the Porch
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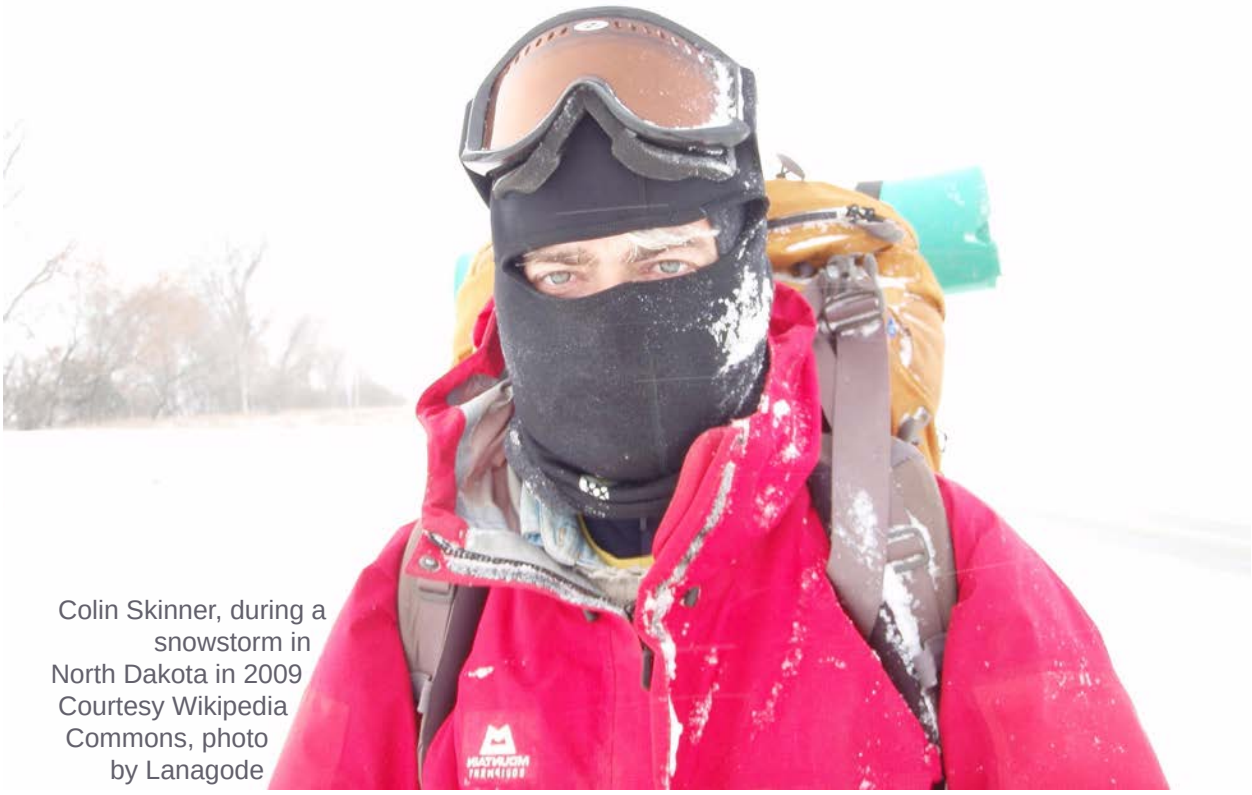
ONE EXTRA PIECE OF INFORMATI



Colin Skinner, during a snowstorm in North Dakota in 2009
Courtesy Wikipedia Commons, photo by Lanagode

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WELCOME

French farmers have been teaching me how to live better since I was sixteen years old. That's when I first saw *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*, two films from the mid-Eighties, which portray rural life in Provence in the period immediately following the First World War. They're beautiful-looking movies, with immersive performances, and directed with the kind of power that implies the crew took a time machine back to 1919 and starting filming. And in their humane gaze, they have a depth and empathy that deserves to be called Shakespearian. The plot considers the travails of farmers trying to make a sustainable living from the land, competing with neighbors for the spoils of a tulip field and a mountain water spring that could bring life to thirsty soil, and hungry people. It's a universally resonant tale: I have mouths to feed, resources seem scarce, so I'll build a fence around the land I believe to be mine, keep the plenty in and the barbarians out. *Jean* and *Manon*, based on novels by Marcel Pagnol, are epic dramas of the soul, comparable to movies like *The Godfather* in their exquisite settings, and clear-eyed lament for human selfishness. They're tragedies, not just because of the disaster that befalls those egocentric enough to steal from their neighbors, never mind humble enough to ask for help. In one of the great scenes of the subtle dawning of a terrible realization, one of the characters awakens to the fact that he has devoted his life to greed in the service of a misguided notion of honor; and that his natural hunger for peace and security has manifested in the destruction of the lives of others. There is one extra piece of information that he did not know, or that he ignored, which led him to - literally - ruin his life.

One extra piece of information that could have led him to empathize with an opponent.

One extra piece of information that might have opened him to see beyond the limitations of “private property”, to see his neighbors as partners in the kind of community where everyone gets their needs met, rather than competitors in a war game where the prize is merely who gets the most stuff.

For this issue of *The Porch*, we asked some of our friends to reflect on the notion of one extra piece of information that changes everything: among them peace activists Jayme Reaves, Glenn Jordan and Michael Fryer explore the question of what defining enemies does to “us” (two of them independently deciding to quote the same Egyptian-Greek poet: serendipity?); Mona Haydar invites us to consider her viral pro-feminist “Hijabi” song, and ask not what other peoples’ heartfelt work can do for us, but how we might make our own creative work in response; and Lyndsay Dyk sees in the haunting science fiction series *The OA* a transcendent evocation of the fact that we are not alone. Our growing community of writers, dreamers, poets, activists and people seeking to live better are stepping into a conversation that’s bigger than “us and them” - seeking the one extra piece of information about our neighbors, our relatives, and even our enemies.

So welcome, friends, to the fourth issue of *The Porch*. We’re glad you’re here.

Gareth Higgins
Editor/Publisher, The Porch

Protective Hospitality - Jayme R. Reaves

I used to live along one of the “peace” walls in West Belfast, on an interface between two of the most famous neighborhoods in Northern Ireland: the Irish Catholic Falls Road and British Protestant Shankill Road areas. I lived in the Mennonite House, bought by the parents of the distinguished peace teacher and activist John Paul Lederach to be used as accommodation for peace-related volunteers and students, and to provide hospitality and a safe space on this conflicted interface. I lived next to the pedestrian gate in the wall, which was opened at dawn and closed at dusk every day by the police unless there was trouble afoot.

In the long spring and summer evenings, I'd notice the kids throwing things at one another through the gate and over the wall built to keep them apart. Running up to and sometimes through the gate, they taunted and teased each other, trolling for trouble, and then retreated to their respective neighborhoods when there was just enough of a threat to warrant it. They knew the adults on their side of the wall would defend them. They knew their community would take their side.

Riots were known to start over smaller matters than this. Always on a slow simmer, it didn't take much for the steam to build up and the lid to pop. Property damaged, injuries sustained, and a lingering legacy of unrest remained in my neighborhood despite the decade long "peace" of the 1998 Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement.

"I hate Catholics," said one of my nine-year-old neighbors who lived on my street. Shocked at such a blatant statement, I asked her why.

"Because, see that wall over there? My daddy says that I need to be extra careful because they'll come through that wall and beat me up. They make me scared and they hate me, so I hate them back."

My heart sank.

"So much for the new generation," I thought to myself, trying to figure out how to explain to this young girl that all Catholics aren't bad. Maybe if I lied and told her I was a Catholic, it might have opened her eyes. But such a statement might put me and my own safety at risk, so I let it go. In hindsight, I

should have pressed her on it, but at the time my gut told me to be wary. Who knows whom she'd tell? I was pretty sure her dad was a local paramilitary leader.

And then there was the graffiti on the wall. Marking their territory, words and slogans are written to demarcate boundaries and to antagonize the other side. Occasionally the letters "KAH" were tagged on the Protestant side of the wall. Painted by kids from the Catholic community, they would dare to breach the wall, paint the abbreviation of the genocidal "Kill all Huns" and then run back into the safety of their own. They have been subjected to their own version for years; "KAT" or "Kill all Taigs" can still be found peppered throughout the city as well. The common nature of such statements is astounding. Protestant "Huns", Catholic "Taigs", language that denies the invitation to see each other's faces.

I expect the implications of these tags are not really taken literally, or even seriously by most of those who paint them. I often dreamed that, in a stroke of madness, I would catch some of the writers in the act, and shout, "Do you know what you're really saying?! You're calling for mass murder!" But I never did. I kept my mouth shut except to those I knew shared my views and with whom I felt safe to express my opinion. You never know who you might offend otherwise. And in this area, offense is not taken lightly. It's best to keep your head down or a Molotov cocktail might find its way through your window.

But if I'm honest, I also kept my mouth shut because, deep down, I was glad the wall was there. I hated the wall, yet I appreciated its presence. Despite the kids, my street was a fairly quiet neighborhood because of the wall. Despite

the kids, the wall made me feel safe. If this had been a middle-class, leafy neighborhood relatively untouched by the conflict, I wouldn't have worried. The wall would have been unnecessary. Yet in a working-class area defined by decades of segregation, sectarianism, and violence between the two communities, the wall provided security to residents on either side, even residents such as me who were working to eventually bring those same walls down.

I have to admit that if I was glad the wall was there, how much more were those who felt they had more to fear than me, like that little nine-year-old girl who was afraid of being beaten up by her neighbors on the other side? Every time I looked at the wall and saw "KAH" painted there, I was disgusted, but those feelings were always tempered by a twinge of guilt because I knew that both my disgust and comfort in its presence were intertwined with a keen awareness of the irony.

At that time, I was a public theologian working on my PhD, exploring the concepts of hospitality and protection. The fact that I both loathed and appreciated a very hostile, impenetrable concrete wall with a locked gate, high railing, and barbed wire at the end of my street felt contradictory and hypocritical. As long as those walls remained, Northern Ireland would never become a truly peaceful and integrated society. Yet, I understood the need to feel protected. I understood what it was like to feel as if danger is just beyond your doorstep. I understood why the wall was put there, why it remains, and why it will probably be there for many years to come. The wall provided both protection for those within its boundaries, and exclusion of those who are unknown and unwanted. I came to understand that these types of

contradictions repeatedly mark a society in conflict, when ideas that are apparently mutually exclusive often reside side by side. Often it is the inability to reconcile these ideas that makes building peace so difficult.

In my old neighborhood, the wall is both the antithesis of hospitality and the boundary that made some acts of hospitality possible. Because of this wall, a group of women from each side go back and forth through the gate for tea on a regular basis, making intentional efforts to know one another and work together on communal issues. Would they make such efforts if the wall wasn't there? Maybe. But maybe not. The wall reminds these women there is still a lot of work to do. The wall affirms their identities, making encounters with the other a little less threatening, giving confidence via the knowledge that they can retreat into its safety when the need arises.

A story about the walls I will never forget was told to me by the famous Northern Irish civil rights activist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey. She informed me that barriers like the one bordering my neighborhood enabled some communities to shelter and provide sanctuary for "battered women" from the other side in the 1970s-80s. In a time when domestic abuse shelters didn't exist, Protestant women on one side of the divide secretly harbored Catholic women who had been abused, and Catholic women did the same on their side. Giving shelter to an abused woman on the other side was the most effective way to remove her from the reach of her partner or the enforcement of her return by her own community and its respective paramilitary forces. The host women knew those seeking the woman being given refuge wouldn't consider the possibility that she had crossed the boundaries into "enemy territory," and even if they thought it possible, they wouldn't have means of investigating out of fear

of the paramilitaries who enforced the wall's exclusion. What I love about this story is that these brave women were not part of a systematic movement. There was no policy in place, and it is still relatively undocumented, but they took it upon themselves to put together a grassroots initiative that subverted the sectarian divide and strategically used the presence of a wall to help ensure the safety of women in need of refuge.

My neighborhood's wall, along with other similar walls throughout the world, both include and exclude. They provide refuge and identity as well as sustain conflict by concretizing division. Such is the nature of walls. Duality resides along its parapets. That same duality appears in the practice of hospitality itself. Arising from the same linguistic root, the tension between *hospes* (hospitality) and *hostis* (hostility) is constantly present. We like to talk about hospitality as if it is a nice, polite, welcoming free-for-all, but in reality it's not. Genuine hospitality requires solid boundaries to provide safety and protection, as well as radical welcome to those who appear both invited and uninvited from beyond those same boundaries. Finding the balance is a particularly tricky and risky endeavor, requiring reflexivity and flexibility, a commitment to the wellbeing of all and an awareness that, as with anything in life, there are no guarantees of success.

If we look for them, we can find defiant examples of people reaching out beyond their own identity to welcome and provide safe haven and assistance to someone from the other side in practically every narrative of conflict and oppression around the globe. There are numerous stories I have encountered over the years of courage and hospitality in difficult times. Once, a mixed marriage family (wife was Catholic, husband was Protestant, 2 kids) received an

anonymous threat to leave or they would be burned out of their house, and so their neighbor sat all night in front of the house with a fire extinguisher. Or the group of Croat Catholic, Serb Orthodox, and Bosnian Muslim clergy who made a deliberate point to be seen having coffee and a laugh on a regular basis in their small, rural town as a means of modeling a different way of living together during the war in Bosnia. The opportunities we are presented with now are no different.

Each one of us is an heir to this heritage of resistance—all we need do is open our eyes to see and act accordingly. It is in our social and political history and it is also in our religious traditions. We are the ones who define what is important: the stories we choose to tell our children and each other are the stories that define our values. From meaningful, healthy remembrance of this heritage comes shared action, and they are dangerous memories because they challenge the status quo, highlight injustice and inform and motivate further acts of resistance as a means of continuing the tradition.

As we consider the threat of physical and metaphorical walls being built through travel bans and immigration policies, we must not forget that these policies have also served to awaken and galvanize a significant number of people who wouldn't normally have gotten involved. The upsurge of churches, synagogues, mosques, universities, cities, and counties declaring themselves sanctuaries is not a fluke. During the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s, approximately 500 sanctuaries were formed as a resistance to Reagan's policies related to Central and South America. At the time of writing, the number now stands at more than 800 and continues to grow.

When times like these lead us to despair, let us remember we are never without options. While ideological and actual wars rage around us, opportunities will emerge to subvert the power that divides us in order to do good and provide protective hospitality to a threatened other. What it requires of us is to stay alert and be willing to put ourselves at risk for our neighbor.

Thinking back to the days when I lived by that wall in Belfast, my memories have been positively tainted by the stories of those who resisted and subverted the wall's purpose. I have been included in that heritage by living within its shadow, being told the stories, and being allowed to share them with others. The opportunity to preserve the heritage by creating new, dangerous memories in these trying times lies before us. Our own humanity and commitments to that which is greater than ourselves calls us to act, and those who have gone before us urge us to persevere. They will tell our stories one day, too.

Fireworks - Missy Harris

Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense. - Rumi

When I went to Comer, Georgia in 1997 to live at Jubilee Partners, an intentional Christian service community, my grandmother thought it was

scandalous. It wasn't their sharing property and resources in common or their primary work of offering hospitality and resettling refugees from war torn regions around the world that concerned her. What was unfathomable to her was the fact that they only had dessert twice a week and didn't serve Coke with every meal.

It was a bit of a fluke that I ended up at Jubilee in the first place. After a visit to another community in Atlanta the previous fall, I was convinced that the place I needed to be was back in Atlanta to work with people who were experiencing homelessness.

The committee that interviewed me thought otherwise and offered me a position in a place that couldn't have been any more different than what I had imagined I would've been doing if I had gone to Atlanta. It was rural. It involved farming and gardening. It involved teaching English as a Second Language classes, which I had never done. It involved childcare, which didn't make it anywhere near the top ten list of things I was remotely interested in doing at the time. One perk was that since they only had dessert twice a week, life at Jubilee involved regular deliveries of cookies via snail mail from my grandmother—lest I die of sugar depravation.

I accepted the position at Jubilee because I had a strong feeling that I was not going to be placed in Atlanta. So there I was in late May, winding my way across the rural northeast Georgia roads, just me in my gold Dodge Dynasty, my atlas beside me on the bench seat, making my way to this tiny town that would soon open the world to me in ways far bigger than I could have ever imagined.

I settled easily into life in this community. The rhythm of each day involved plenty of hard work, prayer, and a good amount of play. It suited me. I gardened. I cleaned out chicken coops. I ridded at least two acres of pasture of pesky, thorny thistle weeds. I taught English as a Second Language classes to adults, who were my parents and grandparents' age. I played soccer and volleyball and endless games of UNO and Dutch Blitz—a highly addictive Mennonite game where multiple people play solitaire all at the same time.

One evening in the summer, the Partners in the community decided to take everyone into Athens to a festival where members of the community and the refugee families could have some time to relax with each other. The packed-beyond-capacity bus ride to Athens was great. Kids ran up and down the aisle, practicing their new English skills and squealing in excitement. The adults talked and gestured. Laughter echoed in every direction.

We arrived at the festival grounds, spread out our blankets, played cards, sang songs, enjoyed the food we had packed and waited as the light faded and the evening began to grow dark.

I found myself sitting between two women, Fatima and Bianca. Both were from Bosnia and were probably in their mid 50's. They were in my English class, so we practiced the words we shared in common, made lots of gestures, made lots of mistakes (my Bosnian was much worse than their English), and we laughed a whole lot. They loved bringing up the time I'd used an English word that was a euphemism in Bosnian for a particular body part. It took me a while, with their eventual willingness to explain through gestures, for me to understand *why* on earth prepositions were so hilarious to them.

As we sat in the grass that evening, in the distance an orchestra began to play. The music of John Phillip Sousa and Woody Guthrie surrounded us as we played games and visited with each other. As I had dutifully done all my life up to that point, I, along with the people around me stood up when the *Star Spangled Banner* began to play. As soon as the song concluded, repeated explosions of color began to light up the night-sky. The obligatory "oooh's" and "ahhh's" erupted ~~in every direction~~ from the crowd around us.

But on either side of me, terror began to take root. Before I could process what was happening, Bianca and Fatima grabbed my arms and pulled me to the ground between the two of them. They buried their faces into my shoulders and sobbed—the kind of soul-deep sobbing that takes over your entire body. That fifteen minutes of fireworks was agonizing.

There was nowhere to go to shield them from the colorful, fiery blasts that instantaneously took them back to the horrors of real bombs that had burst through the air around their homes in Bosnia. Even if we had tried to make it back to the bus together, we would not have escaped the relentless explosions and flashes of light that reminded them of all that had been and all that they had lost. Given the language barrier, there was not a single comforting word I could say to indicate that the horror above their heads would soon come to an end, that this was temporary, that it was meant to be celebratory.

All that I could do was sit there and hold them as tightly as possible, in the middle of that field surrounded by hundreds of other people who were laughing

and cheering, totally oblivious to the anguish happening on the ground, just below their skyward gazes.

At only nineteen years old, I was in way over my head. After we returned to Jubilee Partners, I couldn't get this experience and the image of Bianca and Fatima out of my mind. For several weeks after that I would wake up startled, in a cold sweat, from dreams of being in an open field, unable to get my friends to a safe and quiet place.

But it was in the context of this community that I began sorting it out, naming what had happened, figuring out how to continue being present with Bianca and Fatima when we shared no common words to be able to talk about what had happened.

I have no idea how they sorted it all out within themselves, but I do know that every time I went to visit them in their homes at the Welcome Center after July 4th of that summer, they prepared me a tiny cup of very strong coffee, filled it with a lot of milk and several squares of sugar. They set before me endless plates of Bosnian bread and *burek* (a kind of pastry filled with meat, which I ate without hesitation and with the deepest gratitude, even though I was a vegetarian). I shared the endless boxes of sugar-filled cookies that my grandmother mailed with them.

While we shared coffee and these simple meals, they took out the few pictures they'd been able to bring with them from Bosnia, presented them to me, with their hands over their hearts and tears welling up in their eyes—the exact same way you would even if you share a common language to name your feelings.

Sometimes, they would just take my hand in their hands and pat it. Or, they would put their hands on my face and softly nod their heads and smile, usually ending by sticking their fingers in my dimples and laughing uncontrollably.

While the booming and exploding fireworks around us on that 4th of July evening twenty years ago felt like anything but grace, freedom, or beauty, it was the simple practice of sitting on their porches with them for the remainder of that summer that led me to experience a profound rhythm of grace, freedom, and beauty that I still crave deep in my bones to this day. We were with each other, and not one of us had to be alone.

Today, when I am in a place where the *Star Spangled Banner* is played, I still stand—but with my head bowed, praying that someday we will know a world where bombs bursting in air will no longer elicit cheers and celebrations.

At the same time, I can't help laughing when I see prepositional phrases used with a certain English word. And I thank God for that laughter.

Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense.

On Walls and Curiosity - Michael Fryer

Before moving to the United States a few years ago, I spent most of my life in Yorkshire in the north of England. If you've ever read anything by the Brontë sisters you can probably picture the barren, windswept moors that cover the higher parts of the region. Nothing taller than knee-high heather and bracken can grow in these beautiful and desolate stretches. Trees just can't cope with the constant wind and a famous local song talks about the mortal perils of going for a walk on the moors without your hat. Due to their spectacular natural beauty these areas are criss-crossed with paths used by sheep and walkers alike. I remember one occasion when I was out for a hike on a bitterly cold and blustery day. Walking at an angle into the wind in order to avoid being blown over, I reached a point where I needed a rest and the hot tea I had in a thermos. Thankfully, running like arteries across this open land are countless stone walls, built without mortar but sturdy enough to last for centuries. They're solid enough to block the wind too. And so with great relief I crouched down and found sanctuary from the gale. This is something walls do tremendously well. They protect, support and shelter. However, at some point I knew I would have to move. If I stayed there forever, hypothermia would take hold and my story would reinforce the folk wisdom of that song. The path beckoned me to rejoin it so I said farewell to the comforting safety of my wall and stepped back into the gale.

Curiosity is a truly wonderful thing, despite what they say about its impact on the feline population. It's what has lead to all human innovation, knowledge, and the deepening of relationships. It's also what moves us beyond walls, both literal and figurative. In 1896, Greek poet Constantine Cavafy wrote these powerful lines:

With no consideration, no pity, no shame
They've built walls all around me, thick and high
And now I sit here feeling hopeless
I can't think of anything else: this fate gnaws my mind
Because I had so much to do outside.
When they were building the walls, how could I not have noticed?
But I never heard the builders, not a sound.
Imperceptibly they've closed me off from the outside world.

There's a lot of talk about walls these days. The talk tends to focus on the physical, tangible ones that we don't have much influence over. The walls that don't get as much attention are also the ones ordinary individuals like you and I can help bring down, the kind of walls that Cavafy wrote about; the ones of which we're not yet conscious, or about which we are only just becoming aware. Learning an extra bit of information about someone else, but equally important, learning about ourselves is how we begin to dismantle these seemingly permanent barriers that surround us. It doesn't just happen, it must be intentional. That's the thing about curiosity. It's a conscious, deliberate way of thinking and acting.

A friend of mine was studying for a Masters degree in counseling. His class was quite small which made the fact that he and one of his fellow students clearly didn't like each other more pronounced. Their personalities and communication styles created mutual irritation on a daily basis. Much to their initial resistance, they were encouraged to sit down, talk about it and, above all, listen to what the other had to say. What emerged from those conversations

was highly enlightening for both parties. It turned out that my friend's communication style and personality reminded his colleague of her ex-husband. She reminded him of his mother. Their interactions had been hindered from the start due to unconscious and very complex filters that triggered negative memories of damaging relationships from their past. This new information was not a magic wand. They didn't suddenly like each other but they were able to pause and remind themselves, "*It's not your mother, listen to what she has to say,*" or "*It's not your ex, give him a chance to speak."* That additional information, brought about through the encouragement of listening and curiosity, transformed their relationship.

In the context of living amidst great diversity and difference, I feel I should clarify something important about curiosity. In a recent workshop on intercultural communication, a transgender student shared that the question she is most often asked is, "*What's in your pants*?" Curiosity, to be sure, but a curiosity that lacked compassion, consideration and kindness. We are always going to come across people who look different, sound different, act differently and about whom we are curious. We want to ask questions. That is understandable and very natural. However, if my question and the desire to have my curiosity satisfied stimulates the other person to feel excluded, uncomfortable and unwelcome, I might better choose to live without knowing.

After twenty years of working with people on issues relating to peace and conflict, I am more convinced than ever that the foundation stone of healthy relationships is an ongoing commitment to self-awareness. In terms of inviting us to move beyond the sheltering walls of our comfort zones, this self-

awareness is not only something over which we have control, but is also something that is strengthened with practice. When we listen to understand, not merely react or even reply, we learn things. It's as simple as that.

We have no shortage of opportunities to ask ourselves potentially illuminating questions. The next time you're feeling irritated, perhaps simply ask yourself why. When you find yourself resisting something, try to explore that resistance. When you get defensive, be deliberate in trying to figure out the root cause of why you pushed back. Acknowledge the walls that surround you and get curious about how, when, and why they were built. If you're like me then you've enough things in your life over which you beat yourself up. Please don't add anything more. Be curious without judgement.

My friend Jonny McEwen is an artist. He paints abstract landscapes. I was looking at some of his paintings the other day and came across this one called *Harbour Walls*. On one side of them is known, safe, a haven. On the other side lies the unknown, potential danger but also great possibility. When we seem to be surrounded by people and ideas that don't resonate or feel familiar, we are called to venture beyond our comfort zones, to journey outside of ourselves, and also within, to places that feel awkward or challenging.

Listen and acknowledge your curiosity. It's inviting you on an adventure, in which you could learn to be more beautifully yourself.

Harbor Walls - Jonny McEwen

What Barbarians Are For - Glenn Jordan

"And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution."
C P Cavafy

These are the closing lines of a poem written in 1898 by Greek poet Constantine Cavafy. The poem is in the form of a conversation between at least two people gathered with the citizenry of an unnamed city (maybe Rome, maybe Constantinople) caught in the downward spiral of civic decline. The entire population, it appears, has gathered in the vast city square awaiting the appearance of the barbarians.

In the meantime, all civic life ceased. The citizens seem immobilized, no debate takes place in the senate, no business is transacted in the markets, even the Emperor himself, arrayed in his finery, is up early and wearing all the symbols of his power. Everyone awaits the advent of the barbarians.

A certain disdain for the barbarians is on display The citizens believe that the visitors can be bedazzled by displays of wealth and privilege. But exactly why the city state grinds to a halt at the prospect of the appearance of the barbarians is unclear. Is it from disabling fear? Is it resignation to an inevitable fate? Or is it boredom and disaffection with the status quo? The coming of the barbarians holds out the prospect of a re-invigoration of civic life. After all the local legislators are not doing anything; instead they intend to give over law-making to the barbarians when they appear.

But at the end of the day the barbarians do not appear, and the citizens make their way home in the dark, confused and restless. Their uncertainty is made worse by the appearance of a rumor that the barbarians no longer exist.

In the poem's closing lines, confusion is replaced by fear. The paradox is that the coming of the barbarians holds out the possibility of some antidote to the lethargy and apathy of civic life. If they don't come then change won't happen. The barbarians are needed. There is no active, healthy, invigorating civic life without them. Or maybe, still deeper, with the benefit of history we realize that the disappearance of the barbarians was not because they had been defeated, but because they were already among us, inside the city walls, absorbed into our community. We are all the barbarians now, which means that responsibility for the renewal of civic, cultural, and political life lies with all of us.

But, then again, it's just a poem.

As I write this, Northern Ireland is digesting the results of our second national election in ten months following the collapse of our always fragile shared government arrangements. That collapse, on the surface, is about alleged corruption and the perceived cultural arrogance of the largest party. Underneath that surface, however, the historic nationalistic divisions remain relatively untouched. The divisions we had hoped to rise above still bedevil us.

Over the course of our conflict we've built our walls, physical and metaphorical, to keep communities apart. In fact, Belfast has about 50 walls and barriers which by one estimate, stretch to about 26 miles in total length, and running

through streets, parks, backyards and even a school. Their purpose is to keep communities apart.

We've skillfully honed our language to a surgical blade by which we easily to slice open the thin skin of identity. We're not so crass though as to actually ask if you are a Protestant or a Catholic, or whether you consider yourself British or Irish. There's no need. Instead there are any number of other verbal and cultural clues, like whether you speak of "the mainland" and mean Britain or Europe; whether you "say prayers" or just simply "pray". Even whether or not you aspirate the eighth letter of the alphabet can give a reasonably accurate assessment of what "we" think "you" are.

In Northern Ireland we know all about barbarians. And it's always them (or, in the local vernacular, "them'uns"). Everyone else is a fanatic, but not me, or my tribe.

I've been a bit of an outlier for a while. You see, I'm a Protestant, but I'm from the Republic of Ireland (or the South). I'm Irish; for me the mainland is Europe; I aspirate the eighth letter. But I'm a Protestant. Moving to "the North" of Ireland was quite a shock. Even that sentence is another cultural linguistic clue; generally speaking Protestants say "Northern Ireland" and Catholics say "the North," but I'm a Protestant who says 'The North." Confusing, I know.

At the time, in the late eighties, I was escaping joblessness and the economic and cultural malaise of the South. In Northern Ireland, on the surface at least, people seemed to dress more expensively, and had better roads and infrastructure. The downside was the apparent normality that people were

killing each other on the basis of national identity. Though I had moved only 100 miles up the coast, and didn't use a time machine, I might as well have been moving to another country and another era. As far as the South was concerned, they were barbarians up there.

I wish I had known then how corrosive labels could be. I learned though, through long engagement in peace-building and community development in Belfast, that labels too easily applied tend to imprison people in an irreducible ethnic, cultural, or political identity. I know myself to be more than the label "they" try to apply to me, so why can't "they" be more as well?

This is what I discovered: I needed the other to know who I was. Indeed without my "other" I wasn't quite sure who I was. Freud wrote that the smaller the real difference between any two people or people groups, the larger it must loom in their imagination. He called this the narcissism of minor difference. And one of its consequences is that two enemies need each other to remind themselves of who they are. For me, working in Belfast between two warring sides, this piece of information was seismic.

In his book *Blood and Belonging,* the writer and former politician Michael Ignatieff argued that nationalism is most violent where the group you are defining yourself against most closely resembles you. The barbarians are within the gates.

Was it possible that we Protestants in Northern Ireland, deep down, feared that if somehow the conflict was ended then without a traditional enemy we would lose any sense of ourselves? Worse, would "we" become one of "them"? And

vice versa on the other side? Too few had dared to imagine the possibility of some new identity, shared by all, emerging from the peace.

Instead we surrendered to something worse. Having scoured the political landscape with our corrosive language towards one another, so that civil conversation was almost impossible, we slowly woke to the realization that our ethnic nationalism had weakened the structures and institutions of civic nationalism. These were the very structures and institutions which were necessary to protect us from the violence of our divisions and the barbarians we had invented.

We have come close to complete breakdown a few times in Northern Ireland. Close enough to learn a few lessons and I want to offer just a few.

First, we had to learn here, and are still learning I think, that we cannot shout down those with whom we differ. We cannot compel them, we must woo them. Early analysis of voting patterns in this latest election in Northern Ireland appears to suggest that the traditional Protestant Unionist vote is declining in part due to the failure to reach out to the "other" community. In his chapter on Northern Ireland, Ignatieff wrote, “The liberal virtues—tolerance, compromise, reason—remain as valuable as ever, but they cannot be preached to those who are mad with fear or mad with vengeance.” Both sides bear some responsibility for driving the others mad. The extent to which our actions or our words have contributed to making the others mad with fear or mad with vengeance, is the extent to which we have, willfully or otherwise, misunderstood the other.

Secondly, we had to learn, and are still learning I think, that we must develop the skills and the language to address our own tribe first before we assume to speak to the other. A wise teacher once advised that we remove the plank in our own eye before attempting to extract the speck in that of our brother or sister. That means acknowledging "we" have failed here. Our tribe has been wrong. (Yes I know "they" have as well, but that may need to wait a while until we develop the humility needed to address the differences as well as the similarities.)

On Friday, 10th April 1998 (Good Friday as it happens, which was somehow appropriate for a country still in a conflict in which religion was an identity marker) the governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland as well as the main political parties in Northern Ireland reached an agreement that brought an end to what we called, with classic Irish understatement, the "Troubles." Later that year simultaneous referendums were held in the Republic and in Northern Ireland to end the Republic's territorial claim over Northern Ireland and to ratify the agreement, and both passed.

There is some genius in that Agreement in relation to identity. For the first time in the history of the state equal status in law was granted to both political identities in Northern Ireland. In fact, uniquely in the world I think, the Agreement allows for multiple national identities. People born here can be two nationalities at once, they can hold both an Irish and a British passport, and can choose one or the other, or both. People can move seamlessly between identities. The answer to who "I" am and who "you" are becomes less clear. Indeed the question of who "we" are is also less clear, that is, the question of

who we are on this part of a small island to the west of a small island to the west of continental Europe.

My friend the poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama, like me a native of the South living in the North (but unlike me, a Catholic), suggests that the proper answer to the question "What country are you from?" is "Let me tell you a story…" Identity is much more complex, and potentially much more compelling and exciting, than that imposed on me by my erstwhile enemy. And we do well to resist the imposition of a one-dimensional identity on us, but also to refrain from doing the imposing.

The citizens in Cavafy's poem seem to believe that their national malaise could only be addressed by the barbarians. They believed they needed barbarians, even if only to convince them again of their own civility and superiority despite the national decline. If they didn't have barbarians they would have to invent them as sometimes we have done—Protestants, Catholics, Communists, Republicans, Democrats.

The Northern Ireland experience also raises the imperative of talking to one's enemy. It was not so long ago that many Protestant leaders utterly refused to engage with leaders of violent Republicanism. It seems silly now, but there was a time whenever members of Sinn Féin, known as the political wing of the IRA, appeared on TV their interviews were voiced by actors. As if simply hearing them speak would have a corrupting influence on the general populace. Now though, conversations across these previously unbridgeable divides take place every day. In fact, earlier on the day I wrote this I agreed a date for dialogue on the current impasse in the political process. There will come a day when

dialogue with representatives of ISIS will need to happen. In fact, if the Northern Ireland experience is anything to go by, these conversations are already taking place.

What if we began to think, not in terms of "us" and “them," but of "we the people"? What if we were to recognize both our capacity for greatness, and adventure and creativity as well as our own barbarian tendencies? What if we began to imagine that those barbarians are more like us than we care, or dare, to imagine? What if we addressed first our tribe’s tendency to barbarianize the other? How would that change the tone and content of national debate?

Waiting for the Barbarians - C.P. Cavafy, translated by Edmund Keeley/ Philip Sherrard

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn’t anything happening in the senate?
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.
What laws can the senators make now?
Once the barbarians are here, they’ll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.
He has even prepared a scroll to give him,
replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Melting Stones: Some Thoughts on Friends, Enemies and Elephants - Michelle LeBaron

Contemporary South Africa is a place few predicted: amidst the legacy of a relatively peaceful transition from Apartheid; amidst the promise of a rainbow nation under the leadership of Nelson Mandela who was wise enough to recognize that race relations could not change overnight—the specters of the old regime remain alive and well. True, the statue of Cecil Rhodes was famously toppled at the University of Cape Town, and student protests demanding free fees garnered national attention and disrupted academic calendars. But the protesters have so-far failed to achieve the results they sought. Today, many South Africans live in appalling conditions and cannot find routes out of informal settlements, never mind into higher education. And the people living in such situations are overwhelmingly black and people who were designated by the apartheid regime as “coloured” South Africans.

I’m currently spending several months living in Stellenbosch, the heartland of the Afrikaans language and Apartheid philosophy. Next door to this well-heeled community with its intricate Cape Dutch architecture and sumptuous winelands is Khayamundi, a sprawling informal settlement. The difference in primary education, services, and infrastructure between the two contiguous communities is unmistakably stark. From leafy lace-lined verandas to shacks of corrugated iron, the boundaries belie abundance juxtaposed with struggle.

In the South Africa of today, the challenge is identifying the enemy.

I believe the enemy is stone.

And I believe that, until the statues melt along with hearts and truthful conversations are had about race and poverty and justice and land, conflict here will continue to solidify, and those stones will continue to be thrown at those who refuse to listen.

Many suggest that corrupt and unskilled government is a centerpiece of South African problems. Recent elections in Pretoria, Johannesburg, and other centers have been touted as bellwethers of a change trend from unwavering loyalty to the African National Congress, Mandela's party. It is also true that, though South African education spending is higher per capita than neighboring Zimbabwe, for example, its schools are far less successful in terms of literacy and other achievement measures. Students toppling statutes, then, are right to ask what happened to the rainbow nation dream in which race would no longer bar participation and progress.

But who are the students and what they are toppling? A South African author friend of mine happened upon the day that Mr. Rhodes was removed from his high plinth at the University of Cape Town and carted off on the bed of a truck. Traffic was snarled, so my friend got out to see what was happening. There, he saw a crowd of young people wearing Nike sneakers, taking selfies with iPhones first of the statue's fall, then of the crowd, and finally of themselves with the event in the background. Black students surged around the sculpture chanting angrily and performed the surgery necessary to loose it from its perch. White students, he reported, shifted from one foot to the other around the edge of the group as if unsure of their roles.

The disappearance of Cecil Rhodes from the University happened in the midst of a rash of fallen and defaced statues in South Africa. Bronze likenesses of Paul Kruger, from whom the wildlife park takes its name, were drenched in red paint from shoulder to toe including his jaunty top hat, and on another of his perches, the paint was green. Memorials to the Boer War were set alight and riders knocked off their bronze steeds. But not all of the attacks on defenseless statues were aimed at effigies of white European colonizers. Gandhi's statue in Johannesburg was attacked with white paint, and a bronze Nelson Mandela, arms outstretched over Pretoria, was covered with black trash bags as his base was spray-painted with slogans. The commemorative statue in the Eastern Cape to Oliver Tambo—a founding African National Congress member—was burned.

When it came to light that the sculptors of the Pretoria Mandela had placed a small bronze rabbit in the statue's ear as their signature, many loud voices demanded its removal. The government who commissioned it ordered the sculptors to remove the rabbit to "restore the statute back to dignity," apparently affronted both by the unauthorized placement of the rabbit and the perceived affront. It was accordingly removed, and government representatives did not reply to an offer by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to adopt the rabbit. (Yes, this really happened!)

It is trite to say that attacking statues that—after all—cannot defend themselves, is a symbolic act. Rhodes was not the target in Cape Town, but his colonial life and the values he represents. Gandhi harbored intense racism toward black Africans even as he marched to free Indians from colonial oppression in South Africa. Scholars Ashwan Desai and Goolam Vahed have recently written that he called black Africans “savage,” “raw,” and “living a life of indolence and nakedness.” Indeed, Gandhi campaigned to convince British rulers that the Indian community in South Africa was superior to the black African one and complained at the insult of being classified as black when he was arrested. It does not diminish his achievement or courage to acknowledge the flaws in his thought and actions. Similarly, Mandela and Tambo are seen by some not as liberators, but as sell-outs. Given that these men are dead, defacing their statues cannot be an attack on them personally, but on their status as heroes, on the stories that are told about them and how these stories place people in banal, recycling hierarchies of disadvantage. This helps to explain why a rabbit could not remain in Mandela’s ear: cementing larger-than-life effigies on high

platforms is to place them above the profane world, to solidify and even sanctify their legacies. It is to preserve a unitary account of who they were, one that does not brook deviation and certainly cannot accommodate mascot rabbits.

But legacies are always contested and narratives can be told multiple ways from strikingly different standpoints. If all those memorialized in the defaced statues are enemies enough to galvanize repeated vandalism, what do we learn about the nature of enmity? Perhaps that enmity does not dissipate over time, but is often amplified by the gaps between dreams, ideals, and lived experiences that look too much like the past that revolutionaries and politicians promised to change. When this happens, the idols of the past become catalysts for violent mobilization in the present. In such times, on what can we rely? The South African constitution, according to recent comments by Justice Albie Sachs, was drafted the way it was to keep everyone accountable: "[w]e have constitutions because we mistrust not only the enemy, but also ourselves." Accountability is easier when, through dynamic institutions and community engagement in relation to policy, we learn how to keep ourselves from lapsing into unconscious hubris.

Casting anyone in stone and hoisting them above ordinary mortals is an act of hubris. It is hubris because even the most visionary of us are more complex than a single story. As the Hebrew Bible figure Daniel foretold the coming division of Babylon interpreting King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a statue with feet of clay, so even those who achieve great things can and should be remembered in ways that reveal the complexities, vulnerabilities, discontinuities, and contradictions of their lives.

The problem with grand statues, then, is their scale and their fixity. Times change, and perspectives on the past change with them. Though the stories I have related here are about anger and frustration, they illustrate the power of figurative memorials to elicit strong feelings. Those feelings can range from admiration and devotion to betrayal and rage. I remember the first time I stood next to the imposing seated Abraham Lincoln on the National Mall in Washington, DC and read the text of the Gettysburg address carved into the marble. I felt inspired and awed by the words, but I did not develop a clearer felt sense for the man. That Lincoln is too big and too white; he is nowhere near the viewers' level. He is elevated toward heaven, almost a deity. And for many, I suppose he is.

But Lincoln and Gandhi and Mandela were never gods. They were men. As I reflect on the statue paint-splashing and toppling going on here in South Africa, I wonder whether we humans should check our hubris in relation to how we remember even the most beloved of our ancestors. Is it best that they be captured in permanent installations and placed on high in frozen poses? Or would we find it easier to blur the distinction between friend and enemy, hero and antihero if memorials were human scale and less representational? One of the world's (and America's) most powerful sites—the Vietnam War Memorial—abides nestled into an earth berm, silently reciting thousands of names of women and men on reflective black marble.

I am relieved that memorial practices have, for the most part, moved beyond grand equestrian statues and marble captures of great men (and very few women). For me, the most powerful places of remembering are those of underwhelming scale: a patch of prairie with fragments of art left by Japanese

internees during the Second World War, a hidden garden on the grounds of an Irish monastery with a moss-softened stone carving of a mother and child with rounded edges, the mound of heart-shaped rocks small enough to be carried in my lover's backpack collected on my favorite Swiss Alps hikes, now resident in my back garden.

As I write of these places, my heart softens as it never does when I gaze up at triumphant metal or stone figures. These places bring to mind the importance of community members remembering heroes and heroines together, and jointly deciding whose lives are memorialized, how, and why. I wonder what sorts of memorials would be designed and constructed if the places we live and those we want to remember were invited—even in imagination—to dialogue with us in their own vibrant alphabets, nuanced and imperfect, but original; if we stopped assigning them the roles of hero or antihero, and found more dynamic and complex ways to remember them.

This weekend, I will attend a performance with life-sized elephant puppets made by members of the world-famous Handspring Puppet Company in Cape Town. What I had been anticipating as a wonderful celebration of African culture and artistry focused on elephant conservation has instead turned into a memorial: Ncedile Daka, one of the puppet creators and puppeteers, was murdered last weekend in Khayelitsha, an informal settlement that sprawls for miles outside of Cape Town. At first, his devastated colleagues at Handspring thought they would not be able to perform without Ncedile. But they found a way to improvise, and so the elephants will dance amongst us life-size on the lawn in the summer dusk. Here is what Handspring director Aja Marneweck

said in tribute to their fallen friend, speaking of his artistry in working with one of the elephant puppets on last year's National Day of Reconciliation:

"In the death of [the elephant] Mnumzane scene, Nced performed the young [elephant] Mandla. He was the head and trunk, the main vehicles for touch and empathy. Every time he would bring me to tears because I saw such compassion in Mandla's eyes, I swear I even saw tears. And I told Nced how much he moved me and that only the greatest puppeteers hold the secrets of how to transfer such love through themselves to the puppet, let alone a large elephant. His ability astounded me."

Nced is a South African hero whose creative genius touched many. Remembering him, and the precarity with which he lived, is important in charting the future here. If all memories are personal, then all memorials should be personal, too. Let the stones all melt, let larger than life representations be reserved for the creatures that really *are* that big. For us mortals, let us find human-scale ways to remember those things that cannot be erased by grand impositions on national psyches. The way Nced lived his life makes me want to create, to leave my office this minute and make a dance or write an elegy to beauty, the beauty of the places where we are not friend or enemy, right or wrong, but determinedly alive in our complicated homes— one with another—in all of our contradictions.

His Name's Not Dad - Steve Daugherty

My stepmother called the house. "Hey Steve, have you seen your dad?"

He'd come over to the house that morning and sat down at my kitchen table, flopping open an old photo album. I looked at my watch. One page and ten seconds in to the photo album and I'd looked at my watch.

Dad turned the creaky pages and pointed to people I generally didn't recognized or who had been dead for so long I couldn't conjure up any emotion about them. But my dad was clearly moved. I could only bother to look. He was remembering.

"This is Grandpa," Dad said of a creased image that glowed in that worn seventies yellow. He explained his grandfather was the man who made dad feel like the family favorite as a boy. Took him fishing and cracked silly jokes.

"This is Grandma." She donned a terrific hat.

"This was my aunt," he said of his grandparents' daughter.

"This is my mom, your grandma." In this photo, a lady I have no memory of was holding me, a baby in a diaper, while she smoked a cigarette. Dad caressed this photo with his calloused fingertip.

“There’s Dad, your grandpa.” He tapped this picture and reminded me that the man had been on the team at Bell Labs who invented the pushbutton phone. I nodded at the familiar story, glancing again at my watch.

Turning the page revealed my dad in his new uniform. He’d just graduated the police academy, his sleeve tight on his arms, his jaw square. My young mother stood beaming at his side.

I took a deep breath like one does when they hope to signal a scene change. I had shit to do.

But then Dad flipped back to the beginning of the album. Like one of us had missed something.

He explained, if even just to hear himself say it, that his grandmother with the terrific hat had died suddenly in the early 70’s. It had devastated the family. And then just a couple years later Dad’s aunt died. The family’s grief hadn’t merely doubled because grief isn’t like math. A pain had descended, changing for a long season what it felt like to share this blood.

My dad’s grandfather, his biggest, most joke-cracking, most fawning fan, had lost his wife and his daughter, and then his mind, and then his will to live, and crawled into the bathtub with his shotgun, and took his own life.

We sat motionless at my table, staring at the glossy page.

And then there was that picture of me being held by his own mother. This moment had been captured in the thick of these tragedies. Dad caressed the picture again. His mom had died of emphysema about a year after the photo had been taken.

And then four years later, his father died too.

I'd done all the math before, but the calculations took on a new significance. *Wait a minute,* I thought to myself. *My mother is only 16 years older than me. I was far from a plan developed by clear thinking adults. My parents were grieving children when they began accidentally having children.*

I leaned forward to look at my dad's face in the picture of him in his new uniform. Dad had begun, as custom dictates, working as a rookie state patrolman on swing shifts. A life where you do your duty as an armed insomniac, but almost no one is ever glad to see you. A life that left a widening gulf between my dad and my mom before they had the time or experience to address such fission. The tension, the exhaustion, the depression, the alcohol.

They made their relationship limp down the road for just over a decade. But then my mother and my father called it quits. The back half of the album didn't portray "family" the way it seemed to toward the front. And if it were possible, the pages had less shine on them.

I watched my dad weep with restraint as he continued to turn pages.

There in that album full of faces who meant the world to my dad, I noticed pictures of my brother and I sprinkled in. Frankly, the album included me, but it wasn't an album about me.

I don't know if I was slow to realize this, or if I realized right when I was supposed to—but I realized it all the same:

My dad's name isn't Dad. "Dad" is the title two people on earth call him. That's a sacred privilege , yes. But it's only two people's angle all the same.

His name is Jim.

Jim is an entire world of context and story that doesn't revolve around me and whether or not I was raised as well as my therapist and I think I should have been.

I was struck with a new review; "You did a damn good job," I told him for the first time in my life.

Jim, James, was a boy and a man, a father and a husband and a son and a brother and an ex-husband and half of a custody agreement and a human being who got his ass handed to him over and over and yet managed to do a pretty good job all things considered.

I sat at the table feeling reintroduced to the man. Jim isn't an extra in the harrowing movie about me, a red shirt ensign to my Captain Kirk. I'm better

understood in the grand scheme as an extra in a movie about him. Jim is a story with depth and nuance and meaning and isn't quite captured in my trifling review called "dad."

We hugged. Of course we hugged. What other choice is there between two people than to embody contact once lack of appreciation is removed? He closed his album and left. And the phone rang:

"Hey Steve, have you seen your dad?"

"Yeah. Only just now."

Driving Lessons - Peterson Toscano

When I was 16 years old, two half-drunk men in a car more than twice my age taught me how to drive on a frozen lake. One of the men, my dad, Pete Toscano, had helped a widow in her distress by taking a 1950 Ford four-door sedan off her hands. Then he gave me this classic automobile as a birthday gift. The car looked like a small black and white tank and weighed about as much.

My dad and his drinking buddy Ricky piled into the car. I hopped in the backseat just as Ricky put the Ford in gear and rolled onto the ice. The lake made groaning creaky sounds, but the ice was over two feet thick and easily supported the Ford and us in it. Ricky was tall and lanky, twenty years younger than my dad and looked to me like a cowboy from a Western. He drove trucks

and tractors, and this car felt a little like both as we skidded and chugged on the icy lake.

My dad was never the best driver. He would weave and bob on the road. On city streets and on the highway he either floated from one lane to another like a distracted swan or he charged in and out of lanes like a demented bull. He did better on the country roads in upstate New York where we lived. While he always used his turning signal, he never quite turned the wheel far enough so that the signal switched off. It flashed and clicked for miles, confusing other drivers and driving those of us in the backseat crazy. “Dad!” my sisters and I shouted. “What?” he asked. “Your blinker!” we told him, exasperated by the incompetence of adults.

On country roads he drove too fast. In New York City, he drove even faster and grew agitated by the taxies dodging in front of him. He used his most colorful language for drivers he felt wronged him. “You shit-bird! Stay in your own damn lane.”

Most of my childhood memories are set in the backseat of the family station wagon. Living in the middle of nowhere, we drove twenty minutes or more to shop or go to the movies or the doctor. My dad always drove while my mom read a novel in the passenger seat. Her books formed a forcefield around her where she escaped the real pain of working class life and dove into the Irish Countryside or a Los Angeles crime scene or an upperclass suburban pit of decadent sin. I imagine the book also shielded her from having to see the road and my father’s erratic driving.

On my sixteenth birthday Ricky drove us around the ice for forty-five minutes explaining the complicated shifting process between the three gears. The empty beer cans piled up on the floorboards. Drinking was a big part of the adult life in that depressed area of New York State in long need of a recovery. Maybe I should have been nervous about the drinking and the driving, but we were on an empty frozen lake with nothing to hit—a vast snow-covered empty parking lot.

It was when I got behind the wheel that I felt fear. I was a shy kid who did not like to make mistakes in front of other people, and I was a complete novice. I only ever rode a bicycle. I sat in that ancient car with its mildew smells, holding the massive steering wheel, looking at its giant instrument panel. The three pedals on the floor and the stick shift on the column baffled me. Heterosexuality confounded me at this time in my life, and that first car ride felt just like my first failed attempts with a girlfriend. I flailed about in the driver's seat hoping something would go in the right direction.

Ricky and my dad were patient with me and seemed to enjoy my initial fits and starts. Once I got the hang of it, they encouraged me to "open her up" and cheered me as I glided and spun around. I may not have learned about parallel parking or the three-point-turn, but that day I sure learned how to drive in icy conditions.

That was the first and last driving lesson with my dad. The rest were outsourced to Coach Elko who taught drivers' ed. I still learned things from observing my dad in the driver's seat. For instance, whenever he drove at night on our country roads, he always used his high beams. When he saw the glow of

headlights ahead, he diligently dimmed them down. But God help the drivers who failed to dim their lights! My dad blasted them with a string of expletives. Then he flashed his high beams one time as a warning shot across the hood. If the oncoming driver did not relent and brazenly kept the high beams on, my dad flipped his high beams back on—a nighttime, road rage, middle finger.

After the car passed my dad would curse, fume, and grumble for a couple of miles. He'd then grow quiet. Thoughtful. Perhaps he was remembering his own failings as a driver—the turn signal he forgot to switch off, the times he changed lanes and didn't see a car in his blind spot, or the series of drunk-driving, single car accidents he survived six years before my first driving lesson, at a time when my parents struggled with finances much more than they would reveal to my sisters and me. I don't know what altered him in those quiet moments in the car. Something in his thoughts changed him though. In a conceding tone he dragged out the word, "W-e-l-l," then he would pause and make noises in the back of his throat, as if he were rearranging his attitude. He'd continue with a shrug and hold out forgiveness, "Eh, maybe he's an old guy."

Within - Mike Riddell

I was fresh from six years of theological study—the last part of it in a leafy suburb of Zürich. And now it was time to put the theory into practice. I was in my thirties, full of piss and vinegar as we say in New Zealand. By choice, I'd washed up in Ponsonby, a central city village in Auckland.

In my enthusiasm, I'd agreed to become pastor of a small church with a proud history. Like many urban congregations, it had dwindled under the pressure of suburban migration. Now there were only twenty people in the building on a Sunday. The church had been upfront in telling me they could only afford to pay me for one year. After that they would have run out of money.

The church had been established in 1880. It was once a thriving enterprise, packed with parishioners and held a strong sense of identity. Now it was facing pressure from denominational authorities to close its doors. But the church secretary, Alex, had made a personal vow that while he was alive, Ponsonby Baptist Church would maintain a presence in its community.

Choosing me to be the minister was a last roll of the dice. Desperate times call for desperate measures. My reputation as a radical and a troublemaker preceded me. No other church in the country had any interest in my availability, aware as they were of my inclinations toward social and political activism.

So my induction into the new role was something of a shotgun wedding. Neither I, nor the people of the church, had many other options open to us. We formed an alliance built on the hope of mutual survival. One of my first tasks as

pastor was to dig up the drains of the toilet block to clear a sewage overflow. Let it suffice to say that my studies in ancient Greek hadn't prepared me for this particular task.

Alex, the church secretary, was New Zealand-born Chinese, with a wife who had come to the country from mainland China. Together with their adult children, they owned and staffed the fruit and vegetable store in the central part of Ponsonby. Like all such enterprises, it was a busy and colorful venture.

I recognized early on that Alex was a central figure in the life of the church. He carried the personal burden of "keeping the doors open,",a line in the sand that he often reminded us of. Part of this mission was to support the congregation both financially and through participation. Of the twenty souls who regularly attended on a Sunday, six were from his family.

Baptist churches operate on a principle of congregational governance, and I knew from my first days in the job that it would be important for me to establish a strong relationship with this man who had considerable influence in the affairs of the church.

We were very different people. Alex was a man who had battled prejudice and hardship to establish a thriving business. He and his family worked tirelessly in it. By five in the morning, Alex was to be found at the fruit and vegetable markets, buying stock at the vigorous auctions. And it was late in the evening before all the stock was packed away in the cooler and they could all go home.

He was naturally suspicious of me—a young man who had spent the last six years reading books and talking about ideas. I needed to do something to bridge the gap and form a relationship with him. So I began the practice of weekly visits to the shop.

I would stand in the back near the cooler, to be out of the way of the steady stream of customers. In whatever breaks available, Alex or his wife would chat with me. By being in their workplace, I learned a lot about them and the history of Ponsonby.

The area was on the cusp of gentrification. Alex regaled me with the stories of when the village had been full of Pacific Island immigrants, and he could sell a container-load of their staple diet, Taro, every week. Now people from renovated villas wanted exotic items like pomegranate. Each week I was presented with a gift bag full of produce for the family.

It was a few years before I realized that my overtures had not been successful. I'd done my part to keep the doors of the church open. There was an influx of young professional people to the congregation, and we'd begun many ventures, including the provision of community housing. While Alex might have been pleased at the numbers, he felt his own position as leader being diluted by the changes.

I was slow to discover that Alex was quietly doing the numbers for a coup to get me deposed as minister. As this plot emerged I was both hurt and angry. It led to a number of distressing confrontations. We survived them, but I began to

regard him as an enemy, and felt I couldn't trust his intentions anymore. When you classify someone as an enemy, you cease to really see them at all.

I surrounded myself with supporters, and began to ease my adversary out of the central position he'd held in the life of the church. I considered myself betrayed and sought revenge. My rationale was that I was under attack, and that the obvious reaction was to retaliate. I'm not proud of how I acted. It was from a place of hurt that had fermented into anger.

It was Alex's wife who one day confided in me the family secret. She had many years ago given birth to their first-born—a son. In a Chinese family, of course, this was particularly auspicious. It was in the time when the fruit shop was intensely busy. They both needed to work there, and the baby was placed safely in a box in the back where he slept, as they say, like a baby.

One fateful morning she went to check on him. He wasn't breathing. It was cot death, before such a thing was even known. Neither of the parents were interested in medical explanations. The story that crushed their hearts was that they had failed to care properly for their son and had been punished because of it.

She told me through tears that this was the reason they had become Christians, in a sense to appease the God that had delivered this verdict upon them. Instantly I understood the crippling damage this story, harbored in their hearts for decades, had done to them. I suddenly saw Alex and his family in a completely new light. I recognized their pain and shame.

It was too late. I'd already pushed Alex away, and he would no longer trust me as someone with whom he could be vulnerable. I'd been so quick to cast him into the role of enemy, without stopping to search for the cause of the antagonism. In so doing I had become the enemy, the feared one. I succeeded as minister, but failed as pastor.

A whole generation has passed since then. Alex is dead. I'm a writer rather than a clergyman. I've tried to learn that enmity is often driven by pain, and that listening for it can transform relationships. The differences that divide us are so often generated by the humanity we share. Our enemies are within.

Label-free – Clare Bryden

Hello Let me introduce myself. I'm Clare. I am British. White. A woman. According to my website, I am a consultant, writer, blogger, speaker, and artist. I am single, a daughter, and a sister. Is this helpful information? Does it give you a sense of who I am? Do we share anything in common? Does it matter? If you are a non-British, resolutely non-blogger, or a married *Porch* subscriber, does it make you want to flick on to the next article? If so, I'd be sorry to see you go. Instead I hope you stay with me, so that between my writing and your reading, we will come to a deeper understanding of who we are.

Who am I?

Who am I really? I can and do slap any number of labels on myself. It is not just for the purposes of introducing an article about labels. Even after I noticed them, and had a chuckle at myself, my website still sports those labels as my way of presenting myself to the world.

I am not alone. Other people slap labels on themselves. We slap labels on each other. Then the labels I give myself and others affect how I see myself, how I see others, how I expect them to see me, and how I interact with them.

Some labels are given based on outward appearances, such as gender or race. Other labels refer to more hidden aspects of a person, such as politics or sexuality. Labels may not be explicitly applied to a person, but that person can still take them on, for good or ill.

Can labels be positive? They can be a source of growth, leading a person to put a name to something they are struggling to understand about themselves. They can be transfigured; there are many women and men proud to be identified as a feminist, even though the label “feminist” might be intended by some as a slur. It is possible that labeling myself as an “artist” gives permission to others to embrace the idea that they might be artists too.

Equally, it might lead other people to conclude they are not artists because they think they are not creative, or able to draw like “artists” do. They might feel excluded, or diminished in some way. In general, labels are not meant positively, and often a label will cause people to shrink further back in the closet in fear.

Labels have baggage. Take a simple example: I have a background in science, an interest in sustainability, and a Christian faith. Suppose I label myself “scientist.” Immediately that conjures an idea of what I must believe; I often read that scientists must necessarily be atheists. Similarly, I read that a

Christian can't be an environmentalist, or vice versa, because God told Christians to dominate and subdue the natural world. And scientists and technologists are also implicated in destroying the natural world; they cannot possibly be environmentalists. I continually receive the message that I can be a scientist, or an environmentalist, or a Christian, but no combination of any two, let alone all three labels together.

Divide and conquer

It seems to be a natural human instinct to categorize. Take the word “science,” which comes from the Latin *scire*, to know, related to the Greek *skhizein*, to divide. We categorize in order to better know and understand.

Carl Linnaeus, the 18th century “Father of Taxonomy” developed the modern system of naming, ranking, and classifying organisms. It is fluid; scientists often move organisms between categories, or define new classes of organisms. Taxonomy is vital to understanding families, relationships, and how organisms originated and continue to change. But there are two equal and opposite risks: It can lose sight of the individual and its glorious distinctiveness; and it can lose sight of the greater whole.

Linnaeus, living and working in the eighteenth century before the word “scientist” was coined, would have been known as a “natural philosopher,” literally a “lover of the wisdom of natural things.” Science has been very successful in labeling and dividing big questions up into smaller, manageable and answerable questions. Wisdom is about putting it all back together again, to gain an understanding of the whole system. It is only recently, with much

biodiversity threatened or already destroyed, that we are regaining a sense of whole ecosystems and the web of life.

Them and us

Unfortunately, “them and us” thinking has become pervasive. Driven by the media, the tendency in political discourse has swung in the direction of fragmentation. Brexit Britain and Trump USA become more toxic by the day.

Here is a simple but potentially life-threatening example on the streets where I live, in Exeter in southwest England. I usually cycle around town, and have noticed that I am feeling less safe on the roads. At one time, it seemed that in every edition of the local newspaper there was a letter or article about “cyclists,” “pedestrians,” or “drivers,” and these letters often demonized “cyclists.” People who cycle, or walk, or drive had labels slapped on them, and those labels carried expectations about their behavior. It contributes to a “them and us” mentality, and, I think, has contributed to the increase in road rage that I have observed. But most people who cycle in the UK also have a car. Usually I cycle, occasionally I walk, and sometimes I drive. I am fundamentally a person who just wants to get around town safely and efficiently.

I am aware that I am getting off lightly. I have not been labeled as one of “the unemployed,” “the disabled,” or “the elderly.”

I hope I never forget the insights I gained when I worked on a health research project with a nonprofit called Help the Aged. The organization (now called Age UK) had realized how its name lumped together a whole group of people, and

defined them as needing “help.” Labeling the people we were working with as “the aged” dehumanized them, and reduced them to a cohort of research guinea pigs. I learned to call them “older people,” people first and foremost.

The British welfare system has noble intentions, but stories of inhumane treatment are easy to find. “The elderly,” “the unemployed,” and “the disabled” are clearly not human beings, with individual value, stories, and desires to contribute to society. They are lumped together and treated as sub-standard. Treating people with empathy and compassion—working with them instead of doing something to them—is too much time and trouble. Slap a label on a person, and then you know what process to follow. Labels are an unspoken tool used in implementation of welfare cuts. The outcome is not just increasing hardship for folk who need the safety net, but denial of the humanity of people on both sides of the desk at which the decisions are made.

Demonizing others

Do an online search for “Daily Mail refugees” images, and a slew of dehumanizing headlines return: *Migrants: how many more can we take?; 7 in 10 Calais Migrants Get Into UK;* and *The* Swarm *On Our Streets*. The last was a report on the then Prime Minister David Cameron's horrifying comments “likening [migrants] to insects.” The *Daily Mail* could put these words in quotes, and so appear to be righteous in its condemnation of the PM. But it still had a choice on what graced its front page, and it chose its own agenda and the dehumanizing label.

Much has been written about the results of the UK European Union

membership referendum in July 2016 and the US Presidential election in November seeming to have legitimized racist behavior. Figures from the UK Home Office show that the number of racist or religious abuse incidents recorded by police in England and Wales jumped 41% in the month after the Brexit vote.

Labels have spawned fear and created enemies out of fellow human beings. “Refugees” and “Muslims” are bearing the brunt, not least of President Trump’s travel ban. Again, we see border agencies and guards “just following orders,” and encroaching dehumanization. Asghar Farhadi, the Iranian director who won the 2017 Oscar for best foreign language film with *The Salesman*, boycotted the ceremony as a protest against the refugee ban. In a statement read out by Anousheh Ansari, the first Muslim woman to have traveled to space, he said: “My absence is out of respect for the people of my country, and those of the other six nations who have been disrespected by the inhumane law that bans entry of immigrants to the US…Dividing the world into the ‘us’ and ‘enemies’ categories creates fear.”

Identity

If it is natural for humans to categorize, it is also natural to seek identity. Humans are social animals, and naturally seek identity. The two tendencies to categorize and seek identity can intersect when we seek identity through nationality or membership of a group. The danger is that we try to bolster our need for inclusion by excluding others.

Back at the Oscars, the actor Gael García Bernal commented on Trump's

proposed border wall with Mexico: “As a Mexican, as a migrant worker and as a human being, I am against any form of wall that wants to separate us.”

Another way

There is another way. *The Book of Joy* follows a week-long meeting in 2016 between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, facilitated by the writer Douglas Abrams. During a series of conversations about joy, and obviously embodying a great deal of joy, the two returned many times to difference, separation, and what it means to be human. For example, to quote the Dalai Lama: “If we stress secondary level of differences—my nation, my religion, my color—then we notice the differences…We are same human beings…When we relate to others from the place of compassion it goes to the first level, the human level, not the secondary level of difference. Then you can even have compassion for your enemy.”

Lessening self

The impact of applying labels and seeing differences is to lessen the self as well as the “other.” Douglas Abrams reflects in *The Book of Joy*: “The Archbishop and the Dalai Lama were saying that so much of our stress is dependent on seeing ourselves as separate from others, which perhaps returns to the loss of our sense of communal connection, of Ubuntu.”

As well as categorizing others, we have a tendency to taxonomize our selves. Psychometric tests and personality typing, such as the Myers-Briggs Typology Indicator and the Enneagram, are being increasingly used in the workplace and

on the psychotherapeutic and spiritual journey.

In Myers-Briggs, I can work out whether I have a preference for introversion or extraversion, and on three other scales, and label myself with four letters, say INTJ. It can be helpful for an introverted person to know that they need to spend time by themselves to recharge their batteries, and why they might find an extravert friend or colleague exhausting. But there is a danger of pigeonholing myself, as well as other people. I might constrain myself to act out of my INTJ personality label, instead of experimenting with ways of being and behaving or risking empathy with and learning from others, and stunt my own personal growth.

It is not the same as introversion, but I was very shy when I was young. For years I told myself: “I am shy.” I was attached to that label and usually acted out of it. Goodness knows how many wonderful people I missed. Thankfully, over time I came to realize that shyness is not my identity. I know I have a tendency to feel shy. I also know that it is only a transitory feeling and is not “me.” Furthermore, I realize that other people often feel shy, too. Not just we Brits, either. It was a revelation to read articles that took it for granted that Americans feel shy! So instead of being self-absorbed in my “shy” label, I can now recognize and empathize with others' feelings of shyness and do my limited best to make them feel at ease. If I need to interact as well with seemingly confident and outgoing people, Anne Lamott’s words come in useful: “Never compare someone else’s outside with your inside.”

Self as role

So “I am a human being,” not “I am British”; and “I feel shy”, not “I am shy.” What about all those other “I am” statements at the beginning of this article? *I am a consultant*, *I am a daughter*. It is all too easy to identify ourselves with roles, or as an adjunct to another person, instead of as a valuable human being in our own right. There is a difference between the interdependence expressed in Ubuntu. Stating, “I am because we are,” is different than losing one’s sense of self in the role labels of “wife” and “mother.” There is a difference between saying “I am a lawyer” and mistaking that for my identity, and saying “I practice law.”

Douglas Abrams comments in *The Book of Joy*: “Arrogance is the confusion between our temporary roles and our fundamental identity.” As it is with role labels, so it is with status labels. Here is the Dalai Lama: “And if I relate to others, thinking that I am the Dalai Lama, I will create the basis for my own separation and loneliness. After all, there is only one Dalai Lama in the entire world. In contrast, if I see myself primarily in terms of myself as a fellow human, then I will have more than seven billion people who I can feel deep connection with."

Self as status

The impulse for this article came from my own reflections on vocation. Vocation, or calling, can take many forms. I have worked with many people who will spend their whole careers doing the work they love. We speak of

vocational qualifications, vocations as teachers, doctors, or nurses. I have thought a number of times about vocation to the religious life or to ordination in the Church of England. In that sense, vocation is a calling by God.

I have lived alongside monastic communities for a while, and I know that these are ordinary people. It amused me that the labels “monk” and “nun” are often intended to confer a more elevated status to people who have taken vows of poverty and obedience, and this was even transferring to me a little. It is more pernicious if we start to believe it. One of the temptations of we ordinary church-going people—labeled the “laity”—is to put our leaders, priests and other “clergy,” on pedestals. One of the temptations of being a member of the clergy is to forget that you are still part of the laity (the Greek *laos* means the people of God) and climb on to that pedestal yourself.

I have come to the grand conclusion instead that I have a vocation to be an ordinary church-going person. Simone Weil, the twentieth century French philosopher and mystic, refused even to be baptized into the Catholic Church, writing in *Waiting on God*: “I cannot help still wondering whether in these days when so large a proportion of humanity is sunk in materialism, God does not want there to be some men and women who have given themselves to him and to Christ and who yet remain outside the Church…I have the essential need, and I think I can say the vocation, to move among men of every class and complexion, mixing with them and sharing their life and outlook…”

There are many parallels outside the Church: deciding to train as a healthcare professional, and then to be promoted from the front-line of providing healthcare to hospital management, and disappearing up the greasy pole; or to

run for office, starting locally, and then maybe aiming for election to Parliament, Congress or Senate, and becoming Prime Minister or President. Yet like the Dalai Lama, or even someone who believes themselves to be the "Leader of the Free World" is fundamentally just another human being.

I was one of 1.8 million people in the UK who signed a petition against a Trump state visit. I received the response: "HM Government believes the President of the United States should be extended the full courtesy of a state visit. We look forward to welcoming President Trump once dates and arrangements are finalized." I interpreted HM Government to mean that the invitation was to the office of President, rather than to Donald Trump per se. It reminded me of the powerful *West Wing* episode "Take This Sabbath Day."

President Jed Bartlet is agonizing over whether to pardon an inmate on Death Row before he is executed at midnight, and he has summoned his priest to the Oval Office. Father Cavanaugh asks whether he should address him as Jed or Mr. President, to which Bartlet replies: "To be honest, I prefer Mr President. It's not ego. There are certain decisions I have to make while I'm in this room. It's helpful in those situations not to think of yourself as the man but as the office." He continues to agonize until he is handed a note to say the execution has happened. Then Father Cavanaugh says to him: "Jed. Would you like me to hear your confession?"

There is no label or role or status or office that absolves us from being first and fundamentally a human being.

Label-free

I cannot control others labeling me, but I can control whether I label others or label myself, and whether I act out of those labels. Still, categorizing is a natural way of organizing thought, human cultures are vital and life-giving, and seeking identity is vital to growing into that glorious distinctiveness of myself as a human being. Perhaps, therefore I don't aspire to be label-less, but label-free.

Nadia Bolz-Weber speaks for me when she writes: “Free people are dangerous people. Free people can’t be easily controlled. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not.” Let us be free people. Let us be human beings.

All Bodies Are Beautiful - Mona Haydar

I was on an airplane. People's discomfort with me, the way I looked and how I dressed—what it represented to them was palpable. The microaggressions were everywhere. As I boarded, it was like a slow motion soul train where I was the only one dancing and everyone was staring. From the stewardess forgetting to ask me what kind of beverage I wanted, to the body language of the person sitting next to me, I started to wonder about myself: *Hey! Maybe I am actually a terrorist and even* I *don't know it.* I asserted myself gently to the flight attendant and asked for what I wanted (a lovely caffeinated, sugary, fizzy beverage, which I only allow myself to have on airplanes, so you know I wasn't going to pass that up!). As the carbonated sugar and caffeine hit, I started thinking of all the Muslims who have this experience. I started wondering what I could do to make sure they loved themselves enough to believe they could never be the horrible things they read, see, and hear about their people. I wanted to make sure that eerie thought I'd just entertained about myself never went through the mind of another young Muslim woman. Then my thoughts went global. This wasn't ultimately a "Muslim woman thing." This was about all women—about loving all femme-identifying people, the people who are most typically exploited by the broken systems of our world. I had another sip, pulled out my notebook, and wrote the second verse of the first single from my forthcoming EP. Little did I know what would happen next!

"Someone should tell her husband that she hasn't had a beating recently enough if she's doing things like this."

When I released the video for "Hijabi (Wrap my Hijab)," over a million and a half people watched it in the first two weeks. The backlash has been

overwhelming. The comment above is mild compared to some of the stuff in those comment sections. I've even received some threats, largely from non-Muslim Americans who believe that I am trying to bring Sharia to America. And the funny thing is, many Muslims criticize me too, rejecting the song because they feel I am doing something impermissible against Sharia and Islam. Some folk who treat Islam with suspicion at best and violence at worst, as well as some of the most reactionary Muslims just found out that they have at least one thing in common: they both think they hate me. I did not expect such a massive response. I certainly did not expect for it to affect people to the extent that it seems to have done. The video is relatively simple. Here's how it goes: You see me, then the camera cuts to me and my "hijabi ladies" sitting in a stairwell full of beautiful natural light. Then I start in with the rapping. It's simple. I'm seeking to claim space for the wonderful diversity and beauty of women who wear hijab, and to represent us as vibrant, peace-loving, powerful humans who want to help us all live, and love better.

Muslim women who wear hijab often make news for doing seemingly unremarkable things. A Muslim woman who wears hijab recently was featured in a *Playboy* magazine article. Another is in a current *Covergirl* ad campaign. I was in a *Microsoft* commercial. People don't expect to see Muslim women who cover, known affectionately in the Muslim community as "hijabis," anywhere but on TV crying about their home being bombed or some other horrible tragedy halfway across the world. Muslim women are seen as powerless, oppressed, and without agency, so when a Muslim woman sheds light on the untruth of this stereotype, some people make a fuss about it. This fuss may be rooted in ignorance, or even curiosity, but it's also often a marker of misogyny and racism. We can do so much better. Supporting humans for doing good in

the world—for speaking out for justice, inclusivity, and love—these are remarkable things which should make headlines. A music video with me at the center shouldn't strike people as strange, but it does, because of the way people like me are represented in public. This disharmony must be rectified by our direct acknowledgement and challenge.

The fact that I was getting ready to bear my second child when we made the video seemed to startle people as well. There were people who commented that rubbing my eight months pregnant belly in the video was offensive. A whopping nine out of ten people who were offended by this very normal thing were men.

Hey guys: Pregnant women rub their bellies. That's just what we do.

People who have a problem with that should perhaps take that up with their mothers who rubbed their bellies while those criticizing were inside them, or if that is too much of a stretch, perhaps take it up with the God who made women capable of growing and nurturing life within their bodies. We must resist the war on women's bodies, Muslim bodies, black, and brown bodies, among others, with a very simple affirmation: All bodies are good. All bodies are beautiful.

Then there were the good people who felt that the video wasn't inclusive enough. But it isn't *meant* to be all-inclusive. How could it be? I would have had to include around 7.5 billion people in order for the video to be truly inclusive. The beauty of art is that it is capable of igniting the imagination. Displaying some array of human beauty in the video allows the mind to play

with the idea of diversity and how vast and wonderful the world is. I dreamed up this song and video as a celebration of joy—in direct resistance to despair and fear. This video is a part of my art. I encourage all those who did not feel included in the video to create their own works to represent what they need to put out into the world. I'd love to watch those videos, see your diversity, listen to your hopes, dreams, and fears. We're all in this together. The work of an artist is to tell the stories most intimate to their own experience such that they might inspire the person paying attention to *feel something real*. The feeling I hope people walk away with is nothing more than what is evoked by this prayer: May all beings be well and happy, may all beings be free from strife, may all beings return to love, peace be with you, forever more.

MOVIES, MUSIC, BOOKS

The Night of the Hunter reconsidered by Abby Olcese

Late in Charles Laughton's masterpiece *The Night of the Hunter*, the murderous preacher Harry Powell (indelibly played by Robert Mitchum), stands outside the home of Rachel Cooper (portrayed by Lillian Gish), an elderly widow who's fostering the two kids Harry has spent the film hunting down. Rachel is inside with a shotgun, protecting the children, and Harry is waiting for the right moment to strike.

As he waits, Harry begins singing the hymn that has become his calling card, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” He’s singing low and loud; a deliberate, menacing taunt. But during his song, something interesting happens. Rachel begins singing along, in harmony. Suddenly, this shared piece of religious language takes on a dual meaning. Harry is using it to threaten. Rachel is using it for reassurance.

This moment of dichotomy between the villainous Harry, and Rachel, whose reserves of strength are drawn from her faith and her love for others, communicates what makes *The Night of the Hunter* such a great film, and what makes it an important film to watch right now, when the call to show radical love to others seems louder than it’s ever been. *The Night of the Hunter* makes visionary use of cinematic craft to display the misguided and corrupt elements of faith used to hurt vulnerable people. What’s really unusual, however, is the comparison between those corrupt elements of faith and the open, affirming and truly loving aspects of faith that can heal damage and, ultimately, defeat evil.

In the film, Mitchum’s Harry Powell is a corrupt traveling preacher with a warped, repressed, and hypocritical code of beliefs. He makes his money by marrying widows in various towns, killing them and taking their cash. At the beginning of the film, he has already killed so many that he has lost count.

While in jail for car theft, Harry meets Ben Harper (Peter Graves), who’s sentenced to hang for killing two men during a bank robbery. Ben still has the loot, but has hidden it somewhere in his house. Knowing Ben leaves behind a wife and two kids, Harry smells a payday.

As soon as Ben is executed and Harry is released from jail, Harry tracks down Ben's family, claiming to be on a spiritual mission. He uses his natural charm and promises of salvation to win over the townspeople and marry—then murder—Ben's guilt-ridden widow, Willa (Shelley Winters). He then works on coercing the whereabouts of the stolen money from the two children, John and Pearl, through fear and abuse.

The kids escape from Harry and take to the river, eventually finding refuge with Gish's Rachel and her gaggle of foster children. She helps John and Pearl recover from their traumas, and slowly regain their trust in adults, but their peace is short-lived. Harry follows in hot pursuit, leading to a suspense-filled showdown with Rachel.

It's hard to watch *The Night of the Hunter* without viewing it through the very personal lens of its director, Charles Laughton. Laughton was drawn to the material because of its themes of religious hypocrisy. According to Simon Callow, the wonderful English actor, and Laughton's biographer, as a closeted gay man, Laughton believed the church was responsible for his need to keep his sexuality a secret.

But *The Night of the Hunter* isn't a diatribe against faith or religion. Rather, it's an examination of two different kinds of faith; the kind of loud, hate and fear-driven faith that too often rules our public discourse, and the compassion-driven faith that represents belief at its finest. Laughton explores this difference through a theme that resonated strongly with his experiences of sexual

repression: love—either a fear of it, a desire for it, or a devotion to it, was informed by religion in nearly all cases.

Harry's faith is informed by a hatred of "perversion," which essentially takes on any form of sexual desire. To him, makeup and perfume are satanic temptations, women's bodies are for childbearing only, and man's desire for sex is unholy and animalistic. Willa, the widow he marries, seeks a redemptive love that will allow her to move on from her husband's crimes. She thinks she's found it in Harry, but this proves to be a fatal mistake, one she begins to realize on their wedding night when she approaches him affectionately, and he aggressively rebuffs her advances.

To Rachel, however, love is not perverted. It's natural and necessary, even holy. When her teenage ward, Ruby, becomes smitten with Harry and, after tipping him off to John and Pearl's location, tearfully confesses her actions, Rachel doesn't shame her. Instead, she tells her, "You were looking for love, Ruby, the only foolish way you knew how. We all need love."

Rachel, like Harry, quotes Bible verses. But unlike him, instead of quoting damning verses out of context, Rachel tells the kids stories of Moses in the bulrushes, and Jesus, Mary and Joseph on the run from King Herod, stories of endangered children who persevere. It's her message of love to her troubled young brood: with the right support system, children can survive the direst of situations, and may even grow up to change the world.

These stark differences between Harry and Rachel are expressed not only in the behavior of the characters, but through the film's visual language. The first half

of the film, in which Harry courts and kills Willa, and terrorizes the children, is strongly influenced by German Expressionist film, with its sharp angles and play between light and shadow. It evokes a constant, creepy sense of menace.

Harry is also frequently portrayed in a manner that evokes classic cinema monsters. When John first sees Harry, he appears shadow first, as a ghoulish, exaggerated silhouette cast across a wall. A later scene, in which Harry leans over Willa with a knife, brings to mind images of Bela Lugosi's Dracula. Harry even resembles Frankenstein's Monster at one point, as he chases the children up a set of stairs, arms outstretched, making guttural groans.

Part of the reasoning behind these choices is that most of *The Night of the Hunter* is told from a child's perspective, showing Harry as a literal bogeyman. But it also reinforces the idea that he represents the threat of belief based in hatred that is every bit as scary as supernatural creatures. Scarier, even, since this threat Harry represents is very real.

Compare this with the idyll of Rachel's farm, with its brightly-lit house and abundant garden, accompanied by a charming musical score. Rachel herself is presented using maternal images, looking like a mother goose in her long skirt, leaning forward, with children perpetually trailing behind. It evokes feelings of calm, love and care. Rachel's home is a place where everyone is welcome, no matter where they've come from, or what their needs may be.

The Night of the Hunter ends with Harry arrested and sentenced for his crimes, an angry crowd—made up of those same townspeople Harry charmed early on—baying for blood, and Rachel quietly taking the children home from the

courthouse to enjoy a peaceful Christmas together. Love has triumphed over evil, and brought Harry's duplicitous nature to light.

It's a powerful message, particularly when every day the news seems to bring new threats against marginalized people. It's easy to feel like Harry Powell has taken over the world.

But *The Night of the Hunter* reminds us that people like Harry, ultimately, don't hold the power. They're just the loudest ones in the room. There are many more unrecognized, courageous people in the background, like Rachel, who are slowly but surely making the world a better place. Regardless of faith tradition, Rachel is the person we are all called to be more like, in any way we can; nurturing, selfless, and fiercely protective of those we love.

In the end, it doesn't take much to frighten Harry away. Shortly after he stands singing outside her house, a single shotgun blast from Rachel sends Harry running, howling, across the yard to hide in the barn. It's going to take more than that to reverse painful policy changes and bigoted political leadership. But *The Night of the Hunter* still serves to remind us all that it's always possible for courageous, radical love to transcend the bullies.

Rainn Wilson: Ridiculous Villains, and Stuff That Matters

Actor, author, and comedian Rainn Wilson spoke with Steve Daugherty on the porch recently about his role in the recent movie, *Smurfs: The Lost Village*. Rainn's heart beats in tune with the very same things ours beats for here at *The Porch* (have a look at his *SoulPancake* site for more), and our own Steve Daugherty was delighted to join him in a slow conversation about beautiful, difficult things.

STEVE DAUGHERTY: Rainn, I feel like I should tell you right off the bat that sometimes I look at a picture of you as Lahnk from *Galaxy Quest* just to make me smile, and I wanted to thank you for that.

RAINN WILSON: Oh nice. [*laughs*] Excellent. Thank you!

SD: I heard that you said that you had landed your dream role as Gargamel, and I'd love to hear more about how that went for you.

RW: You know, I love playing ridiculous villains. Comedic villains are so much fun! I didn't really grow up with the Smurfs—I'm a little too old for that—but I always loved those little blue guys, and I always really felt for Gargamel. You know he's so lonely, with his ugly cat. I was really thrilled to get to try and bring him to life in a fresh, new, fun, comedic way.

SD: What is it about playing comedic villains for you? Is that something from your childhood—a way of disarming them?

RW: Well, they're so rich to play because they're so deeply flawed and they have such giant character defects; big egos, giant blindspots, huge narcissism. But they don't recognize how idiotic they are. They take themselves way too seriously. And that's just like a comedy playground. That's just a hoot to play around in.

SD: Why is it those guys always end up with a cat? I'm thinking of Dr. Evil... what is that?

RW: Oh, that's true isn't it? Gargamel and Dr. Evil both have a cat. And the Bond Villain that had a cat—that white cat. I think Donald Pleasance played him. Um, maybe it was Dr. No, I forget which one.

SD: I do too. But it occurs to me Dr. Claw from Inspector Gadget had a cat.

RW: Oh! Interesting. Interesting. I don't know, maybe it's the only person that can give them unconditional love, and a cat gives them that? They certainly can't get it from any human. That's what I am gonna go with.

SD: Okay. A cat kind of embodies that narcissistic detachment so it's really a perfect pet for the villain you just described.

RW: Oh yeah. It's never a dog though is it?

SD: It never is a dog, no. The new Smurfs movie is obviously going to be gorgeous to look at, and has an amazing cast. What are you hoping kids and families will take away from the film?

RW: Listen, the world is in a lot of turmoil right now. There's a lot of pain and fear and disunity, and I think that the Smurfs can be the thing that we can all unite around. Whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, whether you're a Muslim or a Christian, whether you're from Iran or Mexico or the United States; everyone will love these little blue guys. And I think it can be a really fun, uplifting movie.

SD: It sounds a little bit like it comes from the same place for you that *SoulPancake* did; being a hopeful, unitive storyteller. Would you say that?

RW: Yeah. I think that's what we should strive for. We should strive for telling good stories that bring people together and make the world a better place. And

the Smurfs in all seriousness is about people finding their identity, coming together as a family, finding their voice, this is a very girl-power Smurfs movie; so there's a lot of positive things about it.

SD: At *SoulPancake* the motto is "We Make Stuff That Matters." I'm fascinated by the fact that you didn't feel the need to define those words. I'd love to hear you talk about how ~~come~~ you have a sense of what matters and what doesn't.

RW: That's a really good point. I think that to us, what matters is basic human stuff. So we go for basic human questions. Like, who are we? What is love? Where are we going? Do we have purpose? Just some real core human stuff that no matter who you are is basic in our human DNA.

SD: Yeah. It's basic—it's fundamental. I don't know very many people who would disagree with what you just said. So what do you think it is that makes people willfully deemphasize things that we know matter to us?

RW: It's easy to get off track. We're like monkeys with, you know, shiny pieces of tinfoil. You can look at a Kardashian Instagram feed and kinda go "Oh maybe I should do corset training," or "Maybe I need to buy the brand of lipstick," and "Maybe I should be more like this person." It's easy to get very distracted from what unites us as human beings.

SD: Would you mind if I asked you about faith and spirituality and how that plays a role in your work?

RW: So, I'm a member of the Bahá'í faith and one thing that Bahá'í 's hold the most prized is to attempt to be of service to the world and to humanity. Both in our work and in our lives. It's something I certainly don't always succeed at but something I strive for is to look at where the service is, how it is helping others. My wife and I have a nonprofit educational initiative in Haiti called LIDÈ and that's balancing my work life, my life as a storyteller and an entertainer and a comedian with service that gives back to the world. It's difficult, but it's very worthwhile.

SD: Talk to me about the difficulties. Obviously you're a public figure and I would assume everyone wants a piece of you. What are the difficulties of being *you* and servant?

RW: It's not me. It's any human being. We live in a society and a culture that prizes taking care of yourself. Living a life of comfort. Living a life with a tremendous amount of distraction, whether that's video games or shows or sports or social media. So finding that balance between your inner and outward life—a life of service and trying to support yourself and your family—it's difficult for every human being on this planet.

SD: Have you heard of, in psychology, The Hedonic Treadmill?

RW: Hm, no. *Hedonic Treadmill.* I assume it has to do with hedonism but I have no idea what is it.

SD: It's what you're talking about. We seem to have convinced ourselves that going from one thing that mitigates pain, to another thing that protects us from

vulnerability, to another thing that brings us pleasure, until we think *feeling* good is the same as *doing* good. So we can't figure out how to get off the treadmill. We can't figure out why we feel *so bad* when we've done so well at *feeling good?*

RW: I need to look into that. That's a really good analogy.

SD: Really good storytellers can use their platform to tell us these things—in a way they're really reminding us of these things. What do you think Hollywood could improve upon regarding these things you have in your heart?

RW: Well, I think Hollywood does a lot of great stuff. I think like for example, *Hidden Figures* was really entertaining, super funny, dealt with race in a really inspiring and interesting way, it made everyone a ton of money. But Hollywood doesn't green light the next *Hidden Figures* kind of movie, they green light action tentpoles. And I think Hollywood can have action tentpoles and balance it with other movies that are inspirational and positive, and moneymaking, and I think audiences need to speak with their dollars. Not just go see tentpole action films but see movies that bring people together.

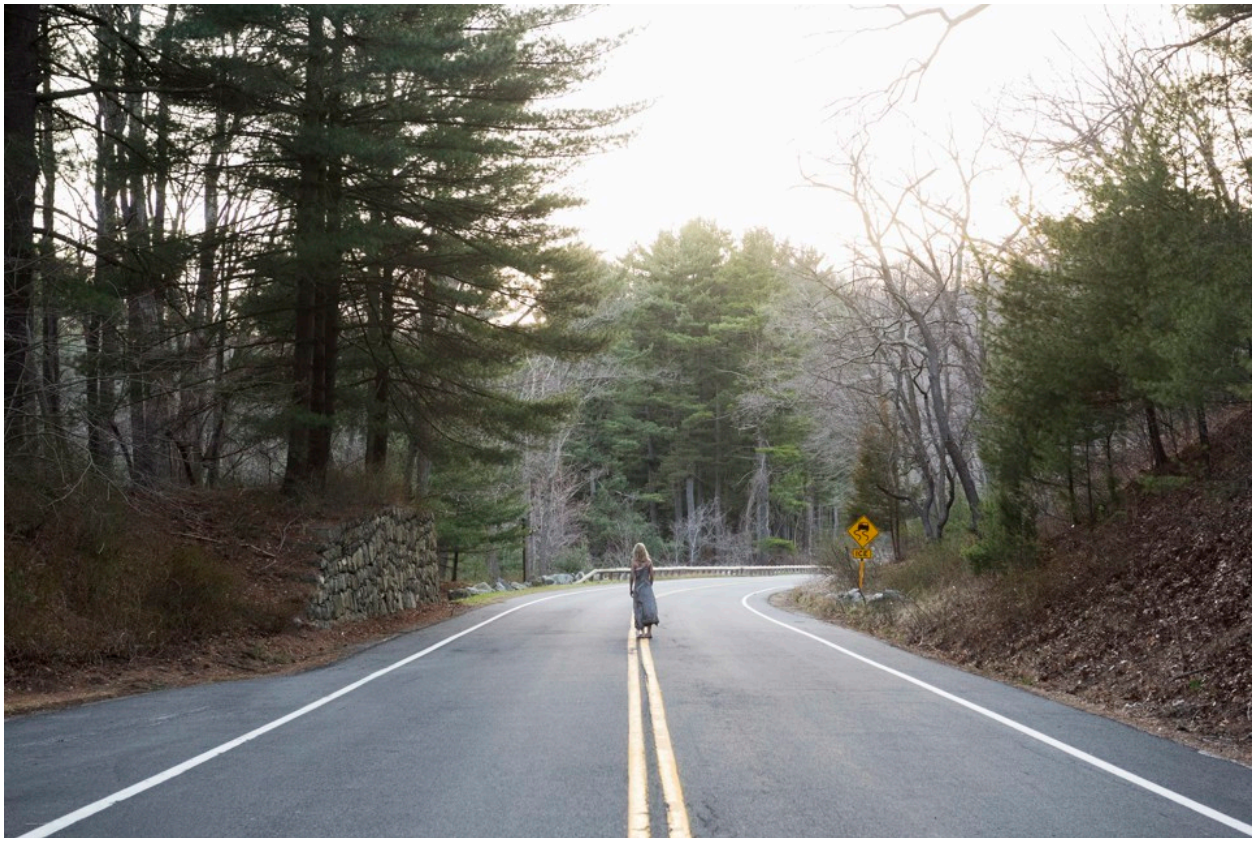
SD: We seem to better fund distraction.

RW: Yeah.

SD: One more question: As you look out at the landscape of entertainment and storytelling, what makes you hopeful, Rainn?

RW: Oh, I think there's a lot of really positive stuff out there. I mean on *Netflix* there's a hundred different titles that you can see that are super interesting and challenging about race, about environment, about religion, all those difficult topics of the day.There's a ton to be hopeful about. More and more people coming together and telling great stories. Telling difficult stories. There's more venues for those stories to get told.

The OA - Lyndsay Dyk



(The following review contains spoilers for the entire first season of The OA. Watch before reading! Note: the following piece discusses elements of the show that some readers may find disturbing.)

The OA is the gutsiest thing I have seen on television in a long time. Well, as for actual on-screen entrails, *Fargo* takes the cake, though *The OA* does not lack in cold, calculated violence. However, what makes *The OA* a truly audacious series is its absolute lack of irony, and its serious search for life in the deadest, darkest places. Co-created by its star Brit Marling and her regular writing partner Zal Batmanglij (who also directs), it hovers somewhere between Sci-Fi thriller (Evil Scientist? Check. Strange machines à la *Alien*? Check) and metaphysical drama

(there are plenty of other dimensions here, rendered in vivid colors). *The OA*, on print, sounds like several of the suspenseful genre-shifters circulating on streaming services over the last year. A young woman, who disappeared from her Detroit suburb seven years previous, is found jumping from a city bridge—wild eyed and covered in strange scars across her back. The first catch arrives when we learn that she, Prairie (Marling), was completely blind at the time of her disappearance. When her adoptive parents find her recovering in her hospital room, she can see.

Over time, she gathers a crew of outsiders to hear her story, and to learn the path she believes will save us. Joining here are a lacrosse player more interested in the life of the mind than the field, a troubled teen with aggressive tendencies, a plump teacher nearing retirement and immersed in low self-esteem, a trans kid navigating parental misunderstanding and teenage social havoc, an orphaned boy with a substance habit - a community of misfits, who discover their own beauty mirrored in the face of a partly healed, partly broken servant leader.

Cinematographer Lol Crawley devotes a clear-eyed but kind lens to the accoutrements of suburban life, and helps us see the familiar differently: an *Applebees* parking lot by night, or the winding paved roads of a half-built development, the inside of an SUV. The series moves back and forth between Prairie's grey scale post-trauma life and her story of captivity, which is colored in lush, warm tones. It's troubling to admit that the subterranean cages she and the other captives are kept in are beautiful, appearing like a minimalist's lavish back-to-nature getaway. There's a tree growing at the center, with a little creek beside it, for goodness sake! However, as it sinks in that the five captives are to

be kept here indefinitely, with no natural light and no physical contact, you catch a hint, a shudder, of the psychological horror Prairie and the other captives face in order to keep living. They are so close to the real thing, but totally powerless to have it.

And here is the shift that so many viewers and critics allowed to disconnect them from the *The OA*'s drama. Cornered, without hope or the ability to physically change their circumstance, Prairie leads the other four captives on the most inward journey possible: death. This absolutely serious series gets more serious, and adds a depiction of the afterlife that runs on Eastern Mystic vibes, spectacular star-scapes, and a magical wisdom figure - really - who tells Prairie, among other things, that eating a glowing dove will grant her the ability to fly. But there's something about *The OA* that earns a plot so preposterous: it's not afraid of being laughed at. It's as if Marling and Batmanglij have decided (and their earlier work would suggest this too) that the questions they're posing (what can human beings survive, how do stories run our lives, who are we really?) are more important than whether or not people like the show.

Back to what got them into the basement in the first place: their captor and charismatic mad scientist, Hap, had chosen each individual because they had experienced a Near Death Experience, and emerged with exquisite ethereal artistic abilities. Each captive was uniquely "special." As the truth behind Hap's experiments emerge, that he is attempting to accumulate proof of an afterlife, the captives knowingly go into repeated deaths and resurrections in order to return with keys to unlock another dimension. These keys turn out to be physical movements which look and feel a lot like modern interpretive dance.

They seem to bring the characters joy, purpose and hope; the cast (especially Marling and Emory Cohen, playing the other main character, Homer) perform them in absolute seriousness. There are now even YouTube videos of members of the public doing the same, either as an affectionate joke about the seriousness of the show, or, deeper, a manifestation of the yearning some of us feel for the "something more" that there has to be. As Prairie tells her band of misfits later as she teaches them these hard-won moves, "These steps must be done with perfect feeling". And for many viewers, this leap from murky kidnap drama to supernatural trickery is too great a gap to bridge.

For some it's the self-seriousness of *The OA*. For others it's the plot's inclusion of jarring, potentially offensive elements like suicide and school shootings. Or maybe it's the silliness of performance art within a television show. But if the co-creators, Marling and Batmanglij, are losing fans, it's because they are playing for big stakes. With *The OA*, they made something radical, and it's not just because of the shifting episode lengths or Netflix's surprise-drop of the series at the end of last December.

The OA tries to put its thumb onto something that is infamously slippery. As Prairie says to her band of outcasts in the unfinished house: "The future is dark. Not dark, like bad. Just dark. You can't see it. And maybe living is just bringing light to what you need in a day. Just—seeing the day. Or at least that's what I'm learning in therapy."

As Marling and Batmanglij edge us closer to the center of the labyrinth, we have to suspend our disbelief. If you are more comfortable within the cleanly plotted world of *Stranger Things*, maybe this much trust in a show's creators

isn't your bag. Trust is uncomfortable; *The OA* is an uncomfortable show. *Stranger Things* is an exceptionally entertaining series, but we quickly learn exactly what we are receiving. The kids are plucky, the parents are well-meaning, the bad guy is very bad, and the monster is evil. It's smart storytelling, and it's a perfectly executed deployment of camp. Since Susan Sontag's 1964 essay, *Notes on "Camp"*, the camp sensibility has become widespread and beloved. The ascension of camp to its throne in popular culture has heralded many ages, most notable the amorphous hipster scene of the last decade. Sontag writes, "Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of "style" over "content," "aesthetics" over "morality," of irony over tragedy." And so when camp is the cultural diet, especially within the genre lines of sci-fi and fantasy where *The OA* dwells, it can feel like a naked story, and hilarious in its sincerity. Yet I wonder if, when Eve and Adam first saw each other naked in the garden, they laughed.

Changing one's diet is a daunting task. Different tastes strange, and when irony is everywhere, to whom can we turn? Who are the people who have kept their palates open to what *The OA* offers? In a 2012 *New York Times* opinion piece called *How to Live Without Irony*, Christy Wampole writes, "Where can we find other examples of non-ironic living? What does it look like? Non-ironic models include very young children, elderly people, deeply religious people, people with severe mental or physical disabilities, people who have suffered, and those from economically or politically challenged places where seriousness is the governing state of mind." *The OA* touches down in two places here—the deeply religious and those who have suffered. This is what makes the Five Movements so compelling and necessary to the core of the show. They express something ineffable: the embodied trauma of a survivor and her passionate

belief in a guiding system which seems to transcend rational understanding. Often, TV and cinema explore this compulsion within religious people through violence—see *Big Love,* for example, or more recently, *The Path*. Though *The OA* is free from explicit dogma, it explores the same compulsion to act from a place of faith. Instead of perpetuating violence, however, the believers actualize their faith through performance.

At the center of this faith stands the one who suffered. Throughout the series, Marling and Batmanglij craft a careful mythology around Prairie (especially once she realizes herself to be something called the Original Angel). She survives her origin story, begins her hero's journey, reveals her identity, and recruits followers. This arc predates modernity, predates camp (in writing the show, the co-creators immersed themselves in Persian and Russian folklore). In episode eight it all becomes crushingly clear where the labyrinth has been leading. The boys have their faith shaken in the OA, their group begins to disband. Books found under her bed by French (Brandon Perea) stack up evidence against her:

> "It was all lies." He says to FBI agent Elias Rahim.
>
> Rahim: "Do you know what second-hand trauma is? It's when you take someone else's pain so that they can survive. That's what you did."
>
> French: "But it's not true."

It cuts to hear French abandon the OA, though you know in your gut that it hurts him most to say it. In the final moments of this first season, French's actions belie his proclaimed disbelief. As the school shooter enters the cafeteria, the four lost boys and their teacher perform the five movements with perfect

feeling, and the OA receives the singular bullet. The rest is ambiguous: does the OA find her portal to another dimension, or was it just the random end to a mysterious story, albeit one that drew together six unlikely individuals, began to heal their marginalization, and granted them the gift of truly seeing the world? For some, the discrepancy between the OA's claims and the proof of her actual powers feels like the "it was all a dream" ending of novice writing. Furthermore, the very realistic inclusion of a school shooter on a television show widely streamed in the US, where the fear of random massacre is part of the real life culture of the audience, seems not only offensive but potentially dangerous. I understand this argument. However, I believe that Marling and Batmanglij chose their final scene based on a deeply committed ethic of empathy. Before production, they spent months interviewing high school students across the Midwest. To prepare for their projects, they often employ a style of research similar to method acting. They eat with their subjects, go to school with them, walk through their neighborhoods. For earlier films they've spent months as freegans: hopping trains and dumpster diving. The intensity with which they prepare for their creative process is a kind of *embodied* writing —they attempt to make a tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling. Marling and Batmanglij do their homework with perfect feeling.

With that in mind, the final scene of *The OA* is one of the closest attempts I've seen television get at expressing the ineffable quality of belief. Through action, through the irrational act of dance in the face of fear, the small band of misfits counters death with life. Together, they act on hope, disrupting one of our darkest collective myths. The OA, and *The OA*, invite us to live like we actually believe that a better story makes a better world.

The OA is available on Netflix, and a second season has been commissioned. We'll probably talk about it here...

How Lou Reed Taught Me to Play Better Golf - Tim O'Connor

I had the coolest job in the world. In my world, at least.

In 1986, I was the music critic for the Canadian Press news agency in Toronto. I was paid to listen to albums, go to concerts and interview rock stars, and write about it all. Among the folks I interviewed one-on-one were David Bowie, Robert Plant, Peter Gabriel and Joe Strummer.

Usually, I was pretty cool about meeting these people, but every once in a while I'd get nervous, not dissimilar to the feeling I get giving speeches, or teeing it up in a golf tournament. (I'm an over-the-top golfer and performance coach.)

I don't think Lou Reed ever played golf, but he gave me one of the greatest golf lessons of my life.

I conducted the interview about 30 years ago, but I fully realized the gift of his wisdom—for golf, writing and frankly for my life—three years ago when he passed away at age 71.

Part of my nervousness came from being a huge fan—an occupational hazard—but also Reed's legendary disdain for journalists. He didn't appear to care about fame or how people—and certainly critics—reacted to his music which often captured the underbelly of New York's drug and sexual subculture in songs like *Walk on the Wild Side* and *Heroin*.

I invested my nervous energy into earnestly preparing and writing out all my

questions. I studied his lyrics on *Mistrial*, the new album he was promoting. I would be ready with intelligent, penetrating questions that would demonstrate that I was a smart, on-the-ball and certainly cool journalist.

I phoned the number provided for the interview. I quickly launched into my first brilliant question: “Is *Mistrial* an attempt to set the record straight about you and your nefarious past now that you’re 43, married and respectable enough to be used in an advertising for a motorcycle brand?”

“I don’t think about that.” Silence.
Oh crap.

I jumped to my second penetratingly dazzling question, which was a just a variation on the first. “Is *Mistrial* a way of saying that we’ve misjudged you, and that we were distracted from the real Lou by the make-up, androgyny and heroin?”

“You know man, I don’t get into the meaning of all this.”

Oh my God.

I was near panic when—completely off my script— I blurted: “I love the sound of the guitars on this album.”

He responded with a sincere “thank you” and launched into an enthused explanation of how they recorded the guitars to get the distinctive sound, and we proceeded to have a relaxed and engaging conversation.

As time for the interview was winding up, Reed said, “Hey man, I know where you were going at the start, but I don’t try to get too much into the why of these things or I might stop the process. I find out about it later on, but if I went and interfered with the process, either I might not finish anything or I’d start leaving things out because I’d worry about what the songs mean.”

Now it was my turn to offer a sincere thank you, and we finished the interview.

When Reed died in 2013, I wrote an appreciation about him. In revisiting the memory of the interview, I came to more fully grasp what Reed meant about not interfering in the process—and the gift that he gave me.

Throughout my life, I have felt compelled to do everything right. For things that I was passionate about—including writing, speaking and certainly golf—I would obsess, over-prepare and fixate.

Despite all my preparation and focus on doing things expertly, much of the time I was frustrated, tense and bottled up. And thus, I chronically failed to live up to my expectations. I was a classic paralysis-by-analysis basket case.

Reed's nugget of wisdom was a milestone in my understanding of self-interference. He provided me with insight into how great performers lose themselves in the action of creation and performance. They allow rather than try.

I had yet another Lou Reed moment this past February when I met Gareth Higgins and he told me about *The Porch*. I looked at the website and saw that Gareth had taken Reed's "rules for living"—as told by his widow Laurie Anderson—and made them the jumping off point for *The Porch* manifesto:

"Don't be afraid of anybody

Get a really good bullshit detector

Be really really tender"

I smiled when I read it because few people ever thought Reed to be particularly tender, but he was with me. I have shared this story with a few folks through the years and most everyone was surprised. They had the same impression—that he was Grade A Hardass who relished that role. "Gimme an issue and I'll give you a tissue," he spat out on 1978's *Live: Take No Prisoners* album.

But only a tender person would have the empathy to see the broken souls who

populated his songs—folks hanging on by a thread, a fix or a trick. Most of us look away. Lou was not afraid to look the desperate and the destitute right in the eye and see the human in there. And he certainly wasn't afraid of what anyone might think or say about his direct verse.

I took Reed's rule to "get a bullshit detector" to mean, 'Hey pal, use the common sense, brains and talent that you've already got, and don't give a f*** about doing things right or trying to living up to expectations.'

Lou Reed wore his tough-as-nails exterior well, but I believe he was really a sweet and beautiful man beset with his own demons. I wish that I had the opportunity to get to know him beyond a single phone interview.

But when I find myself obsessing and trying hard—which I'm still prone to do—I'll sometimes think of my Lou Reed moment. I'll allow myself to let go of perfectionism, or of pretending that I can have the outcome wrapped up in advance. Maybe take a walk on my wild side.

Three sides to every story - Sarah Dean

In the opening to his 1994 autobiography, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, Hollywood film producer Robert Evans states, "There are three sides to every story: yours, mine and the truth." A brash, first-person narrative of over forty years in Hollywood, the book was a bestseller. In 2003 it spawned an award winning documentary of the same name, and earlier this year a stage play based on both opened in London.

Now eighty-six and living reclusively in Beverley Hills, Evans must be delighted that in this era of alternative facts, there is a continued interest in his "true" story. He is perhaps best known as the producer of some of the biggest films of what is considered by many to be the greatest era in US American cinema: *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Love Story* (1970), *Marathon Man* (1976) and *The Godfather* (1972). He knows what makes a good story, and he won't let little things like the truth or other people's opinions get in the way of the greatest story ever told—the story of his life.

Evans started in Hollywood as an actor and by his own admission not a very good one. The title *The Kid Stays in the Picture* comes from a line attributed to studio head Darryl F. Zanuck, who defended Evans after some of the actors involved in the film *The Sun Also Rises* (1957) had recommended he be removed from the cast. Through sheer charm, self-confidence, and audacity Evans managed to become the youngest ever head of a Hollywood studio taking over Paramount in 1966.

Evans tells his life story in a hard-boiled, self-aggrandizing narrative, full of expletives, hep talk and mafia slang—money is “green," women are “broads," and people don't phone, they are "on the horn." It is notable that the comedian

Bob Odenkirk says that his character Saul Goodman from *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* is influenced by Robert Evans.

The book is a riveting read, full of fantastic anecdotes and set pieces so ridiculous they have to be true. He told Francis Ford Coppola that the first edit of *The Godfather* was too short: "You shot a saga, but you turned in a trailer!" He raised millions for the ill-fated film *The Cotton Club* (1984) just by getting Richard Gere to show financiers a fake poster. In the midst of the Vietnam War and Watergate, he convinced President Nixon's National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger to drop everything to be at the opening night of *The Godfather* to boost the film's publicity. The AV Club review of the book wisely states that it reads "as the world's most elaborate humble brag."

The audio book narrated by Evans himself is also something of a cult hit. The comedian Patton Oswalt compared it to "listening to Lucifer dictate his memoir on a Sunday afternoon lying on his couch in his bathrobe with a martini." This comparison is unfair: despite all his bluster and unrelenting self-confidence, Evans is as honest about his failings as he is about his successes. He openly relates how his marriages failed due to him being a workaholic, how his relationship with Francis Ford Coppola broke down and ended up in court, and his various brushes with the law.

If you can cope with the archaic attitudes and overblown language, Evans's candid tales of life on and off set are a guilty pleasure, but more profoundly his story offers us a vicarious insight into what it's like to be a gambler, a risk taker and someone who refuses to compromise in their single-minded pursuit of artistic perfection, even when it hurts them and those they love.

The theater production of *The Kid Stays in the Picture* opened at the Royal Court theater in London in March 2017. The Court is where Sarah Kane's *4:48*

Psychosis premiered, where John Osborne the original "angry young man" made his name and where productions are invariably punctuated by "the Royal Court gasp”—the audible intake of breath from its well-heeled audience reacting to whatever envelope-pushing language or action has just occurred on-stage. Robert Evans's life of movie deals, drugs and womanizing is pretty tame by Royal Court standards and Evans might be a bit disappointed that the latest incarnation of his story has charmed rather than shocked London theatergoers.

The show has been created by Complicite, the physical theater company renowned for a kind of cooperative collaboration to bring complex, "unstageable" stories to life. Under the direction of Complicite's founder (and wonderful character actor in recent television and movies) Simon McBurney, the resulting performances are layered into tightly choreographed ensemble work with innovative lighting, sound, and video design.

Past work in London, on Broadway, and touring internationally has included

productions of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*—complete with talking cats and the devil rampaging on the streets of 1930s Moscow; *A Disappearing Number* invites even the least numerate audience member to revel in the beauty of mathematics; and a breath-taking production of Haruki Marukami's *The Elephant Vanishes* complete with a life size elephant created with a Japanese cast who did not speak English, directed by McBurney who does not speak Japanese.

The story of one man in twentieth century Hollywood doesn't have the epic sweep of the stories Complicite ordinarily undertakes, but what it does offer is a theatrical challenge—how to tell a cinematic story theatrically?

A less rigorous stage director might have chosen to use clips from Evans's films throughout the show, but McBurney chooses to use them sparingly, preferring to explore the challenge of telling a cinematic story theatrically. What may have been a budgetary decision results in an inventive theatrical experience. The cast stage key scenes from Evans's life and films, whilst simultaneously filming the action and projecting it onto the scenery. This provides the audience with the dual experience of watching the action live, intimately in the room with Evans, his colleagues, and family, whilst simultaneously seeing the image he wants to present the world, the edit of the story he wants to tell.

Reportedly the Royal Court box office has had several phone calls from Robert Evans himself, now too frail to travel to London to see the show, asking who is going to play Robert Evans. The answer to this is everyone. Complicite's collaborative approach means that actors swap in and out of roles as needed, voicing his words, regardless of gender or age.

The theatre production of *The Kid Stays in the Picture* is a thoughtful experiment examining genre, story-telling, and truth. It feels timely in its

discussion of truth and its exploration of the behavior of an unapologetic visionary and egotist (although it should be noted that the show was in development long before Trump came to power.)

Undoubtedly Evans deserves his place in Hollywood history. *The Godfather*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *Love Story* were game-changing films that took risks and pioneered cinematic storytelling techniques that are now the norm e.g. complex, realistic characters, naturalistic violence, non-linear editing, and musical themes. It is notable that the truth Robert Evans shares with us in *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, whether on the page, on screen, or on the stage reveals that it took a lot of ugly behavior to create this cinematic beauty.

The Infinite Family - Tyler McCabe

At some point in growing up, I learned that the domestic unit I belonged to could be referred to as a "broken family." My father could be considered demoted by the prefix "step" and my brother by the prefix "half," and to the world outside our home these definitions conveyed a story, primarily, of damage.

That may be the most basic reason the work of Kevin Wilson appeals to me. The families he writes of in his short stories and novels are broken. Separated, reapportioned, cobbled together, magicked apart and back into wholeness—he writes families in situations you've never imagined. In his story collection *Tunneling to the Center of the Earth*, two brothers are orphaned when their parents spontaneously combust on the subway; a woman is hired to play the role of a young child's grandmother after his real one passes away; and a young girl's uncles are forced to fold one thousand paper cranes in order to determine who will inherit their mother's house. In his first novel, *The Family Fang*, two siblings wrestle with their bizarre childhoods in which their parents, both acclaimed performance artists, repeatedly forced them into moral quandaries and put them on public display for the sake of "art." These improbable scenarios reveal how family units locate human trust and betrayal, entitlement and sacrifice, hope and disappointment.

Wilson's new novel, *Perfect Little World*, features his most ramshackle, perishable, and visionary family unit yet. The story centers on a scientific experiment called the Infinite Family Project, or IFP, which allows for ten newborn babies and their parents to live in a temporary ten-year commune in which every parent will equally share responsibilities for every child. The idea

sounds simple and desirable enough to Izzy, our protagonist and the only single mom in the group: the children will sleep in one nursery, eat together, and eventually play and be schooled together, while all the parents take shifts to fulfill the needs of the group. No child will be favored over another. Every child will benefit from the love and care of nineteen parents, and every parent will be supported in their natural inadequacies. At the end of the project, the families will ideally continue on in some looser network of support and sharing.

In the world of the novel, the IFP is a utopian vision rooted in scientific optimism: with careful planning, everyone should be optimally happy and cared for, and the children should develop at faster rates than those outside the study. At the helm of this utopia is Dr. Preston Grind, a scientist who seems truly up to the task of designing a perfect little world. The problem is everyone else; their fears and desires and jealousies threaten to capsize the experiment, yet you can hardly blame them. What if you wanted to spend extra time with your biological child? What if you thought one of the other parents was a bad influence on the children—or another parent thought this of you? What if you were shocked to discover you loved someone else's kid more than your own?

Ten years allow for tiny leaks to turn into floods. Izzy does everything she can to stave off the ghosts of her past, to pretend and go through the motions when she doesn't believe in the project, to ensure that utopia can, after all, exist. Dr. Grind does everything he can to provide for the family, uphold the parameters of the project, and flex when the family threatens to break under its own rules. But as time wears on, the IFP takes on more and more of the characteristics of its subjects—fallibility, volatility, the capacity for sweetness and ugliness in

equal measure. In other words, the IFP goes from experiment to fully realized family.

Perfect Little World tests the perfect family unit like a pane of glass against a boulder; static perfection will always break outside the lab. The real infinite family is perpetually evolving, perpetually becoming. Imperfect and alive. Befitting humanity.

From the vantage point of my own broken family, I know that the families we create contain our tenderest hopes. No matter if the family we design is by choice or circumstance, biology or agreement, we arrive at the doorstep vulnerable, asking to be held. The people we allow to hold us will most certainly fail us, and we will fail them in turn. But the infinite family weathers its own imperfects. The living, breathing family marches on, bending, breaking, mending again.

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