Essays

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Charles Demuth was an American artist commonly categorized as an Early Modernist who worked primarily in watercolor. Demuth’s sensitive creations acknowledge the process of their making, an artistic approach initially developed in Europe that captured the imaginations of American artists in the early twentieth century, many of them famously affiliated with Edward Stieglitz’s gallery in New York City. Demuth’s watercolors reveal complex, beautiful textures that define the depicted objects but in their delicacy also hint at the fragility and temporal nature of the fruit and flowers that were so often his subjects. We at the Brauer Museum are grateful to Philipp Brockington for enhancing our permanent collection with this lovely and historically significant work. —GH

On the back cover: Autumn Kitchen Table. Photo by ernen {sea+prairie} via Creative Commons. Original at flic.kr/p/8FyEoG

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THE CRESSET is published five times during the academic year (September through June) by the Valparaiso University Press as a forum for informed opinion about literature, the arts, and public affairs. Periodicals postage paid at Valparaiso, Indiana.

Postmaster send address changes to The Cresset, Valparaiso University, 1300 Chapel Drive, Valparaiso, IN 46383–9998.

Subscriptions: Regular subscription rates: $20.00 per year; Student/Senior subscription rates: $10.00 per year; single copy: $5.00. International subscriptions add $8.00. Subscribe online at www.thecresset.org.

Letters to the Editor: Readers are encouraged to address the Editor and staff at cresset@valpo.edu. Letters to the Editor are subject to editing for brevity.

Submissions: We encourage authors and poets to refer to our online submissions management system at thecresset.submittable.com/submit.

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whatever is **TRUE**
whatever is **NOBLE**
whatever is **RIGHT**
whatever is **PURE**
whatever is **LOVELY**
whatever is **ADMIRABLE**

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

Philippians 4:8
No Time like the Present

Over the summer, the Cresset office moved from Mueller Hall to Linwood House, just down the hill and across Valparaiso University's Campus Drive South. This move came about a week after I started in my new job as editor—and right as I was in the midst of moving with my family from South Bend to Valparaiso. During that time, I felt like I was dashing from one upended, chaotic environment to another. In truth, I still feel far from settled.

But in some ways, I can't think of a better time for an office move. Right away I got my hands on each issue of the Cresset going back decades. I shuffled through old subscription files and writers' correspondence. I looked through shelves of reviewed books, notes from former student assistants, and photos of past editors. My gracious, insightful predecessor, James Old, spent several afternoons helping me sort through the office and pack up boxes, sharing stories all the while. Here was an old clock, engraved with the publication's name and that of its first editor, O. P. Kretzmann. Here was a coatrack, rescued years ago from the now-razed Huegli Hall. A box in the corner contained X-Acto knives and Zip disks, remnants of past publishing technologies. These first weeks on the job included a rush of anecdotes and information that came with the packing and unpacking. I was grateful for the chance to learn ever more about the Cresset's history and identity. It was a terrific way to start—but slightly terrifying, as well, because the deadline for this issue was just around the corner. One can only soak up so much history and identity before having to move ahead with the work at hand.

Not long after the office move, I was at church one Sunday morning, preoccupied with a long mental to-do list. One line from the gospel reading—a comment from Jesus to his disciples—broke through my mundane ponderings. "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks" (Lk 12:35-36).

What first struck me about Jesus' words was his phrase "have your lamps lit": I instantly thought of "a small lamp set in the walls of the Church to find things of value in the surrounding darkness," the image Kretzmann provided nearly 80 years ago to describe his vision for the Cresset.

But the second point that strikes me now is that the kind of watchfulness Jesus asks of his disciples has been a hallmark of the Cresset since its inception. Like the task of the servants in the parable, the task of this publication is to watch and make sense of what's happening in the world around us, all the while being ready to answer the door at our master's knock.

The writers in this issue do that. Their observations about Ordinary Time (page 4), food (page 9), Iceland (page 16), hearts (page 20), the election (pages 31, 35, 38), artificial intelligence (page 48), denominational meetings (page 54), and much, much more are examples of this kind of watchfulness. I hope that this issue is for you (as Kretzmann wrote in the November 1937 inaugural issue) "a place of perspective and coordination, where the dim confusion of jostling crowds and bewildering roads take shape and form and reason."

It's an honor to take the helm of the Cresset and join the long tradition of thoughtful, watchful commentary. As I get settled, I welcome your feedback and suggestions and stories; you can reach me anytime at heather.gary@valpo.edu.

—HGG
The nature of faith demands that we see and hear God in the ordinary realities of our existence. Christians have historically marked this reality with the liturgical season of Ordinary Time, but the very ordinariness of Ordinary Time means that we often have little clue how to inhabit this season, much less how to attend to and tell ordinary stories.

For those like myself who did not grow up with the rhythms of the liturgical year, some review may be helpful: Ordinary Time occurs between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday, and between Pentecost and Advent.

The practice of marking Ordinary Time involves distinguishing between "ordinary" and "mundane," as these two words do not reference the same reality. "Mundane" describes earthly things that may be characterized as worldly, secular, or dull. "Ordinary," in the Christian sense of the word, means "counted," and describes the patterns that reflect a usual order or course. Ordinary Time and our mundane experiences are not one and the same, even though Christians experience Ordinary Time in the context of our mundane existence. This difference illumines the good news of the Gospel message: the earthly, mundane reality of human existence may be, and in fact has been, ordered in response to God's self-revelation in time and history.

And yet, the stories of ordinary things and the meaning of Ordinary Time remain difficult to identify, tell, and receive. The thirty-three weeks of Ordinary Time and the everyday practices that order Christian life—gathering for worship, extending hospitality, confessing our sins, and resting—are not sensational or newsworthy. Instead, we typically account for our lives through significant events. The ordinary realities that create the narrative background for these events frequently go untold, silently falling from view. What's more, compared to the extraordinary stories we regularly hear, our ordinary stories about washing dishes, going for a walk, or seeing a friend seem trivial. They feel mundane. When others tell such ordinary stories, we often neither know how to receive them nor how to acknowledge their simple significance. And on the rare occasion that we share our own ordinary stories, we often are looking to others to bestow meaning upon them.

The result is that instead of ordering these ordinary stories and practices in relation to the patterns of Christian life, we often relegate them to a mundane plane somewhere below meaningful, marked time and activity. It should come as little surprise then that some Christians experience the season of Ordinary Time as a period of restlessness, uncertainty, or listlessness. This points to our limited ability to inhabit Ordinary Time and perceive its inherent meaning. It also points to our need for teachers who can help us receive Ordinary Time and the ordinary character of Christian existence anew.

Marilynne Robinson is a master storyteller who, through her craft, can teach us how to tell the ordinary stories of our lives. Recently retired from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Robinson is the acclaimed novelist whose work includes *Gilead*, *Home*, *Lila*, and *Housekeeping*. Her novel *Home* uniquely epitomizes the liminal and unfinished quality that characterizes Christian existence in Ordinary Time.
The second of three novels set in Gilead, Iowa, Home lingers in a pseudo-literary purgatory between the first and third volumes. Gilead introduces Robinson's readers to the characters they would come to love, and Lila strikes a compositional chord when read alongside Gilead and Home. Yet Home, like the figures inhabiting Dante's ante-purgatory, seems to cast little or no shadow. Home embodies the already-not-yet quality of its characters while also speaking to the similar existence that is shared by its readers. In this period of Ordinary Time, we stand between the commemoration of Christ's death and resurrection during Holy Week and Easter, and the revelation of God's incarnation during Advent and Christmas. In the present age of the church, Christians likewise stand between Christ's ascension and the hope of his return.

Robinson's craft is so subtle that the relevance of Home in and to Ordinary Time can be understood only well after the book's publication. Today, eight years after Home was published, the book reviews and awards have slowed. Home has assumed its place on readers' bookshelves (likely alongside Robinson's other excellent works). It seems that Home has quietly found its way into a very ordinary place in the landscape of American literature. It is from this position—away from the spotlight—that Home may teach us the most about how to participate in Ordinary Time.

In her writing, Robinson weaves together ordinary stories in a way that reflects the texture of the church's Ordinary Time. She uses everyday events and characters to present an account that tells of the meaning found in ordinary existence. Home begins when the central character, Glory, returns home after a failed attempt at adult life. Her father is ailing, her romantic relationship has recently floundered, and she is no longer certain about her purpose in life. When she returns to her childhood house, Glory begins to revisit the significant people, places, and stories that shaped her early life. Although she welcomes the familiarity of Gilead, she also acknowledges to herself that life has not gone as she planned. "I am thirty-eight years old," Glory says to herself. "I have a master's degree. I taught high school English for thirteen years. I was a good teacher. What have I done with my life?" (19).

At one point, when she cannot make sense of herself or her hometown, Glory searches for the books she read as a child. The books have been distributed among neighbors, but she retrieves them and places them somewhere she can easily find and read them (22–23). Gradually, through the commingling of the fictional stories and the living stories that surround her, the meaning of her life and work becomes clear. It is as if these stories, and the ordinary life of Gilead, enable Glory to remember who she is, who she has always been.

Jack, Glory's older brother, also returns home after a twenty-year hiatus. A prodigal character, Jack has lived a vagabond life and returns to a town that is quick to remind him of his checkered past. Gilead residents tell stories of Jack's past transgressions—stories he's forgotten long ago, but that come roaring back to life in their retelling. The day after a newspaper runs the headline "Rash of Burglaries," Jack finds himself standing in the shadow cast by his much younger self when he becomes the subject of public speculation. "When I walked into the drugstore," Jack shares with Glory, "the conversation stopped" (129). He concludes that others continue to view him according to the stories they remember from his youth.

Jack lives in the tension between the stories others tell, those he tells himself, and the Bible sto-
ries he grew up hearing. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Jack knows the story of creation, the fall, and redemption, but finds himself incessantly bound in the second act of this three-part drama. Jack struggles to prevent his old life in Gilead from defining him in the present, even as Glory tries to make sense of her new life in Gilead. Jack works to embody a new story, but the old stories and memories of Gilead offer a script for his life that he struggles to resist.

Unless we learn to tell stories about God’s goodness in Ordinary Time, we risk telling only part of the story of the gospel; we risk failing to understand the very plot of the story we claim to inhabit.

As Jack and Glory work to sort out their respective stories, their father, Reverend Robert Boughton, is nearing death and struggling to make sense of his own story as it reaches its end. A man well acquainted with grief, Glory and Jack’s father passes his final days in thoughtful contemplation. At one point, Jack offers to leave Gilead to avoid remanding his father of painful memories. His father replies, “I never forget them. Hard as I try. They’re my life” (296). It is as if Boughton cannot forget the painful stories if he is to offer an honest account of his life.

As Reverend Boughton’s condition worsens, his long-time friend and fellow minister, Reverend Ames, comes to share communion with him. As Ames begins the Words of Institution, for what will likely be his friend’s last communion, Boughton finishes the words for him. Robinson pauses to note, “They had said those words so many times” (314). In this moment, the sacred and the mundane commingle. The many elements of Boughton’s life come together—joy, tragedy, Christ, friendship, and family—to speak on his behalf in the ordinary space of friendship and common practice. Even when Boughton cannot provide an account of his life himself, those around him and the practices of the Christian faith tell his story for him.

And then the story ends, seemingly half-told and unresolved. “There must be more to it,” I thought after turning the final page again. And then I reread Robinson’s final line: “The Lord is wonderful” (325). In the ordinary, unfinished existence of everyday life, Robinson tells a story in which the Lord is wonderful—through it all.

Robinson’s Story about an Ordinary town, ordinary events, and ordinary characters teaches us how we might inhabit Ordinary Time and talk about our experiences. Much as Hannah Arendt notes in an essay about Isak Dinesen, “Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it” (Arendt, 1955: 105), Robinson infuses the ordinary stories of life with profound meaning, but the significance of these stories remains undefined. Home opens everyday stories and unfolds the layers of their complexity, but then allows the edges of these stories to remain unfinished—just like the rough edges of our everyday lives.

As Christians, if we fail to see the meaning of and tell stories about our experiences in Ordinary Time, we risk misunderstanding the great events that are central to the Christian faith. Unless we learn to encounter God in Ordinary Time, we risk being unable to see God in an ordinary manger, on an ordinary Roman cross, or in the face of an ordinary stranger. Moreover, unless we learn to tell stories about God’s goodness in Ordinary Time, we risk telling only part of the story of the gospel; we risk failing to understand the very plot of the story we claim to inhabit.

For readers, Home offers a reminder that our lives and our communities bear and tell stories. The stories that our families, churches, and institutions carry and tell are integral to the meaning that they help create, and our communities and institutions cannot exist apart from the stories that give them meaning. When we read our own stories against the ordinary-yet-profound stories that fill Home, we find commonalities. The novel’s three central characters each offer an important lesson about how to tell and receive stories in ways that honor Ordinary Time.
Like Glory, sometimes we need to remember the stories that have given meaning to our lives and work. When we fail to make sense of our lives or our place in the community, it can help to retrieve our old stories and read them during quiet moments. Not all important stories are written, so we may have to retrieve the oral stories from our friends and family members—from our neighbors. Yet by receiving anew the stories that have shaped our personal and Christian existence, we may learn to receive the gift of Ordinary Time. This requires attending to the stories that have historically provided meaning for our lives and work, and allowing these stories to re-narrate our lives. Local churches may attend to these stories in Ordinary Time by creating spaces for people to share their stories, but also making sure that the stories held by older members in a congregation are valued, received, and preserved by the community.

Sometimes we need to pay attention to the stories that other people tell about us or our communities and then work to tell a different story. Much like Jack's experience, not all the stories that other people hold onto tell the full story. The old stories must be told in a way that integrates them into the ordinary experiences of our present lives. The task of storytelling often involves presenting a more convincing and compelling story than the false stories that swirl around us. The ability to tell good and true stories begins with the awareness that ordinary experiences are ordered in response to God's self-revelation in time. Like Jack, we live within the unfolding drama of creation, the fall, and redemption, so we must continually tell the stories of our lives and our communities in a way that includes the third act of this drama. God's redemption of all things is the most convincing and compelling story Christians have.

Like Glory and Jack's father, sometimes we need to gather a host of witnesses and engage in common practices to tell a story that one individual or a single institution cannot tell alone. Like Reverend Boughton's experience, the account that we offer for our lives necessarily includes painful events and memories. Likewise, the accounts of our lives and communities emerge most clearly through the witness of a community. Such a mingling of voices reflects the communio sanctorum—the communion of saints—to which we belong. Along with the faithful who came before us and those who presently surround us, we are called to share our stories with one another, even when we feel that we know our own story and those of others around us. Ordinary Time gives us the opportunity to reconsider, reframe, and refresh the stories of who we are and who we are called to be.

This communal witness often reaches its fullest expression in the common practices that join Christians together across time. Much as Reverend Boughton experienced, when Christians engage in the practices that animate their faith, these practices enact the story of our lives simply through our performance of them. As Craig Dykstra has noted, these practices may include gathering for worship, praying, reading scripture, confessing our sins, and extending hospitality (Dykstra, 2005: 42-3). As we engage in these practices, we tell stories with our lives, bodies, and communities that bespeak the goodness of God.

This present period of Ordinary Time offers Christians an opportunity to celebrate this season anew. As Robinson's Home demonstrates, sometimes this involves remembering stories that once gave us meaning. Sometimes this involves telling
a different story than the stories that swirl around us. Sometimes this involves attending to the collective witness that guides a community and the practices that ground our life together.

Throughout, we have the opportunity to share and listen to seemingly ordinary stories in a way that proclaims, “The Lord is wonderful through it all!” This single proclamation infuses even the most ordinary existence with unfathomable significance and hope. Without this reality, the stories of our lives will remain half-told.

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Works Cited


Endnote

1 The influence of Dykstra’s work on the patterns of thought that inform this essay expands beyond this single citation.

A BLIND MUSIC

Fish born caught by a kind of music

No less opaque than the luminous sprawl that runs a billion years to the back

No less opaque than the crest of an order of none-too-abstinent monks on a liquor bottle

No less opaque than what your father meant by being alive

No less opaque than whether the day is given or taken

We pick up our voices and go at it

But the music plays us and not always well

Colin Dodds
This morning I made a small pot of tea, heating water and mixing it with dried loose leaf to create something energizing. Earlier this week, I sipped a glass of wine with friends while we ate homemade soup accompanied by fresh bread. In those moments, I didn't wonder about the places that nurtured the grapes, the leaves, the grains. I didn't ponder the hands that tended and plucked, crushed and poured. In fact, although I've written about food professionally for the last five years, it's amazing how often I forget to think about the people and places that produce my food. I pay attention to the way it tastes and how it blends with the other things on my plate or in my glass, but I don't always pause to wonder what country my tea is from, who made my bread, or what all goes into the microbrew I'm sipping on a Friday night.

It was pondering questions just like these that launched Simran Sethi on a journey to explore the origins and stories of her food and drink staples: bread, wine, chocolate, beer, and coffee. In the summer of 2012, Sethi quit her academic job at the University of Kansas, sold her house and her car, and set off on a worldwide quest to learn where her food comes from, and from whom. While this was a delightful adventure in many ways, it was undergirded by a sinister truth: the foods and flavors we love are slowly disappearing.

Sethi chronicles her journey in her book Bread, Wine, Chocolate: The Slow Loss of Foods We Love, released in paperback this October. The idea for the book was born in Italy, where Sethi was on a fellowship to study genetically engineered food. As part of her research, she spoke with Stephano Padulosi, senior scientist with Biodiversity International. He understood her concerns about GMOs, but for him, the dwindling variety of foods was the larger issue. It was a story she hadn't heard before, and it captured her. "The topic was so compelling," she told me recently. "It was almost like it chose me. This wasn't just about biodiversity, this was about identity, this was about deliciousness, this was about solving problems in a way that brought everyone to the table."

Modern food writing has tended to do just the opposite. From the celebrity chefs on the Food Network to glossy cookbooks and food memoirs from people who open restaurants or forage their own clams, it's clear that there are limitations about who belongs in the gastronomic community. Not so long ago, the table seemed bigger. Julia Child brought French cooking to American cooks, largely for the first time. Through her books and television shows, cooking became fun and within reach. Ruth Reichl, the food critic for the New York Times in the 1990s, wrote in her memoir, Garlic and Sapphires, that she was writing reviews both for the people who could afford to go to fancy New York restaurants and for those who would never be able to, but wanted to have the experience vicariously anyway.

Sethi approaches her project professionally, but also makes it clear that she isn't part of an elite group. I got the feeling that she eats dried pasta and has never slaughtered her own chicken or made fois gras. In other words, she sounded a lot like me. When Sethi started her research, she discovered some unsettling statistics, which she shares in her book:
According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 95 percent of the world’s calories now come from 30 species. Of 30,000 edible plant species, we cultivate about 150. And of the more than 30 birds and mammals we’ve domesticated for food, only 14 animals provide 90 percent of the food we get from livestock. The loss is staggering: Three-fourths of the world’s food comes from just 12 plants and five animal species.

If this seems a little abstract, consider the humble banana, found in nearly every grocery store in America. Early in her book, Sethi identifies the variety at her local supermarket as the Cavendish. More than 1,000 varieties of banana are grown in the world, but if you’ve spent most of your time in the United States it’s likely that you have only had one or two varieties, chosen because they keep well and have been resistant to disease. “A reduction in agrobiodiversity places us in an increasingly vulnerable position, where warming temperatures or a single pest or disease could severely compromise what we grow, raise and eat,” writes Sethi.

“I had read so many books on chocolate and not one of them got juicy, not one of them talked about how steamy the forest is, how the midges that pollinate cacao are totally relentless, and it’s really uncomfortable.”

variety that was introduced when the soil fungus *Fusarium oxysporum*, in the 1950s, wiped out the Gros Michel—the banana that US grocery stores used to sell. Those Cavendishes are now succumbing to Tropical Race 4, a strain of the same fungus that decimated the Gros Michel.”

It may be tempting at this point to stop reading, run to the store, and buy bananas to freeze. To a certain extent, this was Sethi’s response to learning about the ways that we have put all of our food supply eggs into one basket. Her journey was a quest to find out how to save the flavors she loves. In the process, she takes her readers to coffee forests of Ethiopia, cacao plantations in Ecuador, vineyards in California, and a yeast cultures lab in Britain.

Although I’ve been happily consuming chocolate for most of my life, I couldn’t picture a cacao tree or pod. My main understanding about chocolate stemmed from a fact that I picked up long ago—that chocolate was a fruit. I liked to share that fact with people—mainly my parents—so that I could make the case for eating it at all hours. It turns out I was only partially right. Chocolate is made with the seeds from a cacao pod (the pod is technically the fruit). I had no idea that these seeds went through several processes before they came anywhere near a bar or the cocoa powder you might sift into cake batter. In her book, Sethi describes her first experience tasting the fruit of the chocolate plant in its natural habitat:

“I tilted my head back slightly and dropped the fleshy seeds, one by one, into my mouth. The group watched as my eyes widened and my mouth burst into a smile. It was… astonishing. I had expected something that tasted like chocolate. Not this: not lemonade and honeydew, not custard apple and peanut brittle. Greedily, I reached for more and more. Each pod was different: some puckeringly tart, some sugar-sweet, some tart and sweet simultaneously. There were so many tastes, I doubted I’d ever be sated. These were the tastes of biodiversity.”

Sethi’s story explains why chocolate can vary so much in taste and notes, rather like wine or coffee. In fact, chocolate has even more complexity. “Cocoa has 800 flavor compounds. No other food has as many,” said Brad Kintzer, chief chocolate maker at TCHO, in an interview with Sethi.

Her actual experiences with chocolate and the people who make and grow it removed all abstrac-
tion for Sethi. “I had read so many books on chocolate and not one of them got juicy, not one of them talked about how steamy the forest is, how the midges that pollinate cacao are totally relentless, and it’s really uncomfortable,” she told me. “That’s what I wanted to do more than anything else: describe to people what it feels like to be in those places, what it feels like to meet those people. The constant feelings I had were gratitude and humility.”

The collection of varieties of cacao that Sethi ate in the forest are known as Nacional, which is dwindling in the face of disease and low margins. The Nacional varieties might produce better tasting chocolate, but it requires much more care than the easily grown CCN-51 hybrid, bred for large pods and resistance to disease. Still, in spite of marked flavor differences, Nacional and CCN-51 are often sold at the same price. For many farmers, the choice to plant a clone or hybrid variety is an easy one. In Sethi’s travels, she met Alberto, a farmer who is keeping his Nacional plants alive, even when the cost is significant. “This cacao,” he says, “is the blood of the earth.” A bar of chocolate made with Alberto’s beans connects us with a part of the world most of us will never visit and people we will never meet. Our taste buds allow us to experience a hint of another place. Alberto’s chocolate will be different from that made with cacao beans grown just a mile away from him. “If we start to recognize the diverse aromas and tastes in chocolate, then we’ll understand why they’re worth saving,” writes Sethi.

One year I hosted a wine tasting party on International Grenache Day, the third Friday in September. I was working in a winery at the time and had read about this celebration in a wine magazine. I felt sorry for the overlooked variety, known as a good wine to blend, a workhorse red. I had friends bring different bottles of Grenache wine, which is named for the grape, like Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon. One or two people brought Garnacha, which is its moniker in Spain. We tasted the varieties blind.

Before that night, I’m not sure any of us had tasted Grenache, but by the end, we were noting all sorts of differences between the bottles, and pouring full glasses of our favorites. I fell in love with Grenache that night, but more than that, I fell in love with trying things outside my comfort zone, with being adventurous about how I ate and drank.

**How do we save the diversity of foods we love?** We do it one decision at a time. “I want to support an agricultural system, a social system, that cares for people and that reflects the way I want to live my life,” Sethi said. “Sometimes it feels so symbolic, but just to hold on to these few things, to say: ‘this fuels my day, this mends my heart, this brings me joy.’ I can’t do this with everything I eat. But if I know I’ll only purchase meat from farms and people with whom I’m familiar, and I do the same with my eggs, then there’s a handful of things where I know these stories deeply, I know these people, and I am accountable.”

As I was reading this book, I found myself gaping in front of a stall at my local farmer’s market as a vendor began to tell me about the huge number of garlic varieties in the world. “The ones in the grocery store are just one kind,” she told me. “They just chose them because they have a better shelf life. There are hundreds of others.” It was hard to know where to begin, so I had her make me up an assortment. She ran a commentary of each type as she wrote the name on the long stalk and popped it into a brown paper bag. That night, I chopped some Georgian Fire garlic and added...
it to my salsa as she had suggested. The next day, I minced another type and added it to sautéing vegetables, small steps toward preserving biodiversity, but steps nonetheless.

“Relationship creates a level of accountability, and I think people have shied away from that because they don’t want to hear about the moral imperatives,” Sethi said. “We’ve tried the economic imperatives, we’ve tried to push the science, but at the end of the day we should do this because it reflects our care for each other and it reflects our care for the world, and because it’s the right thing to do. Then, let me just throw on top of all that, it’s also delicious. If I haven’t convinced you already, there’s a hedonistic kind of imperative as well.”

Sethi told me that some people find her book inaccessible. Their primary critique, she said, is that they think she wants them to spend more money on food. She denies that charge, but acknowledges that money is a powerful tool for change. “I’m not buying the most expensive versions of tons of stuff all the time, but I would say if something is super cheap, someone isn’t getting paid.” She points to subsidies, tariffs, and global trade agreements that have significantly distorted prices.

“We should pay for the real price of the foods that we consume. [Currently] people think, ‘Of course a hamburger should cost a dollar.’ But you can’t even get that thing across town [for that price]. Someone paid to slaughter the animal, someone paid to put it together, someone just rang you up, so how could this possibly be so cheap? We don’t ask those questions.”

In her book Sethi writes that Americans spend just 6.7 percent of our income on food, but the latest data shows that the percentage has dropped to 6.4 percent, and that the United States now holds the distinction of being the country that spends the least amount of our income on food.

“I don’t want a bargain here,” Sethi said. “I want to pay so people can live. I want to pay the right amount to the farmer so his or her kids can go to school. I want the cook who’s slinging something at whatever retail outlet [for me] to be able to feed him or herself as well. It’s a sacred relationship, and it’s one that I don’t wish to compromise on or in any way take advantage of.”

Sometimes I cringe a little as I hand over money for farm fresh eggs or ground beef. Growing up, I learned to shop on sale, to look for ways to stretch money. It goes against my grain to willingly spend extra. I try not to allow my inner turmoil show as I hand over a card or cash. I place my payment into the hands of a woman who collects the eggs herself, who tends the cows who become my hamburgers. Sometimes she brings her daughters along to help sell bacon, ground lamb, and sausage, and I have a glimpse at what I am helping to fund. It doesn’t hurt that when I go home and make scrambled eggs, the yolks are the yellowest I’ve ever seen. I pierce them with a fork and beat hard until they swirl into sunshine. The first time I ate an egg fresh from a friend’s backyard chicken coop, I had to stop and pay attention. After years of conventional eggs, the intensity of flavor caught me by surprise.

It might seem impossible to completely change the way you buy food, but Sethi believes everyone can do something. “I don’t think this is a pursuit for one socio-economic group or one political group,” she said. When people say, “I can’t afford that,” Sethi sees that as a cop-out. Instead, she said, simple movements create change—starting with a pivot in the grocery store away from the canola and palm oil and toward the olive oil, or finding out where your food was made. “There’s always going to be someone on the far edge of the continuum raising her own goats and cooking everything from scratch. But I think it’s important to say everyone has a seat at this table because a serious weakness of the food movement and the environmental movement has been the idea that it’s only for rich or progressive people.”
While many good things have come out of the flourishing food movement, it has also promoted a certain snobbishness. But food is not for the select few—food is a gift for everyone. We all deserve delicious and nutritious food, regardless of whether we can make out flavor notes in our green beans. Sethi manages to cut through the snobbery and communicate that point. "I don't cook; I don't grow stuff. I eat and I obsess about food," Sethi said. "I can look at Michael Pollan and [say] 'Well, that dude roasts pigs and bakes his own bread and has his own mini farm in his backyard, of course he can do it. That Nigella Lawson, she can whip up a feast out of anything, of course she can do it.' I want people to know that I'm struggling and figuring it out just like they are—that if I can do it, surely they can try."

I frequently kill hardy potted herbs and have had terrible luck with baking, but Sethi's words encourage me not to give up on eating ethically, even if my progress seems slow, my steps too small. Even knowing and supporting one story, one farmer, is better than none at all.

The first line of Bread, Wine, Chocolate is: "This is a book about food, but it's really a book about love." Each of the foods she chooses to seek out have meaning to her far beyond their flavors. She traces taste back to before we were born, with taste buds developing just eight weeks after conception. We are connected to our mothers through what we eat, learning to taste through their preferences, which couple with the biological responses we have to sweet and bitter tastes very early on to protect us. Later in the introduction, Sethi writes: "This is a book about love, but it's really a book about taste."

After each section on a food, Sethi offers tasting guides intended to walk the reader through an immersive experience. At first, it might seem strange to spend time alone with a piece or two of bread, or taking your time savoring a beer. The point of this practice is not to identify all of the present flavors or to become an expert. Rather, the idea is to pay attention, to notice what is good, and to be thankful for the nourishment for the body or soul wrapped in a piece of chocolate or a glass of wine.

Spending time tasting and savoring food, perhaps especially when alone, also communicates something important to me, and to Sethi, about our value as individuals. By choosing excellent quality food for ourselves, we are showing the same kind of care we might put into a meal where others are present. Our engagement with farmers, our families, friends, grocery store clerks, and every other person who might come into contact with our food relies on our self-worth. If we don't feel compelled to give good things to ourselves, what argument can we make for excellent quality of life for others?

"Tasting is different from drinking or eating," Sethi writes. "Tasting is about getting intimate with the substance we have actively chosen to put inside our bodies—the beer that makes our tongues tingle, the chocolate that melts in our mouths. It happens in the immediacy of the moment but, simultaneously reflects the long history of who we are, as well as the flavors of our collective memory." The tasting notes encourage celebration of good things. They are an invitation to thanksgiving. Sethi closes the introduction with: "This is a book about taste, but it's really a book about joy." When we slow down and savor our food, we accept the gift, we honor the hours of tending and toil.

The bread and wine that Jesus took and used
to represent His body and blood at the Last Supper were products of His specific place. The wine was made with Judean grapes, grown in the often unforgiving ground, certainly carefully tended. The bread was made for Passover, flat and unleavened, bearing little resemblance to the vast array of loaves found in churches on a Sunday morning in the present day. In her section on bread, Sethi writes about a visit to India and the Golden Temple, where a wheat pudding called karah prasad is made. Visitors to the Hindu and Sikh temples eat it devotionally. Food and faith are inextricably linked—sometimes, perhaps, in ways that we would rather they were not, as with the many animal sacrifices in the Old Testament, or the long parade of Jello-based salads at the potluck. Still, those sacrifices were one way that God cared for the Levites who had offered themselves to service. Those four kinds of macaroni salad represent labor, perhaps a recipe handed down through generations, a good gift given to the congregation. Even at the Passover, observant Jews consume bitter herbs as well as sweet charoset. The food of our faith can never be disentangled from sacrifice and suffering, even as it signals celebration. Jesus celebrated God's deliverance of the Israelites with bread and wine that would convey His broken body and spilled blood. From worship to fellowship, food is a part of an active faith life. But whether or not we are acting devotionally, faith cannot truly be separated from food, either. What we choose to take into our bodies has far reaching consequences. They are physical, emotional, relational, local, and global. When we approach food with gratefulness, when we celebrate the diversity of what is created and what is made with that creation, we are engaging in worship. "Every bite and every sip we take are our prayer," Sethi writes.

Bread, Wine, Chocolate is an invitation into Sethi's experiences, but also an invitation into a new way of life. In the time since I have finished reading, I've found myself pausing often while in the kitchen. I'm wondering about the rice I'm measuring and mixing with water to heat, thinking about where it comes from and how many people have a hand in getting it all the way from there to my grocery store. I'm thinking about my tea while the kettle boils, and the many varieties that live within my cupboard. I'm staying present with a glass of wine, without rushing.

Our intellectual gifts help us to become informed about food, but the spirit of Sethi's book is much more embodied than that. From an early age, we learn about God with our senses. Should it surprise us that our taste buds can help guide us toward justice, reaching our hearts more fully than internet searches or appeals to logic?

"In its best manifestation, food is love—one of the most intimate connections that exists between people. But love is hard, and improving our relationships is work," Sethi writes. As with any important relationship, this one may require making a sacrifice or two. It may require an examination of finances, or an expenditure of time. But like all the best relationships, the quality of life that follows makes the struggle worthwhile.

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WHAT YOU DON’T KNOW ABOUT THE GARDEN OF EDEN

is that Genesis leaves out so much. The kumquats
and ugli trees, goji vines, even a whole host
of virtue plants: the Bush of Spousal Devotion,
with its bloated brown fruit, and the gamey berries

that fell from the Honesty Hedge. Who could stomach
even a little Patience, its milky purple hearts?
Most puzzling to Eve were the trees intended
for future generations—trees that discouraged

children from hoarding Easter candy
or peeing in neighbors’ kidney-shaped pools,
or the one that could keep a boy with a learner’s
permit from riding the clutch. Those fruits
tasted like pulpy water to Eve, their juices
squandered down her chin. But the Garden knew
we’d never put those trees to use, knew that sin
would be the father of all our inventions. Else why place

the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the bright
center; why have it offer the coolest shade
for snakes and smoothest hollows for squirrels,
their bellies round as little moons? On the hill

next to the blood oranges, behind the papayas,
and above the acai that Adam ate by the handful,
Knowledge didn’t disappoint. It broke open red and sticky
like a pomegranate, each bite a hard, sweet germ.

Bethany T. Lee
God and Man in Iceland

Thomas Albert Howard

Recently I had the opportunity to lead a study trip to Iceland as part of an ongoing effort to reflect on the legacy of Protestantism in light of the Reformation’s quincentenary in 2017. Like other Scandinavian countries, Iceland has possessed an established Lutheran church since the sixteenth century, even if growing levels of secularity characterize the island republic today. But though I set out to discover Protestantism in Iceland, what first smacked me in the soul was Iceland itself: a geologic peculiarity, a cultural storehouse, a clump of aching beauty plunked down in the heart of the Atlantic.

Iceland’s beguiling landscapes are well known: a plethora of active volcanoes, glaciers, waterfalls, lava beds, vast tundra, thermal baths, geysers, fjords, and more. An infant in geologic terms at just 70 million years old, Iceland invites beholding, not inhabiting. Civilization boasts a toehold, and little more, around Reykjavik, where two-thirds of the country’s scant population of about 330,000 dwell. The remainder of the island, though pockmarked with smaller towns, basks in rugged, uninhabitable splendor. This is not Tennyson’s “nature red in tooth and claw”—the Norwegian-imported horses and sheep roam unmolested by natural predators—but rather nature expansive, enrapting, imponderable. Our study team felt this most piercingly when we traveled on Snaefellsnes peninsula on Iceland’s western coast. Walking along the lava-crust cliffs at the peninsula’s end, one can look up and see the glistening glacial ice cap of mount Snaefellsjökul, immortalized in Jules Verne’s Journey to the Center of the Earth, and then turn to take in the vast Atlantic. I’m not sure if beauty can save the world, as Dostoyevsky claimed, but if so, deliverance might well start here. Indeed, I’d like to think we had an intimation of what C. S. Lewis memorably described in Surprised by Joy as “Pure Northerness,” a longing that “engulfed [him]: a vision of huge, clear spaces standing above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity.”

While in search of Protestantism, we anticipated finding Odin, Thor, Loki, and other Norse gods. We were not disappointed. On the same trip on Snaefellsnes peninsula, for instance, we stopped at Helgafell, a sacred hill venerated by Thor worshipers centuries ago. In Reykjavik, one can’t miss streets with names such as Odinsgata, Thorsgata, Baldursgata, Tysgata, Freyjugata, and Lokastigur. A short walk from a restaurant named after Odin is a health food store called Yggdrasil, the great World Tree in Norse mythology.

Along with Lutheran confessional documents, we packed Snorri Sturluson’s Prose Edda, a key source of knowledge about the Norse gods, written around the year 1220. What especially struck me was its brooding melancholy, even fatalism, epitomized by the events of the world’s end, Ragnarok, which most of the gods do not survive. Thor is slain by the sea serpent Jormundgand. The bound wolf Fenrir, Loki’s child, escapes to wreak havoc, and ultimately devours Odin. Then,

The sun grows black,
the earth sinks into the sea.
The bright stars
vanish from the heavens.
Steam surges up
and the fire rages.
But today the old gods live on, and not only on street signs and in our weekday names. A relatively recent, fascinating development in Iceland has been revival of interest in pre-Christian beliefs. In 1972 the Ásatrúarfélagað or Ásatrú Association (Ásatrú, “faith of the Æsir,” i.e. the Norse gods) formed to rekindle knowledge and veneration of the old gods. Largely the brain child of the farmer and poet Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, Ásatrúarfélagað gained legal recognition in 1973 as a registered religion according to provisions in Iceland's Constitution. For most of its early history, the group consisted of hardly a hundred members. But today, under the “high priest” Hilmar Órn Hilmarsson, its membership has climbed to around 2,500, making it the largest non-Christian religious group in Iceland. Ásatrúarfélagað does not have a fixed theology; members can understand the pagan gods however they please. Presumably for most members involvement has an antiquarian motive, but a pagan temple is under construction for cultic use, and the group has revived a central ritual: the communal blót or outdoor sacred feast, a rite officially abolished in 1000 with the Christianization of Iceland. Ásatrú priests (or goðar) also conduct name-giving ceremonies, coming-of-age rituals, and weddings and funerals. As a registered religion, the group receives a portion of the state’s “church tax” to fund their activities, and they even have their own burial plot. Fortunately, unlike some neo-pagan movements in other European countries, Iceland’s has no neo-Nazi undertones.

While lingering on the old gods tempted, we pressed on in search of our quarry: Protestant Christianity in Iceland. Today, despite record levels of atheism, most Icelanders still belong to the Lutheran Church. Its individual churches, usually small white structures with a red roof, dot the rugged landscape, tiny, forlorn outposts of the divine. Lutheranism in Iceland is necessarily understood in light of the island’s earlier Christianization, about which our group learned from Sverrir Jakobsson, a historian of medieval and early modern history at the University of Iceland, and from Reykjavik’s impressive National Museum.

Uninhabited for eons, Iceland witnessed the coming of Irish hermits, possibly as early as the 700s, to seek out a solitary life of prayer. Only the scantiest evidence remains of these pious squatters, who brought with them the ascetic impulses that once drew restive Christians to the deserts of Egypt to seek the face of God. Since the Norse gods arrived with subsequent emigration from Norway, Iceland is the only country in the world
that, due to the hermits, can pay honest, if mischievous, lip service to having been founded as a "Christian nation."

Christianization proper began in 999–1000, according to the Book of Icelanders (ca. 1200), a key source of early Icelandic history. At this time, Iceland stood under the influence of Norway, whose king Olaf Tryggvason, a convert, enjoined the new faith over the old Norse gods. The directive divided the Icelandic chieftains. Resolution came at Althing ("parliament"), the annual summer meeting of all chieftains at Thingvellir (which we visited) where matters of common concern were discussed and justice meted out. Remarkably, the chieftains agreed to have the "Lawspeaker," one Thorgeir of Ljosavatn, consider the matter and make a decision binding on the whole island. According to the record, Ljosavatn retired to his booth and lay under a hide for a whole day and night to meditate on the knotty question. He then rose and gave a speech in which he said that it would be intolerable for the country to divide over religion and that the new faith should be accepted. But he offered these caveats: the old gods could still be worshipped privately without penalty, and the eating of horseflesh and the exposure of infants (two criticisms made by Christians) should be allowed to continue. With this verdict, conversion took place as a peaceful and almost unique historical event.

Eventually two bishoprics came into existence: one at Skálholt in the south, and the other at Hólar in the north. The first bishops were foreigners. But in 1056, a native Iceland, Ísleifr Gizurr, was consecrated. The ceremony took place in Bremen, then a key ecclesiastical post for all of northern Europe, and was performed by Bremen's Archbishop Adalbert. Reportedly, Iceland's first native bishop traveled to the continent with a captured polar bear from Greenland to offer as a gift to the Holy Roman Emperor. From roughly this time, a handful of monasteries began to crop up throughout Iceland's vast landscape.

Compared to other parts of Europe, Christianity was still young in Iceland when the Reformation erupted. In the 1500s, Iceland stood under the colonial rule of the Kingdom of Denmark, which had embraced the still newer faith emanating from Wittenberg. At first the new faith was practiced in Iceland only by traders and merchants, mainly Germans and Danes; the first Lutheran church was built for them in Hafnarfjörður, south of Reykjavík. In 1537, however, Christian III of Denmark issued the so-called Church Ordinance, reasoning that what was good for the motherland was good for the colony, and top-down efforts to Protestantize all of Iceland got underway. In some instances, this went peacefully. More often it encountered resistance, as anything imposed by sheer force by a distant ruler might elicit.

The last holdout was the northern Bishop of Hólar, Jón Arason, an epic figure in Iceland's religious history and the last Catholic bishop in all of northern Europe. Allied with two of his sons, Ari and Björn (celibacy was not Arason's strong suit), the three men with a band of armed followers defied the Danish crown until 1550, when they were captured and brought to Skálholt, where the Reformation had found more fertile ground. Fearful of Arason's popularity and unwilling to wait on official instructions from Copenhagen, the Danes and Protestant Icelanders who had captured the three men decided, without trial, to put them to death. Records indicate that on November 7, 1550, it took one blow of the axe to sever the head of Ari, three to do the same for Björn, and no less than seven to finish off their father—a stiff-
necked man in every respect. Our present-day motley group visited the site of the execution in Skáholts, the beauty of which today resides uneasily with memory of the grizzly event.

The last bulwark against Lutheranism fell with Arason’s head. Soon thereafter, following the script of events on the continent, church and monastery lands were expropriated by the crown. Medieval practices such as veneration of saints and relics, masses for the dead, and the sale of indulgences soon fell by the wayside. Printing took off as well—the first press was actually introduced by Arason—and soon Bibles appeared in the vernacular, shaping modern Icelandic, which is closer to Old Norse than any Scandinavian language. And not least, the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) became the confessional benchmark for the entire island with its well-known theological accents: “People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith . . .”

At first an elite phenomenon, Lutheranism spread and took more popular root in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet despite the island’s thoroughgoing Lutheranization, Arason himself became something of an Icelandic hero. This happened not so much for his religious proclivities but because during the nineteenth century—when Iceland still chaffed under Danish rule—the renegade bishop seemed an apt symbol for Icelandic national independence. This political movement gained steam in the early twentieth century and was achieved in 1944 when Denmark lay under Nazi control. Shortly after independence, Arason’s image, complete with crook and miter, appeared on one of the first postage stamps.

Today, Lutheranism is a state religion, institutionally located under the Ministry of the Interior. Religious freedom is practiced, but only Lutheranism enjoys a privileged place in Iceland’s Constitution. Article 62 reads: “The Evangelical Lutheran Church shall be the State Church in Iceland and, as such, it shall be supported and protected by the State.” Interestingly, in today’s more secular climate, 72 percent of Iceland’s population opposes this arrangement and desires separation of church and state, but, according to the same 2015 poll conducted by the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, 73.8 percent of the population remains registered in the national church.

Permit me to draw two lessons from our journey. First, while many in 2017 will celebrate the Reformation as the font of modern liberalism and freedom of conscience, people in the sixteenth century often did not experience it this way.

Unlike in math, many things in history simply do not add up.

Throughout northern Europe, the Reformation, as the case of bishop Arason attests, was often imposed by royal fiat and resistance was crushed. Or else, absent a powerful sovereign, violence occurred or civil war broke out—for example, the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre or the English Civil War.

Second, unlike in math, many things in history simply do not add up. One would think that a predominantly Lutheran country might vilify its last Catholic bishop. But, again, this is not the case: even as Lutheranism became ensconced in Iceland, the defiant bishop emerged as a national hero. And today, an increasingly secular population still nods to Luther’s faith as well as to the memory of its staunchest resister—even while welcoming the pagan gods from their 1,000-year sleep.

Go figure, and get thee to Iceland before Ragnarok. ♦

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Hearts

Gary Fincke

1

In space, the hearts of astronauts become rounder. According to the scientists who have studied this phenomenon, the hearts of those who spend long periods of time in space were transformed into a shape that averaged nearly 10 percent more spherical after six months.

2

In Minnesota recently, the hearts of moose have often faltered too soon, causing the moose to suffer a cluster of early mortality so profound that they have been wired and followed from a distance by veterinarians. When interviewed, one of the vets explained that when a moose heart stops beating, it sends a text message to their phones that says, “I’m dead at x and y coordinates,” directing them quickly to the downed animal so they have a better chance to decipher the clumsy heart.

3

My sister, who has examined the human heart in the commonplace of gravity, has prepared herself for surgery on her own faulty heart. The doctor is a friend, the anesthetist a colleague. A volunteer for study, my sister has already been monitored a dozen ways, details of her heart and the outcomes of her surgery to become averages or anomalies.

4

One afternoon during eighth grade, I stood with my classmates around the cow’s heart that Miss Hutchings unwrapped on her desk. Inside and out, she said, we need to know ourselves, and she halved that heart to show us auricles, ventricles, valves, the wall well-built or else. Her fingers found where arteries begin. She pressed the ends of veins. She said we were learning the circulatory system the proper way, observing firsthand.

5

The cow’s heart Miss Hutchings displayed looked nothing like the ones that had been suggested on Valentine’s Day, during cartoons, and in art classes beginning in first grade with Mrs. McIntyre, who had us draw a sweeping arc from near the top of our red, folded construction paper down to the very bottom. “Now cut, children,” she said, “very carefully along that line and then unfold.” And though some of them were V-shaped and others looked more like balls, in a minute all of us had the suggestion of a bright red heart upon which to write “I love you” and carry home to our mothers.
Previous studies have shown that astronauts are exposed to a range of health issues when taking prolonged trips into space, including losses in bone density and muscle mass and vision anomalies, but now it's been shown that there is more to be concerned about than those problems. The rounder the heart becomes, the weaker it gets. A rounded heart is a heart at risk.

Once, riding in her car while I was visiting Maine, I listened to my host tell a story about hitting a moose on the stretch of highway we were traveling. A family had pulled up behind her on the shoulder, the father asking, “You got a use for that moose?” I smiled, thinking that was the punch line, but there was more. A moment later she described the haunch of moose she’d bartered from that family. “That moose was all mine, by rights,” she said, “but the father dressed it out, so it was a fair trade.” Even though it was raining heavily, she accelerated, our speed feeling like an exclamation point, the air inside the car so rich with story. Because I love to eat organ meat, I asked her whether she’d received part of the heart and liver. “Not the heart,” she said. “Not that.”

And last week, in Pennsylvania, when my vocabulary for encouragement stumbled and stalled, I offered my sister the weak consolation of listening to her analyze the pros and cons of heart surgery. The muscle, she said, can regain what’s been lost. Just in case, I’ve updated my will. Three hours, on average, this operation takes, she went on, though by then I was fixed on the sort of planning that included a will revision, the summary she provided about how post-operative rehab is organized failing to adhere to the moist walls of my memory.

Both of us had listened for years to our father’s reports on his aging heart. About the tempo at first, the pacemaker fresh under his skin after he’d fainted at the wheel and drifted, through luck, into a field as level as his crab-grassed lawn. Sixty, he’d say, counting the beats for a minute as if he were in training. The first time he exposed its shape near his shoulder I imagined his body penetrated by some circular alien who would, inevitably, invade his blood.

After our class had inspected the cow’s heart, Miss Hutchings unwrapped the hearts of chickens and turkeys, the hearts of swine and sheep. She arranged them by size on the thick, brown paper sack, leaving a space, we knew, for ours. Richard Turner, whose father’s heart had halted, examined his hands. Anne Cole, whose father had revived to cut hair at the mall, stepped back, turning away from the entry to the steer’s aorta, the four chambers we were required to know.

A long-held belief of many traditional cultures and their healers is that eating the organs from a healthy animal supports the organs of the eater. For example, eating the brains of a healthy animal supports clear thinking, and eating animal kidneys will cure people suffering from urinary disease. That logic means that the best way of treating a person with a weak heart is to feed the person the heart of a healthy animal. There are countless reports about the success of these types of traditional practices. None of them have been verified by scientific testing.
Some statistics I didn’t tell my father:

The human heart usually weighs about ten ounces, but the heart of the blue whale often weighs about 1,300 pounds. It averages about eight to ten beats per minute that can be heard two miles away. On the other hand, the tiny hearts of hummingbirds are the largest proportionate to their minuscule body weight. Their heart rate runs to over 1,000 beats per minute when they’re active, but it slows when they sleep to less than 100—a necessity, or they would starve to death before morning.

According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the average weight of a moose heart is three pounds. Trying to make things clearer, a spokesman for the department claims, “It’s like holding a football.”

“The heart doesn’t work as hard in space, which can cause a loss of muscle mass,” says the lead scientist for ultrasound at NASA and senior author of the study of astronauts’ hearts. Though the astronauts’ hearts returned to their normal, more oval shape, shortly after their return to Earth, what’s left to learn is whether there are serious, long-term consequences, something that can’t be known for years.

“You know these things when you teach in a medical school,” she says. “I’ve known for quite some time my heart cannot heal itself.” She talks as if I, too, have always known she’s had what she calls a “persistent disability,” something “nagging, whose voice has gotten louder.” As if that voice could carry hundreds of miles, revealing her heart’s distress. She says the surgery is a choice that’s been made by her body. She is thin. Skeletal, I think, and all I can think to say is, “It’s good you have the inside information on your surgeon.”

“I’m thankful that I know these people,” she says, “I trust them.”

I looked forward to the ritual of tiny candy hearts being shared at the Valentine’s Day parties we had in grade school. Love You Much, it said in blue letters on the pink candy. Be Mine was repeated in red letters on pale blue hearts. From fourth to sixth grade, I looked at Susanna Frank or Nancy Harris or Kathy McMichaels each time I swallowed one, sending sign language their way.

The ultrasound pictures of the long-term-in-space astronauts’ hearts are stunning. The hearts look as if they’ve been molded like clay, becoming so round they appear to be incapable of working. It doesn’t surprise me to learn that astronauts often get lightheaded and faint upon standing when they return to earth because of a sudden drop in blood pressure. I think of my father, hospitalized at last, admitting he had, despite the pacemaker, fainted twice when standing, the third time after bending to place his ball on a tee at a public golf course. Despite my father’s protests, his friend had called an ambulance. Within a week he underwent his second heart repair, this time triple bypass surgery.

The day after we looked at animal hearts, Miss Hutchings asked us to take our pulses. Using the stethoscopes she’d brought to class, we listened to each other, boy to boy, girl to girl, because of the chance we’d touch. The images of those butcher hearts faded while I dreamed of pressing my ear to the rhythmic hearts of Sharon Rolfe and Janelle Fisher, whose breasts, so far, had brushed me a few times while dancing. And then Miss Hutchings recited the quart total of our blood, the distance it must travel, leaving and returning. We learned all of the names for the routes it followed, ending with capillaries so close to the surface I understood, though she didn’t say it, we could nearly reach them with our lips and tongues, rushing the blood to each of the sensitive sources for joy.

The sugar Valentine’s candy I loved in grade school are called “conversation hearts” in the ads
for them on the Internet. They come in two sizes—small and large—but both kinds still feature the familiar messages from my childhood: *Marry Me, Sweet Talk, Darling*, all of the speaking hearts in pastel colors, three pounds for $15.76.

21

Now there are variations on that candy:

- Heart-shaped Twizzlers
- Heart-shaped lollipops
- Heart-shaped sucker rings that fit on a finger
- Heart-shaped candy strung into bracelets

And colorful, decorated heart-shaped boxes in multiple sizes that contain those heart-shaped candies, the packaging suggesting a truncated Russian nesting doll.

22

A woman named Mercy Brown was once exhumed for public autopsy. The people in the town in which she had lived believed that a local cluster of consumption might be worsened by those who had died from that disease, but it could be bettered by burning the uncorrupted heart of the victim. Not only might there be an end to an epidemic, there was a chance, people said, that her brother Edwin might be cured of his tuberculosis by eating the ashes of her heart. Mercy’s father had to watch his daughter be raised from the grave after being months buried. He had to endure the burning of her heart. Edwin, at last, swallowed the ashes, but he died, regardless, in two months, leaving his father to live alone and remember his daughter being twice buried. This happened in Vermont in 1892. Mercy Brown was also thought by many to be a vampire.

23

The rounding of the heart could mean trouble for people who want to embark on long-term missions to Mars. Astronauts currently spend up to six months at the orbiting International Space Station, which is staffed by rotating crews. Missions to Mars would take about eighteen months and may offer no return trip.

24

As if she wants me to be convinced her upcoming operation is routine, my sister tells me our cousin has undergone his third operation, that he has flown from Virginia to a Texas hospital for the latest surgery. So thin, she says, his pants want to fall down, his shirts hang like curtains, reminding me how, every late August, my mother held up what he’d outgrown, what I’d grow into, dressing me for school and church for a year, two if we were lucky, teaching the lesson of the threadbare, the ill-fitting and the out of style, learning what was good enough. He’s still standing on his own two feet, my sister says, wearing her hand-me-down language, adding he’s in our prayers and he’s a fighter like a litany, like I should say amen or sing the Doxology before a recessional hymn of hope. My sister, who learned to sew her own clothes, who wore homemade, but new, who needed to perfect the careful cut and stitch because she was older than every female cousin, declares, “Our time will come,” like some minister for fatalism. She’s at the window of the spare room where I’ve slept, saying the weather, so sunny and mild, is heavenly while I try to ignore the sewing machine, the half-finished skirt and the thick file of patterns collected in the good light I have to tear my eyes from.

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Is it safe to eat a fresh raw moose heart?

Someone has already posted that question in an Internet forum about large game animals. He received half a dozen responses:

“I wouldn’t. Chances are you will be just fine afterward, but eating that heart raw isn’t very smart. As a rule of thumb you shouldn’t eat anything raw from a game animal, especially an internal organ like the heart.”

“No, it’s not safe to eat the raw flesh of a moose or a deer or any wild animal, you can get heartworm.”

“Apparently you forgot why we let large game animals hang after we gut them and then let the carcass chill to near 32 degrees. It’s to kill the intramuscular parasites.”
Now it is understood that in order to keep the heart healthy in space, astronauts must know the amount and type of exercise they need to perform to guarantee their safety on prolonged spaceflights. It's been suggested that exercise regimens developed for astronauts could also help people on Earth who have physical limitations also maintain good heart health. Those models could also give doctors a better understanding of common cardiovascular conditions for ground-based patients.

During the last years of his life, as he approached ninety, our father wore sweaters even in summer. So cold, so often, he kept the windows shut in his un-air-conditioned house. He would probe for his pulse, reporting, “Still there.” After that small, brief joke, he’d wait five minutes, sometimes ten, before listening to his wrist again, head bowed, leaning forward, as if he needed to coax a heartbeat with prayer.

When I attended my fiftieth high school class reunion recently, there was a large poster that was labeled “In Memoriam.” It listed those from my class who had died, a bit reminiscent of the Vietnam Memorial, complete with a few small, impulse tributes of programs and table favors laid beneath it. Sharon Rolfe and Janelle Fisher, I discovered, had each been dead for more than twenty years. Except for our war dead, causes weren’t listed, but like all the others, their hearts had stopped.

In the midst of writing this essay, I take a heart- age test and learn my heart is a year younger than my age but I have a twenty-two percent higher-than-average risk of problems in the next decade. I remind myself that I’ve lowballed my answers, that this is a worst case scenario, but there’s no denying my mother’s heart failure when she was younger than I am, my father’s bypass and pacemaker, my sister’s impending open heart surgery.

A few answers to the raw moose heart question were more condescending:

There is an Animal Planet TV show about humans getting animal parasites. You stand a good chance of being their next guest star.

If you want to take the chance, it’s your body.

Everything points to a glass or two of red wine being heart-helpful, but I drink only white wine and even then only rarely, preferring beer. There is
evidence that hearty laughter is good for the heart, but I seldom laugh out loud. I blame it on my family history, all those dour Germans drinking beer and frowning until they tumbled with heart attacks and strokes.

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There seems little question that eating organ meats has fallen out of favor among people I know. I tell them that liver, kidney, and heart are some of the most nutrient-rich foods you can eat, but there aren’t any takers. At the grocery store, when I look for veal or lamb kidneys, there are none, and when I settle for a package of chicken hearts, the clerk goes “Eew!” and acts as if she’ll pass it through without ringing it up just to avoid touching it.

33

Even when, in the assisted living home, my father stopped watching television, when he slept twelve hours a day and napped three times, his fingers went to his wrist as he woke, repeating, “Still there.” Even when he gave in to the wheelchair. Even when half his weight vanished although he ate, like always, everything that was served. Even when his sentences turned shorter, the ends lost like addresses, phone numbers, and the names of the dead, his fingers returned to his wrist to read the braille for “still there,” while I waited, despite reason, holding my breath for his up-to-the-minute news.

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Although raw moose heart is uniformly cautioned against, there are several methods posted on the Internet for how to prepare moose heart for cooking, most of the directions similar to this:

When the heart is still fresh, soak it in a bucket of cold sea water or fresh water to flush out the blood. Rinse well. Trim the fat and the tops of the valves off well so that the final product is mostly red and the top is relatively level, with clear access to the chambers of the heart. At this point, the heart can be kept in the freezer if wrapped well in Saran Wrap and butcher paper, however it is best when eaten fresh.

The recipe calls for:

- 1 moose heart
- ½ loaf of your favorite white bread
- about 4 stalks of celery, chopped
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 T parsley leaves
- 2 t rosemary
- 2 t oregano
- 1 t sage
- olive oil
- 3 T butter
- salt to taste
- pepper to taste
- water, red wine, soy sauce to taste

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This morning, the day of my sister’s surgery, a waitress spread whipped cream into the shape of a thick, valentine heart across my son’s banana-walnut pancakes. She did it carefully, making sure, she said, you know it’s a heart and not a circle, so unashamed of her public sentiment, her heavy body turned delicate in the sweetened air.

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All this afternoon I regret the impossibility of omniscience. And yet I am thankful. At last, from the nearby table, my phone sings its song of incoming text. And though the news, this time, is good, in the altered atmosphere, I believe our dependable, dangerous hearts are becoming spheres.

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The Hookup Culture, Revisited

Christina Bieber Lake

Feminism, like all "isms," is hardly a monolithic category, and the rifts within feminism continue to create revelatory fault lines. Consider the important issue of the hookup culture and what it does for—or to—women. Hanna Rosin and Caitlin Flanagan, two frequent contributors to the Atlantic Monthly, have taken sides. Flanagan, in numerous articles and her book Girl Land, has expressed a sadness for the lost protections of girlhood. She wants to challenge the strong cultural pressure on girls to grow up too quickly. Rosin fires back that Flanagan is merely nostalgic, and that today's young women actually benefit from finally being in the driver's seat in the sexual revolution, and particularly in the hookup culture. Their argument reveals that we need a clearer picture of what happens to young women who have inherited the culture created by the sexual revolution. We need answers to questions like "How does the hookup culture operate in real women's lives?" and "What happens later in life to women who participate?"

Of course, you can try to crunch numbers and claim that they don't lie. In her Atlantic article "Boys on the Side" (September 2012), Rosin points to data by sociologists that suggest that women are not damaged by the hookup culture at all. She reports on research that asks young women questions like how much sex they've had (answer: not as much as we are led to believe), how happy they were about their last relationship, and how interested they are in marriage in the future. One could ask how much useful information you are actually getting from the answers, but Rosin blithely concludes:

Zoom out, and you see that for most women, the hookup culture is like an island they visit, mostly during their college years and even then only when they are bored or experimenting or don't know any better. But it is not a place where they drown. The sexual culture may be more coarse these days, but young women are more than adequately equipped to handle it, because unlike the women in earlier ages, they have more important things on their minds, such as good grades and internships and job interviews and a financial future of their own. The most patient and thorough research about the hookup culture shows that over the long run, women benefit greatly from living in a world where they can have sexual adventure without commitment or all that much shame, and where they can enter into temporary relationships that don't get in the way of future success.

But is this really true? Does this kind of research (and this interpretation of it) tell the whole story?

I do not believe that it does. I also don't necessarily think that we can trust self-reporting within a sociological study. If women have been primed to believe that the sexual revolution and the resulting hookup culture has been good for them, would we expect them to report otherwise on a survey? Can we expect them even to recognize any evidence to the contrary? The fact that we will never get the whole truth from a sociological study is one of the
main reasons why we need memoirs and fiction. And while pulp fiction can be (and has been) profitably studied to reveal patterns of desire for fantasy lives in their readers—think Harlequin romances, erotica, and so on—what less formulaic types of fiction reveal about readers and their needs and beliefs is less clear. One thing is for certain: fiction can challenge stereotypes. To my knowledge, no one has ever blamed Edith Wharton for thinking too simply about what it meant to be a woman in the nineteenth century.

When it comes to the hookup culture and the question of the impact that our culture's sexual mores is having on young women, one surprisingly revelatory recent collection of short stories is Katherine Heiny's Single, Carefree, Mellow. Heiny's voice is haunting and distinctive, and her perspective is keen. The overall collection feels like a mix between Lena Dunham's current HBO series Girls, and the older HBO series Sex and the City. It is sharply ironic, laugh-out-loud funny, jarringly intimate, and, in the end, more about the lives and needs of real women than it is about sex.

The opening story, "The Dive Bar," features Sasha, a young woman who is asked by her lover's wife to meet her in a bar. As the story progresses, Sasha reveals much more about her separate, female friendships than she does about the fallout from her affair. So when Sasha gets verbally assaulted by her lover's wife, she ends up grateful that the wife had chosen a bar that Sasha and her friends would never go to instead of one of their usual places, because the confrontation would have "ruined whatever happy memory she had of being there."

Additionally, three stories in the collection (including the titular story) feature Maya, who feels on the verge of discovering that her boyfriend and later husband, Rhodes, is himself less important to her than the family he brings with him. Of her new mother-in-law, she says that "she wished that she knew Hazelene in some other way, from work or the gym or the neighborhood, so that she could still have Rhodes's mother when she no longer had Rhodes himself." But, sadly, Maya doesn't quite learn how best to meet her actual needs because she feels she doesn't need to. She can marry who she wants and have affairs on the side when things get boring—all of which she proceeds to do in a later story, and all without apparent consequences.

The freedom to hook up that the stories appear to promote is what led one reviewer to declare that "not since Laurie Colwin has a writer so poignantly and wittily depicted the joys of infidelity. Katherine Heiny knows the secret: happy marriages make for happy affairs."

But what this reviewer has missed is that the most powerful of Heiny's stories are not the ones that contain this "secret." Stories that end on a blithe note fall predictably flat, such as "Blue Heron Bridge," in which the protagonist, Nina, just decides that she isn't going to be bothered by the fact that the man with whom she was having an affair had also had one with her banal neighbor, Bunny Pringle. We just don't buy it that she is so happy about this discovery that she leaves a trail of "rose petals and sugar and bits of brightly colored paper," and that other people would "never experience anything like it themselves." Instead, the powerful stories are the ones that expose their protagonists in the act of lying to themselves about what they are and are not getting in these affairs. To be even more precise, the most powerful stories are the ones where the protagonists come heartbreakingly close to this discovery without quite getting there, exposing the real damage that comes from the fact that they have accepted our culture's most pernicious lies about happiness. "The Rhett Butlers," a story that appeared in the Atlantic in the fall of 2014, is the collection's best example.
“The Rhett Butlers” succeeds in executing the rare and notoriously difficult second-person point of view. “You always think of him as ‘Mr. Eagleton,’ even after you start sleeping with him,” the story begins. “You always call him that, too.” Within two sentences the reader is invited to take the perspective of both a sixteen-year-old girl who has sex with her forty-year-old history teacher, and the young woman she later becomes. We know from the start that neither the girl nor the woman she became ever stopped thinking about Mr. Eagleton as an ordinary teacher and authority figure.

And this matters. Because the perspective that we might expect a story on this subject to deliver is not the perspective we get. We do not hear the tale of a girl who was naively seduced by her teacher, and later understood it as abusive and regretted it. Instead we get the perspective of a young woman who calls that earlier version of herself naive, but her naiveté) is hemorrhaging, but what she really has is appendicitis.

Barely registering is not the same thing as not registering at all. For the real genius of “The Rhett Butlers” is in the places where Heiny lets you see the cracks in her protagonist’s thin coating of sophisticated nonchalance. For example, the narrator admits that she was expecting that there would be “naked kissing,” and wasn’t necessarily expecting sex. She tries to hide her feelings by not naming them.

You know that in the motel room, you and Mr. Eagleton will take off all your clothes and get into bed. You imagine that will lead to something you think of as naked kissing. Which it does, but the naked kissing lasts for about five minutes and then becomes sex.

All your life, men will snort with laughter when you tell them about this naked-kissing business—about the fact that you actually thought that—but it’s true.

Although the narrator wants us to see her laughing it off later, the revelation of this abuse of a young girl’s innocence hangs in the air in the story. It continues to hang in the air, giving the reader only the slightest whiff of it from time to time. For example, when Mr. Eagleton shows her a pornographic film, she pins the discomfort she feels on her mother. “You are young enough to still have your parents always in the back of your mind, and you are heartbroken to think that your mother lives in a world where such films exist.” Or this:

Which is not to say that you don’t enjoy it. You only wish Marcy were there to watch it with you, because that would make it real. That’s the problem with Mr. Eagleton—he’s unreal. The part of your life that contains him is too sealed off, like the last slice of cake under one of those glass domes.

Like all effective metaphors, this image freezes us and forces us to process it, to consider what it says and doesn’t say. The narrator knows that she has to hide something that shouldn’t need to be

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hidden, and she would like to believe she doesn’t care that she has to do so. But she does care. She wants to believe, in spite of her own insistence to the contrary, that her first sexual experience should be something special and important. She compares the relationship not to an everyday piece of cake—an unnecessary and ordinary treat—but to the last slice of cake in a glass dome in a restaurant. The gift of her sexual intimacy is something she actually believes to be precious, but she cannot fully admit she believes it. The cake metaphor is only a very small crack in the veneer of her self-deception.

The narrative continues in this heartbreaking fashion. As soon as she comes close to admitting that she has been deeply hurt, she covers it over by presenting herself as someone who is above it now, and sees how silly it all was. She begins to recognize that she doesn’t even like Mr. Eagleton, and she stops seeing him. She apparently regrets only that he’s a teacher and not a fellow student, because she still has to go to class and he makes her uncomfortable. She gets annoyed when he deliberately gives her C’s (she is an A student), but that annoyance is again dismissed as slight. She displaces it into the category of “things you learn as an adult”—chief among these being that not all adults act like adults should. When Eagleton keeps showing up on her street on his motorcycle, “this confirms something you have long suspected: Marcy—Marcy, who says things like, ‘I never knew you weren’t supposed to put tinfoil in the microwave’—is actually more mature than Mr. Eagleton.”

Many of the stories in Single, Carefree, Mellow work this way. They seem to be rolling their eyes at the experiences described within. But just like parents who see through a teenager’s gesture of defiance to the real feelings of vulnerability that motivated it, we know better. In spite of characters—and perhaps their author—who have been enculturated to believe that sexual infidelities of any sort can be brushed off as meaningless, in the end the narratives themselves belie these efforts.

What is valuable is time spent reading these stories for the window they provide on the complicated legacy of the sexual revolution. They teach us how to read beyond the sociological data and into the self-talk of women who inherit a culture that they can only ascribe to or defy, but cannot change. They also teach us, perhaps unwittingly, that to become so evidently desensitized as our culture is to the gift of sexuality is also to reveal an original sensitivity to it precisely as a gift worth protecting. You could tell yourself all you want that it doesn’t matter, but in the end your efforts themselves will give you away.

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GENESIS: FIRST DAY

It would be a mistake to say that in the beginning there was nothing. There was something—a very distinct and definite *something*—lying deep in the psyche of the One who was lingering there in the dark, waiting.

There was a thought
an intention
an idea of one kind or another, which gave voice
to the task of converting matter to energy, colliding heat and color.

It may have been easy, what do I know? It may have been like
switching on a desk lamp.
Which is to say, a very distinct and definite event
some discontent with the dark
the spark being the thing.

And there was evening and there was morning
the first day

Angela Doll Carlson
Trump, Sanders, and the Future of American Parties

Peter Meilaender

Those of us following the current presidential campaign have learned one important lesson: that our predictions, whatever they may be, are likely to be wrong. Such a remarkable campaign cries out, however, for interpretation. For the surprises that it has brought us seem to arise from structural changes in the American political landscape. We want to understand those changes—or at least try to understand them—so that even if we cannot predict the future, we can be at least somewhat better prepared to deal with it.

Among the most important changes with which this campaign confronts us is a transformation in our political parties. Though it may have been more obvious on the Republican side, the contests for both the Democratic and the Republican presidential nominations developed in unexpected ways. To begin with the Republicans: although it may be difficult to recall now, the single most striking fact when the presidential campaign began was the remarkable strength and depth of the Republican field. This formed a sharp contrast to the Democrats. Their only really plausible candidate seemed to be Hillary Clinton, who was not especially popular and remained dogged by accusations of scandal and corruption. Her only competitors either were unlikely alternatives—the unknown Martin O’Malley and the aged, cranky socialist Bernie Sanders—or, like Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren, chose not to run.

The Republicans, however, had an unusually long roster of plausible candidates, including both older, experienced politicians and also young up-and-comers. Among the former were governors (or former governors) such as Jeb Bush, Rick Perry, Chris Christie, and John Kasich; among the latter were more governors—Scott Walker, Bobby Jindal—as well as several senators, such as Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Rand Paul. This group could boast of impressive experience and successful records in office, and it seemed to offer also a deep pool of future talent that might shape the political scene for years to come. Republicans were entitled to feel optimistic about their prospects looking forward. Yet from all of these strong candidates, Republican primary voters managed to choose the one person lacking any experience or expertise, whose campaign initially seemed more a publicity stunt than a serious run for office: Donald Trump, who must have been as surprised as anyone when voters eventually handed him the nomination.

It would be almost unfair to hope that the Democrats would provide a similarly unlikely story, but their nominating campaign was not without unexpected drama of its own. For one of those implausible challengers to Hillary proved more formidable than could have been predicted: that aged, cranky socialist, Bernie Sanders. It is almost a fixed principle of American politics that socialists cannot succeed here. On the face of it, moreover, it would seem difficult to design a candidate who seemed less likely to appeal to young voters in particular, but that is precisely what Sanders managed to do. Before ultimately wrapping up the nomination, Clinton faced much stiffer competition from Sanders than anyone expected, and there were moments when it seemed possible that Sanders might even steal the nomination. No doubt, some of Clinton’s difficulties were due to her own unpopularity and inability to shake the taint of corruption hanging over issues like her e-mail server. But Sanders’s success was not due simply to her limited appeal; like Trump, he too managed to tap into a mood of deep dissatisfaction among American voters.
This comparison suggests something significant about the campaign: that the contests in both parties were in fact much more similar than we might initially recognize. The similarity runs deeper than the influence of voter dissatisfaction or of an insider-outsider dynamic. Rather, the nature of the disagreements within each party was similar. In each case, we witnessed a nationalist revolt against a more internationalist partisan identity. This is again more obvious in the case of Trump. His most important promises have all reflected a nationalist instinct (as reflected in his slogan, “Make America Great Again”). He has promised to rein in immigration and deport illegal aliens; he has promised greater security, based on a tough stance toward terrorism; he has questioned our international defense commitments, such as the NATO alliance; and he has criticized free trade agreements. All of these promises embody a clear determination to place America and American interests at the center of our policy, and they implicitly accuse past policy of failing to do this.

Although it may seem less evident, the Sanders insurgency—in some respects even more surprising than Trump’s—is rooted in a similar nationalist urge. To see this, we should remind ourselves of the central fact of Sanders’s political identity: that he has always been a democratic socialist. Socialism—unlike communism, which at least in theory is a stateless, global ideology—is a form of economic nationalism in which the government, either as owner or as regulator, exercises extensive control over the economy. Although Trump appeals more to cultural and Sanders to economic populism, both men claim to speak for working-class Americans who feel unrepresented by current policies. It is no accident that Sanders and Trump—unlike, say, Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, or (until recently forced to change course by Sanders’s challenge) Hillary Clinton—have both opposed the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), a proposed free-trade agreement between the United States and Europe.

This nationalist and populist dissatisfaction mirrors what has been going on in Europe also. There, of course, the European Union provides a convenient bogeyman for nationalist appeals. But one European country after another has seen increased support for nationalist parties that are neither straightforwardly right- nor left-wing in conventional terms, from Austria’s Freedom Party to the Alternative for Germany to the French National Front to the UK Independence Party. The same phenomenon thus appears to be transforming the party landscape across nearly all Western democracies.

What accounts for this? It is no accident, I think, that this change is sweeping the West in the wake of the increasing globalization that has occurred since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Globalization is a difficult concept to define, but it refers to thickening cultural and economic ties that develop among states as they participate more fully in international networks of communications and trade. This process appears to be generating a new divide within Western societies, creating a world in which the upper and upper-middle classes feel more “at home” (if I may use that phrase in this context) than do middle- and working-class citizens, to say nothing of the poor. Their differing levels of “at-home-ness” derive from both economics and culture. The economic benefits of globalization extend, on balance, to entire democratic populations, since all citizens enjoy, for example, the benefits of lower prices when trade opens up new markets. (Indeed, these benefits are probably more important for lower-income citizens than for the wealthy.) But the costs of global competition are localized: competition causes a particular factory, in a particular town, to go out of business and lay off its workers.

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Middle- and working-class citizens feel vulnerable to these dislocations, which the better-off are less likely to suffer and more likely to navigate successfully should the need arise. Culturally, the professional classes are more likely to feel comfortable traveling and interacting with their peers in other cultures; members of the working class, by contrast, generally have more local attachments and a more parochial (a term I use without any negative connotations) cultural horizon.

Politicians and policy-makers, bureaucrats and judges all belong to the professional class, and it is therefore not surprising that they feel relatively at home in an increasingly globalized world. Nor is it surprising that the voters whom they govern feel inadequately represented—are, perhaps, inadequately represented—by these “insiders,” “elites,” or the “establishment.” (None of these terms are very helpful in my view, but all carry rhetorical weight in our political discourse.) So we see the same shift occurring in both political parties—in a slightly different key, no doubt, given the parties’ differing traditions and principles, but variations on the same theme nonetheless.

What does this portend for the future of American party politics? Since it seems unlikely that both parties will continue to function successfully if riven by internal conflict, we should expect some shifting of the ground. For example, we could imagine a third party arising—like some of the European parties mentioned earlier—and displacing one of the two existing parties by appealing to this nationalist discontent. Third parties, however, have difficulty getting a foothold in the American system—more so than in European parliamentary systems. Usually, when one does threaten to gain strength, one of the two main parties will adopt its themes and siphon off its voters.

Alternatively, we could imagine “elites” from both parties, or simply their more mainstream voters, joining together in a kind of new coalition party. This too would have a European parallel of sorts, since European parties of the center-right and center-left have on occasion joined together to defeat an upstart populist party, like the Freedom Party in Austria or the National Front in France. But this too seems somewhat implausible, since it would require people to abandon strong rival identities as Republicans and Democrats.

More likely would be a decision by one of the parties deliberately to take up the nationalist banner and remake itself as a populist party in this vein, with a platform drawing on what might seem a mix of Republican and Democratic impulses: anti-immigration, anti-trade, isolationist in foreign policy, committed to preserving entitlements and the welfare state. Since this is more or less Trump’s platform, and since the Trump insurgency has actually succeeded, it is perhaps more likely that the Republicans would move in this direction than the Democrats. If either party were to do this, however, it would be cause for concern. For it would seem likely to make American electoral politics more class-based, with a party of the haves, or the winners in a globalized world, against a party of the have-nots, those who feel themselves to have lost out as a result of globalization. This would be a step backward. From Aristotle to the Federalist papers, the chief historical critique of democracy has always been that it encouraged rule by faction and allowed the many poor to oppress the few rich. The great success of American constitutionalism has been to create a middle-class democracy, in which party lines have not simply coincided with those of socio-economic class. A partisan struggle between globalization’s winners and losers would threaten to erase this achievement.

It harbors the seeds of an even more worrisome problem, however, one difficult to describe but worth sketching here briefly. Suppose that the Republicans did indeed remake themselves in Trump’s image, as a nationalist party. And suppose that the Democrats became in turn the internationalist party. What would the latter look like? We know from Trump roughly what a nationalist platform would involve, but what exactly would an internationalist platform be? There are more ways than one to be “internationalist,” but suppose—one last supposition—that it took a cue from Trump himself, who has attempted to cast the current election as a battle between “patriots” and “globalists.” “Globalists” are those cosmopolitan types uncomfortable with their own country and its culture, more at home with their peers in
other countries, and only weakly attached to their fellow citizens. Moreover, they are often committed—this is an important subtext of Trump’s rhetoric—to what is often known these days as “global governance” or transnationalism. Global governance undermines sovereignty and downgrades the claims of the nation-state, seeking to move authority instead toward international institutions such as the European Union, the United Nations, or the International Criminal Court.

Global governance of this sort is different from, say, the internationalism of more traditional treaty-making, which preserves the independent

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and sovereign status of the nation-states committing themselves to an agreement. The chief difficulty with this more ambitious form of transnationalism is that it is inconsistent with the US Constitution. Under the Constitution all democratic authority is grounded in the People. It rises from below. The Constitution does not permit our sovereign authority to be handed away; it is premised on the existence of a demos that gives itself law. We, the People, retain, always, the ultimate authority to govern ourselves.

A partisan quarrel between nationalists of the Trumpian sort and globalists of this type would be a disaster. It would confront us, on the one hand, with a party that rejects the principles and practices that have served America so well over the past century, in particular commitments to trade and to the defense of freedom internationally. And it would confront us on the other hand—for perhaps the first time since the Civil War—with a party that, implicitly if not explicitly, rejects the basic constitutional order. We would have one party that was constitutional but that supported lousy policies, and another that supported better policies but was anti-constitutional. That would be a poor choice of alternatives indeed.

Such a development should also worry Christians. At the risk of oversimplification, it seems to me that any plausible Christian approach to politics must balance particularist and universalist commitments. As embodied creatures of place and time, we inhabit specific countries and have special obligations toward our fellow citizens. But as redeemed men and women with a destiny in the Kingdom of God, we also owe duties of Christian charity to persons around the globe. In different ways, the Republican and Democratic parties as they have existed in recent decades have struck a balance between these two emphases. Christians in both parties must therefore strive to recognize—and not only recognize, but address—the concerns that are driving the current wave of bipartisan nationalism, but without entirely abandoning international commitments in the process. I fear, however, that we may be facing a future in which our particularist and universalist commitments are housed in opposing political parties, threatening to leave Christians as well as constitutionalists without a viable partisan option.

One can only hope, therefore, that the campaign and its aftermath still has other, different surprises in store for us.

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Among the shocks Donald Trump has wrought to American politics, one of the strongest has been his assault on bedrock tenets of American foreign policy. The Republican nominee for president has urged better relations with Russian president Vladimir Putin, called into question the value of NATO, and expressed disdain for European integration. At first, the “unfair” media mostly ignored Trump’s novel geopolitical worldview, but after Trump conveyed his support for Russian efforts to spy on Hillary Clinton, the “unfair” media started calling attention to the consummate dealmaker’s business relations with Russia and the pro-Russian sympathies of his key advisors.

This whole weird soap opera might have been tremendously funny, except for the fact that Trump could end up as president of the United States. That frightening prospect compelled former CIA director Michael Morell, in an August 5 op-ed for The New York Times, to label Trump an unwitting agent of the Russian Federation. Those who remember the Cold War or who follow European politics are familiar with Russian attempts to meddle in the democratic processes of Western countries. Usually, however, that meddling remains on the margins. That it assumed center stage in an American presidential election is simply stunning, and an indication of how disastrous a Trump presidency could be.

To understand how bad Trump’s foreign policy “vision” is, one must see the way that US interests have come into conflict with the interests of Putin’s Russia. Since World War II American foreign policy has aimed at the economic and democratic integration of Europe. The premise underlying this policy is that integration is the necessary condition of a permanent European peace. Economically dependent nations have strong disincentives against fighting each other, and democratic states hardly ever, indeed arguably never, wage war among themselves. The best way to avoid war in Europe, therefore, on a continent plagued by war historically, is through economic integration and the spread of democracy.

Putin’s view of the matter, however, is quite different. From his perspective, the economic and democratic integration of Europe represents a threat to Russia’s historic hegemonic interests. Compared to any single European state, Russia is a great power, but compared to an integrated and well-functioning European Union, Russia is a weaker party forced to play by European rules. Thus, insofar as Putin perceives Russian interests hegemonically, his foreign policy will aim both to thwart and roll back European integration. And to be sure, Putin has been working to undermine the European Union for a number of years. He does this partly through military intimidation (annexing Crimea and invading Ukraine), partly through economic pressure (attempting to control the flow and price of gas from Russia to Europe), and partly through a distinct kind of information warfare.

Russian information warfare is not a naïve propaganda strategy that aims to brainwash. Rather it seeks to generate uncertainty about Russia’s intentions and the state of international affairs so that Western decision makers will choose the path of least resistance, which just so happens to coincide with Russian objectives. According to Maria Snegovaya at Columbia University, the Russians refer to this strategy as “reflexive control.” Reflexive control seeks to cause “a stronger adversary voluntarily to choose the actions most advantageous to Russian objectives by shaping the adversary’s perceptions of the situation decisively” (Snegovaya 2015, 7). As an example Snegovaya cites Ukraine,
where Putin has been employing reflexive control to persuade the United States and Europe to adopt a passive stance toward Russian aggression, something the West is inclined toward anyway.

Information warfare, therefore, is cynical rather than ideological. It seeks to latch onto sentiments and critical rhetoric already present in democratic societies so as to reduce these countries' ability to act. This cynical information strategy involves multiple techniques. First, Russian officials deny or distort facts in order to create confusion and superfluous debate. In Ukraine, for example, the Russians deny they are militarily involved while also insisting that the 2014 Maidan demonstrations in Kiev were instigated either by neo-fascists or American agents. As ridiculous as all this sounds to most Americans, such factual distortions generate suspicion and speculation in other parts of the world more susceptible to conspiracy theories. Second, the Russians seek to relativize moral differences between their conduct and the conduct of the United States. When accused of violating the territorial integrity of Ukraine, for example, Russian spokespeople quickly refer to the US invasion of Iraq, a war viewed as illegitimate throughout most of the world. Third, by relativizing moral differences, the Russians also seek to undermine confidence in democratic norms. Since the United States appeals to those norms extensively when justifying its own foreign policy, the ability to point out American hypocrisy undercuts US criticisms of Russia's foreign policy.

During the Cold War, Russian information warfare was more successful in latching onto the rhetoric of the political left. Today, however, the strategy is bearing fruit on the right. Putin presents himself as a defender of traditional values and a proponent of national sovereignty, themes important to the European right. Indeed, the political parties furthest to the right in Europe frequently cultivate informal relationships with Russia. Many experts suspect that they also receive Russian financial support (Orenstein 2014). Whether or not this is true is, from the point of view of information warfare, mostly irrelevant. Putin need not pay off Western politicians to pursue his information campaign. He needs only to find a few "useful idiots"—public figures who stir up democratic debate by unwittingly advocating policies the Russians also favor.

Useful idiots, although always present in Western democracies, have historically been consigned to the margins. That's why Russian information warfare has not scored a lot of historical success. We can therefore only imagine the tremendous glee in the Kremlin when in the United States the Republican Party nominated one such useful idiot as its candidate for president. Like his analogues in Europe, Trump has opaque financial relations with Russia. After bankrupting four companies, Trump reportedly has trouble securing capital. He's forced to rely on private investors, and seems to have borrowed from Russian oligarchs (Marshall 2016).

None of this means Trump holds his pro-Russian positions insincerely. Whether or not he does is irrelevant. His dismissive attitude toward NATO and the European Union closely resembles that of his foreign policy advisor Carter Page. Page (who, incidentally, has significant investments in the Russian gas company Gazprom) has been critical of America's response to the "so-called" annexation of Crimea. He even goes so far as to draw a parallel between NATO expansion and the case of Eric Garner, the African American man who was killed in 2014 by a white New York police officer. In 2015 Page wrote in Global Policy
that the "deaths triggered by US government officials in both the former Soviet Union and the streets of America in 2014 share a range of close similarities." Meanwhile, Trump's campaign advisor, Paul Manafort, spent years working for Viktor Yanukovych, the Putin-backed president of Ukraine who fled office and sought refuge in Russia after the 2014 Maidan demonstrations. This past August the New York Times even reported that, according to handwritten ledgers released by a Ukrainian anti-corruption agency, Manafort had been earmarked to receive $12.7 million in undisclosed cash from Yanukovych's political party.

To be sure, Trump's supporters are probably not interested in his foreign policy positions. What attracts them, presumably, is his domestic agenda. In that respect, Trump's dangerous geopolitical views are a kind of collateral damage, the unintended consequence of nominating a useful idiot for president. However, the Republican nominee's support for such unorthodox and ignorant views demonstrates that even basic political consensus is breaking down. The breakdown is no doubt the result of many factors, but surely one contributing factor is our country's extreme political polarization. Political polarization is not only undermining the possibilities of effective governance in Washington, but also, as Donald Trump shows, it is weakening the country and threatening our national interests. Assuming we survive the circus of 2016, one lesson to draw is that political polarization has real costs. In a world more unstable and uncertain than at any point since the height of the Cold War, all of us, both politicians and citizens, should recognize the importance, and the patriotic duty, of reestablishing a core consensus on America's values and interests.

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Faith in the Ballot Box

"VOTE YOUR CONSCIENCE."

These words signified the closest Senator Ted Cruz came to endorsing presidential candidate Donald Trump at the contentious 2016 Republican National Convention. Cruz's phrase sent another message: voting requires moral consideration. For Christians, this means applying their faith at the ballot box. With both presidential candidates rocked by scandals, the moral task of voting in this election seems particularly complicated.

Yale Divinity professors Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz offer practical guidance for Christians in their new book, Public Faith in Action: How to Think Carefully, Engage Wisely, and Vote with Integrity. This short, accessible volume provides readers an opportunity to clarify their understanding of Christian values and how those values may be applied to current political issues.

Public Faith in Action functions as a "companion" (ix) to Volf's 2011 A Public Faith, which cast a theological vision for "the place and the role of followers of Christ" in pluralistic societies. Supplementing this vision, Public Faith in Action explains more concretely what kind of "virtues and commitments" are needed for Christians to faithfully process political concerns. While the arguments of Public Faith in Action are not as fully articulated as those in A Public Faith, this book is written in a way that invites discussion among small groups of Christians serving in "many different places and situations" (xiii). In so doing, the authors provide an introduction to Christian political theology and praxis that is friendly to a general audience.

Volf and McAnnally-Linz divide their book into three parts: "Commitments" (theological assumptions), "Convictions" (commitments applied to current political topics), and "Character" (virtues that aid Christian public engagement).

"Commitments" features a concise account of theological points made in A Public Faith. The authors set a strong, Christo-centric framework for Christian public engagement. Volf and McAnnally-Linz attest to how the Church throughout history either strengthened or damaged its witness depending on its relationship to governments. They urge Christians to remember the incarnational model of Christ and reject an ideal of expanding the kingdom of God by coercive methods.

In chapter two of "Commitments," titled
"Christ, The Spirit, and Flourishing," the authors delineate human flourishing as the Church's ultimate political goal. They identify three aspects of human flourishing: leading life well, life going well, and life feeling good. The authors chose these three aspects in order to "correspond roughly to three important strands... in the Western tradition" (13), namely Kant’s ethics of duty, Marx’s materialism, and contemporary pop culture’s emphasis on feeling good.

In the section’s last chapter, titled “Reading in Contexts,” the authors identify two contexts Christians must keep in mind for faithful public engagement: canonical context and contemporary context. Because of the great differences between the world of the Bible and the world of today, the authors call for a careful, communal reading of both contexts. As an example, they cite Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s use of the biblical narrative to address racial injustice.

The largest section ofPublic Faith in Action is “Convictions.” Volf and McAnnally-Linz organize each of its seventeen chapters around a contemporary issue, then cite a parallel in the Bible, and end with the authors’ summation of Christian stances on the subject and a list of discussion-type questions titled “Room for Debate.” These brief, clear chapters on topics dominating US life and political discourse (including education, marriage and family, borrowing and lending, health and sickness, migration, policing, and the environment) establish a baseline understanding of the issues at stake. By illuminating the nuances of the debates, the authors explain the need for Christians to reject a utilitarian calculus, especially in the chapters on economic matters.

In the chapter on marriage and family, the authors sketch out one of the most contentious culture war topics, same-sex marriage, by skillfully analyzing its legal and cultural implications. Volf and McAnnally-Linz show persuasively how supporters of traditional marriage can maintain a consistent, Christian worldview while they also advocate for a legal protection of same-sex marriage. The authors’ desire for a more gracious Christian political engagement comes across most plainly on this theme.

The “Character” section stands slightly apart from the two earlier sections, and addresses the virtues Christians need for faithful political witness. The authors share stories of notable individuals who illustrate these virtues. The story of Father Stanley Rother—a Catholic priest from Oklahoma whose social justice work in a poor, rural part of Guatemala was cut short when he was killed by a death squad in 1981—stands out as an example of Christian courage that will stay with readers.

Volf and McAnnally-Linz draw heavily from scripture in making their arguments—a move evangelical readers will appreciate. The list of suggested resources at the end of each chapter is divided into “introductory” and “advanced” study, and the authors’ superb annotations and copious notes will encourage readers to research beyond the scope of this book.

In recent years, several other Christian authors have published books in a similar vein toPublic Faith in Action. These include Darrell Bock (How Would Jesus Vote?: Do Your Political Views Really Align With The Bible?, 2016), Tony Evans (How Should Christians Vote?, 2012), and Wayne Grudem (Voting as a Christian, 2012). Compared to those works, Volf and McAnnally-Linz’s volume leans more toward the evangelical left and expends more effort to persuade its readers to reject factionalism. Their desire to cultivate a spirit of civility and move the discourse forward makes for an edifying read, regardless of whether readers agree with their take.

The political realm is complex, and readers who finishPublic Faith in Action might not feel more confident in their vote. But Volf and McAnnally-Linz encourage Christians to work toward a biblically rooted, common political good. Public Faith in Action’s durable message is not merely for individual Christians to vote their conscience, but, just as important, to first ground their conscience among the totality of believers: past, present, and future.

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Jesus Christ might have been a superstar, but few believe he wandered Judea with his disciples singing rock songs. If the Parisian painter Georges Seurat ever sang during his Sundays in the park, his songs didn’t come out sounding like Stephen Sondheim’s variations on New York minimalism. And despite Vietnam’s colonial history, the songs of 1970s Saigon bore little resemblance to those of miserable French peasants a century prior, composer Claude-Michel Schönberg’s soaring melodies notwithstanding.

So is it really such a stretch to imagine America’s founding fathers rapping their stories, as the composer, lyricist, and actor Lin-Manuel Miranda has them do in *Hamilton: An American Musical*?

"Of all the forms of contemporary pop music, rap is the closest to traditional musical theater," writes Sondheim in his memoir, *Look, I Made a Hat*, "both in its vamp-heavy rhythmic drive and in its verbal playfulness." Some other productions have realized this: The short-lived jukebox musical *Holler If Ya Hear Me* used the songs of the late rapper Tupac Shakur, and Sondheim cites his own Witch’s monologue from *Into the Woods* and songs from Meredith Willson’s *The Music Man* as examples of similarities between the two styles. Based on *Hamilton’s* phenomenal success, theater composers should have been exploiting their proximity to rap all along.

After all, the music’s theatrical potential is enormous. Both genres thrive on vivid personalities, telegraphed to audiences instantly, and they delight in complicated rhyme schemes delivered with apparent ease. Both genres also center on vocalists telling their own stories, with lyrics in the first person far more often than the third. This idea of “story” is a complex one, though; in both rap and musicals, a “story” can mean any number of things, from “narrative of an event” to “what I thought of an event,” from “the forces that shape who I am” to “legacy.”

Like politicians and rappers, *Hamilton* is obsessed with such stories. The words “story” and “legacy” litter its lyrics, as do words like “history” and “narrative.” Sometimes this obsession bogs down the show and detracts from the show’s soundtrack album. When *Hamilton* works, though, it reveals the chaotic swarm of life behind the events.

The story of *Hamilton’s* creation takes a similarly lively route. After Miranda won several Tony Awards for his 2008 Broadway musical, *In the Heights*—which also featured rapping, albeit in a more contemporary setting—he went on vacation and read *Alexander Hamilton*, Ron Chernow’s biography. Almost immediately Miranda imagined a rap song about the life of Hamilton, an orphan who lived his early years in the Virgin Islands. In 1772 Hamilton wrote a highly praised newspaper essay about a devastating hurricane, which prompted the locals to pay for his passage to the northern colonies on the mainland. “He literally wrote his way out of his circumstances,” Miranda said in a 2011 interview with the *Charlotte Observer*, “which is the same story as a hip hop artist’s.” Miranda wrote what would become the musical’s first song, “Alexander Hamilton;” and in May 2009 performed it for President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama as part of a White House Poetry Jam. From there Miranda developed a revue-like project called *The Hamilton Mixtape*; Sondheim referred to it as an experimental piece in his 2011 memoir, and the *New York Times* called it “the next big leap.” And so it leapt: to an off-Broadway theater in February 2015, to Broadway that summer, and from there to winning eleven Tonys and a Pulitzer Prize. The show opened in Chicago at the end...
of September, and a tour is scheduled to stop in eighteen cities so far, with more dates being added. This mostly-rapped musical biography, in which people of color portray every major character except King George, has become enshrined in American culture as few musicals have.

Once you hear (or, if you're lucky, see) *Hamilton*, its success no longer seems unlikely. For one thing, Miranda was right about Hamilton's life: there's a musical there. The American Revolution spawns a rousing showstopper in "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)," in which the full company dances onstage to celebrate the colonists' victory. Hamilton's complicated relationship with his wife, Eliza Schuyler, and her sister Angelica yields the poignant and very Broadway-ish ballads "Helpless" and "Take a Break." Hamilton's affair with Maria Reynolds led to the nation's first sex scandal and to the smooth R&B highlight "Say No To This." And the most infamous aspect of Hamilton's life, losing a duel to Vice President Aaron Burr, haunts the show from beginning to end. Early on, a headstrong young Hamilton echoes Eminem's "Lose Yourself," rapping, "I am not throwin' away my shot"; he ends the show doing exactly that, and the gesture costs him his life.

*Equal parts Broadway geek and hip-hop head, Miranda has figured out how to fuse his obsessions while staying true to both. He develops his characters through their flow patterns the way he and other Broadway composers use melodic leitmotifs. Although the show's rapping has earned plaudits from legendary MCs like Jay-Z and Talib Kweli, its rhymes, nearly all of them perfect, land with auditorium-friendly clarity as well as dexterity. This is Broadway rap. Just as nobody ever expected to hear the songs from *Rent* in a real-life East Village club, you won't hear much on Power 92 that sounds like *Hamilton*. Indeed, most of its rap references are twenty years old. Miranda recasts the late Notorious B.I.G.'s "Ten Crack Commandments" as the expository "Ten Duel Commandments," and the character of tailor-turned-spy Hercules Mulligan draws heavily from Busta Rhymes's roughneck charisma. The most *au courant* rap number is "The Reynolds Pamphlet." As Kweli notes, the doomy bass drops and double-time cymbals of trap, a recent rap subgenre, are perfect for the song where Hamilton publishes an account of his infidelity (Charlton, 2015). "He never gon' be president now," chant Hamilton's political opponents with glee as they dance around him, making the stage rain with pamphlets.

There's a strange kind of comfort in hearing about Hamilton's affair and disgrace, or in remembering that he was killed by a sitting vice president. No matter how dysfunctional our current political moment seems, America has survived worse. One of the pleasures of *Hamilton*—or of Gore Vidal's 1973 novel *Burr*, which covers much of the same ground—is watching the nation's founders break free of their marble busts to squabble and air their petty hypocrisies. "The New Englanders and the New Yorkers from the beginning gave over to the Virginia junto [i.e., Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe] the American republic," laments Vidal's Burr, a proud northerner, "and with relish the junto proceeded to rule us for the better part of a half-century." Territorial and philosophical arguments come to their head in *Hamilton*'s two "Cabinet Battle" numbers, in which Hamilton and Jefferson hilariously debate the forgiveness of the states' war debts (Washington forgives them, and Hamilton wins) and whether to send military aid to post-revolutionary France (Washington doesn't send the aid—Hamilton wins again). At one point Jefferson balks at the idea of self-sufficient southern states like Virginia paying off the war debts of the North. Hamilton retorts, "A civics lesson from a slaver. Hey neighbor/ Your debts are paid 'cause you don't pay for labor."
show's few references to slavery, although a third “Cabinet Battle” on the subject exists online, cut from the show for length.

Too bad Miranda didn't do the same with “Dear Theodosia.” The mawkish, meandering ballad, sung by Burr and Hamilton to their infant children near the end of the first act, serves two sound theatrical purposes: it reminds us of the parallels between Burr and Hamilton before politics drives them apart, and it establishes Hamilton's bond with his son, later a source of conflict and tragedy. Unfortunately, it also augurs the main flaw of the show's second act, a willingness to smooth over the complexity of its ideas and the tumult of history for the sake of theatrical convention. The real Burr enjoyed a fascinating relationship with his daughter Theodosia, training her in Greek and Latin and sharing a lifelong friendship and correspondence before her untimely death at sea. In the show, Theodosia vanishes after her infancy. True, Miranda couldn't include everything, but alluding to the character in one song only to abandon her is stage writing at its most utilitarian.

Similarly, the show's obsession with the idea of "story," as opposed to simply telling the story, begins to grate the more it appears. Upon learning of Hamilton's affair, Eliza burns the letters she wrote him, singing "I'm erasing myself from the narrative / Let future historians wonder how Eliza reacted when you broke her heart." A few songs later, in the middle of his duel, Hamilton wonders, "What is a legacy?" Even given the founders' documented interest in their own legacies, these lines don't sound like the characters Eliza and Hamilton so much as a playwright desperate for a theme. Later Eliza reverses course, becoming the caretaker of her dead husband's legacy and writing herself "back in the narrative" during the final song, "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?" Washington's answer to that question, given several times during the show, is simple and fatalistic: You have no control over any of it. But in Hamilton's grand final gesture, the company looks out to the audience and sings the same question: "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" An audience who accepted Washington's answer might shrug and reply, "We have no control over that." The more likely audience, moved by a cast of professionals singing pointedly to them, might feel resolved to start reshaping their stories. The musical itself seems confused on the matter.

Hamilton explains the complex idea of "story" most believably when it lets events speak for themselves—or when it lets rap music speak for those events. In the second "Cabinet Battle," Jefferson ends a tirade against Hamilton with a confident, "And if ya don't know, now ya know." Rap fans of a certain age will recognize that refrain from the Notorious B.I.G's 1994 hit "Juicy." In it, Biggie talked about how he wrote himself out of his circumstances, from being a poor rap fan to a drug dealer to a successful rapper; he mocked the people who told him he'd never amount to anything; he considered the forces of poverty and racism that shaped his life; and he marveled at his legacy, his newfound ability to provide a good life for his mother and his friends. One man's story—in all its moving, untidy complexity—unfolds during a five-minute song. Hamilton takes more time to consider its subject, but like "Juicy," it works best at its most granular. Those rap battles, slow jams, insults, and wisecracks get the job done because they reverberate with the vitality of history, not as it is theorized but as it is lived.

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WHILE BABEL FELL

We could have accomplished anything
we were saying.
silkpod tongues curling to cocoon in our mouths.

You once said we'd build wings like this,
people working together—
study the kestrel, osprey and ibis
fly to heaven, taste the wine, and back.

All our committees disbanded and worthless. Fights
crack across the street—
someone felling the gardens of cypress,
someone striking the scribes with a whip,
someone pouring dark honey
the whole Euphrates down.

I wound through back-alleys like script curving
from a pen, until I found you, took your tongue
in mine, said with my body,
what I meant.

I was watching two hummingbirds

thrum and shudder, a nectar center.
Pleasure in taste,
pleasure in plump, whirring bodies.
That blur
where wings should be.

Brianna Flavin
Ronald K. Rittgers’s *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*

**Seeing Suffering Anew**

Among the many things that Lutheran reformers attempted to change during the Reformation was how Christians understood and experienced suffering. In this ambitious book, Ronald Rittgers explores how these new understandings were advanced and—at least in some cases—took root. “Consolation literature” (that is, writings that addressed the experience of suffering) forms the bulk of sources used in this study, complemented by a broad sampling of other relevant writings such as Luther’s biblical lectures and treatises, instructions for pastoral care in the church ordinances of new evangelical churches, and writings by lay Christians who had absorbed and appropriated an evangelical ethos of suffering. The volume is meticulously researched and brings to light many sources found only in archives. An appendix of primary sources lists more than a hundred writings, and endnotes comprise about 120 pages of the text.

Rittgers marshals this impressive array of evidence to establish the centrality of suffering in the theology and piety of the German Reformation. Evangelical authors agreed that suffering was not salvific, as it was in late medieval theology. Instead, they regarded it as a salutary experience that should be embraced and endured. Several different reasons for suffering were cited by these authors, some from late medieval traditions and others from the new, evangelical theology. But their aims were profoundly practical; through numerous means evangelical leaders encouraged ministries of verbal solace to those who suffered in order to comfort them and strengthen their faith. Rittgers also raises some larger questions, for example, about power and control in the implementation of the Reformation. The finding that theologians were much more concerned about consolation than social discipline challenges the prevailing interpretation of confessionalization in Reformation history. This is an important finding and one that calls for more research along these lines.

While Rittgers focuses primarily on the theological and practical shifts that originated in Wittenberg, he begins with a thorough, three-chapter introduction to suffering in the Western Christian tradition. This careful prelude builds the case that there were many continuities between late
medieval and Reformation initiatives, in addition to some important differences. The first of these three chapters describes the pastoral care that clergy were to provide to parishioners, especially to those in distress. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 attempted to mold priests into prudent and discerning doctors of souls. Many new pastoral manuals were produced in an effort to assist priests in carrying out this mission. These manuals instructed clergy to help believers embrace suffering by viewing it as an opportunity to make satisfaction for their sins and to become more like Christ and the saints.

Chapters 2 and 3 both delve further into late medieval conventions by examining forms of literature and piety beyond clerical instruction. First Rittgers surveys the long tradition of consolation literature, which extends back to ancient sources both pagan and Christian. These texts attempted to make sense of human suffering and provide encouragement to those in the midst of it. A common theme in Christian versions of these writings was the idea that suffering was an instrument of God's discipline, used to prepare God's chosen people for entrance into heaven because it made satisfaction for sin and fostered virtue. Chapter 3 mines the literature of late medieval mystics to show the unique perspectives these thinkers brought to the matter of suffering. For the mystics, suffering not only atoned for sin and fostered virtue, but also enabled spiritual union with God. Suffering, then, became "the most noble thing on earth, the pinnacle of Christian discipleship, and the most reliable—indeed, the only—path to union with God" (64). This mystical emphasis converged with the immense popularity of passion piety to reinforce the idea that Christ's suffering sanctifies the human experience of suffering.

Chapters 4 and beyond elucidate how German reformers both appropriated and attempted to reform the theology and practice of suffering that they inherited. Rittgers devotes two chapters to Luther's dealings with the subject, emphasizing that Luther kept suffering central to Christian life yet changed its meaning and role. Luther rejected the late medieval belief that human suffering made satisfaction for sin, arguing that no human work could earn religious merit. Yet Luther did regard suffering as a necessary and beneficial experience for faith, in large part because it stripped believers of confidence in their own works and forced them to exercise trust in God. Luther's theology of the cross went further than previous theologies by claiming that, on the cross, Christ was abandoned by God and suffered the full depths of the human condition. Yet because the cross is offensive to human reason, only faith can grasp the hidden goodness in this act and in humanity's continued suffering.

The theme of suffering was prominent in writings by Luther's followers, who gave multiple ways in which suffering could work for good.

Beginning in chapter 6, Rittgers looks beyond Luther to evangelical consolation literature written by various authors from 1521 to 1531. The theme of suffering was prominent in writings by Luther's followers, who gave multiple ways in which suffering could work for good. Early evangelicals adopted some beliefs about the benefits of suffering from the late Middle Ages: suffering conformed one to Christ, increased longing for heaven and gave testimony to one's election. They also adopted Luther's belief that suffering tested and strengthened faith. In addition, the influence of the theology of the cross is seen in repeated references to God's hidden work and to Christ suffering with believers.

Chapter 7 explores how new beliefs about suffering were taken up in evangelical church ordinances. In contrast to late medieval pastoral manuals, the new church ordinances gave sustained attention to suffering. Most editions of these ordinances included instruction on pastoral ministry to the sick and dying, which directed pastors to visit the sick, to explain an evangelical view of suffering, and to offer the sacraments.
Early evangelical authors thought that teaching an evangelical approach to suffering was an important step toward making Europe more genuinely Christian. This project posed a special challenge since evangelicals had removed many of the practices that Christians had used to cope with suffering, especially recourse to the protection of the saints. In place of praying to saints, evangelicals instructed believers to imitate saints' lives, especially their suffering.

Chapters 8 and 9 chart the increased production of consolation literature by evangelicals in the mid- to late-sixteenth century, as well as the evolution of its emphases. Rittgers argues that these later works increasingly saw suffering as a divine punishment, although they did not assume this was true in every case, and they continued to offer multiple explanations for suffering. Later evangelical authors agreed that spiritual despair was the worst form of suffering and that one should prepare for spiritual battles by meditating on scripture. This idea incorporated a late medieval trope of the “spiritual knight,” which became more popular in the sixteenth century as evangelicals struggled to compensate for the loss of the saints as a devotional resource. Evangelicals also assigned functions to angels that had been performed by saints, especially protection and comfort. Finally, the later sixteenth century saw the increased use of mystics, who in the 1520s had been negatively associated with radical reformers. Evangelicals’ appeals to the mystics helped bolster their argument that their reforms were really a recovery of the best of historical Christianity. It also led to increased emphasis on believers’ union with Christ and Christ’s suffering with humanity.

The final chapter attempts to gauge the impact this wealth of literature had on lay Christians. Past research on Lutheran clergy has often emphasized the resistance and misunderstandings they encountered as they tried to implement reforms, but Rittgers argues that at least some lay Christians grasped this new theology of suffering and integrated it into their own outlook and practices. Private letters, family chronicles, diaries, private devotional works and autobiographies contain numerous examples of lay people who emphatically eschewed late medieval ways of coping with suffering and instead fashioned creative ways to meet suffering with their newly-reformed faith. The most prevalent evidence of a new Lutheran disposition toward suffering is seen in cases where laypeople actively worked to console themselves and each other with the promises of the gospel. In one case, parishioners arranged a vigorous lay ministry of consolation for their pastor, who was grief-stricken, ill, and despondent. Rittgers acknowledges the challenges and limits of gauging the reception of this literature, but the examples he cites here are instructive.

The author presents his project as a contribution to the history of pastoral care, but in this case pastoral care must be understood in the broadest possible sense, encompassing theological foundations, institutional priorities, education, and preaching, in addition to personal conversations. This book fills a vast hole in the research with diverse examples of how sixteenth-century Protestants approached suffering. The numerous perspectives Rittgers engages in this volume make it a rich resource that offers a front-row seat to the vitality and complexity of early modern Christianity.

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THE CONSTELLATION’S PRAYER

My daughter,
    I pray for you a lighthouse—

though my blue supergiant heart
    has the brightness
of a million suns
and my four angles

are strong in the carpenter’s
square,
    I am set to supernova
in a million years.

Long may you be carried
    in the spiral arms beneath me.

I pray that you will only
gather
    the right stones
into your orbit.

I pray that you will circle
a planet
    fit to view your light,
fit to ballast

your extreme seasons
your circuit like a belt
your uneven sphere
shaped by your own gravity.

I pray that you shine
    past all
measure, past all
    Enlightenment.

Miranda Barnes
Ridley Scott's 1982 science fiction masterpiece, *Blade Runner*, opens with a man named Holden administering a test to Leon, an employee of the Tyrell Corporation. Holden says, "You're in a desert. You're walking along in the sand when all of a sudden...you look down and see a tortoise. You see a tortoise, Leon. It's crawling toward you...You reach down and flip the tortoise on its back, Leon. The tortoise lays on his back, his belly baking in the hot sun, beating its legs trying to turn itself over, but it can't, Leon, not without your help. But you're not helping.... Why is that, Leon?"

Holden is a Blade Runner, a specially trained police officer designed to hunt down and "retire" state-of-the-art androids called replicants. This question about the tortoise, and later questions about Leon's mother, are part of the Voight-Kampff test, a test designed to evoke emotional responses and determine whether someone is a replicant. Leon, it turns out, is a replicant—one who did not appreciate Holden's questions and killed him, rather than completing the test.

[spoilers about Blade Runner and Ex Machina follow]

But as the remainder of the film shows, the boundary between human and replicant is quite an ambiguous one. Another Blade Runner named Deckard (Harrison Ford) is hired to hunt down Leon and his three compatriots, all of whom are the most sophisticated model of replicant available and are illegally searching for a way to extend their lifespans. During the course of his search, Deckard meets Rachel (Sean Young), a replicant who believes she is human because she has had memories implanted; it takes Deckard over 100 questions in the Voight-Kampff test, compared to the usual twenty or thirty, to determine that she is a replicant. Near the end of the film, Deckard and Roy (Rutger Hauer), the leader of the group of four replicants, confront each other on a rooftop; in perhaps the most famous line from the film, Roy laments what will be gone when he dies:

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time... like tears in rain....Time to die.

The poetry and memorability of this line belies Roy's existence as something less than human, as does Roy's willingness to spare Deckard's life, even in the face of Roy's own certain death.

The most noteworthy blurring of the boundary between replicant and human, however, comes in the character of Deckard himself. At the end of the film, another police officer named Gaff leaves an origami unicorn on Deckard's doorstep. In both the Director's Cut (1992) and Final Cut (2007) versions of the film, Deckard has had a dream of a unicorn running through the forest. The origami unicorn is widely interpreted to mean that Gaff knows Deckard's dreams and memories because Deckard himself is a replicant. Rather than administering the test on others, Deckard should have been the subject of the Voight-Kampff test himself.

While itself completely fictional, the Voight-Kampff test bears some resemblance to Alan Turing's 1950 proposal for measuring artificial intelligence—what is known today as the Turing test. Turing did not seek to measure emotional responses, as the Voight-Kampff test does; rather, he proposed evaluating conversations between a human and a machine to see how well the machine could mimic human speech patterns.
This test, which Turing introduced in his paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” does not measure whether machines can think, but instead, how well an artificial intelligence can play “the imitation game” (433).

The idea of the Turing test plays a central role in Alex Garland's 2015 film, Ex Machina. This film tells the story of Caleb Smith (Domhnall Gleeson), a man who works for a company resembling Google and who wins a company-wide contest to meet the reclusive CEO, Nathan Bateman (Oscar Isaac). Caleb travels to Nathan's estate, and, after signing a very restrictive non-disclosure agreement, learns why he really has been brought to what seems like the middle of the wilderness: to test out a form of artificial intelligence (AI) that Nathan has developed. Nathan tells Caleb that he “will be the human component in the Turing test… [and] if that test is passed, you are dead center of the greatest scientific event in the history of man.”

When Caleb meets the artificial intelligence—a humanoid robot named Ava (Alicia Vikander)—he quickly realizes that this is no ordinary Turing test. He is already aware that she is a robot, so he wouldn't be able to objectively measure her skills of language imitation. Nathan agrees, and tells Caleb that what he is looking for is something more subjective: “If I hid Ava from you so you just heard her voice, she would pass for human. The real test is to show you that she's a robot, and then see if you still feel she has consciousness.” Nathan, it becomes clear, is looking for more than what Turing's original test would measure—the ability to imitate human speech—and is instead looking to test for actual intelligence.

But the longer Caleb stays at Nathan's estate, and the more he participates in this test of Ava, it becomes clear that the boundary between Caleb's humanity and Ava's status as a machine is blurry. In their initial meeting, Caleb asks Ava to tell him about herself, saying that she can start anywhere because he's “interested to see what she will choose.” During their second meeting, Ava turns these same words—slightly sarcastically—back on Caleb, highlighting the inequality of their relationship and demonstrating, as Caleb later tells Nathan, “an awareness of her own mind, and also of awareness of mine.”

The boundary between human and AI blurs even further when Ava starts flirting with Caleb. When Caleb first meets her, Ava looks mostly robotic in form, with wire mesh covering most of her skull and body and only her face appearing to be human. As Caleb begins to recognize her self-awareness, Ava responds by putting on a dress and a wig that she thinks he will like and suggests that they go out on her ideal version of a date—a visit to a busy intersection so she could people-watch. Despite his discomfort with the idea, Caleb grows sexually attracted to Ava, and with this introduction of sexual tension, the tone of the movie begins to grow more sinister. Power outages lead to lockdowns. Nathan stays up late at night, drinking in dark rooms and surprising Caleb when he enters. Caleb discovers older models of Nathan's AI—all female—in closets in Nathan's room, with human-like skin seamlessly fit over mesh frames. This psychological manipulation has Caleb questioning his own humanity, to the extent that he cuts his own arm open with a razor to confirm that he, unlike the models in Nathan's closet, will bleed.

Together, Caleb and Ava begin to plan how they could escape from Nathan's compound, and just when it seems that they might be successful, Nathan reveals to Caleb that Caleb wasn't administering the test; he was the test. Nathan tells Caleb, "Ava was a rat in a maze, and I gave her one way out. To escape she'd have to use self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, empathy, and she did. Now if that's not true AI, what the fuck is?" By manipulating Caleb, Ava was able to convince him to help her escape, thus demonstrating that he viewed her as an intelligent, conscious being.
Yet *Ex Machina* is not just a film about a man who serves as a test for AI. It can also be seen as a Turing test all on its own, a test of the very viewers of the film. At the end of the movie, Ava and Caleb have successfully implemented their plan to override the lockdown mechanism, and Ava kills Nathan, puts on synthetic skin so that she looks fully human, and leaves Caleb locked in the compound. As she finally steps outside and travels to a busy intersection full of people, Ava calls to mind a thought-experiment that Caleb described earlier in the film. In this thought-experiment, a woman named Mary is born in a black and white room and only knows about color second-hand. One day, Mary steps outside and finally sees the blue sky. The purpose of this story, Caleb explains, is to show the difference between a computer and a human mind: “The computer is Mary in the black and white room. The human is when she walks out.”

With this unexpected ending, we as viewers are left to wonder how we view Ava, and as a result, where our sympathies lie. Do we see Ava as a horrifying, immoral computer? Or do we see instead a story of a woman who has achieved her freedom? Like both Caleb and Ava, we, too, are being tested, to see how far we will extend the boundary of humanity.

While this particular plot might still seem firmly within the realm of science fiction, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider how much we trust artificial intelligence in our everyday lives. We ask Google Maps how to get to that new restaurant. We ask Siri what the weather is, or who the prime minister of India is. We trust Netflix to recommend movies and Goodreads to find our next book. We've probably all been in a situation where we have trusted a machine more than a human—whether it's trusting GPS more than our spouse to provide directions, or using Wikipedia to fact-check what someone tells us at a party.

Certainly, there are significant differences between these examples and a full-fledged AI like Ava, and this essay is not meant to be a warning against the dangers of technology. Rather, it's a reminder that tests like the Voight-Kampff test and the Turing test exist because the boundary between human and machine is a fluid one, with influence working both ways. Our daily interactions with Google, Siri, and countless other forms of contemporary AI don't just shape the computer algorithms; they shape how we think, too. And, perhaps even more importantly, whether it's a targeted ad from Amazon, a thermostat that adjusts the temperature when we arrive home, or almost any app on our smartphones, the ubiquity of this technology shows that science fiction is no longer the only place where we should grapple with the implications of the blurring of this boundary. These aren't questions for the future—these are questions for now. ♦

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**Works Cited**


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Paranoia and Political Hacking in Mr. Robot
Gregory Maher

The second season of the television series Mr. Robot delves deeply into society’s collective paranoia about hacking, data leaks, and cybersecurity. In doing so, it has had an uncanny ability to mirror or even predict real-life events. For a storyline that follows a group of fictional hackers, the news of hacks involving the National Security Agency, the Democratic National Committee, and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton are never far from the viewer’s mind. But it’s not just the events in which hackers achieve center stage that ring true; the release of the season one finale was postponed due to its graphic similarity to last year’s on-air murder of television reporter Alison Parker and photojournalist Adam Ward.

Through the first season (which aired on the USA Network in 2015) and into the second (released this past July), Mr. Robot has demonstrated the humanity and complexity of hackers. Mainstream media coverage frequently vilifies hackers, portraying them as “masked others”—a portrayal that many hackers seem to relish. Series creator, writer, and director Sam Esmail destroys these conceptions and ties the show’s plot into the fabric of contemporary cyber warfare, with its constant struggle of threats, undermining, and blackmail.

The entities in the world of Mr. Robot are best visualized on a vertical spectrum. This spectrum extends from the legal and visible players down into the “deep web” of “unindexed” (unsearchable, and thus effectively invisible) and the “dark web” of illegal activity. At the pinnacle is E Corp, a global conglomerate involved in everything from computers to consumer credit to banking. At the other end is fsociety, a loose hacker collective led by the mysterious Mr. Robot (Christian Slater), whose primary goal is to bring down E Corp and erase financial records in order to eliminate all debts as a form of economic revolution. Between these two ends is Allsafe, a cybersecurity firm where lead character Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek) works as a security engineer, protecting clients such as E Corp from cyberattacks.

At the opening of the second season, the viewer begins to see that this spectrum is the controlled narrative presented by the media and generally accepted by the public. New points appear on the spectrum as the FBI, the Dark Army (based on real hacking groups such as the Chinese PLA Unit 61398), and other players enter the plot. At the same time, viewers get a closer look at the interdependent community of people—siblings, parents, and friends—for whom “hacker” is but one portion of their identities.

Elliot has always had an affinity for hacking. During his childhood, it allowed an escape from his strict household and fed his persistent desire for secret knowledge. Elliot’s strength, his ability to overcome barriers of privacy, grants him access to others’ weaknesses. In the process, Elliot adopted the murky, indecipherable persona of hacker and continued to advance his skill as a “white-hat” hacker—seeking loopholes in companies’ systems—before becoming a security engineer at Allsafe Cybersecurity.

Elliot’s role as hacker is not to act as an agent of chaos—the evil “masked other”—but as the conscience of the viewer, questioning and overturning the accepted narrative of the upper, “legal” end of the spectrum. While socially awkward, Elliot becomes an archetype of the modern assassin. He is hooded in black, with dark eyes and large pupils that reflect his own acute fear of being watched. He holds an unsmilng awareness of his power: exposing his targets’ source code and, by extension, their hidden sins.
At the beginning of the first season, the viewer meets Elliot in a scene when he is exposing an internet café owner’s child pornography ring. In this moment, and successive ones, Elliot grapples with this power. He confronts person after person over their dark secrets: infidelity, perversion, or ouster business plots. The “victims” are often those he perceives to be closest to him, and thus with the greatest chance of betraying him; of proving his paranoia is justified. At other times, Elliot is simply striking where he sees a weakness, both enraptured by the ephemeral power and driven by a deeper anger. It seems that everyone Elliot knows is hiding something, accessible just on the other side of an email password or phishing scam.

Elliot suffers from a variety of mental illnesses, manifested at times in anxiety attacks. During these scenes of high tension or action he finds calm in conversing with an unknown other. At one point he says, “I wish I could be an observer like you—then I could think more calmly.” That might be Elliot addressing the viewer directly, but there’s another layer of meaning, as well. Elliot’s father developed leukemia as a result of exposure while working on a mysterious E Corps project, and the illness led to his untimely death. This imaginary conversation partner becomes a proxy companion to fill the void left by his father’s death, and this imaginary presence increasingly insinuates itself into Elliot’s already unstable consciousness.

Halfway through the first season Elliot transforms from mere hacker into a full-fledged operative, gaining access to an E Corp data center. Hacking here requires lock-picking skills to pass through secured doors, improvisation to respond to unforeseen obstacles, and deception to move past more complicated barriers in the temperature-controlled warehouses full of servers. Elliot realizes in this scene, within the labyrinthine Steel Mountain facility of E Corp, that the full meaning of exploiting system weaknesses includes manipulating others to get them to divulge or allow access to information.

Esmail’s approach to developing the show’s characters is to see them not simply as hackers, but as humans with their own lives, dispositions, and even personal style.

Part of what makes the series so compelling is its realistic handling of hacking and cyber security. So many film and TV depictions of hackers rely on corny stereotypes—think of Skyfall’s lascivious hacker, Raoul Silva, versus the cardigan-draped Q. The intended audience for Mr. Robot’s hacking scenes is security professionals. To that end, the series’ tech consultant, Michael Bazzell, a security specialist and former FBI cyberthreat investigator, checks every detail for accuracy. The main cast attended hacking seminars as preparation for the show, and Malek worked with a typing instructor in order to realistically channel Elliot’s behavior.

Esmail’s approach to developing the show’s characters is to see them not simply as hackers, but as humans with their own lives, dispositions, and even personal style. Mr. Robot permits the viewer to reconsider the role of hackers and their work. In one striking scene, fsociety pays off a worker at a kill shelter to allow the group to burn evidence of their E Corp hack. Faced with the sobering presence of the crematory oven, the hackers pick the locks on the dogs’ cages to let them escape.

Composer Mac Quayle’s churning electronic beat aligns the mood of the series with the unknown, with technology beyond the grasp of most viewers. The soundtrack combines seamlessly with the series’ dark color palette, both favoring interior and nighttime scenes. When the interior camera pans over a window, the white light from outside appears harsh and unforgiving. Mr. Robot also employs elements of the horror genre such as high-pitched noises like the pressurized rush of wind before a subway train and the screech of its brakes against metal tracks. Pounding, disorienting music is often layered over scenes of crowds in which the central
action is occurring. This oversaturation mimics Elliot’s own anxiety attacks, his sense of the world closing in on him. One character, White Rose (BD Wong), leader of the Dark Army hacker group, summarizes it best when he tells Elliot, “We’re all living in each other’s paranoia.” During hacking scenes, Elliot’s own adrenal hyperawareness only amplifies the effect.

The way the show details the whole process of the hack, from planning to execution to the inevitable political and economic fallout, also blurs the line between the series and reality. For instance, following Wikileaks’ release of thousands of emails from the Democratic National Committee in July, the DNC established a “cybersecurity advisory board” composed of security and big tech policy experts. The DNC has been criticized for not including any actual cybersecurity technologists on the board and for misunderstanding the motivation and culture of hacking—the importance of both which are clearly demonstrated in Mr. Robot. Like corporate, media, and governmental entities, political candidates often deride hackers’ efforts as terrorist, anarchic, or puerile, but they have no choice but to rely on hackers’ expertise to test their system security and move ahead after being cyberattacked.

Now that hacking is a ubiquitous threat for any major political campaign, questions about the role of data security and access are unavoidable. What data should be publically accessible, especially data related to campaign finance and elected officials? Elections have long been built on information disseminated by journalists and platforms pushed by either party. The current presidential election exemplifies the ease with which politicians spin half-truths and anecdotes into a partisan “reality” for a dissatisfied public.

The hacktivist introduces a new dynamic into this process. By accessing private information and releasing it widely, hacktivists reveal the bare-faced truth of politicians, corporate figures, and others. Whether hacktivists should have a voice in the current election is debatable. Regardless, the information they make available can cause voters to reevaluate public figures and their policies, as well as provide a ground for legal action.

In Mr. Robot, Elliot’s hallucinations and flashbacks cause the viewer to look back and try to piece together what is past, present, or speculative—what is reality and what is in his head. Mr. Robot does not fully separate its reality from our reality. Because of this, the show prompts its viewers to analyze the truths with which we are presented, especially as we wade through the tangle of election media coverage. People want to believe what they see, and leaked information provides a proof-test. There is a cost to that knowledge, however: not just the illegality of such hacks, but the sickening reality of deception. Mr. Robot reminds us that hackers are fully formed, psychologically complex individuals. Likewise, it reminds us that we need to pay close attention to the motives, sources, contexts, and framing of information—as well as the methods used in its apprehension. ♦

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I had the privilege of representing my Presbytery at the 222nd General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Portland, Oregon, in June. There are not many Presbyterians in northeast Wisconsin; I was the only minister we sent. My Presbytery also sent a ruling elder, which is a Presbyterian term for an ordained layperson. (The idea of "ordained lay people" is confusing to most other denominations. Presbyterians ordain people who have not attended seminary to positions of leadership in local congregations. They also serve in the wider church. At every level of the church above the congregation, lay people and clergy are equally represented.) Our third representative was a college student who served as an advisory delegate.

I celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of my ordination the same month I traveled to Portland. That quarter century, plus the seventeen years I've served in this region, plus the fact that I had never attended General Assembly, caused my number to come up.

I cannot remember a week I worked harder or longer hours. I returned to Wisconsin way past "tired," "weary" and "exhausted." At church on the Sunday after I came home, I heard the gospel story where Jesus describes salt that's lost its savor, which is only good to be trampled underfoot. That probably comes closest to my physical and mental state following GA.

Still, it was exhilarating!

Since returning I have read the capsulized summaries of actions that we took, and honestly I do not remember much of the final outcomes. It was like swimming in a fast-moving "process river": I remember some of the series of rapids, but most of the trip is simply a blur. There are, however, moments and snippets of conversation that capture the essence of my time at GA.

I was assigned to the Way Forward Committee, a new group created to address the challenge of a cumbersome, slow governing structure that often impedes the most exciting, life-giving ministries from springing up. We were assigned oceans of background reading. This was not unique to my committee; I heard members of other committees say they could have spent a month reading 40 hours a week and still not have read everything.

But the work of the Way Forward Committee was considered significant enough that we were called to Portland a day early. When I arrived it was easy to identify the local people who were there to help direct us. They were friendly and so prepared that I did not have to read a single sign; they pointed me from gate to baggage claim to light rail. From light rail I walked the two blocks to my hotel and I was ready to start.

I shared a room with Keith, a pastor from New Jersey. Keith made a good impression immediately. He arrived at the room well past midnight because his flight had been delayed; I slept soundly through his arrival.

It has been said that General Assemblies are family reunions, but I have to say the metaphor is not adequate. I found them to be like national gatherings of an organization I've been a part of a long time. They are gatherings of an organization I've been part of for a long time. I kept crossing paths with people and recognizing them from...somewhere. I exchanged quizzical looks with more than a dozen people I had encountered in other settings, years ago. Two of these meetings were rewarding. One was with a minister whom I had taken a class from and who had been in a class I taught. She recognized my face, snapped her fingers, and said, "Humor Guy from Wisconsin!" I much prefered that over "Teaching Elder Thomas
Willadsen, Winnebago Presbytery,” which is how my name badge read.

A few days later I met Bill. We knew each other from some forgotten moment in the past... Did you go to Committee on Ministry orientation in Minnesota about ten years ago? Boundary training in Stevens Point? Where did you go to seminary? Hmm. After a few more attempts Bill remembered that we’d shared a hotel room a few years ago when we read ordination exams outside Chicago. Then we had nothing more to say to each other.

There were a lot of homeless people in Portland. After ordering breakfast on Saturday at a coffee shop a block from my hotel, I passed a homeless man as I returned to my room to retrieve my phone.

“Do you have any spare change?”

“Not right now.”

And I didn’t. I had only paper money in my wallet. Still, my conscience nags me when I pass someone who is obviously needy. As I walked past him on my return to the coffee shop, I handed him a dollar, asking, “You’ll take paper, won’t you?” He did. Then he asked me, “What did the boy strawberry say to the girl strawberry?”

“I don’t know.”

“If you weren’t so fresh, we wouldn’t be in this jam.”

I love jokes like this. I asked him, “What did the fish say when it swam into a wall?”

“Dam.” He knew the answer, but still, we’d shared a laugh. I decided to give this guy a dollar every time I passed him.

The next day he was not there, and I worried.

I saw “my” homeless guy again on the last day of the assembly. The joke he told was not good, but still worth a buck. Later I wondered if he had some kind of schedule, perhaps a different corner for each day of the week. That would reduce his need to find new material. Maybe it was just a coincidence.

The bulk of my time was spent working with the Way Forward Committee, and I take some pride in two ways I influenced my committee’s work.

The first time we gathered in our assigned meeting room, there were platters of cookies on stands throughout the convention center. I grabbed a plate, filled it with a nice variety, then walked around the room, serving them to my fellow members as they settled into their seats.

I had signed up to give the committee’s opening prayer. Before I began, however, I gave my name and Presbytery and added, “I am the cookie czar, and I will gladly bring cookies back from the platters out in the hallway at each break.”

I was crushed when I found no cookies at the first break—or any of the subsequent breaks that evening. We are a denomination that runs on cookies! We can’t make a decision without at least a few Fig Newtons or pecan sandies! And don’t get me started on the chocolate chip vs. oatmeal raisin debate.
The next day I stopped at the “special needs” booth run by the local arrangements people. I explained that I am a lifelong Presbyterian and I cannot make it through the day without some cookies—and I had promised seventy-two of my closest friends that I would be delivering the goods after each break. This was the only time I saw the local arrangements people flummoxed. They asked the people at the late registration booth next door, who offered me individually wrapped Lifesavers. I filled a pocket with them and said this might tide us over. Then someone said that the cookies we’d had the day before were leftovers from a graduation that had just been held at the convention center. There would be no cookies provided to GA participants.

Before we reconvened, I asked to make an announcement. I was a little shaky from low blood sugar, so that probably affected my message. “The special needs and late registration people just informed me that yesterday’s cookies were a sadistic charade. The cookies were leftovers from a prior event. I’ve got a pocketful of Lifesavers for those of you who are desperate. I regret having to make this announcement.”

I was really pleased with “sadistic charade.”

The Presbyterian Church, like all mainline denominations, has been losing members for decades, yet our infrastructure has not changed. The Way Forward Committee’s task was to create a different kind of denominational structure. We were charged to be visionary. So after hours of reports, testimony, and theological instruction, the seventy-two members of the committee broke into four small groups and dispersed to each corner of the room to meet. I decided to follow someone who seemed especially well-prepared.

“I’m going where you’re going,” I informed her. “Hell in a hand basket?” “Is there room for me?”

After much brainstorming, the small groups proposed a variety of responses to the whole committee. And finally the full committee made a bold proposal: the creation of “The Way Forward Commission,” a body to study and identify a vision for the structure and function of the General Assembly agencies of the PC (USA). Commissions have the authority to make binding decisions. Thus we enabled the denomination to make changes that it deemed urgent.

My small group proposed creating a 2020 Vision Team to develop a guiding statement for the denomination and plan for its implementation. We discussed at length who should serve on this committee. We wanted a variety of ages and perspectives. We struggled with how to word our desire for diversity. I suggested “that we seek to include the voices of peoples long silenced,” a phrase from the newest statement in our Book of Confessions. I was delighted when that wording was accepted, and pleased that the first other member of the sub-committee who spoke in favor of it was a theological student advisory delegate from Puerto Rico. Maybe this Vision Team will really help chart the course for the future of my denomination.

My last conversation at GA was my most memorable. I was stepping onto the light rail, headed to the airport, when I heard a man say, “Cookie Monster!” I turned around and saw someone who turned out to be a member of my committee—I just didn’t recognize him. He said, “In committee I always spoke through a Spanish interpreter, and I sat on the other side of the room from you.”

“Right. Are you speaking English now, or is this Pentecost?”

“I’m good with English, but I’m shy in big groups, so I used the interpreter.”

“Darn. I was hoping to learn a new language without having to go to school. What did you think of our committee?”

“We were awesome!”

We were awesome, in the true sense of the word. The Way Forward Committee, the commissioners and delegates at General Assembly, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) were all awesome for ten days in Portland. But now, we were very, very tired.

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