terrorism. I would say *Original Sin* and *A Taste For Death*. Then the non-detective stories, *Innocent Blood* and *Children of Men*.

TK: Thank you very much for your time. And for the delicious iced coffee.

PDJ: It’s been my pleasure.
I write from Baltimore—a snowed-in victim of the famed Blizzard of ‘96. To your average Michigander it’s a couple feet of snow. Big deal. To a Baltimorean, it’s a Blizzard and we’re gonna starve if we can’t get to the store, you’re crazy if you think I’m even trying to drive to work when I can’t make it out my front door and the schools close down for a week. Federal Express offices: closed. The Red Cross: closed. The Government: closed (but we’ve all grown rather accustomed to that.)

The store nearest my snowed-in hideaway is out of bread, frozen bread dough and dry activated yeast, The Sound of Music is the only decent thing left in the video store and, shortly after I lost my automobile beneath a four-foot snow drift, I ran out of both onions and garlic in the kitchen. (Gasp.)

On the fifth day, I dig my way out my back exit—pressing past the half-open screen door, frozen in place by a single eight-inch-thick icicle stretching from the gutters to the pavement—and trudge in to the clinic where I work. There, I learn of a body found frozen to the pavement in the doorway of an abandoned business. I’m both relieved and surprised that I haven’t heard of others like him. Yet. City officials promised they would get everyone off the streets and into shelter before the freezing rain settled in atop that which had already fallen. Someone must have forgotten him.

Kevin Lindamood writes from Baltimore, where he works at an agency providing for the health needs of the homeless in that city. A graduate of VU, he expects soon to return to studies in graduate school. This is his second piece for The Cresset.

It’s been two years since last I’ve written. The silence here is contagious.

I.

When the twins were born twelve weeks early at Bay State Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, doctors separated them immediately, placing each in her own incubator bubble, for fear of infection too powerful for underdeveloped immune systems. The larger sister, at slightly over two and a half pounds, appeared ready to take on the world: she gained weight, her lungs processed oxygen, her heart circulated blood throughout her developing body, she kicked some and she cried some and she slept, curled under sterile blankets, while nurses and doctors continued to monitor her vital signs.

The younger twin wasn’t ready for the world alone. The hospital community focused its rescue efforts around a scant two pounds of struggling life: her heart rate soared, her parents wept, her lungs were unable to filter enough oxygen into her body that shook with the awesome stress of being alive. Weeks later, refusing all medical efforts to stabilize her vital signs, the younger twin took yet another turn for the worse. Her blood oxygen level fell and her heart rate continued to climb. The nurses held her. Her parents rocked her. Another nurse fed her. Someone stuffed a sterile teddy bear into her plastic bubble. Nothing worked. Red faced and blue skinned and short of breath when she cried to whomever might listen, she wasn’t expected to make it much longer.

Desperate, one of the nurses remembered something she once read in a European medical journal. This is
what she did: she removed the younger twin from her incubator bubble, opened the adjacent bubble and placed the dying infant next to her larger, healthier sister. This is what happened: within minutes, her heart rate returned to normal, her blood oxygen level climbed and stabilized at a level higher than any level she had achieved during the previous month. Within minutes. The larger twin reached a small, perfectly-formed arm around the back of her sister, pulled her close and held her there. *Hey sis, how ya been? This world is an unkind place.*

On the streets of Baltimore, Stan lies sprawled alongside a turned over trashbin a few blocks from my home. He spits and shouts obscenities at the snowflakes at which sting his skin. It's well known that all the shelters have banned him for bad behavior and most of the nurses at the clinic where I work have long since figured him lost and dead.

"Hey, Sir, ya gotta cigarette?" he mumbles incoherently as I walk by and avert my gaze, contemplating the realities of human beings thrown to trashbins. The snowflakes continue to fall. They haven't heard him either.

"Please Sir, can I have a cigarette?" he asks again, like Oliver Twist begging for another bowl of gruel. *Please, Sir, I want some more.* Tossing him a cigarette, I watch a rat scurry out of the trash bin as I mentally match this picture of Stan with the snapshots I've seen of Stan alongside his twin brother.

The picture was taken in happier times, in spring, judging from the cherry blossoms adding their color to the corners of the photograph, when Stanley and Daniel wandered the streets together and checked themselves into the VA rehab center together to detox from years of chronic alcoholism. They once fought in the War together. Now, they slept on the streets when the shelters were too full to take them both. And in the photograph, they stand together in front of the cherry blossoms, wrap their arms around each other and smile.

The twins have become folklore in this city. And the legend tells it like this: At the completion of a long rehab program, the brothers were ready to move into transitional housing when Dan had a sudden relapse, packed his bottle in his pocket and headed back for the streets. Days later, police found his body curled into a storefront doorway and fatally frozen. Devastated, Stan ran away from the rehab center and took his brother's place in the storefront doorway, chronically addicted and angry, feeding from trash dumpsters and soup lines, sleeping in doorways and alleyways, cursing passers-by, cursing the world as the shelters began to ban him and reject him one by one by one.

That was four years ago. No one expected Stan to live this long. I saw him in the clinic, two weeks before Christmas, semi-sober and wrapped in layers of dirty army surplus blankets. The steam grate burns on his wrists and ankles were swollen, burning, red. *Where are you brother? I can't make it in this world alone.*

II.

The cherry blossoms are perhaps the most beautiful sight on the east coast. (And the recollection of them is a wonderful exercise in wishful thinking when buried by a blizzard.) And each springtime in Baltimore, the cherry trees are blooming. It happens every year but they always catch me suddenly, as if I'd never seen them before; I am taken by their delicacy. In a few months, they will go and I will forget them, again. And so on.

I have a friend who thinks the blossoms holy, nearly weeps for them at the end of spring, gathers them up as they fall and presses them in books. She must have thousands tucked away in the pages of Shakespeare and Faulkner and Hemingway, dated, in the top margin, with each year, the approximate location of each tree, whether she rescued them from the ground or caught them, gently, as they fell. It's a bit elaborate, her system. She says that everything has a right to be remembered and I smile somewhat uneasily at the conviction with which she displays and explains her collection. I mean, they're only flower petals. They come. I enjoy their fragrance. They go. I forget them. We've been over this before. The hippie generation knew about flowers: *Where have all the flowers gone?* they asked. I'm from Generation X: the twentysomethings. We grew up watching the Brady Bunch, and then re-runs of the Brady Bunch. And then movies about the Brady Bunch. We don't know much about anything.

I do know that there really isn't all that much to this whole Generation X phenomenon. (Except, maybe, a few billion dollars in book deals and movie tickets.) If I understand the concept correctly, it's about a generation without identity, a brat pack of searching twentysomethings attempting to wrestle meaning from the muscular arms of a troubled society. What's so unique about that? Aren't the twenties—in the average life cycle of the human being—*always*, or at least frequently, about loss of identity and the search for meaning in an unkind and rapidly changing social environment? Hasn't a modicum of hopelessness always accompanied a wide-eyed post-adolescent into her third decade in the wealthiest nation on this third planet from a distant and dying star? (As our planet spins closer to the sun, the heat rises steadily. Science has proven it, for whatever that's worth.) Perhaps the degree of twentysomething—hopelessness increases with the naming of each successive generation of twentysomethings. Or maybe it has more to do with our approximate distance from the sun.
Across the country in suburban New York City, as millions of midnight viewers watched a glittery ball drop in Time Square, a twenty-four year old woman revved her car’s engine and barreled headlong off a backroad bridge. She was a twentysomething. From Generation X. So, I’ve heard something about reaching. Even the Baby Boomers know about reaching. We all know about reaching. And about falling. Like the cherry blossoms.

III.

In the clinic on Friday, a homeless, overall-ed child, maybe three, falls from his seat in the waiting room and doesn’t cry. From a distance, I catch the dull expression pouring from his brownblack glare and he looks like someone who has just lost his dog. But, living in the shelters, he’s probably never had a dog, never had the experience of watching one die. I doubt he ever will.

And I rush past him. I don’t notice his stance until the second or third time rushing past: his arms are extended. They don’t differentiate or play favorites. He’s not really looking at anything or anyone; his glance remains distant and unfocussed. I make a sad clown’s face in hopes of winning a smile. Instead, he pushes down his lower lip in perfection mimic of my frown. And his arms, trembling and bruised, remain extended, like gifts, to me rushing by and to the nurses rushing by and to every stranger, busy, rushing by. By and by, Lord, by and by.

We get too damn busy, sometimes, even to notice arms extended.

Passing his seat again, where he stands, arms wide, I stop as first a nurse, then me, then another reaches down and lifts him up, feels his arms tighten like a vice, his sigh on my cheek says something someone anyone to hold. This goes on for nearly an hour. Till he has to go home. No. Till he has to go. And each of us, maybe twenty, maybe thirty, maybe forty, has lived long enough to understand. The reaching. The never-ending, undifferentiating reaching.

Arnold is wearing overalls, too. He’s at least fifty if he isn’t also three. And I busily rush by Arnold daily. “Hey, coffee, gimme some coffee,” he mutters in a voice so deep it shakes every ounce of his three hundred and twenty five pounds. He’s terribly persistent and schizophrenic, speaks with a slight southern drawl and, today, he’s drunk. He only drinks when he’s particularly depressed (which is about every other day) and I shake a finger at him as he removes a brown-bagged bottle from his coat pocket.

“Not in here,” I warn, almost smiling at his bravado.

“Then gimme some coffee,” he rumbles, “I gotta drink somethin’.”

He rolls up his eyes and tucks his chin—his eyes are bloodshot and his jowls sag—and we stare in silence for at least thirty seconds. He’s content to stare longer. He wins. I leave to get Arnold his coffee. Two creams and a packet of Sweet & Low.

My neighbor bought a bulldog pup last year—Action Jackson—and for the first few weeks, Jackson could sit in the palm of your hand. A little lump of puppy buried in folds of skin. He liked to drool. I swear, a bulldog must be born with all the skin he’s ever going to have, and he simply grows into it slowly as a child grows into an old pair of hand-me-downs. Jackson’s so big now, I think he’s almost outgrown his skin. But when he was a puppy, he tumbled down the stairs like a child in grown-up clothing. He still likes to drool.

For over two years, I’ve searched for a way to describe the seemingly indescribable. I have, I believe, found it: Arnold is a baby bulldog: a child in adult clothing.

I heard a pop scientist talking on the news the other day about the human ability to recognize, without senses, the presence of a familiar person in the room: like radar. The fabled sixth sense. Arnold has it. And just as my presence blips onto his own internal screen, his voice sounds out, like an alarm: “Hey, Kev, I need some coffee. Gimme some coffee.” I hear it in the morning; I hear it in the evening as I slip out the door on my way home; I hear it in my sleep: “Hey Kev, Coffee, I need some coffee,” the southern drawl droning out the “o” in a third syllable. His voice rumbles my stomach like a stereo with the bass set on ten.

Then, one day, slowly and as unnoticeably as a baby bulldog grows into its skin, I began to block out Arnold’s daily request as he hung over the half-wall separating my desk from the clinic waiting room. It’s a natural adaptation, I think. When the human mind is repeatedly distracted from the object of its concentration, it tends to simply phase out the distraction. Move from the country to the city and you’ll spend a week lying awake all night listening to traffic and fire-engines and gunshots. Move back to the country and, due to the midnight melodies of crickets, you’ll find it difficult to dream.

But then there’s a counter-reaction that’s just as natural: if you fail in your attempts to gain someone’s attention, you will alter your patterns of behavior until you are, once again, recognized. Schizophrenia and the high consumption of alcohol do not invalidate this particular natural phenomenon. Once I began to ignore Arnold’s
requests for coffee, he simply plugged in new combinations—like a human computer—until he achieved the desired response. This was his winning card: "Hey Kev, I need my Java." And I responded. For two reasons: first, I was surprised that Arnold had knowledge of the word and second, because his use of the word—slow and drawn-out and deep and trembling (JAAAAAAAvaa)—made me smile.

And once I began again to ignore my name and all synonyms for Arnold's favorite caffeinated beverage, he began plugging away at something new. So there I am: making phone calls and answering E-mail messages and writing in charts. Arnold leans over the wall and announces his presence: "Hey Kev, gimme some coffee, I need my coffee."

I pick up the phone, wedge the receiver between my ear and shoulder and dial a number while simultaneously punching a few letters into the computer with my other hand.

"Come on Kev," he pleads, blandly, "I need my coffee. Hey Kev. Hey Kev. Hey Kev. Hey Kev. Hey Kev." With fluid motion, and a steely concentration of which my fourth grade teacher would be proud (she always thought me easily distracted), I replace the receiver, open a medical chart and begin writing deliberately, as if my ballpoint were actually a goose feather.

"I need some JAAAAAvaa," Arnold quips, hoping, again, for a reaction to the once-successful word.

I continue my work and strike up a conversation with my co-worker at the next desk, as if Arnold were calling from the moon.

"Hey Kev," he continues, and then pauses for what seems at least twenty minutes. I sink into another chart and lose myself in recollection of a previous session. Arnold's next attempt is a calculated one. "You're a bAAAAAstand, Kev. You bastard. You're a bAAAAAstand."

"ARNOLD!" I shout, frustrated and red-faced. I drop my charts and aim at Arnold with the tip of my ballpoint.

"Heh, heh, heh," he chuckles. He smiles a broad smile and I notice the gap between his two front teeth. I could fit the tip of my ballpoint between them. "Gimme some coffee," he insists. He fixes his eyes, bloodshot, upon mine and drops his smile into the sagging jowls of a bulldog.

Again, as before, Arnold wins. Two creams and a packet of Sweet & Low. IV.

Walking home past the Convention Center, I follow two children who in turn trail their father by a few feet, more interested in mud puddles than in where their father is taking them. They aren't twins and, judging from the brand new out-of-the-package BALTIMORE ORIOLES t-shirt on the eight-year-old boy and the foil propeller spinning from the felt hat of his younger sister, they are tourists. The little girl skims the left arm of her teddy bear in the mud while she dangles it by its right, singing She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain at the top of her lungs: And we'll all go out to meet her when she comes, we'll all go out to meet her when she comes . . . . Daddy proudly wears a brand name camera around his neck like a medal and stops at a yellow umbrella to buy hotdogs. He turns to get his children's reactions, and his daughter spins with him as she grasps hold of his shirt tail. She'll be driving six white horses, she'll be driving six white horses . . .

The boy drops back a few dozen feet, his attention drawn toward a narrow alley between two bank buildings: an old woman in a ripped black hair net fishes for chickens out of a rusted green dumpster. Her shoes are too big for her feet. I stop and watch the child, pretending to tie my shoe.

"Whaddaya want on your hotdog, Johnny?" the daddy calls impatiently, struggling to separate his daughter from his shirttail.

The boy runs up to his father, gasping and excited, and asks if he could have two.

"Two hot dogs!" Daddy's inflections are rhythmical, Johnny, we've been over this before. You can never finish two hot dogs. Your eyes are too big for your stomach."

Actually, his eyes are big enough for two stomachs. I untie and tie my shoe again as the boy argues his case for the old woman. The father counters with a line about not being rich enough to feed every old woman on the street and still save enough for the boy's college education. Figuring it ridiculous to untie my shoe again, I take my place in line at the hotdog stand as the boy pushes forth his lower lip and folds his arms. He elbows his way past his father's legs and speaks directly to the hotdog vendor.

"I'll have two hot dogs please." He wipes his chin on the sleeve of his new t-shirt and cocks his head back to question his father: "If I don't feed her, Daddy, who else will?"

V.

Bouncing the rubber toe of his blue tennis shoe against the steel base of a parking meter, he stands across from me, at arms length, and falls to pieces.

"I've never been ready for this, I'll never be ready for this; I'm not ready for this." The cherry blossoms fall around us like snow.

James is dying and he hasn't had a place to call home for over two decades. The doctor has given him six months. Infused with a newfound certainty, a finality, for the first time able to see his life from a beginning to an end, he flips through the stages of grief as if turning the
pages of a history book—which he does also, in his way, sometimes in an emotional fury, sometimes quietly removed, with the eye of an historian. He follows a Biblical pattern, which is more human than it is Biblical: his beginnings, his *Genesis*; his fall from innocence; his fall from grace. Constant is one realization: *James is not ready to die.* And as he reflects through years of uncertainty, years of poverty and addiction, years of separation and isolation and frustration and alienation, he tries in that moment, desperately, to find his way back *home*.

“I think of that poem,” he says to me in a moment of absolute lucidity before losing himself in a storm of anger, “that poem by Frost.”

*The Road Less Traveled,* I respond, impressed that we share a favorite poet.

“No, no, nooo,” he insists, in a tone of voice suggesting he’d corrected the error a hundred times before, “it’s called *The Road Not Taken.* Everyone always thinks it’s about the road less traveled, as if it’s congratulating people for taking the hard road, the tough way, for being individuals. And maybe it’s doing that, maybe it says something about that, too. But from where I’m standing, it’s about all the roads not taken.” He shifts his weight to his other foot and clamps his eyes shut tight. When he opens them, his face is wet. “I think about all the roads I could have taken, all the things I could have been, all the places I could have gone and, you know, when it’s all said and done all the could’ves and would’ves and should’ves all put together don’t make up for the fact that when I die, there’s nothing left of me, no children to remember me, no friends to say ‘ya know, he was a good guy who maybe had a hard time,’ no words written anywhere to say ‘James was here and he felt things and he tried to be the best person he knew how to be.’ Just nothing. Nothing.” He looks at me, pleading, as if I’d take a chisel and etch his words on the wall beside us. He pauses to cry, twisting the top of the parking meter as if trying to open a Ball jar. Again, he clamps his eyes shut tight. When he opens them, his face is wet, too.

*The Road Not Taken,* I speak softly, acknowledging his correction.

“There’s so damn many of them,” he says, calmly and slowly, after a silence, “and at the end like this, I’m left alone with little left to do but to think of them.”

I never again saw James after that conversation and

VI. It encapsulates all the unbridled enthusiasm and staged theatrics of a religious revival: Lobby Day ’95. Bus loads of public policy advocates, school children, health care providers and participants in various financially threatened social programs converge upon a small waterfront Capitol City just weeks after the newly-elected Governor of Maryland offered up as sacrifice to the National Chopping Block a $34 million cash assistance program which provided a modest monthly income to the poorest of the poor and the sickest of the sick. Maryland simply cannot afford this program, he said.

Attending, instead, to that to which a newly elected Governor must attend (insiders suggest he was out conducting secret meetings with Browns’ owner, Art Modell concerning a $200+ million pledge to move the team to Maryland), he offers in his absence his proudly publicized and politically chosen Lieutenant Governor—a woman genetically linked to John F. Kennedy—to wish words of welcome to the waiting crowds. And she warmly wishes welcoming words. And she smiles and waves. And speaks kindly to the schoolchildren.

One of the schoolchildren sticks a pudgy hand straight into the air and waits, struggling to raise it a centimeter higher and a centimeter higher, attempting with puffed cheeks to stifle the *ooh, ooh, ooh* rising up from his diaphragm into his throat, like the kid in the third row who knows the answer to a math question. Finally, the descendant of a political hero acknowledges the impatient hand.

The boy clears his throat and asks in a way that, to the attentive ear, only slightly lets on to the fact that his question was prepared and prompted by someone old enough to have lamented the death of JFK. “Why,” he stammers, “did the Governor get rid of a program for people with no money who are too sick to work? What are people going to do now?” The boy smiles proudly, pleased to have completed his task.

The Lieutenant Governor accepts the question quickly and adopts a philosophical tone. She begins by talking about the people in her life who, confronted with a physical disability, have overcome adversity to lead productive and fulfilling lives. She adds something about personal responsibility. Something about bootstraps. And then, failing to demonstrate the political charisma everyone assumed must run in her family, she shares with the audience her beliefs derived from her experiences with persons with disabilities. This is what the descendant of Kennedy thinks about disability: She believes that if a person simply believes hard enough (presumably in him or her self) and
tries long enough (presumably to perfect the art of faith healing) she can overcome the most disabling setback and return to the work force to become a productive member of a new society. Perhaps if she had anticipated the question and the participation of schoolchildren, she would have brought with her a copy of *The Little Engine that Could*. It may have proven a helpful visual aid.

Hmmm. I don't know. The last time I checked with my nurse practitioner, "totally medically disabled" implied (at least in the medical circles of which I am aware) that work is not an advisable option. But do what I know? I neither socially frequent medical circles nor am I an expert in welcoming waiting crowds warmly. And I'm a little fuzzy on the quantitative or qualitative tools used to measure social productivity. Hell, I don't even know that much about faith healing or, for that matter, about John F. Kennedy.

Exasperated by this Kennedy's remarks, I whisper to the woman sitting next to me that if this faith healing progresses into allegations of her political predecessor's resurrection, I'm leaving in a hurry.

She looks at me coldly and purses her lips. "That's tasteless," she says blandly.

"Yes," I agree, clearing my throat and rising to leave, "Tasteless." Tasteless, indeed.

As I leave, I think of James and the roads he's never traveled; I think of the streets he's strolling along now, waiting for the shelters to open, waiting for the line at the soup kitchen to subside. I think of Stanley, waiting for the day he's going to bed down in a corner behind the dumpsters beneath a pile of rags and dirty army surplus blankets and never wake up again.

It occurs to me that the road is the wrong metaphor for James, for Stan, for Dan or Arnold or the child with extended arms or the old woman in the black hair net, fishing in the dumpster for chicken bones. It's the wrong symbol for most victims of debilitating poverty. Roads imply choice: like certain members of the hippie generation pop-starting a rusted VW van, cruising the vast national network of roads and highways and byways like free and wandering nomads. For victims of poverty of this generation, of the twentysomething generation, of the pie generation, of each and every and any generation past, perhaps a more fitting metaphor than that of roads.

We live during a time of Little Engine Politics: the belief that if an individual simply works long enough and strives hard enough (*I think I can I think I can I think I can*), she can reach the top of the highest hill and coast safely into the valley. The problem is this: the little engine—fearless protagonist of our favorite childhood story book—never would have made it to the crest of the hill if the tracks had been damaged or removed altogether. Without tracks, the little engine couldn't, can't and, barring the occasional mechanical miracle, won't. And no amount of hoping, no amount of thinking, not a room full of warm wishes nor a chapel full of faith healing will propel the Little Engine over the hill on tracks that simply aren't there. She'll be coming 'round the mountain when she comes and, when she gets here, we all won't come 'round to meet her because we all won't be here. Certainly not the casualties of an economic environment which favors commercialism over community and football teams over fair housing.

The pushers of Personal Responsibility—the twin theory of Little Engine Politics—want someone like schizophrenic Arnold, who hasn't worked a day of his fifty years, to pull himself up by his bootstraps and concentrate on something like a forty hour work week. Arnold has enough trouble concentrating on a cup of coffee. And he doesn't even own a pair of boots.

It's frightening, this theory. And it's not just coming from the Republicans. I heard it from the mouth of a Kennedy.

**VII.**

The boys, too, were twins. The first born, maybe twelve, watched a pickup truck round the corner and broadside his brother. In a coma in the hospital in danger of never waking again, doctors thought the younger twin's prospects poor and kept a close eye on his brain activity. "Good morning, what do you want for lunch today?" the doctors called out routinely in greeting, never expecting an answer as they lifted the boy's eyelids and signed his chart.

The older twin visited his brother daily and read the Sports section to a brother who couldn't answer, couldn't look him in the eye and express joy in their home team's victories, disappointment in the team's losses. He discussed lineup choices, poor play decisions, the lives of players having a particularly bad season. "They say Coleman ain't been pitching too good since his mother died last spring." He read to his brother every word in each Sports section, eventually climbing in bed along side him, as he visited day after day "to make my brother better." When finished reading, he let his head sink back into stiff hospital pillows and listened to the quiet pumping of the respirators.

The doctors reported no progress. "Good morning, what do you want for lunch today?" they asked out of habit. The older twin entered with the day's Sports section, climbed into the hospital bed and took his place next to his brother. Weeks passed. Months passed and the hospital psychiatrists feared for the older twin's emotional health, talked with the doctors about limiting visitation hours, appealed to the parents to keep the brother home.

The mother watched her son leave every day with
the newspaper tucked under his arm. She peered through the window of the hospital room to watch him report to his brother on each and every game. If I don’t stay with him, Mommy, who else will?

“Let him do what he wants,” she told the psychiatrists.

The doctors agreed. “What do you want for lunch today?” they asked. And only the older twin answered.

On the morning after the big game, after their team lost, the older twin told his brother that the coaches made a mistake to take Coleman out of the game and put in the reliever. “He was pitching his best game of the season,” he argued as he held up the newspaper photograph and read the caption. “Can you believe it? When we make the Major Leagues, we’ll never let the coaches push us around like that.” And when he finished reading and sank into the pillows and closed his eyes and drifted to sleep, his father picked him up and carried him home and watched the rise and fall of the younger twin’s chest through the rectangular window of the hospital room door as it slowly closed behind them.

The next day, the room was empty except for the sleeping younger twin. The doctor listened to the whisper of the respirators. “Good morning,” he spoke aloud to himself, moved quickly through the room in his daily routine and turned to open the blinds and let in the sun. “And what do you want for lunch today?”

“A McDonald’s hamburger,” the reply came quickly. The doctor nodded, left the room and approached the family keeping daily vigil in the waiting room. “Your son wants a McDonald’s Hamburger and I’m going across the street to get it. I think you should get in there now.”

And when the older twin saw his younger brother, he climbed into bed and talked with him about each game of the entire season. His brother remembered everything: the scores, the players, the weather conditions during away games. “Are you kidding?” he argued, “when Coleman’s been having that bad a season and if I’m ever the coach, he’s outa there by the seventh at the latest.”

The twins threw their arms around each other and pulled the covers up to their chins, each lost in the other’s words. Hey brother, how ya been? Where did you go when you were sleeping?

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VIII.

When it’s snowing like this, I’m reminded of Terry, the wandering, HIV+ theologian, afraid to move out of the weather, afraid of permanence, afraid of people: he detested snow with a passion and wondered aloud from what demonic corner of the cosmos it originated.

“Some people say Hell ain’t made of fire; it’s made of the coldest ice.” He plucked an icicle from a parking meter and tossed it to the ground for emphasis. I watched it shatter into a hundred pieces. “The coldest, coldest ice.”

“Ice, too, is nice, and would suffice,” I spoke softly to myself. Frost wrote that one, too, but Terry had never heard of a poet named Frost.

To Terry, winter wasn’t one of four cycles in a natural, annual progression; it was divine retribution, penance for a lost city the gods had all but forgotten.

“God’s here in Baltimore,” he whispered to me a few months before he died. He rushed me into the bathroom, locked the door and turned on all the water faucets before revealing the presence of this holy and invisible visitor. Terry was afraid Secret Service officers were out to arrest him because he was the only soul in the city who knew the location of God. Certainly this information would be perceived as an immediate threat to national security.

As we waited—holed up in a locked bathroom—for the Secret Servicemen to pass by his window, Terry told me: “I know I’m going to die.”

Then he announced, more, I think, to the hidden Secret Servicemen than to me, that he would set himself on fire or jump off a bridge long before his body became too sick to breathe. “I’m takin’ myself out before the virus ever gets me.” He struck a match for emphasis, lit the end of a filterless cigarette, blew smoke rings toward the ceiling and poked at them, rhythmically, with his finger. “Takin’ myself out, out, out.”

A few months later, Terry turned skeletal in a hospital bed and now lies buried beneath suburban ground in a donated grave plot under two solid feet of the best snow and ice Old Man Winter, or God, could muster. I pass by the cemetery, now and then, when my car isn’t buried and my door isn’t frozen. Locating Terry’s gravesite, while at first a monumental endeavor, has become easy, routine. The site is recognizable: it’s the one without a headstone to mark the place his body rests.
Envy (ma non troppo)

When the evening ends again tonight
and folds itself into a deeper
darkness, I will not think of you.
Tomorrow, years ago you were born
and we no longer mark this festival
across the continent and the conflict.

How I will miss you! not even
able to think of you. With the last
hours left, I wonder what has become
of your appointment,

I wonder when did you first begin
to fade? I was thrilled
that you could venture so far ahead,
me caught with the rest. I watched
with the others as you rounded
the corner, smiled, and disappeared.

Of course I liken my life to yours
and try your accomplishments on like
second-hand clothes, but it is only
to inspect my own life, when in the evening
I feel the wind blow through the cracked window
and just before I put on these old boots, I despair
for the lives I chose not to lead.

If you sense envy, it is not
of you. What I envy
is the life we led before and wish
I could only tell you this:

My eldest dreamt that a white horse
carried him off a cliff. He is happy
and strong. The baby walks and says no no no.
My wife discovered a small lump on her left breast.

Today I walked to the borderland
and opened my hand without longing. The road shone
with the last of the white rain and looked
like it rose and continued above the horizon.

Mark Conway
THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Out on the prairie the wind is a sister. It is a wife, a husband, a brother. The wind is the one always by your side, so constant you forget it is there.

Out on the prairie you can see the wind. It weighs down the grass and rolls it along in great green and gray waves spreading out for miles across the plains. The wind dances tall, spiraling plumes of earth and stubble to the sky, up to the clouds. It dismisses like puffs of smoke the dust of wagon wheels and horses hoofs.

Out on the prairie you are mindful of the wind, more than at any other time, when it stops. Then the earth herself holds her breath and waits in expectation.

Springing Waters stepped out of her sod hut into such a stillness of a late morning. The night before the wind blew as if intent to wipe off the earth every imprint of human hand. Now all was still, under a clear, cloudless sky, from which the mid-summer sun beamed down with a heaviness that assaulted even bronze skin and black hair and took breath away.

Springing Waters reached back inside the wooden frame of the doorway to lift the water buckets by the cord that held them. They were tied to each other by a braided leather strap, long enough to fit over her shoulders and allow the pails to dangle to each side at the middle of her hand, relieving their weight during the long walk back from the well.

The single, village well and pump stood away from the settlement to the north, half way up the gentle slope that partially shielded the sod houses from winter wind. The hut in which Springing Waters lived was to the east, perhaps a quarter mile walk each way from hut to well along a circular path skirting around the other houses. The women of the village went to the well early each morning, as soon as their men were off. There the women chatted, exchanging news, gossiping, under the cover of work which was precious to them.

Springing Waters chose a different time to go to the well, not because she was naturally a loner, but to avoid the looks and the silence of the other women and their whispers when she turned away. Actually she admired those fair-skinned women, admired them for their fortitude and stamina. They came out onto the prairie with their families to live at odds with nature, to struggle against the earth and elements, to carve out a place for themselves. Springing Waters’ people had been there for centuries and long ago learned how to live in harmony with that same earth, at peace and in balance, without struggle.

There were so many things Springing Waters could teach the whitefaced women in their aprons and bonnets. She knew they would not listen, and somehow deep inside she felt when all was said and done the white women and their white men would succeed in taming the earth, at least for a while. They would win, and Springing Waters and her people would have to live at odds with a new, twisted world around them.

Dave Kehret, Associate Pastor at the VU Chapel of the Resurrection, offers this midrash on John 4. The lesson is appointed for the second Sunday in Lent during the Lectionary Cycle A. Pastor Kehret, a well-known preacher and writer, has provided a number of scripts for Soul Purpose, VU's student chancel drama troupe. This is his second appearance in The Cresset.
The people of the settlement called their village New Olm, a name that meant nothing to Springing Waters. Once the site had been only a stopping point on a road running west to the mountains. But the expanse of land and the nearness of the river was invitation for others to come and bring cattle, build houses, and try to grow crops. The settlement was still small. It boasted a dozen sod houses, a general store, and a blacksmith shop. A church was being built. There was yet neither doctor nor banker, teacher or preacher.

Her empty buckets and coiled harness in one hand, Springing Waters drew shut the heavy, wooden door of her sod hut. The hut belonged to Sam, at least Springing Waters assumed it did. Sam was her reason for living there. Sam was shelter. Sam was safety. Once Sam meant rescue and life. Now Sam was survival for another day.

Each day Sam got up with the pre-dawn light, dressed, ate some morsel from the day before, and went out. Some days Sam would walk down to the blacksmith shop. When a wagon train came through town he might get two, three days of work with the blacksmith, shoeing horses, repairing wagons. Some days Sam worked on the range, round-up time, calving. Some days there were crops to plant or a meager harvest to gather. Some days took Sam to deep holes along the river, and he would return with fish or frogs. Some days he would come back with game from hunting, prairie dogs, pheasant, prairie hens, raccoons. Each day Springing Waters would wait for Sam’s return, her world consisting of little more than the hut, the well, the path between, and Sam.

Long ago, marked now only by memories sealed off from recall, there was another world, a bigger world, a world with even a future. Once there was a village of kinfolk and children to grow up with. There were things to learn about the earth and about the ways of her people. There was laughter and grieving, hoping and regretting.

There was Great-grandmother. Her wise old ways set her apart from everything as much as did her ancient face and hands. Her life was with the children. She had lived more productive years than anyone else around. She had outlived all her peers. Her own children were growing old. Her grandchildren had children of their own. Like the younger children of the village, Great-grandmother was not looked to for productivity. But unlike Great-grandmother the children would someday join the productive life of the village. Great-grandmother someday, before her health and strength failed, would wander out into the wilderness to join the rest of her people.

Occasionally something else set Great-grandmother off from the children. When the village faced a crisis, when hunting was bad for a long time or the rains did not come, when the first white man came, then the leaders of the people came to Great-grandmother’s hut, and the children were sent running elsewhere. Then a hush fell over the village, and the wind grew still.

There was for some reason, a special tie between tiny, young Springing Waters and Great-grandmother. Perhaps because Springing Waters was the last of her generation of children, she found a special place in the ancient lap, not taken away by later newborns. Great-grandmother taught her to walk and to talk. Great-grandmother taught her to sing and sang to her the ancient songs few others knew. Their melodies danced in the air and rode upon the breezes, as if they had a life of their own.

The Crèssel
Then one day Great-grandmother was gone. She had taken Springing Waters with her to sleep the night in her hut. She sang the ancient songs far into the night. Springing Waters drifted in and out of the land of sleep, hearing the comforting voice of Great-grandmother singing on and on, until finally sleep grew deep and Springing Waters had heard the songs for the last time. When she awakened, Great-grandmother was gone.

At a tender age, but a proper one for that world, Springing Waters was given to Running Beaver, some years older and with a promising future among the people. She did not know him, let alone love him, on that day when her family walked in procession through the village to his hut. But she learned to do both in time and do both deeply. Her greatest desire was to bear him a child. Her second greatest grief was that she never did.

Her greatest grief, however, began the day the hunters returned in mourning, even though they were bearing the kill. The buffalo herd turned, they said. Running Beaver was brave and on his horse wheeled around to turn the herd away again. But his horse stepped into a prairie dog hole. Both were trampled. With full honors of the people, but out of compassion for Springing Waters as well, they buried Running Beaver far out on the prairie.

That same day, Springing Waters was taken to the house of the brother of Running Beaver. Such was the custom of her people. Though in that house was already wife and children, there Springing Waters would be sheltered, and there she also would be wife to the brother of Running Beaver. In that house would be jealousy and spitefulness, and there would be no children from Springing Waters to endear her to the brother of her lost delight.

A year later, when the white-skinned trader with the red beard came through the village, Springing Waters was the one who worked to meet his eye. She was the one who made certain to be seen by him again and again the days he was with her people. She was the one who risked arising in the night and going to his bed in the early morning. Before the village arose she rode off with him and never returned.

Red insisted they be married the white way, though Springing Waters could not fathom the importance of saying, "Yes," to some words she didn't understand and each of them putting an "X" on a paper, all a whole year after they rode off together. If it made Red happy, she was content. Life with Red was life on the move, even more than with her own people. Into the mountains they would travel. Traps they set out together. There they would weather the winter and in the spring collect from the traps and head down river with a canoe of beaver pelts.

That life, though it did not match the good she had lost, was good, and Red was a good man, until he heard about the gold. Springing Waters sensed the evil that infected him the minute Jake entered their lives. And she was helpless to hold him against the call of quick riches. That year Jake went with them into the mountains to set the traps. Then Red left her to winter alone, with provisions enough, while he and Jake went on to find gold.

Spring returned and Red did not. Springing Waters collected the pelts from the traps and headed down river alone. She waited for Red where they always traded the beaver pelts. Months went by. Finally Jake returned alone. He had gold and stories of Red's death, once by rival gold seekers and again by falling from a cliff. In addition Jake had Red's dying gift of Springing Waters, to be his wife.

Life with Jake was an evil nightmare. The gold was spent on drink and only after begging on food. When Jake went out, he left Springing Waters locked securely in the cabin. There she would wait each day in dread for the drunken abuse of the night to come. One day Jake did not return, nor the next, nor even the next. There was no food or water left, and the door was bolted from the outside as securely as ever.

A handful of passing soldiers heard her screaming. They rode past and only returned as a lark. Their torment was worse than Jake's. They left her to die. A long day later Sam came by.

Sam asked no questions. He spoke to her softly and left again. In a while he was back, and Springing Waters could hear him outside, singing strange songs as he worked. Then he came into the cabin, lifted her gently and carried her outside to a crude litter he had constructed to pull behind his horse. He placed her on it, then went back into the cabin for blankets, a couple of pieces of clothing, and whatever seemed of value. As slowly and carefully as he could, walking beside his horse, Sam transported Springing Waters to his sod hut.

Those days and hours were ones of dreams and delirium for Springing Waters. Somewhere Sam had gained healing powers and the skill to awaken her own healing powers. Slowly she regained strength, and her new world came into focus. And what she once dismissed as part of the haze surrounding her suffering mind and body turned out to be
real. She heard people tell of it, but herself never saw a man with skin so black.

In the stillness of noonday, Springing Waters walked the path from her hut with head held down, as if needing to concentrate always on the path one step ahead. Only when she reached the place where the path from her shelter reached the road did she look up towards the still windmill high in the air. Immediately her eyes were drawn down to its base. Someone was there at the pump, at midday!

Springing Waters turned to go back, then paused to consider. There was not a drop of water at her hut, and the day was getting hotter with no breeze to bring relief. She was more than half way to the well. Perhaps the person would leave, seeing Springing Waters on the way. She would walk slowly. Her eyes went again to the road just one step ahead of her feet.

Springing Waters whole life had become that and no more, looking ahead no more than a step at a time. There was neither past to produce hope nor future to hold promise. There was just the day. There were just the hours of waiting for Sam to return and the daily fear that he would not, though each day he did, so far, bringing safety and security for another night. Until the next day of anxious waiting.

She paused along the road. The figure at the well had not moved.

Sam never asked Springing Waters about her past or how she got to the point where he found her. He rarely spoke of the world he came from. In the evenings Sam talked about his day or what happened in the village. Once or twice when he did talk of his past it was completely beyond Springing Waters’ comprehension. Only the strange songs of Sam’s people could Springing Waters comprehend, though the words made little sense to her. Still she would beg him to sing them to her.

Springing Waters hung the cup on its hook and reached down for the braided harness. At the edge of the well platform she stopped and looked out across the valley, at the far hills and the river, at the trees on the riverbank, at the houses of the village and the half-built church, at the road leading off into the distance.

For a moment she felt a breeze. No. But then again. She heard a sound far overhead. High above a little gust tugged at the windmill, inviting it to turn toward a new flow of air. The stubborn blades turned and stopped, creaking as they did.

Someone was singing, a melody dancing in the air. Maybe just the creaking of the windmill blades. No, more than that, a voice singing along with the creaking blades and the new breeze blowing, an old, familiar voice singing old, forgotten songs.

If the wind kept up, there would be water before the afternoon was over. Springing Waters looked off into the far distance, then, head high, stepped out upon the road.

The two of them walked together —one upon the dusty path, the other upon the wind.
Time and Again

Charles Vandersee

Dear Editor:

Five American canvases, perhaps somber, as befits the season.

The Future

The future is where we read the memoirs and diaries of public figures active today. In them will be disingenuous surprise—over various bad things that have happened in the 20 or 30 years since 1995.

National parks and forests as we knew them, spacious and even mysterious, have to a considerable extent turned out to look like everywhere else:

"Not our fault. We didn’t know all this would happen. Nobody warned us, that ideas have consequences. If people out there saw this coming, why didn’t they speak up?" Of course people had spoken up, in the 1990s. But they were hooted at, as ecofreaks, elitists out of touch, and enemies of the marketplace. They were, of course, merely studious, skeptical, stewardship-minded, and prophetic—rare things to be, a species therefore deserving stomping.

Viewing serious damage to the national fabric, the memoirs will nonetheless display the braggadocio of the common despoiler: "We pretended our motives were moral, fiscal, even Constitutional. We said it over and over again, outraged if someone said otherwise. But it was all naked politics in the public square, month after contentious month, delivering to the people who always want more than their share. We successfully distracted the opposition by pretending to legislate on principles. But that was faking it; it was all lowdown politics."

These lowdowners of the New Guiltlessness and Braggadocio: The time for throwing a bright light on them is now, and, unfortunately, for some time to come. Wholly politicized, despoilers demonize good stewards in the present, labeling truth-telling as obstructionism. Then in the future, 20 years from now, they’ll do a second round of demonizing: charging the same stewards with silence and enervation back then. The New American Despoilers are that kind of people.

The Gap

The gap is between the ways insiders and outsiders see things. Take, for example, religion. We are a more secular age than before, but not necessarily because people in the US have willfully abandoned God, though it may look that way from inside the Communion rail. Instead, more people find themselves honestly unable to believe. Typically, they must feel regret, as do people colorblind or tonedeaf, missing out on something, though they may not talk about it. Even among atheists, probably only a few are actually hoping to destroy religion.

Instead, however, of dealing with unbelief in the proper way, by addressing the gap, church people grouse and claim to feel marginalized. They need to make and iterate simple rational requests. Should they encounter a militant secularist, they need to explain to her what honesty requires. It requires her to experiment.

She has to mark out in life one liturgical year, and attend services in a liturgical church every Sunday for that period: listening sympathetically to the readings, singing the hymns, inquiring what the order of service is attempting.

Alumnus Charles Vandersee, at the University of Virginia, participated in an American Literature Association symposium on contemporary women poets of the Americas, in Mexico, with a paper on Ann Deagon. He writes regularly for The Cresset.
to do, becoming in Bible class a vigorous hermeneuticist. Try out the inside for about 60 weeks—the cycle and its start again.

Because the gap is mainly one of ignorance, not a priori hostility to religion. Most persons of nonfaith probably had no religious upbringing, or were indoctrinated by glib study guides, or fell among churches devoted more to personalities and programs than to contemplation and eternity. People with defective experience are not equipped to judge, whether in religion or cuisine, and people not equipped have to be reminded of this, and brought inside.

One should draw a line, regrettably; churches with no feasts except Christmas and Easter and Fourth of July may not work. The experiment concerns the power of time to transform one. Time has been imaginatively converted by the church into a highly stylized disorder, contra nature: a year-long improbable sequence of ancient occasions and commemorations. Standard calendrical routine is thereby violated, and in procrustean communal fashion, diminishing ego for an hour. Fervent preaching and smiling good fellowship are worthy, but not sufficiently disorienting to the ego. It isn’t merely a matter of dipping into the past for inspirational (useful) texts, once a week, but of submitting to an almost timeless cycle of time, to find out what happens—in it, and to oneself.

The Root

In a moment of inspiration some years ago Paul told Eunice’s son Timothy that the root of evils is the love of money. According to certain US cultural and political voices, especially conservative ones, the present times are evil—one hears of the crumbling and even collapse of traditional values and all that is good, owing considerably to the “takeover” of the media and the universities by the radical and godless, some of whom allegedly (as Pat Buchanan told the Christian Coalition last September) have actual “contempt” for the U.S.

But if you look closely, there has been no takeover, and the word “contempt” is merely part of the fashionable lexicon of slander, apt to be used by deplores of fashion. The truth is that young bright conservatives are not barred from getting doctorates and teaching positions. They can also gain entry-level newspaper jobs.

What excludes conservatives is not a liberal cabal but, as they know, their own love of bucks and prestige—as lawyers, investment bankers, consultants, and entrepreneurs. Apparently conservative parents are unable to bring up their Timothys to work their way slowly from the local daily paper (salary a pittance) to an weighty editorial position in Washington or New York. “Sadly,” writes Kenneth Lee, disingenuously, in the magazine of the conservative American Enterprise Institute last fall, “the university, once dubbed the free marketplace of ideas, has been transformed into a gray one-party state where only one set of views thrive” (sic).

All these unfortunate lapses: color, number, and grammar! Also the sneaky passive voice: “been transformed.” Not at all. If it’s true, which it isn’t, agency is involved, and actions have consequences. Conservatives have opted out. How strenuously? Mr. Lee found by studying voter registration lists that the History and English faculties at Cornell and Stanford have 117 Democrats and only 5 Republicans. One had no idea how egregious is the self-imposed exclusion—the social irresponsibility—of Republicans, disdaining university employment, but there you are.

Of course, I may be wrong. You have to be smart to make money, but you don’t necessarily have to be intelligent. Maybe Republicans aren’t intelligent enough to get admitted to graduate school.

The Empties

It isn’t the recyclable papers and bottles that don’t get recycled that trouble the little city of Dogwood. The recycling center on McIntire Road over by the municipal ball fields is always van-jammed and wagon-ridden. But those empty buses around town! The city mass transit system, belching. “Foo, what fumes!” as the poet Kenneth Koch eloquently put it, in his odd little poem “Thanksgiving,” irrelevant to the present topic. Empty, these heavy riveted wheeled boxes, except for a few minutes at rush hour.

Instead, let’s mobilize bored teenagers, empty-minded around town. Let them do the hauling, using their own cars. Pay part of their insurance, plus $10 an hour, way above minimum wage, plus mileage. On call all hours, except maybe 2:00 to 6:00 a.m.; let them hang out, waiting for calls, at some grungy central location with a pool table, ashtrays, the online Britannica, and free Dr. Pepper. They’ll pick you up at your house, like a taxi, take you to your job or the Senior Center, or wherever. At rush hour use a few schoolbuses. No pay, free ride. Driver records name, phone number, mileage, turns it all in daily. Honor system, but the city hires one person as auditor to do spot checks of recorded distances and make random phone calls to passengers to verify trips.

Doesn’t this expensive subsidized system wipe out the free-market yellow cabs here in town? Well, the huffing buses are tolerated. Can you trust teenage Tims and Tammys not to beat up and rob fragile old gents, leaving them in pools of crankcase oil? Don’t know. But those awful, gaseous empties, buses and teens, a disheartening pall on small cities nationwide! Demoralizing us by the sight of waste—the ongoing rolling smoking waste of a society smart but unintelligent. Isn’t a Teenage Transit Corps at least worth trying?
The Past

The past is that portion of time, increasingly large, which seems to be dedicated to a phantom named Santayana, a Harvard philosopher not thought to be an authority on anything much. What was it he allegedly said? "Those who do not condemn the past are repeatedly studying it"? "Santayana" must be a sort of anagram for "sanity"; that is, prowling around the past, you realize that the present time, anywhere in the present or past, is a bit crazy, and realizing that fact, you gain just that margin of sanity you need to survive in your own present.

Newspapers and magazines in recent months have pointed to a new phenomenon in corporate behavior: not only "downsizing," but cutting staff beyond actual need. Put your remaining people on overtime, and if business improves, then hire new young (inexpensive) people. "We talk of men out of work and of office forces cut to the bone; but somehow we keep a mistaken notion in the back of our heads that with the return to so-called 'normal' the old conditions of a few years ago will magically return; that the jobless will get jobs and things will be easy again. This will not be true. We shall have to hunt jobs . . ."

That's not Time or Business Week just the other day, but the depths of the library stacks. With students in class I was searching old magazines for ambience, to get a feel for the era of Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis. Not 1995 but January of 1922, in a forgotten popular periodical named The American Magazine.

From the same magazine, also 1922, an unexpected perspective on today's teenagers and their distractions, TV, sex, and video games. It's George Ade, the Indiana humorist, being serious as he looks back 50 years: "The contrast between the rising generation of now and the simple urchins of [the 1870s], so far as environment and daily experiences are concerned, is simply a book of miracles." "They listen to talking-machines and look at airplanes, and scoot around in automobiles, and talk over telephones." "Nowadays they have athletic fields and gyms and leagues and associations," whereas back then there was only the swimming hole, a "crick" for fishing, firecrackers on the Fourth, and a magic lantern show at the town hall. "Cinnamon water and corn-silk cigarettes made up the full program of an orgy." Now in 1922, "Just around the corner is the moving-picture theatre, the most potent influence of the century."

Cinnamon water? By contrast, Ade's wonders of 1922, zanily juxtaposed: "mail-order catalogues, refined vaudeville, . . . wireless telegraphy, golf, the germ theory of disease, telepathy, the enfranchisement of women, . . ."

The past as the margin of sanity doesn't always work, of course. Ironically, T. S. Eliot, acquainted with some pasts, lapsed into a fever of his time, depicting war-ravaged Europe as a "vast panorama of futility and anarchy," though we now know he was referring to his wife. In December of 1921 he had gone off to Lausanne, Switzerland, where he found (as he told his correspondents) chocolate shops and a good orchestra, and felt a little better, but not for long. Later he started going to church, and that helped more.

Indeed, church-going people ought to be saner than the rest of the population, since once a week they spend an hour in the past, and in that disorienting cycle of past time mentioned above, a strengthening agent. It is liberating to sojourn in these eras and that cycle, where strange ways, if scrutinized, can remain strange. Strengthening also to hear names used routinely that are seldom used elsewhere: Golgotha, Arimathea, Emmaus. The strangeneses—and the anxieties—of pasts seem to be what we need, to meet with equanimity the strangeneses that come toward us in the present.

Meanwhile, may the despoilers and the disingenuous and the bored venture into Washington National Cathedral or some other strange space this season, to experience liberation from their demons, which seem determined to shape our future.

From Dogwood, faithfully yours,

C.V.
Religion and Politics: Hot and Cool Connections

Robert Benne

The modern world is awash with examples of lively interactions between religion and politics. Sometimes it is politics or law affecting religion. The FBI attacks the Branch Davidians at Waco. Judges rule out prayer at local commencements and order baccalaureate services off campus. The Justice Department pursues a local fundamentalist church that pays heads of household more than non-heads because St. Paul says so. An amendment is proposed that would give more freedom to religious expression. All these are examples of the public sphere affecting religion.

But religion also affects politics. Abroad we have conservative Muslim agitation for Islamic republics. Christians and Muslims fight for political power in Africa. Religion is used to sacralize nationalist causes in the former Yugoslavia. The Catholic bishops press for human rights in Mexico, Central and South America. Christians organize for more democracy in Korea. Stories are now in the fall of Communism and the Lutheran role in assuring a peaceful transition from Communism to democracy in East Germany. Dramatic examples all.

The domestic scene is just as interesting. The issue of abortion simply won't go away, thanks to the passion of religiously-based protest groups. The Republican avalanche of November 1994 is viewed in part as an effect of resurgent religious populism. Organizations like the American Family Association tenaciously challenge television and movies to clean up their acts. Mainstream Protestant denominations continue their advocacy efforts in national and state legislatures as they have for many years. But, above all, there is the rise of the Christian Coalition, which has drawn much attention because of its political involvements on the conservative side. With over 1600 chapters and 1.6 million members, it is led by an attractive and sophisticated Ralph Reed.

The very effectiveness of the Christian Coalition has raised the hackles and fears of secularists and liberal Christians alike, though it is difficult to see how the Coalition's involvements are any different in principle from what liberal Christians have been doing for many years. At any rate, religion is taking on a vigorous new role in American political debate and action.

This profusion of "revolting religion," as a student of mine once put it, to describe the Reformation, comes as a surprise to many of the elite centers of western culture. After all, one of the expectations of the more militant edge of the Enlightenment party thought that reason, science and technology would lead us away from the oppression of kings and the obfuscations of priests toward a world of eternal progress.

Religion, irrational and therefore dangerous in their view, would gradually disappear among the educated classes and would no longer play a role in education, politics, law, medicine or any other public endeavor. As the history of the West has unfolded, these desired outcomes were partially realized. The secularist hopes seemed to have become more plausible.

Wishing, however, did not make it so. Indeed, the ideological blinkers worn by secularists prevented them from even seeing the emerging role of Islam on the world stage. Islam as a publicly relevant religious movement was and is real. Secular intellectuals are only now catching on to the perennial relevance of religion to politics. Whether they like it or not, it is a fact.

No religion worth its salt lacks a public dimension. Great religions are comprehensive visions of life. Their themes are relevant for all of life, not just for the private sphere. Theistic religions affirm that God is the God of all life, not just of the inner recesses of the heart. Belief in God's universal law will have public repercussions for any society with a critical mass of serious believers. This is just as true of the United States as it is of Iran or India. The religious impulse for public relevance is irrepresible. Indeed, after long years of marginalizing the public relevance of religion, the West is now finding that religion is asserting its public face.

So, the question is not whether organized religion will affect politics, but rather how it will do so. Moreover, there are great stakes involved for both church and society in the manner in which this "how" is addressed and acted upon. Some kinds of interactions are dangerous for both church and society. Indeed, I will argue below that the greatest dangers with regard to this issue in this country concern the church, not society. The American church has more to lose than American society if it does not attend carefully to how it involves itself in the political order.

In the following I will move through the two basic ways that the
church affects politics—indirect and direct. Those two break into further subdivisions which I will explicate briefly. (Those who wish a more detailed elaboration of this topic might consult my recent book, The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century, reviewed in The Cresset, Reformation, 1995.)

By "indirect" I mean that the church as an institution does not become directly involved in political life. What political effect it does have comes through its laity who are involved in the political world. "Indirect" ways of connecting the church to politics are characterized further by their being unintentional or intentional. Let's look at the indirect and unintentional mode first.

The Ethics of Character

The indirect and unintentional mode means that the church simply affects the deepest inward orientation of persons—their character—through its preaching, teaching, worship and discipline. When the church is really the church it has a profound effect on the formation of the outlook and character of its participants. In fact, when the church does indeed bring forth a "revolution of the heart and mind" of its members, it does have a powerful and deep-running effect on its surrounding society. It is arguable that this is the most powerful way a religious tradition affects public life. And it certainly is the least controversial.

There have been many historical studies of this mode. Weber, in his The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and Lindsay, in his Essentials of Democracy, showed how much the church, without intending it consciously, had a powerful effect on economic and political life respectively. Weber argued that capitalism could not have emerged without the "this worldly asceticism" of Calvinism while Lindsay contended that the development of democracy in England would have been impossible without the disseminating communions that practiced democracy within their churches.

In a similar vein, Glenn Tinder, in his The Political Meaning of Christianity, argues that Christianity, through its millions of lay persons, has provided the spiritual center of democratic politics with its belief in the "exalted individual." We also have many contemporary examples of Christian laypersons who have been formed powerfully in their churches and who then act out their belief in the specialness of each human person in their public, political life. As voters or leaders they insist on just and humane policies. In the latter category one thinks of a Senator Paul Simon or a Supreme Court Justice Rehnquist.

Interestingly enough, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has rarely moved beyond this indirect and unintentional mode. Yet it has been a powerful former of persons and has much indirect effect on public life through laity who have been shaped by its ethos. A surprising number of Missouri laypersons and clergy have entered formal political or association life.

This mode of connecting religion and politics has much to say for it. It keeps the church from itself becoming politicized, it respects the ministry of the laity, and it focuses the church on its primary mission of proclamation. While many, if not most, laity would like to stop with this level of church-political connection, it is to my mind insufficient. For one thing, the church as church is entrusted with the whole Word of God for the world; it must articulate the Law and Gospel to the public world, not just to individuals. Second, laity often fail to connect their faith and their daily life in the public world. Third, the task of formation is not being done so well these days. The laity's character is not shaped so decisively by the church as we all would like. We cannot simply rely on unintentional influence.

The Ethics of Conscience

So we need a more intentional way of connecting the church with political life. We need an ethics of conscience to build on the ethics of character. This more intentional way aims at awakening the conscience of the laity by bringing laity into a lively conversation with the social teachings of the church. Like the first indirect way, the institutional church does not become a direct actor, but unlike it, the church does try intentionally to connect the teachings of the church with the public life of the laity by stimulating their conscience.

The Evangelical Academies of Germany are excellent examples of what I mean here. The Academies were formed after World War II to guard against any future take-over of the public world by demonic powers, which had happened so disastrously in the Nazi time. The Academies brought together diverse parties within large institutions who had natural conflicts of interest, e.g., union and management. The idea was to provide a gracefull context for working out connections between Christian values and worldly challenges. In the mutual conversations that ensued all parties became more aware of the teachings of the Christian moral tradition, the issues involved in contemporary challenges, and how the two related.

This sort of heightened moral deliberation can and does go on within our churches, but it needs much more disciplined attention than it currently gets. This "ethics of conscience" approach needs to be carried on at all levels of the churches' life if laity are to be equipped to make connections between their Sunday and Monday lives. This is not a simple task, of course, for many reasons. Many lay folks don't want their consciences stimulated when they come to church. Others invest their own social and political opinions with undue religious weight, making civil conversation well nigh impossible. Many local congrega-
tions lack materials and talent to pull off such moral deliberation.

But, nevertheless, it seems to me that this is a place for the church to direct far more attention than it has in terms of materials and training. This indirect and intentional approach really aims at equipping the saints for their ministry in the world. If done well, it promises far more than the more unintentional approaches to religion and politics.

There are several other indirect but intentional sub-categories that I will only mention in passing. One involves the capacity of the church to awaken the conscience of the laity and then encourage them to form independent voluntary associations of their own or to join other associations that have already been formed. One thinks here of voluntary associations like Bread for the World (another Missouri-Synod spin-off) or the Christian Coalition. These independent voluntary associations are very numerous—Lutheran Peace Fellowship, Lutheran Volunteer Corps, Justice Network, Lutherans for Life—to name a few Lutheran organizations. They allow lay folks to band together to express an agenda that is so controversial or outright political that the churches themselves cannot properly handle it. They continue to be important conduits of Christian political witness, even as they provide significant voices for democratic political life. (In this regard, it is difficult to understand why so many secular and Christian liberals seem to regard the Christian Coalition’s efforts as somehow an illegitimate religious incursion into political life. One can certainly criticize the Coalition’s stance on the issues as well as its implicit claim that its stance is “Christian,” but as an independent voluntary association it is a perfectly legitimate expression of a Christian voice in political affairs, just as, say, Bread for the World is another legitimate voice.)

Another indirect and intentional way the church can affect the public order is through its church-related institutions. If the church really has the courage to embody its vision and values in the institutional life of its related colleges, social service agencies, senior citizen homes, etc., it will make a strong public witness. Such “social pioneering,” as H. R. Niebuhr termed it, has been and is one of the most effective ways of influencing public life. Institutional incarnations of religious values demonstrate the connections between church and world in a particularly persuasive way.

The Church as Corporate Conscience

If the church were to take these indirect modes of connecting religion and politics seriously, it would have its plate full. And there would be less energy and time left for the direct ways of relating religion and politics. However, there are theological and ecclesiological reasons for more direct approaches to religion and politics. Theologically, the church is entrusted with the Word of God in both Law and Gospel; it is called to address them both to the world, not just to its own congregants. God’s moral and religious claims are on the whole world, not just Christians. Ecclesiologically, the church is more than its dispersed laity. As an institution it too is the Body of Christ; it is called to act corporately, not only individually.

Thus, we have a warrant for direct and indirect approaches to the world. The best examples of these are Papal encyclicals, bishops’ letters, and church social statements. In such instruments the church not only addresses its laity but also tries to influence public policy. In truth, Catholics have been far more successful along these lines than Protestants. Though every mainstream Protestant communion tries mightily to make an impact on the world with its statements, they are for the most part ignored by both laity and the world.

There are reasons for this disparity. First, Catholics speak with moral weight because of the size of their communion and because the Pope and bishops have retained a measure of moral authority. Second, Catholics speak relatively infrequently on carefully chosen topics. This gives them time to craft statements carefully and to take seriously the input and feedback they invite. Third, Catholics seem to argue from their own unique moral tradition. This gives them a certain immunity from the world’s ideological divides and lends them an integrity that is increasingly scarce in our fractured public world. Fourth, they carefully distinguish among levels of authority. Affirmations of core convictions that all Catholics should hold are distinguished from public policy options about which Catholics of good will and intelligence can disagree. Room is made for both consensus and disensus.

These characteristics are often lacking in Protestant attempts to influence policy by social statements. We need not go into the sorry catalog of shortcomings with regard to these qualities. Fortunately, there are signs that Protestants are beginning to come to their senses. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for example, is currently re-thinking the frequency, kind, and manner of its social statements. Perhaps we can look forward to more effective means of expressing the church’s corporate conscience.

It should be noted that historically one of the most effective means of public witness has been a prophetic “no” to certain political or social practices. The Confessing Church’s direct refusal to capitulate to Nazi demands on the church is a case in point, as was the Norwegian church’s resistance to Nazism. The Pope’s denunciation of abortion as part of the “culture of death” is another. Often, when social practices move toward the demonic, a vigorous proscription rather than a presumptuous prescription is called for.

So, in spite of all, the church
must act as the Body of Christ's conscience. It should do so wisely, sparingly and authentically. When it does so, direct and intentional influence is a legitimate and effective way that the church connects with the political sphere.

The Church With Power
Some of the dramatic examples of the church's involvement with politics that I listed at the beginning of this essay demonstrate this direct approach to the political sphere. Under this mode the church moves beyond persuasion to more coercive types of involvement. It uses its institutional power—money, staff, troops—to sway public policy according to its will. This approach is the most controversial and debatable way of connecting religion and politics. It is controversial because it commits the institution, the Body of Christ, to partisan public policies about which the membership often has no consensus. It is debatable because it commits the church to the use of power, the "earthly sword," a practice against which the Reformers protested. God has given the church the power of the Word, they argued, not worldly power, and when the church gets too involved in political power it loses its integrity as the Body of Christ. It lends its sacred symbols to very worldly projects.

Protestant churches participate in "soft" forms of direct power when they operate "advocacy offices" in the national and state legislatures, when they use their pension and investments to induce businesses to follow policies the church endorses, and when church bodies commit money and leadership to "conflict-oriented" community organizations. The controversy surrounding each one of these activities bears witness to their borderline legitimacy.

A wise church, I believe, will use such means only when there are no other options for the church or the society. The church, for example, must inescapably invest its money, so it should do so on the basis of its own values. But it should do so within rather wide parameters; it should prescribe or support business practices only at the obvious extremes. It should not be overly aggressive and intrusive with regard to the vast majority of enterprises in the murky middle. With regard to society, the church may responsibly act directly if there are no other organizations to do so because they are absent or have been suppressed. The Polish Catholic church's support of Solidarity is case in point along those lines. The Catholic church's withdrawal of support for Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines is another. But in both cases the church withdrew from direct political action when other options became available in the society.

Conclusion
It is clear that there are a number of options for connecting religion and politics. I have outlined a number of those options above and have commented on their legitimacy. I believe that the Lutheran tradition strongly prefers the more indirect connections, though it leaves room for judicious use of the direct. We would do well, I think, to focus much more attention on the indirect and in church-related institutions which are the foot-soldiers in the battle for a humane and justly ordered world. The church should heed its calling by preparing them more fully.

Ars Poetica
The disappointment again
as their bodies swim into sight
and there is nothing there I want.

I had hoped to keep the child,
free of time's delusion, entire
in his easy posture, asleep at her side
and she in an ecstatic sprawl, proof
against the fading light.

But they are both lifeless
eyes coral and the child lost.
Polaroid, liar, seeing only
what's there. Curve of skin turning
to shadow, rumors of distance we can never see, dissolves, exposed by the flash.

It cannot save the bravery
of the paired treading toward the surface.
Yet, one to another, they memorize
the cadence of their breathing
echoed in the diaphragm of air,
the twisting together
of rain and the stillness afterward,

and know that they are dreaming
the single dream that they
will never tell one another.

Mark Conway
Endings

Jennifer Voigt

Humanity has been obsessed with its end since, well, its beginning. Every culture and religion deals with it in one way or another whether it thinks of the end as coming with a long winter’s snow as in some Norse myths, or through fire as some Christians have come to believe. We just can’t stop telling stories about our end. Even in our century when we like to think of ourselves as enlightened and freed from superstition—and in some ways religion—by science, our faith in science has led us to construct different stories, though they are no less interested in the finitude of the human race. It wasn’t long ago, during the Cold War, that children went to bed saying, “Now I lay me down to sleep...” expecting the Lord to take their souls as a result of a nuclear war. Scientists and environmental groups warn us of the holes in the ozone layer, the Greenhouse Effect, and massive extinctions, armed with narratives as to how this all will bring, to paraphrase REM, an end to life on earth as we know it. Even The New Yorker has entered into the prophecy business with a recent article on the phenomenon of diminishing sperm counts. “Is this the way the world will end?” it asks as if it were the National Enquirer. One has only to read the article to find humor in the coming apocalypse since The New Yorker sees more of a threat to masculinity in the phenomenon, ignoring the fact that with the population at five billion and counting, and children born everyday, the diminishing fecundity of our men seems a moot point.

For Christians and therefore the Western world, the end of the world has always been connected with the idea of moral collapse. The concept that what is seen as declining morality can bring about the end of the world goes farther back than St. John’s plagues and horsemen to Noah and to Sodom and Gomorrah. During the fourteenth century, a period rife with problems in the Church and society, so many people were speculating on the end of the world that at least one European ruler got fed up and banned all apocalyptic prophesies.

Since many of the films made about the end of the world, like the Mad Max series, are actually quite good, it would be nice for someone in the movie-making business to ban the making of really bad end of the world films, like Seven. Seven is a ludicrous story about a serial killer, (played by Kevin Spacey with a look of sociopathic calmness on his face borrowed from Charles Grodin) who takes it upon himself to mete out judgement on the world by selecting seven victims whose lives exemplify the excesses of the Seven Deadly Sins.

The film’s makers might have been able to resurrect it had its outline ended here. However, they decide to add to it with layers and layers of film cliches, from the main characters themselves—the two detectives who are paired to investigate the murders—to the tension that defines their relationship, to the young wife who heals it. Remove the catchy theme of pseudo moral condemnation and what you have is another Lethal Weapon, with Morgan Freeman in the Danny Glover role and Brad Pitt substituting for Mel Gibson.

However, since the film masquerades as a sermon, it is instructive to attend to its lessons and the most instructive aspects of the film are the places in which it fails. While the afore-
mentioned fourteenth century dwelt on the coming of the New Jerusalem, it also produced literature that depends highly on allegory. Medieval priests used allegorical figures in their sermons to spur their followers into greater contemplation (not to mention contribution), and in the fourteenth century dream vision, The Vision of Piers Plowman, the Seven Deadly Sins themselves appear as characters. Seven teats the Seven Deadly Sins from their medieval roots and attempts to sew them into the fabric of twentieth century American urban life, by making the murder victims' punishments fit their "crimes," much as Dante does in The Divine Comedy, but with less finesse. The film attempts the Seven Deadly Sins to patch up what it sees as decayed places is the fabric, burned into it like cigarette holes by pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, lechery, and gluttony.

Other films use allegory and make it relevant rather than just having the characters say that it's relevant. In The Seventh Seal Death appears as a character to terrify medieval European society. Where in The Seventh Seal the use of allegory feels organic and necessary, in a film set in the twentieth century the use of allegory looks forced and ridiculous, and its place in a film about a serial killer at its deepest reveals the extent to which movie producers will go to exploit a genre that is ruthless in its own sense of exploitation.

The film pretends that it is a comment on the decadence of modern life, but uses the language of another age. It takes so much time for Freeman to explain to Pitt the significance of the Seven Deadly Sins to their predicament that the killer may as well have been speaking Latin. It was a lucky coincidence that one of the policemen assigned to the investigation was Freeman's more learned character, and that Pitt's character, who for research reads the Cliff's Notes to Chaucer and Dante, didn't have to stumble through it on his own. If you really want to see a movie where books help you solve murders rent The Name of the Rose.

But the use of allegory and the allusions to the medieval texts in the film fail not only where the plot is concerned, but from a thematic standpoint, as well. Since the Middle Ages there has been a fundamental shift in the concept of human identity. Where we see ourselves as individuals today, medieval people envisioned themselves as part of a flock. Dante and some of the other medieval writers to which Seven alludes used allegory as a kind of mirror, using individual sins to reflect larger sins committed by the institutions that shaped medieval life. For all of its preaching about moral deterioration, Seven never makes the individual sins relevant to the everyday lives of the primary characters. We never see the actual breakdown occurring. For a while the film looked as if it could have been going somewhere, for the tension that soon became a cliche could have been a manifestation of Pride, the sin that St. Gregory felt was the greatest of the seven, since it led people to think that they were like God. But the scene showing the autopsy of the first murder victim ends all hope that the movie might be heading in an intelligent direction. Instead, we realize that the film is trying to be more disgusting than disturbing.

Just because the movie doesn't come through with a connection between the murders and actual social decadence, that doesn't mean it doesn't try. The final sequence attempts to tie everything together, but by that time it's too late and characters' final actions are so contrived that they don't fit with the rest of the movie and end up looking like the editors made a mistake and pasted the end of one film on the beginning of another.

The film also attempts a connection through the predicament of Pitt's character's pregnant wife, who after moving to the big city, decides that the world is no place to raise children and considers the option of aborting. Had her considerations come about as dialogue with the character's experience instead of as a reaction to things that neither she nor the audience ever sees, the writers could have been forgiven for adding yet another superficial aspect to a movie that rapidly becomes superficial itself. The scene in which the character announces her considerations tells us less about crumbling moral foundations of society than about the modern person's ability to apply morality to the decision-making process. The same stilted reasoning that the character uses to justify her considerations mirrors the murderer's, and therefore the film's, stilted understanding of what evil actually is and does. It suffers like much other contemporary moralizing, from "literal" readings.

The New Yorker's investigation into a possible avenue for the end of the world indicates, as does Seven, that we still think of our children as the hope for our future. Few films are as hard on the world as Seven. It is not only lousy storytelling, but woefully shortsighted and unforgiving. Unlike a film like Waterworld, which also deals with the end of the world, it allows no mistakes and foresees one final, horrible end. In Waterworld, Mary's abortion is not used as a moral barometer of society, but as an example of how the world ends for everyone every day of their lives. In Seven Morgan Freeman's character, who falls asleep to the constant rhythm of a metronome, at the end of the movie has nothing good to say about the world except that it is "worth fighting for." At one point during Seven Freeman throws the metronome across his bedroom in frustration, as if he were frustrated with the law its constancy dictates and he is looking for something else to guide him. But as his final words suggest, he never finds what he's looking for. However, the scene brings to mind
another one of Brad Pitt’s films, _A River Runs Through It_, in which a metronome is also a symbol of law and in which boys are taught to fish by its rhythms. They realize fundamental truths when fishing with the metronome, but realize grace when they break out of those rhythms.

Throughout this review of _Seven_ I have mentioned several films that do what _Seven_ tries to do but ultimately cannot. _Things to Do In Denver When You’re Dead_ takes its characters and audience through a similar version of Hell but manages to undo everything that _Seven_ does. _Things to Do In Denver When You’re Dead_ reverses _Seven’s_ conclusions, and offers the people in its audience a gift to take home with them at the end.

The movie begins with a baptism and ends with a martyrdom. It tells the story of Jimmy the Saint, played by Andy Garcia, a former mob member who moved to Denver, like everybody else who’s moved to this town recently, to escape hectic big-city life. His one tie to his former profession is that a Denver mobster, played by Christopher Walken, holds the mortgage on Jimmy’s business, and one night he calls in the loan. Suffice it to say that what Jimmy does to erase his debt to his old employer goes horribly wrong, and he and the friends he assembles to help him are given a week to get out of Denver or they’ll be hunted down and killed by Death in the form of a guy who dresses like one of the Blues Brothers and is more spooky than doll-faced Kevin Spacey could ever dream of being.

As violent as the film is (asked before the premiere of his film on the closing night of The Denver International Film Festival which directors he admires, the director mentioned Quentin Tarantino and Martin Scorsese), and as dead as the title indicates the characters are, everything about _Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead_ affirms life. Death in this movie is less a physical state than a state of spiritual paralysis. Christopher Walken plays Satan in the form of a quadriplegic, who holds court in a room with small stained-glass windows and whose son molest children in school yards. It is an ugly reflection of a fallen Holy Family—an impotent god, a missing mother and an anti-savior. Jimmy the Saint’s endangered business offers dying people a chance at second life through videotapes of themselves talking to their heirs (It is ironic in that it is indeed a film-director’s own hope of immortality—his work born again to live on video store walls). Even Jimmy’s doomed friends, who at one point hold a meeting in a cemetery, as if it is the home in which they feel most safe and comfortable, refuse to die easily.

Jimmy’s clients and friends pay homage to the stuff that makes life worth living. One woman in Jimmy’s videos, dying of cancer, offers a gorgeous soliloquy on the joy of the first six months of romance, when you’re first getting to know each other, are both giddy and are falling in love. When she tells us to enjoy it because it’s something that ends, we feel the heavy weight of death compared to the supreme weightlessness of life in the difference between falling in love and working for a relationship.

The film’s women are its hope. Jimmy’s friend, a young prostitute who is in love with him and whom he protects from malicious johns, would be the film cliche of the hooker with the heart of gold if Jimmy weren’t a saint. Instead, she’s Magdalene, or Hosea’s wife, or the chosen people of God. Another of the film’s women, Jimmy’s new girlfriend, is the first six weeks of a romance embodied. The film’s only mistake is making her a ski instructor who wants to live in Aspen. These are real women, not wimps who run like Mary, Rachel, and Sarah, the Bride of Christ, and fishers of men.

The fundamental problem with _Seven_ is that it gives up on the living. The rain that falls on its characters throughout lacks power to cleanse, forgive, heal or save. It dwells far too much on the law, on the mistakes we as imperfect beings make. It sees every sin as a “deadly” crime, not as a chance for spiritual revelation, repentance, contemplation or re-birth of the soul. _Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead_ is populated by evil-doers, many who commit crimes on par, worse, or more shocking than the ones _Seven’s_ serial killer accuses his victims of committing. The differences between them and the characters in _Seven_ is that the world isn’t on the verge of ending. They are given infinite chances at life.
Non-Trivial Pursuits


In this important book Professor David Novak, a leading modern Jewish theologian, attempts to illuminate and recover one of the most central and troubling categories of Jewish thinking: The concept of the election of the Jewish people. Novak begins by arguing that one cannot utilize the concept of election in a philosophically acceptable manner without first discovering why the concept had become obscured or fallen into disuse. He carefully reconstructs the trajectory of the problem and shows that all roads lead back to Spinoza, who inverted the relationship between God and the Jewish people by arguing that it was Israel who elected God and not the reverse. Novak then explores later Jewish thinkers like Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig in an effort to see how each thinker attempts to restore the notion of Israel's election engaging and overcoming Spinoza's legacy. But Novak suggests that both thinkers fall short of their worthy goal. Although Cohen manages to make Israel's election “perpetually significant and not just historically contingent as it was for Spinoza” he still affirms Spinoza's “major premise that man, not God, elects” (110). On the other hand, Rosenzweig actually overcomes Spinoza's notion that “the world is to relate itself to God, but God does not relate himself to the world” (109). The real difficulty with Rosenzweig's theology, according to Novak, is his theological understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity and especially his description of what happens to these two communities during the endtime redemption. It seems that Rosenzwieg “has compromised the transcendence of redemption by making it the culmination of a process" thus indicating that "he did not fully exorcise the tendencies of the Idealism on which he cut his philosophical teeth" (103).

Having traced the trajectory between Spinoza and modern Jewish thought, Novak then goes back to the Hebrew Bible and the Rabbincic corpus to clarify the early history of the notion of Israel's divine election by God. It is at this point that I would raise the most serious objections to Novak's project. Like too many theologians he uses the Bible as a series of prooftexts to substantiate a position that he has already arrived at in advance. Thus his attempt to start with Scripture and then look to Rabbinics leaves one with the false impression that he is tracing the history and evolution of a biblical idea. In fact, for Novak the biblical text is only used to illuminate a series of Rabbinic ideas. I do not wish to say that the tradition cannot be read in such a way, but it leads to a tendency to view the tradition as more homogeneous and static than it in fact is. One can see this tendency in the fourth appendix where Novak discusses attempts to source critically analyze Halevi's Kuzari. Here Novak informs the reader that "in the case of Halevi, or any other theologian whose thought has become part of the tradition of Judaism, that thought has to be taken to be systematic with apparent inner contradictions interpreted for the sake of unitary order" (265). I believe this statement is true of Novak's approach in general.

Instead of carefully exploring the various dimensions of the biblical concept of election and allowing the reader to feel the variety of nuances and tensions that are most probably
caused by the different ideological and historical moments found in the biblical text, Novak flattens out these tensions and reads them in light of later Rabbinic exegesis. Thus he makes some generalizations that probably would not hold up under scrutiny. One such example can be found in Novak’s discussion of biblical statements that appear to reject the scrutiny. Later Rabbinic exegesis. Thus he caused by the different ideological and historical moments found in the biblical text, Novak flattens out these tensions and reads them in light of later Rabbinic exegesis. Thus he makes some generalizations that probably would not hold up under scrutiny. One such example can be found in Novak’s discussion of biblical statements that appear to reject the scrutiny of the sacrificial cult, and indeed of worship in general, are not rejecting them in principle” (146-7). While I would readily admit that many scholars have too frequently assumed that any prophetic critique of the cult is an endorsement of modern Protestant worship, nevertheless, one could argue that the Hebrew Bible might indeed contain one or two statements that could be construed as a radical rejection of the Israelite cultus (Isa. 1:12-17; 66:3-5; Pss. 50:12-13; 51:15-17). I acknowledge that once such statements are read in the light of the whole biblical tradition they function as a type of rhetoric calling for reform not rejection. But the question is, did they always function in this tame manner?

The other major difficulty is that it is unclear that Novak ever puts forth a systematic statement of the concept of Israel’s election and then defends this concept. He works his ideas out in relation to the various thinkers he examines but at times one is not sure exactly where he stands on a given issue. That is not to say that Novak does not discuss many interesting ideas and that these ideas are all connected up with the notion of Israel’s election. But the book has a loose quality to it that often makes it difficult to figure out why questions have been taken up in the fashion that they have. One wonders if the book would have been clearer if Novak had begun by describing the basic views of Israel’s election and then selected and defended one particular view. Then he could have traced the notion of election from the biblical materials forward in a strict chronological fashion up until the modern period and along the way he could have critiqued the positions that he believes are wrongheaded.

There are a few problems with the editing of the book as well. It is odd that in a book written by a leading scholar on Jewish-Christian relations the word “supersessionism” has been consistently misspelled. Additionally, I was disappointed that a text that contained such a wealth of biblical and rabbinic citations did not include an index of original sources.

In spite of any of my criticisms of this book, it remains an important and erudite book that contains an encyclopedia of interesting ideas. More importantly it has once again forced Jews and Christians to take seriously the Bible’s talk of God’s election of Israel. This alone makes this a timely book that deserves careful reading and further discussion.

Joel S. Kaminsky


McCullough takes the sovereignty of God seriously, and speaks in a prophetic voice. He writes of a loss of awe and the attempt to control God through familiarity, much in the same way that the ancients tried to manipulate God by knowing God’s name. In the process, McCullough critiques “rampant individualism” in its various guises. In one example, he invites us to “consider the well-meant evangelical exhortation to ‘invite Jesus into your heart.’” “But why,” McCullough asks,

on the basis of one verse has an entire theology and language of “personal acceptance” of Jesus swamped the far more pervasive apostolic call to confess “Jesus is Lord.” The answer, I submit, is that it fits more comfortably with our American sensibilities. So long as I invite Jesus into ‘my’ heart, I’m still in control of things and my personal freedom is in no way threatened. (23)

The author takes us on a tour of lesser, more controllable Gods: the God of My Cause, the God of My Understanding, the God of My Experience, God of My Comfort, God of My Success, God of My Nation. In this context, McCullough offers a critique of trends in feminist theology (as it is usually written) that is as difficult to dismiss as it is succinct:

Traditional theology has failed, feminists contend, not simply because it implies God is male but because it seems to justify a hierarchical view of the world conceived in terms of powerful/powerless, superior/inferior, active/passive, and male/female. I do not wish to dispute whatever helpful truths liberation and feminist theologies have to teach. My concern is more fundamental: both begin with a cause (in some cases a good and worthy cause) and then re-conceive God accordingly. This theological enterprise flows not from divine revelation but from human evaluation; it begins not with God but with an analysis of what’s most needed. (29-30)

McCullough never calls us to an individual “leap of faith” in order to
embrace the God beyond that which we call God. Rather, he, like Josiah Royce, takes Jesus (particularly toward the end of the Gospel of John) and Paul seriously. We encounter God through Word and sacrament, *shared within community*. We are dismissed and sent out into the world, not as individuals, but as members of a community, which gives witness to Christ's abiding presence until He comes again in glory. The author urges us to renew our sense of mystery and awe in worship and to renew our sense of community at the same time. The two, in his thinking, seem to be necessarily intertwined.

This book will not delight liberals, and will offend some conservatives (he attacks such conservative golden calves as "The Myth of Christian America."). There is little that is new in the book. Most of what McCullough has to say has most likely occurred to those who have spent some years thinking about these issues. But McCullough has bothered to write these notions down and present them in brief, trenchant nuggets. The nuggets are not always the precious metal they first seem to be, but most are. They all need to be fleshed out, which makes the book quite useful for classroom use in colleges and adult education courses. It should lead to lively discussion.

Gregory Holmes Singleton

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This compendium of knowledge and scholarly assessment of the Bible, the biblical world, and the use and influence of the Bible comprises more than seven-hundred entries ranging from short summaries to substantial interpretive essays. An extensive index, maps, and brief bibliography enhance its usefulness.

Biblical books (including the deuto-canon) are treated, as are many important individuals, events, places, and concepts. A distinctive feature is this volume's focus on the use and influence of the Bible. So, for instance, it contains major entries on the Bible in "Literature" (English, British Commonwealth, European, and North American) and "Translation" (theory and practice; versions in ancient, medieval, English, modern European, African, Asiatic, Australian Aboriginal, and Native American languages), and shorter entries on the Bible in "Art," "Law," "Science," Jewish and Christian worship (s.v. "Lectionaries"), and in Christian communions frequently ignored in standard Bible dictionaries (Eastern Orthodox, Mormonism).

Among the best of the many helpful interpretive articles are "African-American Traditions and the Bible," "Feminism and the Bible," "Jewish Interpretation" (s.v. "Interpretation, History of"), and "Judaisms of the First Century CE." Among the best summaries are "Africa," "Israel, Religion of," "Samaritans," and "Women."

Unfortunately, the Companion does not always deliver on its promises. It falls well short of its claim that "any book or part of a book that is recognized as canonical . . . is treated" ("mentioned," yes, but not "treated"): the books of the larger Eastern Orthodox and Ethiopic canons remain unaddressed. Despite its promise of articles on pseudepigraphical books, the enormous important book of Jubilees (also part of the Ethiopic canon!) receives no entry, and New Testament apocryphal books (e.g., the valuable Gospel of Thomas) suffer the same indignity. The sometimes canonical Epistle of Barnabas, the Clementine correspondence, and the Shepherd of Hermas, are also largely ignored.

The greatest shortcoming of this volume is its Anglo-European narrowness. So, for instance, "Africa" in the Bible and "African-American Traditions" are treated, but "the Bible in Africa" is not. Similarly, the "use and influence of the Bible" does not appear to extend to Central and South America and the Pacific rim (apart from translations). Insightful articles of this sort would increase the value of this "Companion" more than the standard and widely available fare treating "Absalom," "Ahab," "Andrew," etc.

For teachers who have not invested in the authoritative six-volume Anchor Bible Dictionary, this book is indispensable for its promulgation of the results of recent scholarship. It belongs alongside—but does not replace—the excellent one-volume dictionaries (e.g., Harper's, Mercer Dictionary) now on the market.

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**Notes on Poets**

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