

A person is sitting on a long wooden pier that extends into a large body of water. The person is seen from behind, looking out towards a range of mountains under a clear sky. The water is calm, and the mountains are rugged and rocky. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

# THE PORCH

ISSUE 18

A slow conversation about beautiful and difficult things

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## Welcome to The Porch

Hi friends - welcome to *The Porch*, a slow conversation about beautiful and difficult things, inviting us into a story of connection, community and courageous action for the common good. The Porch is entering our fourth year, as the decade draws to a close. We're grateful to be publishing our eighteenth issue, and glad to have you with us. We're starting this issue with a little manifesto, Five Notions and Five Steps, an invitation perhaps to a different way of living in the days to come. It's a time of trouble, and a time of light too. Let's take some of these steps together.

Meanwhile, in this huge issue of *The Porch* you can find three poems by Kim Falone...consider some simple and revolutionary guidelines to reverse the email spiral...eavesdrop on Elisabeth Ivey's remarkable essay *Dear Ancestors*...you can be saved by a turtle by the side of the road...learn life lessons from the high school prom...hear from our beloved friend David Wilcox on Sky Fishing...and explore many ways to live the New Story, wherever you are...

The Porch community is growing - and the more folk join us, the better we can resource our writers to tell a better story. Over 13,000 people get our email newsletter, and if even a quarter of those subscribed to the magazine, we would be able to deepen our work exponentially, so please do share with your friends what we're up to together. We appreciate you being with us, and are always glad to hear from you.

See you next time,

Gareth Higgins  
Founder, *The Porch*

## The Good Fairies - Andrew Taylor-Troutman

*If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder...*

*- Rachel Carson*

Once upon a time, I was absolutely convinced that no parent should willfully deceive a child with stories of the Tooth Fairy or the elaborate fairy tale about a jolly old man in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer. I argued that too many adults cling to harmful fantasies. For example, while the world burns, people still believe that climate change is a myth. Children deserve the truth!

Though readily agreeing with my point about climate change, my wife suggested that perhaps I should wait to make up my mind about such things as fairies until we actually had children.

About four years later, our three-year-old son trailed behind us, as she and I strolled through our neighborhood. Our pride and joy kept pausing to consider the creepy-crawlies making their own way along the side of the road. Suddenly, he shouted, "Daddy, *wow!*"

I turned around, expecting to see a particularly colorful centipede; instead there was a tiny tooth in his outstretched palm! He grinned, revealing a window in his slightly bloodied smile. I hadn't even known the tooth was loose.

Our son had already heard of the Tooth Fairy from some older children at church. But his little





brow furrowed at the idea of a whisper-winged creature sneaking into his room while he slept. Lying beside him that night, as he snuggled his trusty blankie, I assured him that this fairy was good.

The next morning, he came downstairs clutching a silver dollar and exclaimed, “I *love* the Good Fairy!”

Any lingering desire to cling to my previously held beliefs against magical stories was dispelled the following Christmas Eve. Our son lay in bed much too excited to sleep. He wondered just how do reindeer fly? He didn’t give me time to answer before rushing on: How does Santa carry all those presents? How does Santa make it all the way around the world in one night? And what about kids, like his best friend from preschool, whose homes don’t have chimneys? How does Santa bring their presents inside?

Finally, he sighed, “Daddy, it’s *such* a good story.”

~

Now my wife and I have two more children, which means more stockings hung by the chimney with care. On Christmas Eve, the kids will leave out cookies and milk, and our firstborn will insist upon carrots for the flying reindeer.

But at no point during the holiday season will you find the Elf on the Shelf—the elf who infiltrates a child’s home in order to document any misbehaviors throughout the day. Each night this elf-spy then rushes back to the North Pole to report infractions to Saint Nick. This is *such* a terrible story.

I understand that actions have consequences, and that parents want to teach children the difference between right and wrong. But the Elf on a Shelf is designed to shame. Shame is never a part of the solution, but its own problem. Shame is about power over someone else.

As both parent and pastor, I wish to maintain a critical distinction between shame and guilt. Shame kills and therefore should never be tolerated, including in religion. But admitting our guilt can actually

save lives. Confession may be life-giving.

~

Perhaps “confession” calls to mind certain booths in Roman Catholic churches. Entering, you would pull the curtain behind you and sit to wait for the wooden slot in the dividing wall to slide open, offering just enough space for you to whisper your uncomfortable truths to a priest in the adjacent booth. But it is not necessary to have a booth or even a priest. The genius of personal confession is that, by speaking your guilt, you can let go of shame—*the truth shall set you free*.

This saying was uttered by the same ancient rabbi of Nazareth whose birthday many Americans celebrate in December. We have also domesticated this rabbi’s call to confession, making salvation strictly a personal matter. This despite the most well-known and oft-quoted Bible verse that God so loved *the world*.

In many religious traditions, a public worship service invites the entire community to pray or sing aloud. Whether public or private,

no prayer should ever shame, for confession should never belittle and demean. But we must tell the truth. Public confessions dispel fantasies of our innocence by naming the sins in our society. It is the role of a prophet to call us to admit the truth. Climate change activist Greta Thunberg is a fearless example of this kind of truth-teller.

Like a biblical prophet of old, Thunberg speaks truth to power by reminding world leaders that they will be judged in the future by their actions today: “I want you to panic. Our house is on fire.” But her fundamental message is addressed to all of us. She holds up a mirror to our sins, pointing out the error of our dependence upon fossil fuels, and prophesies a cataclysmic future unless we immediately change our ways. As of ancient times, she is a voice of truth crying in the wilderness: “If not you, then who? If not now, then when?”

We are guilty. If the world is to be saved, we will need to answer the call to confession.

Yet Greta Thunberg does not shame. Shame immobilizes, shame isolates. As our modern prophet of

climate change, she rallies people across the world to participate in events like the strike for climate change on September 20th through 27th, 2019. This young woman understands and applies ancient spiritual truths: first, we must acknowledge guilt; then, true confession leads to action.

~

In order to emphasize the critical distinction between shame and guilt, I think we need another kind of prophet. If I can liken Greta Thunberg to the truth-telling child shouting that the emperor has no clothes, Rachel Carson reminds me to experience the natural world in quiet, childlike wonder.

At the end of her life, Carson wrote, "We live in an age of rising seas. In our own lifetime we are witnessing a startling alteration of climate." This author and biologist died before she could fully realize the truth of her prophecy.

Though best known for her book *Silent Spring*, a damning exposé of the sins of chemical manufactures and their harmful pesticides, Carson was a poet of the sea long

before she became famous for decrying the dangers of DDT.

*Nor can we know the vicissitudes of life on the ocean floor, where sunlight, filtering through a hundred feet of water, makes but a fleeting, bluish twilight, in which dwell sponge and mollusk and starfish and coral, where swarms of diminutive fish twinkle through the dusk like a silver rain of meteors, and eels lie in wait among the rocks.* (from "Undersea," 1937)

I wonder if some prophets "twinkle through the dusk" like a good fairy. While acknowledging the mystery with such beautifully crafted words, Carson also wrote, "The lobster feels his way with nimble wariness through the perpetual twilight." Carson, too, explored what she could know of the natural world. In her last book *The Sense of Wonder*, she described taking her nephew Roger down to the shore to search for sand dollars, dig for mollusks, and watch the sandpipers on their spindly legs dash from the ebb and flow of the tide. While recognizing the urgent ecological crisis of her day, the prophet Rachel Carson still made time for the unearned rewards of the creation's munificence. Indeed,

she felt both were necessary: “The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.”

~

My reading of the biblical stories, as well as the words of these two modern prophets, leads me to believe that a genuine prophet does not seek that mantle; rather, a prophet feels compelled to tell the truth even at personal expense and sacrifice. I marvel at such resolve while confessing that I am often unwilling to pay attention to the painful consequences. *Mea culpa*.

I do plan to participate in the upcoming climate strike and public protest. Daily, I do try to focus on the wonders around me, including joining my son in paying attention to the creepy-crawlies along the road. And I take a *such* good story to heart.

After the first “Good Fairy” visit, my son lost another tooth the following summer while we vacationed at the beach. Another “Daddy, *wow!*” moment. Only this

time, instead of a coin, he awoke to discover a little wonder.





## **A Father's Advice to Himself**

Don't worry. The tooth fairy knows this beach house.

She will put a starfish under your son's pillow.

When he wakes, his tongue wiggling in the hole,  
dream she flew through the crack in the window.

And when he wonders, over the cereal bowl,  
if she knows Santa and his eight reindeer,  
consider how they all might vacation together,  
might even be *here* for all we know!

Notice every beautiful nothing, and  
make his world magic as best you can.

Put on your swimsuits, walk down to the sand.

Trail behind, step in his footprints and listen,  
when he holds the conch shell to your ear,

*Daddy, it's a walkie-talkie with the ocean.*

*Andrew Taylor-Troutman serves as poet pastor of Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, NC. His fourth book, Gently Between the Words, will be published in 2019.*

## Once, When I Was Young - Helen McClements

Once, when I was young, I had a dream that I would go to my Upper Sixth formal dance, svelte and glamorous, with a boyfriend in tow. For seven years, the 'formal' had been at the back of my mind. The formal was when you shrugged off that bright blue school uniform and emerged, radiant, to show your peers & teachers that you were more than just a nerdy teen. I was most disappointed that one of my teachers couldn't go, as she had tickets for a Daniel O'Donnell concert on the same night. Most unfair, I thought, everyone made an effort for this, even those who hung round church all weekend in their Lee jeans from the factory shop in Newtownards and *Fruit of the Loom* sweatshirts. Girls who NEVER dressed up, were rendered unrecognizable, with glossy locks and shimmery lipstick. And of course, they all had boyfriends. I rarely had a boyfriend. And then, miracle of miracles I managed to find myself a *sort-of* boyfriend. He'd recently been dumped and needed a diversion, and I was anxious to fill that role because 1)

he was a bit of a dish, and 2), it was Christmas and the formal was in February. All I had to do was hold on to him until then.



As the night itself approached, Formal Fever took hold. We took the train to Belfast, going to *Delaney's* for lasagne and chips and sneaky bottles of *Mateus Rosé*. Trips to Belfast were a new thing, and not something I did on a whim, lest I be blown up or shot. It was 1997, so that was still a real possibility. The mere mention of going to Belfast, and my grandmother would say in a sombre tone, *Watch out for the bombs*. In fairness, she had lived through the Nazi Blitz of

Belfast, hiding under the kitchen table while the roof crumbled above her. She probably had PTSD. However, I was willing to risk losing a limb if it meant getting a nice dress.

In those days, few people spent hundreds on formal attire. We ogled dresses from *Kookai* and *Monsoon*, though *Etams* and *Top Shop* were more in our price range. I bought a red satin dress in *Principles* for £35 with a cowl neckline and spaghetti straps. Inevitably, another girl wore the same dress on the night (cheeky), but we resolutely avoided each other.

In the preceding weeks I was in shocking humor as I tried to diet, ditching my after-school snack of four slices of white toast with real butter and homemade raspberry jam. Sometimes I had a slice of Cadbury's Chocolate roll to finish, or a slab of my grandmother's cake. Not eating these oddly coincided with the weight dropping off and I didn't have to resort to laxatives. A friend gave me make up tips and I booked an up-do with Michael Conroy on High Street. Then, disaster struck.

One of our friends was let down by her date. Never the most pro-active it had to be said, she left it up to us to find her another, with two days to go. At the time, the principal's son was doing a bit of Janitor work in the school. He was a smiley sort of a fellow so I asked if he'd like to be her date for the evening. He said he would. Phew, we all sighed.

Then, *my* date announced that he might not make it after all. Our formal was on a Wednesday and he worked in Dublin. Previously, it had felt like the height of sophistication, having a graphic designer 'sort of' boyfriend who worked in Dublin but that feeling soon dissipated when this news broke. Much to my embarrassment now, I recall asking if there were any flights between Dublin and Belfast. That, I thought, would be quite James Bond-ish, with him 'jetting in' for the occasion. There weren't, but he made it with just enough time to look smug and self-satisfied in a photo, with the air of someone who was doing me a terrific favor, which, I suppose, in a way he was.

The actual event at the Culloden Hotel, was probably the biggest

disappointment of my life to date. We were served platefuls of dried up turkey, most of which was scraped directly into the bin. The band was mediocre and there was, to me anyway, a sense of acute let down. The real anti-climax, however, was the *after* formal. The organizing committee, had, in an act of madness or desperation, booked the *Sea Cat* ferry for this, to sail from Belfast to Stranraer in Scotland. It was sold to us as an excellent option, as the bar was open all night. There was the promise of "live music". God help anyone taking the journey for real that night, with about a hundred kids in formal attire lurching about from excess drink or the rhythm of the waves. The "live music" was one disconsolate chap on a keyboard. His eyes bore an expression of utter defeat, as indeed they would, if your career trajectory had led you to here, playing *Sweet Caroline* to a bunch of drunk sixth-formers. The janitor ditched my friend for another girl at the *Sea Cat* terminal before we even set sail, which meant that she spent the whole crossing to Scotland and back, crying inconsolably.

'Sort of' boyfriend and I broke up shortly afterwards. "Don't worry," said my mum. "There will be other formals." "I never want to hear of another bastard formal again," I replied. But six years later, there I was, this time as a teacher in Bloomfield Collegiate. Back to North Down we went, this time to the Clandeboye Lodge. I had an actual boyfriend this time, called Donal, but he was a doctor, up doing "doctory" things that night in Coleraine. I missed Donal: I wished he could have seen me, in my finery. This formal was even more tedious than the first formal. It wasn't so much *no craic*, as *minus craic*; a *craic vacuum*. I took to the drink, and suddenly, the band seemed to improve. I bopped about a bit and metamorphized into Miss McClements, the "young cool teacher", giving it stacks on the dance floor. Of *course* I took the shot a student offered. Ruby red in color, it tasted innocuous enough, until the tabasco hit the back of my throat. Little f\*\*ker. I retched & ran to the bathroom. If toilets could talk, that one would have phoned the Samaritans. Up came the shot, the wine and the dinner. My eyes were streaming, my throat was

burning and a small crowd had gathered outside the cubicle. "Are you ok Miss?" they asked, genuinely concerned. "Oh, I'm absolutely fine," I chirped, adopting the cadences of the locale, as though that was going to detract from the state I was in.

My dad had kindly agreed to pick me and two others up when festivities were over. I rang home. "Can you come early?" I bleated, "I am most unwell." I hid in the toilets before attempting to emerge discreetly. I didn't manage that. My friends were in fine fettle by now and non-plussed at being told they had to leave. It was 10 o'clock. "My dad will be here soon," I said. And there he was, in his anorak, marching purposefully across the dance floor. Raging he was too. 'Into the car,' he said. I was a

disheveled mess with mascara down my face. "What am I going to tell Donal?" I wept. Donal was a committed Pioneer. He didn't get pissed at formals, or anywhere else. "You say nothing!" snapped my dad. "You're not a Catholic, you don't have to confess everything!"

I will urge my children when their time comes, to avoid the whole formal pantomime. Nine years ago, I did however, squeeze into my *Principles* gown and attend another formal in the Stormont Hotel, this time with the husband. It too, was shite. "I'm sorry for dragging you to this," I whispered as we left early to go to the Errigle Inn. "Totally worth it to see you in that frock," he replied. I wish I could have shared that moment with seventeen year old me. She'd have loved it.

*Helen McClements is a mother, writer and teacher from Belfast. She can often be heard on BBC Radio where she shares her musings on 'Thought for the Day'. In contrast to this, she writes a blog called [www.Sourweeblog.com](http://www.Sourweeblog.com), where she unleashes her frustrations at juggling parenthood with work and the vagaries of life.*



## Living humbly, faithfully, within Earth's whole biosphere - Boyd Wilson



We, the 7.7 billion big-brained biped mammals, *Homo sapiens*, may feel a bit less full of ourselves in light of the fact that our bodies are said to weigh in at just 0.1% of the mass of all life on Earth. The rest is dominated by plant life with 80%, bacteria with 13%, then fungi with 2%. Animal life (insects having the biggest

share) make up a mere one-sixth of fungi's modest portion.

That's the science. What does faith say to me?

For every 100 humans stocking the planet when I was born there are now about 370. Yes, I'm old, but my 80+ years amount to less than a flicker in the timescale of life on Earth. Our impact on the

whole web of life and its resource base has soared scarily faster. The rush gets more out of control despite voices of wisdom both ancient and modern.

It may help to note that while the Hebrew and Greek scriptures were being written, around 19 to 26 centuries ago, the human tally grew to less than 3% of what it is now.

The thing is, it's not all about us and our time. Our species is a latecomer in the 4.3 billion years since the first primitive life cells emerged in water, beginning the saga of evolution.

Let's first rubbish the old notions that Homo sapiens is somehow the only species immune from the ecological truth that species exceeding the limits of gross consumption in the wider context of life become extinct. We have no exclusive, supernatural, rights and expectations regardless of the rest of the biosphere.

Yes, there's plenty fuel for claims of divinely ordained exclusiveness in selective readings of ancient traditions. But

there are deeper grounds for a holistic, ecologically earthed faith.

Here's a funny thing: around 1967 a series of articles I published in *The Southland Times* on sustainably productive husbandry of farmland were accorded New Zealand's top award for economic journalism. The joke in retrospect? The values described and discussed didn't include a single number preceded by a dollar sign.

For me, the key to hope is that elusive truth - glimpsed, sometimes felt, pointed to in nature, art, science, all healthy religion but never to be objectively defined - I know as The Incarnation. This truth, I believe, is from before the Big Bang, is eternal and embraces all people, indeed all creation. And, for me, the window upon the Incarnation is the thoroughly earthed, natural, human life of Jesus.

Whatever perceptions people begin their search from, the challenge, I say, is to together seek faith within this truth, agreeing that it's bigger than we can

possibly contain within any and all of our boxes of religiosity, spirituality, science, art, knowledge, cultures, traditions, whatever... ; indeed, bigger and more potentially life-giving than we can more than begin to imagine. Yet imagination is

precisely the gift our species has to share in hope for all life on Earth.

Perhaps I've lost most who have read this far. That's OK. I, too, am lost, but lost in challenging wonder.

*Boyd Wilson was a prominent agricultural journalist before becoming an Anglican parish priest specializing in rural context of land-inclusive community.*



## You Can Run On For a Long Time - Martha Tatarnic

*Why, Physically and Emotionally, our Gated Communities Aren't an Option*

My Spiritual Director asked me this summer if there was a particular verse of Scripture that was refreshing me over these slow, hot months. I didn't answer with a biblical verse, but rather with a song that had been in my head since the beginning of July. It's a traditional, but I know it as a Johnny Cash song. My husband Dan and I purchased Cash's late-life, stripped-down masterpiece, *American V: A Hundred Highways*, thirteen years ago at a stop on our first cross-Canada road trip:

*You can run on for a long time  
Sooner or later, God'll cut you down.*

I have always found the dark and threatening tone of Cash's singing appealing. I hear it and it is like the skies open up for me, recalling the big prairie skies of Saskatchewan where I heard this song for the first time.

Something else opens in me, too. For any of us who have known what it is to be backed into a corner of our own making, we can't help, deep down, to long for the possibility that God's terrifying redemption could actually set us free. Ultimately, that freedom must be connected to the song's inherent promise: we're not in this alone. We can get pretty far along the road of self-reliance, but we will come back to this truth. We can't out-run the relationships on which our lives are grounded.

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Not that we aren't given every opportunity to try.

Our level of material wealth and the very fast-paced nature of technology make religion and community seem quaint and unnecessary in today's world. More importantly, we are relentlessly shoe-horned into believing that a reasonable goal in life is to keep what I, myself, have. We are sold skin creams to keep our



face from getting wrinkles. We are sold insurance policies so that all that we currently have will be protected in the case of disaster striking. We are sold diets and health fads so that we can “maintain” or “get back” our figure. We are sold ever-shifting advice on how to stay healthy, this holy grail promise held out to us, so thoroughly promising that death and decline can be held at bay... if we just eat the right number of vegetable servings and get on the most recent band wagon of the right cooking oil.

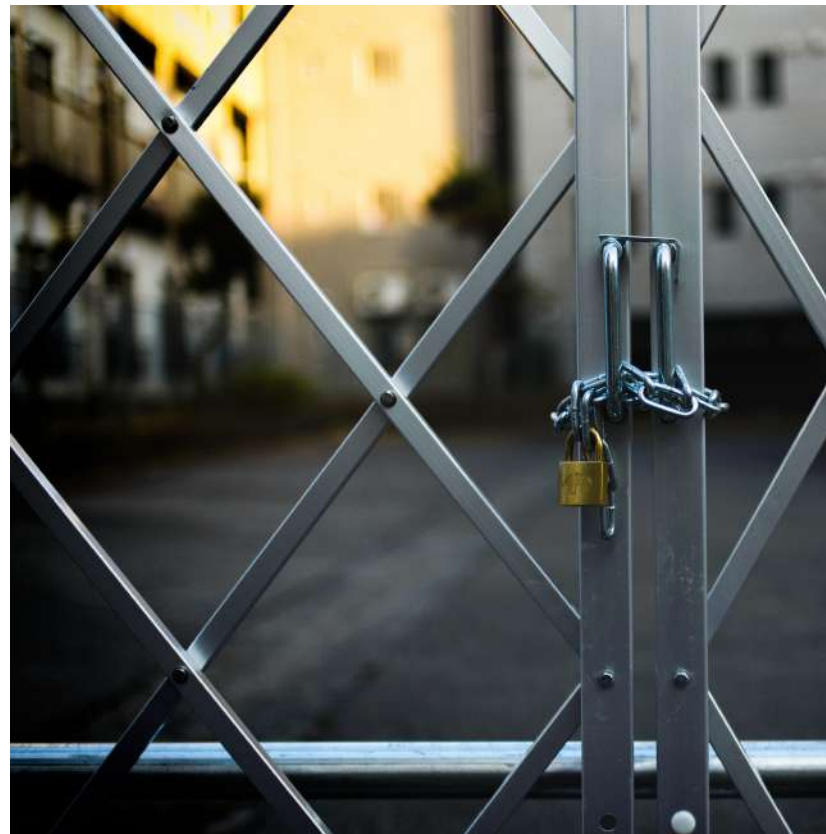
There isn't necessarily anything wrong with insurance or skin cream or healthy lifestyles. But when we are primed to think that this life is about guarding ourselves, protecting and attaining what we are told is the status quo, it becomes difficult to imagine that there might be anything outside our religious pursuit of our own maintenance.

Sometimes, though, the lie of it all catches up. Sometimes you can't run any further. Sometimes it all comes crashing down.

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I serve as an Anglican priest in a downtown southern Ontario church, St. George's, St. Catharines. This summer, we have been stuck on essentially one topic of conversation. In June, our Parish Council agreed to offer space to a temporary shelter seven nights a week through July and August in an endeavor called *Out of the Heat*.

The program has been eye-opening. I didn't know that we at St. George's needed to have our eyes opened. We have offered a daily free neighborhood breakfast for more than twenty-two years.





We are very familiar with the local population experiencing homelessness, and those living on poverty's edge in our downtown. Yet none of us really had any idea that the offer of a mat in our gymnasium would be the only option for so many people to find a safe and comfortable sleep. None of us realized just how much the need in the core of our small city keeps mushrooming. Our staff have this summer picked up more opioid needles from our property and called more ambulances for suspected overdoses than can be imagined. The number of guests at our morning breakfast has at least doubled. *Out of the Heat* ends in the morning and spills out into our parking lot, where spaces are rented out to help support our programs. Our staff have had to play make-shift security, asking people to leave our property so that others can also use it. And we know we are asking these good folk to leave when they have nowhere else to go; we can see the variety of illnesses—mental and physical—that are plaguing them, and yet we have only the faintest idea of how we might be able to help.

Our church is one of the most beautiful and historic buildings in all of St. Catharines. It has become appealingly simple to imagine that if we just disband *Out of the Heat*, everything will return to normal. And yet, short of moving our church into a gated community, these problems are right here, right where we are. You can't see the level of need in our downtown and not come to the crashing realization that the system is failing far too many people. You can't see the suffering in our community and then go back to your neighborhood bubble, thinking this isn't about you. You can't come to this brink, this overwhelming brink, where whatever we have to offer so clearly isn't enough and not fall on your knees, praying to God that the call to love our neighbor be heard far and wide and that a whole city might figure out how to work together as brothers and sisters.

The hardest thing about the summer has been the realization that we can't put the genie back in the bottle. We might want to play the ostrich, sticking our heads into the sand of our individual spheres of self-concern. But it simply isn't

possible to make believe that we don't also have a share in these problems.

This is hard. And also freeing.

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The Anglican Church of Canada has been profoundly blessed now for many years by the faithful leadership of Indigenous people who have tenaciously continued to walk with us, despite historically and continuously causing them so much harm. They have been willing to pursue reconciliation with the colonial church, even though we really have no right to ask them.

From our Indigenous Church has come hard-earned wisdom, hard-earned from being on the front lines of community trauma and crisis for generations. Several of our Canadian Indigenous communities have made global news headlines when waves of youth suicides have marked them as the highest suicide rates, per capita, anywhere on the planet. Every one of our church's Indigenous leaders has not just had to be versed in Scripture and theology, but also in suicide

prevention and addiction counseling.

There has been a tendency in the colonial church to imagine that what we really need on the road to reconciliation is to give our Indigenous people the space to "be themselves." We've been working for a long time toward self-determination in our church, building in the structures that allow Indigenous people to make decisions in ways that are consistent with their own traditions and cultural norms.

There is a grave delusion baked into this approach. First of all, we can't just simply quarter off part of our church, and part of our country, and imagine that if we just give them space, the rest of us should just continue going about our regular business.

Second of all, to attempt to do so is to miss out.

Our Indigenous leaders have fiercely named the suicide and addiction crises in their communities as being, at its heart, a spiritual crisis. And what they have learned is that the commonly accepted methodology of

connecting individual people with the available supports and resources doesn't work.

What they have learned instead is that these spiritual traumas require communal interventions. What needs to be strengthened and attended to most is *relationship*. People need to reconnect to one another in healthy ways, and they need to feel rooted to the earth and to the One who created that earth. One of the most dramatically successful suicide intervention programs currently offered is a youth music program, first piloted at Six Nations near Brantford, Ontario.

It isn't enough to just share with Indigenous people the space to tend to themselves and learn their own lessons. Those of us who are not Indigenous need to pay attention. They are leaders. *Their* story may even be *our* story.

The crises we have witnessed and lived all summer in St. Catharines, these are not disconnected from those of our First Nations' people. We are also in spiritual crisis. And we also need communal solutions.

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These communal solutions need to start at the level of changing our hearts. This is the ultimate spiritual trick, pride. It is said to be the greatest sin, the biggest barrier to relationship with God. It is certainly the biggest barrier to relationship with one another. In a million different ways, we trick ourselves into thinking that we stand alone, that we go it alone, that we are self-sufficient, that we don't need. We get so fooled into thinking this, that sometimes when our self-sufficiency comes crashing down—and it always will, because we can't and don't stand alone, we do make mistakes, we get sick, and we will each die—sometimes when that self-sufficiency comes crashing down, we think all is lost and that we have nowhere to turn.

The status quo sets up shop in the gated community of my heart too. I make believe that this life is about doing what I want; I just need to follow my desires; I am in charge of my own destiny; my worldview is the one that represents the truth.

Ultimately, it's the urgency of Johnny Cash's song that sounds most hopeful to me. Our false idols will crumble one way or the other.

Mistakes, heart breaks, illness, mortality—it will all catch up with us. The dire need of our world will crash through those gates. Our beautiful edifices will be confronted by the ugliness we so want to ignore.

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*Out of the Heat* ended on the last night of August. On the first day of September, a Sunday, our parking lot was strewn with debris, make-shift tents, shopping carts full of each individual's worldly goods. Some of the homeless population had already started to migrate toward the park to claim a place to sleep under the trees until November comes, hoping for a mild autumn as they wait for the next temporary shelter to open its doors. Even if we wanted to extend the program at our church, the city's bylaws are now prohibiting us from doing so.

We had to begin asking those still lingering on our property to clean up and leave.

Our church's work now re-directs itself into advocacy, seeking those communal allies that can work together to seek solutions to our housing and addiction and mental illness crisis. We are opening the doors of a newly renovated part of our church to offer counseling and mentorship to at-risk youth in our city in a centre we are calling STEP. We have a hunch that the most important thing we can offer to the need around us is ourselves: community.

We will keep opening our sanctuary, and the sanctuary of our hearts, in prayer. We try to remember, and to offer others this truth too, that our false idol of self-reliance has long ago crumbled, that the only hope we have is doing this together.

*Martha Tataranic is the lead priest of St. George's Anglican Church in St. Catharines, Ontario, and author of **The Living Diet: A Christian Journey to Joyful Eating** Once, When I Was Young - Helen McClements*

## A Positive of a Negative? - Gareth Higgins

Three years ago, on the morning of the second Sunday of November, I put on some Leonard Cohen in the background while Brian and I let ourselves wake up. We were very tired, physically and emotionally, the shock of the Presidential election result still not sinking in. Fear for the future of many, and uncertainty even for ourselves was thick, and heavy.

The playlist shuffled through, and soon played one of Cohen's most recent songs, Come Healing, whose second verse goes like this.

Behold the gates of mercy

In arbitrary space

And none of us deserving The  
cruelty or the grace

O solitude of longing

Where love has been confined  
Come healing of the body Come  
healing of the mind

O see the darkness yielding That  
tore the light apart Come healing of  
the reason Come healing of the  
heart

When the song ended, Brian said That's a lovely song. We should sing that at church. A nice thought, which I quickly forgot, and the day unfolded. That evening, we came as usual to the church community where we are members. This time, confused and frightened of what was going to happen in the world, we were feeling the need of the circle, and the mercy, more than usual. And there they were, printed on an insert page to the order of service, the lyrics to Leonard Cohen's song Come Healing. It turned out to have been planned a few weeks previously, someone knowing that whatever the result of the election, we would need healing.

\*

I want to touch on five notions, taking place exactly three years after so many of us were confronted by the choice that many of our neighbors made to opt for a story of separation and scapegoating, instead of connection, sharing, and



community action for the common good.

The first notion is that we are not alone. It is a small sign to find one person saying on a Sunday morning That's a lovely song. We should sing it at church, only to discover that that is exactly what we would do that very night. But is a sign nonetheless that we are not alone. And there are bigger signs of the presence of love, of a new world waiting to be born, and people ready to birth it.

There has been so much grief in the past three years, so much news of the awful, that it has been at times difficult to get out of bed in the morning. And that's just for those of us who have been rattled and provoked; of course many people have been physically endangered, too, and their pain is greater than those of us who have merely had our certainty shaken. But we are not alone. We have always been promised that love conquers death, the good can come from the most difficult of circumstances, and that where two or three human beings collaborate for the common good, something much bigger than the sum of its parts is possible. We can

dilute the meaning of these words, partly because we are so used to them that overfamiliarity makes them seem less real; but when I stand back and think about it, it is clear: love outlasts even death; there is no situation that can separate us from love, even the most grievous ones, because love may be grieving too; and part of the answer to so many of our challenges is simply to gather, in twos and threes, or two or three dozen here in our circles, or two or three thousand for a march for our lives or the climate or the Women's March or Pride or Black Lives Matter or #MeToo.

The second notion is that while grief, fear, and even rage are completely natural and understandable responses to the aggression, anxiety, and dislocation of the past few years, if we do not learn to work with grief, fear and rage in a healthy way, they can turn into depression or even violence, towards ourselves or others. The good news is that love has given us not only the need but the genius, and not only the genius, but the responsibility to form communities in which we can hold space for that

grief, fear, and rage. So whatever you are grieving just now; and whatever you fear; and whatever is stirring your rage, whether it is a stone in your shoe or an earth-shaking anxiety attached to tangible realities that seem unchangeable, inevitable, insurmountable, let me say it again.

You are not alone.

Love is stronger even than death.

Even the worst thing that has happened to you is being woven into something from which love can emerge.

Where two or three are gathered, the spirit of cosmic, Undefeatable Love is present too.

My friend Ken Morefield in Raleigh gave me permission to share these words, posted in November 2019:

Today is the 40th anniversary of the day my father was taken hostage at the American Embassy in Tehran, Iran.

Not much left to say that hasn't been said, numerous times, by people more eloquent than I. Time

passes. I try to strike a balance between not being trapped in the past while acknowledging the ways it has influenced and continues to influence the present.

My father once said that he would never go through that experience again for all the money in the world, but neither would he give it up.

Shit happens, and we learn from it who we are.

There is a poem from Rilke I have remembered recently:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night.

...Flare up like a flame

and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final...

Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

Ken continues "I enjoyed talking about God when I was younger...But even in my youth, I didn't like talking about how God walked with me silently out of the night and helped me to just keep going. I (and some of my loved ones) have often said in many and various ways that the absolute best thing about my brother being murdered or my father being a hostage was that I didn't have to spend my whole life waiting for the worst thing that could happen to me and wondering how I would respond to it. In retrospect that sentiment feels as profound as it is naive.

I hope those experiences have made me a more compassionate person, though there are days when I sort of doubt it. I know there are a lot of people out there who are experiencing their worst day today, or just experienced it yesterday, or who are looking forward in fear to experiencing it tomorrow. God is speaking to you as He makes you. If you cannot give Him your hand today -- because you cannot see Him or don't believe Him -- I offer you mine. I did not make you. I cannot

save you. But I've been to the nearby country they call life, and I'm happy to walk with you as we grope our way through the darkness towards it."

\*

So to turn to the third notion, let's go to an ancient sacred book. I did not grow up in a liturgical tradition, so the revised common lectionary and I are pretty much strangers. But it seems serendipitous that the texts in the lectionary this week are the ones we read earlier:

The Hebrew Prophet Haggai, who apart from having a really cool name, knows how to stir the heart toward some real inspiration.

Haggai says: Is there anyone here who saw the Temple the way it used to be, all glorious? And what do you see now? Not much, right?

So get to work! God is speaking. Get to work! Get to work, all you people! - God is speaking. Yes, get to work! For I am With you. I'm living and breathing among you

right now. Don't be timid. Don't hold back.

Before you know it, I will shake up sky and earth, ocean and fields. I own the silver. I own the gold.

This Temple is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning but an even more glorious finish: a place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness.

And so, the third notion I want to share tonight is that something good is unfolding, even amidst the pain and trouble; and that it's normal to forget the good news when overwhelmed by the brokenness. But the story doesn't end there.

\*

How does this speak to us in our current moment?

The past three years have revealed much trouble in the world. The shock election result was magnified by the way we receive information these days - electronic media, including the little devices that live in our pockets, transmit information, propaganda, anxiety

and sometimes wisdom at speeds that even a few years ago would have seemed like science fiction. It's a social earthquake that we no longer have an editorial buffer between ourselves and what we call "the news"; that we can - and often do - repeatedly check for what's happening in the world all day long. The lack of buffer is a good thing - no longer does it depend on Walter Cronkite or Katie Couric to tell us what we're supposed to care about, and how we're supposed to care about it. But the lack of buffer is also a challenging thing - because it can be really difficult to get a sense of perspective about what's actually happening in the world. One major example is that the rate of violent crime in the United States has decreased by between 50-70% in the last twenty-five years depending on the source; but a majority of people living in the US believe that violent crime has actually increased during that period. When we get our information without a wisdom buffer, often from a device that we carry with us on our person, reality can easily distort.

But of course the very same technology has multiplied the capacity of people to form mass movements for positive change in an astonishingly rapid timeframe. Think of the marches that occurred in the wake of the election; think of how many times you have seen footage or heard about thousands, tens of thousands, and sometimes millions of people putting their bodies where their hearts are all around the world - and getting out there to show solidarity with just causes.

The noise on the surface of what is usually called politics has been ugly and divisive; but many of the undercurrents of politics and democracy right now thrill me.

A year ago, more women were elected to Congress than ever before. More People of Color. More Indigenous people. More openly LGBTQ people.

The marches may be happening less often, and fewer people may be showing up - but this is for really exciting reasons. One reason people aren't marching as much as before is that we are getting involved. And

more privileged people are willing to give up some narrow interest to serve the common good. I personally know two people running for Congress.

There is momentum toward resolving the climate crisis - with the strikes initiated by Greta Thunberg; the movement toward planting millions of trees to heal the earth; even Fukushima in Japan seeking to transform itself into eleven solar power and ten wind power plants; and on Easter Monday, 77% of Germany's net public electricity was powered from renewable sources - turns out God had already provided the solution to human interference with the environment.

There is momentum toward restorative justice and prison reform.

There is momentum toward ending violence against women and toward replacing toxic masculinity with emotionally mature men.

There is momentum toward people not only buying their food locally, but growing it themselves.

There is momentum toward enshrining the human rights of LGBTQ+ people.

There is momentum toward solidarity with immigrants, and those living with profound insecurity.

There is momentum toward processes that help address the legacy of past national sins - the conversation about reparations for the descendants of Africans brought to these shores in chains, and about the original sin perpetrated against the Indigenous and Native people of this land has never been so deep, and so mainstream, and so heard.

There is even some momentum toward building civil and interdependent relationships between people who are politically divided.

And yes, there is pain and struggle. But we know more than ever about how to help with pain and struggle. The legacy of the activism of the late 1960s is that we have feminism, human rights, therapy, and the ability to be vulnerable widely

accessible in both private and public spheres.

As always, we are part of the answer to our prayers.

And so, to the fifth and final notion.

What are we supposed to do?

My friend Eric, a UCC pastor in Nebraska, told me recently that he used to think that the human race was about to go off a cliff; he had even been preparing his congregation for this. Not to depress or scare them, but so they could be ready to love the world more, and meet the new needs that would arise. But over the past couple of years, Eric has changed his mind. He now feels that we may have confused prophecies of doom for Messianic ones. For Eric, and for me, Love is supposed to be reborn in every generation, and it is the task of every generation to be midwives for what' next.

So try this on as a thought experiment:

- What if the next stage in the evolution of the common good is imminent?

- What if tens of thousands of people are waking up to a new level of consciousness, which really just means tens of thousands of people devoting themselves to universal Love, to loving their neighbors as themselves, and to being willing to make sacrifices for the common good?
- What if we are on the verge of an unprecedented series of nonviolent revolutions across the world, that will transform things from top to bottom?
- What if Greta Thunberg is the face of a generation?
- What if the spirit of this is alive among us right here, right now, in this community? What if Love is trying to be born among us, and we just don't know it? How differently might we treat each other if we truly believed that we were sitting beside an embodiment of Love?
- What if there are many Second Comings - what if it is true that this era did not begin with the rise of authoritarian populist politicians, but that that was just the way the last era ended; and the new age is begun in movements led by women, girls, people of color,

LGBTQ+ people, immigrants, and other historically excluded people, powered by previously nonexistent networking capability, and whose purpose is to create Beloved Community, with Love, each other, with the earth, and even with our enemies?

What if, along with the pain and struggle of the present moment, we're also actually on the verge of a safer and more compassionate world?

I don't know for sure. I do know that wisdom tells us to take no fearful thought for tomorrow. Instead, as Wendell Berry says, we are to ask ourselves, What good thing does the world need that I could get good at doing? And then do that. Because whether the human race is going to go off a cliff, or enter a new level of wonder, we are called to do the same thing: to nurture and tend communitarian love societies in which we bear each other's burdens, tend to the soil and water on the streets where we live, and serve the common good from whatever gifts we have been given.



But just for fun, let's go with the hopeful vision of an unprecedented series of nonviolent revolutions. The thing is, it won't happen - or it won't happen as fully - if we don't take our place in it.

So if you want to take your place in it; if you want to overcome the three most pressing challenges of our time - the rise of authoritarian populism, the threat of nuclear conflict, and most of all, the climate emergency, try some of these, knowing that the carpenter from Nazareth, and pretty much every other wisdom teach, invites us to be wise as serpents, innocent as doves.

#### 1: For the soul:

However you pray, pray. Pray to ask the right questions, to face the best truths, to not be distracted by the things that could distract us, and to ask where you fit in all of it.

#### 2: For the mind:

Focus on what is beautiful more often than what is ugly. Consider a reverse Sabbath from electronic media. Instead of reading the news

every day, get out into the world, talk with people, be in nature. Read the news only once a week, one out of every seven days; and look for sources that are at least as emotionally mature as you are, and at least as committed to the common good.

#### 3: When it comes to activism:

Instead of being overwhelmed by all the trouble, I encourage you to discern and commit to one cause that you're willing to devote more energy to. Pursue that one. We are called to be Love resurrected in the world collectively - no one of us does it all. You have your part, and I have mine.

#### 4: For our relationships:

Love your enemy. Release the negative emotions you hold about people on the other side of the political divide. Don't make tribalism worse.

Some of our current moment is distressing, and sometimes even terrifying. But we are not alone; and the even the fear is an invitation to imagine a whole new tomorrow. As Brother Roger of Taizé, who lived light, and

experienced the greatest suffering,  
said:

"During the darkest periods of  
history, quite often a small number  
of people, scattered throughout the  
world, have been able to reverse  
the course of historical evolutions.  
This was only possible because

they hoped beyond all hope. What  
had been bound for disintegration  
then entered into the current of a  
new dynamism."

What if this is supposed to be us?

Turn to the person next to you, and  
take in who they really could be.  
Offer them your hand.

Are you in?

*Gareth Higgins is an Irish writer and co-founder of The Porch, Movies & Meaning, and the New Story Festival.*

## Unwinding the Way: Belfast Transformations - Jasmin Pittman Morrell



Belfast unwound me. Slowly, suddenly, I found myself stretched as open and wide as the blue, unspooled ribbon of horizon across the Belfast Lough.

I knew the city had suffered.

From a childhood spent on America's east coast, I sometimes heard reports blast from Northern Ireland, and interpreted those stories through the lens of a child's eye. Men killed people with guns and bombs. It seemed as if the whole country exploded, spraying glass and wood and brick into a gray, unyielding sky. There was something called the IRA, and they were angry about things I didn't understand. *I was frightened. I*

couldn't imagine how the people living in that far away place must have felt.

Now as an adult, from the moment I stepped off the bus that had brought me from Dublin to the Great Northern Mall in the heart of Belfast, I recognized the weight of a not too distant past, mingled with the quiet beauty of a place dedicated to its own transformation. I knew this retreat would be a gift.

Rumpled and groggy from travel, sitting in Caffé Nero with a freshly made cappuccino, I drew the first of many deep breaths. My book, *Queen of the Fall*, lay open on the table. "So great are some hungers,

so unrelenting,” Livingston writes, “that whatever even halfway fills them must be tried...What can we do but feed, then feed again, the tender shoots within us?”

The foundation of one of my core relationships had recently cracked. My heart was hungry for solidity, for peace, and a salve for its wounds. Looking out beyond my own life and into my community back home, I longed to bring the same salve to others. Through my work, I spent time with people living on the margins of society. They lived outside in tents, even when the ground sparkled with crystals of ice. They met, or dodged, their burnt-out, underpaid, social workers. They were well acquainted with others looking past them, in the same way you might look past a road sign or a fire hydrant. In May of 2016, it was a pre-Trump, pre-Brexit world, but America and all of her injustices still seemed able to compress the air in my lungs. Perhaps paradoxically, knowing some of what Belfast had suffered allowed me a certain sense of respite that no sandy beach vacation ever could. This was a

place where I could learn something about peace.

Watching a distinctly northern Irish world flow past from the café’s large windows, I got lost in a waking dream. Down the street, the Crown Bar presided over the corner like a gentleman full of secrets. Its architecture caught my untrained eye, and the cream-colored, upper half of the building appeared vaguely Victorian, though with warm dashes of color of which I imagined Victorians might not have approved. Across from the Crown, a film crew hovered around a large group of women, costumed in white leotards with red sashes. The women shivered like poppies in a spring freeze. I didn’t know it in that moment, but Samson and Goliath, the dual shipbuilding cranes used to create the *Titanic* stood sentry nearby, emblematic and bold. By the time my ride walked through the café door to take me to our lodging, I’d fallen in love.

What is love if not a moment of recognition we continue to return to again, and again, and again? Looking out into the world, our hearts connect us to a place. Either

the landscape mirrors something within our own souls, or the story of a place, almost like a living entity, reaches out and takes us by the hand. Or sometimes we're connected to another person, because in them we recognize a home. We know we can belong. In love, we're continually recognizing and returning to God.

\*

A few days before I was scheduled to fly into Dublin, I overheard my boss remark to a co-worker, "Jasmin will be out of the office... she's going on a pilgrimage to Northern Ireland." I watched my colleague's eyes widen with admiration, and perhaps a touch of envy.

I wanted to shrug off the notion of a *pilgrimage*. It seemed to imply a mantle of spiritual loftiness I didn't want to wear. I wasn't a pilgrim, nor had I thought of this as a sacred journey.

But I was wrong.

Over the course of the week, I listened in suspense and awe to some of the politicians, faith leaders, and artists who had helped

bring peace to their communities, in a time when neighborhoods were divided into deadly lines between Catholic and Protestant. Our group spoke of the U.S. civil rights movement, reminded that a movement is made up of thousands of individuals dedicated to the daily, sometimes mundane, work of dismantling oppression. We basked in music and poetry, and light pouring through the stained glass of beautiful, airy cathedrals.

Then, in the quieter moments, healing had its way with me. Walking in the granite Mourne Mountains with a fellow traveler, we began to learn each other's histories, developing an easy camaraderie that nurtures me to this day. I healed over sticky toffee pudding and beer in a pub with a new friend, a local woman whose work paralleled my own caregiving back home. Riding the train with my roommate, we bonded over our mutual penchant for solitude, discovering how easy it was to relax in each other's company. In our cottage, I healed in an armchair with my housemates, women with wonder and depth and courage in their souls. We drank tea, and diets-

be-damned, we indulged in thick slices of bread slathered with butter. And one afternoon spent in silence, I wept beside a creek until I was spent, while grazing sheep kept benevolent watch over me. The creek rushed and tripped over its stones, absorbing my grief and eventually, washing it away.

In this way, I left a piece of myself in the Irish countryside, and the kelly green hills forgave me the intrusion.

On another day, after I'd taken some free time to wander through Belfast on my own, I stumbled across the Sunflower Pub. The bartender gave me a hearty welcome—any American who didn't ask for Guinness, but a locally crafted stout, earned his respect. A live band had begun to strum a few songs, when it was time for me leave to catch the train back to our retreat lodging. Filled by music and the easygoing charm of the pub, I hopped on the train, on the line I *thought* would take me back to where I needed to be.

Soon, as the train clipped further and further away from the city, I realized I didn't recognize any of

the stops. Commuters leaving work and going back home gradually emptied the train car. Looking out the window, wide swaths of heather blanketed the fields. We'd reached the end of the line, and I was one of the few passengers left to exit the train step off onto the platform.

Inside the train station, a man with deep laugh lines around his eyes and eyebrows like bushy, white caterpillars stood at the ticket counter. As I approached, he took one look at me and asked kindly, "What're ya' doing all the way out here, love?"

*Losing my way, I wanted to say. But, I'm making a new one.*

Jasmin traveled to Ireland with *The Porch*, on one of our annual retreats. You can find out more - and maybe join us - at

[www.irelandretreats.com](http://www.irelandretreats.com)

*Jasmin Pittman Morrell is a writer and editor living in Asheville, North Carolina with her husband and two daughters. She enjoys facilitating healing through creativity, imagination, and deep listening.*

## America is a Family Squabble - Stan Dotson

*As my first blow against it, I would not stay.*

*As my second, I learned to live without it.*

*As my third, I went back one day and saw*

*that my departure had left a little hole*

*where some of its strength was flowing out,*

*and I heard the earth singing beneath the street.*

– **Wendell Berry, The Mad Farmer and the City**

*Do not be afraid, little flock, for God has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*

*Sell your possessions and give to the poor.*

— **The Gospel of Luke\***

*\*A Note from the Author: Sacred texts have been and continue to be an important resource for most cultures in the world, with narratives and teachings that help us deepen our understanding of who we are in the world. As a Christian, I find the Bible, particularly the teachings of Jesus, to be this kind of resource, providing a larger Story in which to place my story. Despite the ever-present temptation of dominant cultures to freeze these texts and use/abuse them as justifications of social control, I find it well worth the trouble and hard work to thaw the texts out and allow them to live freely and do their challenging and liberating work.*

*Arroz con mango* is a great Cuban expression used to describe any two things that don't belong together, like rice with mango. My three year old neighbor Lucas loves a particular cartoon where the characters think up such things, and there's a great word to react whenever you hear an example of rice and mango—*¡guácala!* For

example, the host might ask *Do you like ice cream?* and the kids yell back, *¡Sí!* Then he asks *Do you like pepperoni pizza?* *¡Sí!*

*Do you like pepperoni ice cream?*

***¡Guácala!***

We see an example of *arroz con mango*, a *¡guácala!* combo, in the



words of Jesus ; it's the juxtaposition of two of Jesus' favorite images: sheep and kingdom. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for God has been pleased to give you the kingdom." Do you like sheep? ;*Sí!* Do you like the kingdom of God? ;*Sí!* Do you like sheep running around the throne in the king's palace? ;*Guácala!*

This particular rice and mango combination represents what is perhaps the longest-running conflict in human history: two dreams, two ideals, two visions of what it means to be human. According to anthropologists like Jared Diamond, this conflict is ten thousand years old and running, starting with the emergence of settled agriculture and the ensuing project of civilization that began around 8,000 BCE in the fertile crescent. Biblical scholars see the conflict illustrated in the Genesis account of Cain and Abel, with their divergent offerings of produce and lamb. Cain's offering represented the settled community; the Bible says he was the father of cities, with its attendant civilizing tendencies, while Abel's offering represented the much older

nomadic shepherding and hunting/gathering way of life (or as Jonathon is learning to call it in pre-school, the "foraging and tracking" way of life). The Genesis fratricide story hints at what was happening ten thousand years ago: as the settled communities developed and expanded they found coexistence with the nomads to be problematic, and started killing them off, or pushing them to the margins.

It's interesting to me to note that this conflict was not just occurring over there in the holy land; for some strange reason the urge to abandon the flock and construct kingdoms was happening all over the world, including here in the "new world" long before the arrival of the Europeans in 1492. Thousands of years before Columbus, Cuba was first inhabited by the foraging and tracking and fishing people known as the Guanahatabey, and long about the same time Cain was slaughtering Abel in the fertile crescent, along came the Ciboney, Cuba's first agricultural and settlement-oriented group of people. The Ciboney started killing

the Guanahatabeys and driving them further and further west, until Columbus and his explorers found the surviving remnant living in caves around Matanzas.

Cain and Abel's conflict doesn't stop with the Genesis murder account; it continues throughout the Hebrew Bible with competing understandings for the kind of life one can offer to God in order to be blessed. Cain and the civilizers won this culture war, as the story of kingdoms and empires has been the dominant, defining, and determinative voice not only for the semitic middle eastern people but for virtually the entire world over the past ten millennia. But the beauty of the Bible is that Abel's voice, the voice heard outside the realm of the kingdom, still echoes throughout. Listen to some examples of the biblical argument between the constructor of civilization and the nomadic shepherd:

- *Example One:* The descendants of Cain celebrate surplus production; you see this in the story of Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dream, while the descendants of Abel

strongly critique the idea of surplus; you see this in the story of manna in the wilderness.

- *Example Two:* Cain's folk worship the god of conquest who shuns strangers, seen in the Joshua story, while Abel's heirs worship the god of convivence who welcomes strangers, seen in the Ruth story.
- *Example Three:* The civilizers glorify the city in Isaiah 52 (*Awake, Zion, clothe yourself with strength! Put on your garments of splendor, Jerusalem, the holy city. ...Rise up, sit enthroned*). The same prophet, a few chapter earlier, channeled the voice of the shepherds who celebrate the destruction of the city (*The noisy city will be deserted and will become a wasteland forever, the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks, till the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest. ...How blessed you will be*

*when the city is leveled completely, letting your cattle and donkeys range free.)*

- *Example 4:* The kingdom folks turn in their hymnbook to sing Psalm 99 and imagine God as a King to be feared, (*The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned, let the earth shake*). The nomads, on the other hand, prefer the music of the beloved 23rd Psalm (*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*).
- Final example: As the city-oriented communities became ever more stratified and complex, the civilizers needed an ethic focused on social control, and they came up with 613 laws governing and regulating every aspect of daily life, while nomadic communities throughout time and across cultures have all shared a simple three-fold ethic of care, hospitality, and courage.

For hundreds of thousands of years prior to the first settled community, Abel's way of life was the only story, but it didn't take long for the kingdom story to push it to the margins of history. So if we spit into the test tube and send it off to Ancestry.com they are likely to reveal that we are all grandchildren of Cain (like it or not). The attraction of the city, the felt need for increased production and surplus, the influence of the latest technology, the nostalgia around homeland and the necessity of drawing borders, plus all of civilization's attendant assumptions of conquest and privilege and supremacy, this is the dominant story in which we all live. It is our project—and we spend a lot of time trying to restore it or reform it, to realize its ideal.

Without even being conscious of it, our cultural prejudice against those who live outside the project is woven throughout our vocabulary: words like *villain*, *vulgar*, *vagabond*, *vagrant*, *barbarian*, *delinquent*, *heathen*,—they all have etymologies denoting someone living outside the boundaries of civilized city life. Even the progressive reformer

Bartolome de Las Casas, the heroic advocate for indigenous rights in sixteenth century Cuba, said of the foraging and tracking Guanahatabeys that they were "living like *savages*" (that's another word with roots meaning "living in the woods").

Cain's vision of city and kingdom and empire was no doubt the dominant story in Jesus' day, and everybody had a place and a role in the story. The carpenters of Nazareth were aiding and abetting in the construction of new Roman cities, Galilee's fishermen were the heart and soul of the empire's export industry, the tax collectors were complicit in administration of Caesar's economy. Even dissenting groups like the revolutionary zealots were living out Cain's story: their aspirations were simply to replace one system of civilization with another. They thought their king could do it better. So it was a family argument between cousins, between the grandchildren of Cain.

And yet the people of faith still had to deal with this ancient alternative voice that just wouldn't go away; their scriptures told them that the

very earth, drenched in the blood of Abel, was reverberating and singing beneath the streets. So throughout the Hebrew Bible we see evidence of *arroz con mango*, these two stories colliding, and throughout those sacred texts we see some of the ancients trying to develop a third way, a way to reconcile the conflict. Their resolution was to bring the margins to the center, to bring the values of the shepherds into the city and incorporate them into the imperial project. This third way is seen most fully in the crowning of shepherd boy David as Israel's most iconic king. He was a musical shepherd-king who could sing "we are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture" in one verse and then in the very next verse invite the sheep to come into the palace courts where he ruled. This was an interesting way to try and heal the cultural divide between flock and kingdom.

When we think about and bemoan the ideological and cultural divide we have in our own country, it would do us good to remember that at its core this, too, is a family squabble between cousins, the grandkids of Cain. Most all of us

cousins share a basic conceptual framework of something we call "America," with liberty and justice for all, where liberty is mostly measured by purchasing power and justice is mostly defined as everybody having access to that power. We just argue about the best way to administer life within this framework. Then, when we think about an even greater historical divide, the deeper global divide between capitalism and socialism, now represented between the US and Cuba, it would do us well to remember that this, too, is just another family squabble, because both sides are also arguing over the same story and who can get it right. Karl Marx and Adam Smith, Elizabeth Warren and Donald Trump, they are all cousins in Cain's lineage with opposing ideas on how to administer the means of production and its distribution within the kingdom.

All the branches of Cain's family tree have at least one thing in common: in order to participate in the project it is essential to be identified with the *patria*, with the home team's version of the story. This is as true in the context of

Cuba as it is in the superpower US. Paco Rodés remembers how it was imperative for him and his progressive baptist compatriots in post-1959 Cuba to prove to the new government leaders that they were loyal to the project; they were just as revolutionary as anybody. Paco and other people of faith spent decades trying to prove their pedigree as bona fide Cubans. One of the worst things that can happen in Cuba is to be labeled counter-revolutionary. You lose all credibility, all respect, all sense of belonging. It's like being labeled un-American here in the US; no one wants to lose credibility and membership in the tribe and the access it affords. Think about what response is engendered by the phrase "America: love it or leave it"—don't we generally go to on the defensive? Hey, that's not fair, they're as American as you are! It's the same way the Squad of four congresswomen and their allies reacted to the president's racist remarks; a strong assertion of their pedigree as *real* Americans. No doubt they are; no matter where their ancestors immigrated from, they are bound to share the basic conceptual framework of liberty

and justice for all; they want everyone to have access and purchasing power. What's missing in these reactions is any consideration of actually leaving America; the pull of the membership narrative is way too strong.

We share these core values because we live and move and have our being in the cultural assumptions of Cain. The *23andMe* tests are not likely to reveal much Guanahatabey in our blood; we are in the line of Ciboney and Columbus and Las Casas. It's our dominant, defining, determinative story. And while we can celebrate that the foraging and tracking values of hospitality and compassion care have not been extinguished, our basic infrastructure remains that of a civilized kingdom, complete with all the complex web of laws and hierarchies and methods of social control and violence.

This is part of what makes Jesus so unique: he presented a completely different and unimagined third way to reconcile these two incongruent images of flock and kingdom, a way totally opposite to

what the ancients had tried. Jesus was not bent on assimilating the marginalized into the dominant center of his society; instead he was constantly calling people to leave the center and hightail it to the margins, making the Abel story dominant, inviting Cain to leave the civilization he founded and join a movement outside the city walls, creating an entirely new paradigm: a kingdom without a king, a commonwealth without borders, a reign based on the relationship of sheep and shepherd, grounded in the ancient nomadic values of compassion care and hospitality and courage.

Maybe Jesus intuited that the civilizing project will always come at great cost. For all its benefits—orchestras and architecture and cars and computers and competitive sports—the world's kingdoms always demand a steep price: violence and social control and corruption and assumptions of privilege and supremacy, be it Roman supremacy or white supremacy or US supremacy or Communist Party supremacy. Maybe young Jesus woke up one morning and on his way to work



heard some faint music, Abel singing beneath the streets of Nazareth, telling him to leave the carpenter shop, leave his family, leave the comforts of home. He tuned in and turned on to a new vocation as he dropped out of the old one. Jesus left hammer and saw at the construction site and started walking, inviting others to listen for the earth song, calling them to leave whatever was holding them captive in the kingdom—jobs or responsibilities or possessions or family—and join him on the journey.

When I think about the history of those who have claimed Jesus as Lord over the millennia, I wonder, could it be that churches by and large have been so screwed up because they have the story backwards? Since the time of Constantine, hasn't the church's mission been to weave the Jesus story into the tapestry of the Cain story, to assimilate the good shepherd and sheep and incorporate them into the courts of the palace?

What would it feel like to unravel the story here and now, to reverse the story that defines our dream as

an American one? What would it feel like to change the story that keeps us captive to a complicity of oppression and exploitation that produces suffering all over the world, not the least of which in Cuba? Jesus' calling was not to continue taking advantage of these systems, no matter the comforts they offer, but to leave them. Jesus consistently called people to divest themselves of the common dream, to withdraw complicity in Cain's project, to quit their jobs as he had done, to leave fishing nets and tax collecting tables and swords behind, to leave the possessions they so carefully guarded. What if Jesus' mandate to "Sell all you have and give it away" was not so much a do-good ethic of charity within the civilized world as it was a radical sign of leaving that world behind? What would it feel like to leave?

What would it feel like for any of us cousins to leave Cain's dream, whether it be *hasta la victoria siempre* or *one nation under God with liberty and justice for all*? I'm spending a lot of time these days trying to discern what such leaving would mean for me. Who knows what it would look

like for you? Maybe it would involve pulling up roots to start living a pilgrim life, or moving to another country to start from scratch with a new language where you have to be dependent on the kindness of strangers. Maybe it's figuring out how to keep Jonathon and his outdoor companions in the woods past pre-school— imagine him foraging and tracking all through elementary school, and then deepening his learning through high school and university, with all of his education based on the curriculum of the forest's wisdom. Whatever it might look like for you, and wherever you find yourself captive to the craziness of this civilized world, take a moment to consider brother Wendell's invitation :

*As your first blow against it, don't stay.*

*As your second, learn to live without it.*

*As your third, go back one day and see that your departure has left a little hole where some of its strength is flowing out,  
and listen to Abel singing beneath the street.*

And maybe you'll hear the voice of Jesus in the mix:

*Do not be afraid, little flock,  
for God has been pleased  
to give you the kingdom, another kind  
of kingdom,  
a kingdom of care, a kingdom of  
welcoming hospitality,  
a kingdom of courage. Amen.*

*Stan Dotson is a native of Asheville, NC, and now lives in Matanzas, Cuba. He is co-pastor of the First Baptist Church of Matanzas, and is guitarist for the fusion group Con Fe Mezcla'o.*

## Three Poems - Kim Falone

### Transition

I'm standing in ashes  
Searching the sky for smoke  
It's time to move on  
I'm looking for the next fire

For me it has always been fire  
Flames that have called to me  
Burned me, moved me  
Dragged me from my inert slumbers

Fires of passion, creative fire  
Fires that have destroyed  
Fires that have transformed  
Fires I have had to put out

Older now and worn  
I stand here in the ashes  
Of all my many tended fires  
I see new growth, strong roots, decay  
All with a life of its own

I am finished here

As I raise my tired eyes to the horizon

Searching again the sky for smoke

Quite unexpectedly

I smell the sea

The ageless, cleansing

Limitless, forgiving

Folding and unfolding sea

## **The Roar**

He lies next to his wife  
A woman he half loves  
In a hotel room near an airport  
It could be any hotel near any airport  
He could be any man  
Who loves with half his heart  
Who shuffles like a shadow  
Who speaks in half truths  
And lives a life  
That happened to him

Sometime after midnight  
A mistaken stranger  
With his room numbers confused  
Rattles the door handle of the man's room  
While attempting to insert a key  
Perhaps it is the intensity of the fear  
In his half sleeping state that opens the gate  
Perhaps it is grace  
But the man in the bed begins to roar

It is a huge and chilling roar  
The man is shocked at himself  
But he cannot stop it  
The roar has entered his body  
Through his pelvic floor  
It lifts him out of the bed  
Onto his feet  
Twists him slightly  
Flings back his head  
Stretches open his jaw  
Grabs hold of his tongue

It is wild deep animal sound  
The air around him quickens  
And becomes red hot  
The room begins to quiver  
The stranger is frightened off  
The woman is terrified  
And the roar continues

The sound that had lifted him up  
Now takes him down

He has to crawl on his belly  
Through the vibrating tunnel of this roar  
That is ripping open his chest  
He didn't create the roar  
But it is moving through him now  
And somewhere in the midst  
Of this ancient pulsating sound  
Emanating from his mouth  
He commits to it  
He lets the roar define him

When it is finished  
The man and the woman  
Lie back on the bed  
Silent and stunned  
Finally he laughs  
Then she laughs  
A laughter that leaps and guffaws  
A free laughter  
A loud laughter  
A laughter they have never shared  
They laugh themselves breathless



When he returns home from the airport

The next afternoon

It is gray and drizzling

He takes off his shoes

And walks barefoot into the garden

His feet sink into the damp earth

He crouches down

And digs his hands into the mud as well

Inside, his body is still vibrating

From the sound of the roar

His throat opens again

This time the sound is softer

A slow deep solid moan

The moan of a man

Who has just given birth to himself

## **Woman Alive**

One spring day

Early in the morning

In the middle of her life

She knew it was time

She opened the front door

With a great deal of fear

A lifetime ago

She had been stoned

And then burned

For the very thing

She was about to do

She stepped out on her front porch

With no clothing or covering of any kind

Sat down on the cool stones

And opened her legs

Revealing the center point

Of earthly pleasure

And the power source of all new birth

As she warmed herself  
In the rising sun  
Her throat opened as well  
And the tone she sounded  
Was dark, deep, ancient  
And true  
People began to pass by  
Many never noticed her  
Nor could they hear her voice  
Their eyes were focused  
On their own roads

Others shouted at her  
Shaming, degrading, accusing  
Threatening to destroy  
But she kept her rage in front of her  
Her grief alive inside her  
And none of them came near

Others were called – drawn to her  
They heard her sound from across town  
When they saw her sitting there

So open and so brave  
They smiled so deeply  
Their faces were changed forever

At the end of the day  
She was still alive  
She stood then in the moonlight  
Tears streaming from her eyes  
Moistening, strengthening  
Her breasts, her belly, her feet

Stronger now  
And safe enough  
She opened her arms  
Her heart wide  
She became  
A living, breathing prayer

*Kim Falone has an extensive background in the healing arts. A licensed bodyworker since 1986, she and her husband Vince are the founders of the Center for Relaxation and Healing in Chatham, New Jersey. For further information on Kim's writing or healing work, please visit [www.kimfalone.com](http://www.kimfalone.com)*

## Sky Fishing - David Wilcox

Growing up, I was always afraid of his anger. I grew up watching my dad suppress his rage. I figure those emotional tectonic plates move undetectably slowly, but over time the pressure builds up. I used to have this haunting fear that the anger somehow resides in me, as if I've always been living on a fault line.

When I was 19, we finally did the belated road trip that should've happened when I was 10, but better late than never. My dad was full of the romance of the road, fueled by travel books like *Blue Highways* and Steinbeck's: *Travels with Charlie*. So in the summer after my freshman year, we took off from Ohio in a rented van.

The excuse for our travel was to go visit my dad's childhood home in South Dakota, but what we found along the way is more important to the story. My dad had a curious love of crumbling greatness that drew us to visit obsolete industrial sites all through the midwestern rust belt.

We went out of our way to walk through closed steel mills and empty freight yards and abandoned factories. We did a lot of walking on broken glass. It was a perfect setting for my dad's frustration with all that had gone wrong. My dad was angry about a lot of things.



That feeling of walking on broken glass was kinda familiar. My dad usually sputtered a steady stream of cynical blame - as if it was the steam releasing from a pressure cooker. The heat and pressure of all that tectonic force was deep underground.

But the emotional earthquake finally happened when we were visiting Duluth Minnesota.

He wanted to see the old shipping yard where all the Great Lakes cargo boats used to load and unload back in the heyday of American steel. Many of the tall cranes along the loading docks were still standing, but none of them had any work to do. We crossed over the liftbridge and out onto the Long Barrier Island there at the western edge of Lake Superior. We got to see what used to be a bustling bee hive of commerce. A proud livelihood for America's union workers. Abandoned.

My dad was semi-retired and trying to keep himself busy with hobbies. He had some kites in the van, and the wind was pretty strong coming across the water, so

while we were stopped, I took one of the kites out and I was assembling the sticks and attaching the bridal.

I had the kite resting on the pavement off to one side of the big empty parking lot, and as I was kneeling down to attach the string, a loud Ford pickup with those big tires accelerated toward me and then screeched to a stop. He quickly backed UP and sped off while laughing, but it drained the dignity out of what I was trying to do.

I was trying to honor my dad by flying one of the kites he had made. He took pride in how high those kites could soar out above our flat Ohio Prairie land. He made his own kite REELS too, out of old wire spools that were big enough to hold 3000 feet of hundred pound test. There were different colors of fishing line to mark how much string was out. Dad called it: Sky Fishing.

A kite could lift so high into the sky, it would become barely visible flying a half mile up, and that was a big Kite. When the wind got stronger at higher elevations, the

string would howl with a strange vibration while the Kite strained to lift the weight of all that line.

It was a pretty good breeze, so I let the kite spin out line - using my thumb on the edge of the spool to create drag, just like my dad had taught me. But today we weren't going for any records, and I had kinda lost heart because of the run-in with the pickup, so I just reeled the Kite back in after 20 minutes or so, and I disassembled the sticks, and slid the kite back into its long plastic tube.

We were planning on driving back over to the lift bridge when we saw that same Ford pickup, and I asked my dad to stop for a second because I wanted to try to clear the air. I didn't want to carry that anger, and I thought if I could just talk to the guy, I would be able to let go of the lingering adrenaline.

So my dad stopped the van, and I walked over to the pickup and said: "Hey man, I don't mean any trouble, but I'm the guy you buzzed in the parking lot back there, and it did give me a scare looking UP at that big grill."

He apologized and offered me a beer, and we were just starting to ease the tension with a little small talk when I noticed that my dad had gotten out of the van and had walked over to where I was standing next to this guy's pick up.

Before I knew what was happening, I heard the sound of hissing and saw my dad folding up his Swiss Army knife. My dad snarled to the man: "That's what you get for Messing with my son."

I looked at my dad and said: "Oh no, what - What did you do?"

As the front left corner of the pickup started to sink toward the ground, the driver jumped out of his truck and looked at his tire. Then he looked at me with fury, so I said: "Oh shit, I had NO idea he was going to do that!"

My dad had gotten back into the van - as if that would protect him. He had definitely not thought this through.

The Man grabbed a tire iron out of the back of his pickup and was pacing erratically and yelling that he did NOT have a spare and that those tires cost \$200 EACH.

He dropped the tire iron and got out his jackknife instead. He walked quickly from one side to the other, and punctured BOTH front tires on our van. He knew we had a spare and he didn't, so it would take TWO of our tires to make us even.

Then he yelled: "What the fuck you gonna do now?"

You can't get away! You're going to pay me for that fucking tire. Right the fuck now!"

My dad's face went white. What, did he think this guy was going to cower in the face of parental authority? He was no kid. He was probably only a few years older than me, but I was no kid either. And we had no getaway. There's only one road back to the mainland and we could all see that the lift bridge was UP. Nobody was going anywhere for a while.

I yelled: "Dad! Open the door. We gotta call a tow truck! We gotta pay for this man's tire!"

And my dad was nodding and holding his hands up inside the van.

The angry man said: "That's a fucking great idea! Call that tow truck NOW! And they better have one of these tires in stock!"

And my dad nodded some more, and I came to his side and said: "OK. So far, nobody's hurt. Tell him you're gonna make the call."

Eventually, both our van and his pickup went back across that bridge with the front wheels up in the air - each behind a tow truck.

But that was after some scary negotiation. The hard part was the awkward conversation while we waited for the rescue to arrive. At first, I stood beside our van with my dad, talking him down.

It was a strange shift in our father-son relationship. I guess my dad had been trying to be the hero, battling the bad guys, using all that anger that he had been saving up his whole life. When he saw me trying to get all Gandhi with the bullies, he must have thought maybe Billy Jack was a better strategy. We had a lot to talk about on the rest of our long road trip.

He told me stories of the punishments his strict father had



given him, and he showed me childhood scars. I wish we could've talked it all out, but my dad had a flask of rum that he kept refilling every day for the rest of the trip. So I did most of the driving. And there was a LOT of driving. We kept going all the way to South Dakota, his childhood home.

But Duluth really was the turning point.

I'm grateful for the whole mess. I got to be the grown-up. I found the words that got my dad out of trouble. One of my favorite memories of our whole trip was that awkward time waiting for the tow truck.

I took the kite out again to show the Man in the pickup. He was surprised to find out that my dad had built the kite. He said it looked like a pretty good kite. He saw our Ohio tags and asked what we were doing so far away from home. I told him about our road trip. He said he never did anything like that with his dad. I said we were just trying to make good on an old promise.

He asked about the huge kite reel, and I explained that my dad's goal

was for his kite to soar as far up as possible.

He said to me: "You DO that - for your dad."

I apologized again, and he apologized again, and when his tow truck came, and the front of his pickup had been hoisted up in the air ready to roll, he climbed into the cab of the tow truck and waved as they headed toward the liftbridge. My dad and I waved back.

*David Wilcox is a singer-songwriter, and you can find him at [www.davidwilcox.com](http://www.davidwilcox.com)*

## Underrated Movies Changed My Life Too - Vic Thiessen



I was seven years old when I saw my first film, *The Sword in the Stone*, and I've been a film buff ever since. As evidenced by my reaction to that film, I am not a film buff only because I enjoy watching great films, but also because films have had, and continue to have, a tremendous impact on my life.

Indeed, a number of my most-loved films are films that critics (initially at least) found to be mediocre but which changed my

life. The most significant example of this is my all-time favorite film, *The Sound of Music*.

Upon its release, most critics found *The Sound of Music* too sweet and shallow to take seriously. At the time, I was a nine-year-old boy living in constant fear of monsters (too many sci-fi B-movies on TV), lying awake for hours each night. After watching *The Sound of Music*, I started singing *My Favorite Things* to myself every time I was

afraid. My insomnia disappeared. Even more importantly, the words of *Climb Every Mountain* both haunted and guided my life for many years as I sought to find my dream. Not Maria's romantic and family dream, and not the "American Dream", but a dream to help create a better world, guided by the lyrics: "A dream that will need all the love you can give, every day of your life for as long as you live." *The Sound of Music* is (for me) all about standing up to the worst darkness humanity can produce and facing it not with bombs and bullets but with music and laughter and joy and beauty and wonder and love and compassion and trust in the light of God.

I continue to be drawn to films that are not afraid to emphasize wonder, kindness and compassion in a life-affirming and light way, without the need for action or violence (e.g. last year's *Leave No Trace* and *Eighth Grade*). And yet when I consider the underrated films I love (in part because of how they impacted my life), I discover that many are quite dark. Some of them coincidentally (or not) also tell

the same story, a story I evidently find compelling and inspiring.

These latter films include *Dark City*, *Joe Versus the Volcano* and two Terry Gilliam films (*Brazil*, *The Zero Theorem*). All four of these films tell the story of a man, living under uniquely alienating conditions, who is trying to make sense of his life. These men know something is off/wrong, not just with their personal lives (three of them have meaningless dehumanizing jobs), but with the world around them. They all dream of a better place (three of them about a coastal beach) and they are all searching for love/romance.

In pursuit of their dreams for a better meaningful world, the four men make efforts to unmask what theologian Walter Wink called *the Domination System* the complex of individuals, institutions, and decisions which is oppressing the people in the worlds they inhabit. Some of these efforts end tragically and yet, in one way or another, all four men will find the romance they seek as well as a form of peace with their dreams and for their souls.

Linking these four films is their efforts at **humanization**: the search for what it means to be human and what it means to live a humane and meaningful life. The worlds the four men inhabit are not “real” but they depict the *spirit* of the dehumanizing environment that far too many people on this planet really inhabit. At the time when I first saw each of these films in the cinema, I *was* one of those people, experiencing a soul-draining daily grind while losing sight of the big picture. Thus each film, at just the right time, reminded me of my need to challenge the Domination System around me, focus on beauty and continue to work toward my dream.

Another underrated Gilliam film, *The Fisher King*, had the same impact. This time grounded in the real world, *The Fisher King* is also about men searching/dreaming for meaning in an uncaring world devoid of human connection. This dream is marvelously portrayed in the scene showing hundreds of commuters in Grand Central Station suddenly waltzing together. *The Fisher King* shows how dreamers and romantics, through

acts of kindness, mercy and compassion, can change the nature of a cold reality.

But when I think of underrated films about unmasking powers and performing acts of kindness, one film stands out as one of the great cinematic achievements of the 21st Century. Despite the unnecessary redemptive violence (much of which is absent from David Mitchell’s source novel), I love *Cloud Atlas* (directed by the Wachowskis and Tom Tykwer) for the brilliant way it weaves together six stories and time periods to show how the world has struggled for centuries against the corporate and political powers of the Domination System, and how we, individually and collectively, can change the future and make the world a better place. Facing slavery, colonization, oppression and consumerism, people/souls connect to each other over time to fulfill their dream for a better world by standing against the Domination System and by their acts of kindness and thoughtful decision-making.

Watching *Cloud Atlas*, I am reminded that we are all part of the



same one story described above, that we all share the need for love and the dream to make the world a better place. Each of our unique stories informs other stories, past and present, and together we can create a new story, not on some distant planet (*Cloud Atlas*) but on our planet if we dream together and work together fast enough. The world can be cold and alienating, but it can also be the place of great beauty, joy, music and connection exemplified in *The Sound of Music*.

The films mentioned above are not flawless. Some even make me cringe at times. But they resonated deeply with me and they share a vision of refusing to be cogs in a dehumanizing, mind-numbing consumerist machine. They teach me to open my eyes to that which is soul-draining around us while focusing on the soul-nourishing beauty that is also around every corner, holding fast to the dream of a world where all life may flourish.

*Vic Thiessen is a freelance writer living on the east coast of Canada. He has reviewed over a thousand films, contributed regularly to a number of magazines and websites and hosted a weekly film night for the past twenty years.*



## Beyond Category - Sarah Mussen

“The category is a Grand Canyon of echoes...” - Duke Ellington

We have evolved as a species that survives best in herds, tribes, groups, and villages. When conditions force us to make quick evaluations to maintain safety, put food in our bellies, or ensure we have enough, it is far more expedient to make quick judgements on who we can trust to work with us to maintain our safety and comfort. Who is on our “side” and who are we struggling against? Since as individuals we are nuanced, unique, and complex creatures it can be difficult and take more time than most of us have to understand the core values of the people we encounter in our lives, we take short cuts. We use labels and, unfortunately, once a label is affixed to someone we often do not look beyond it. We then use it to sort people into categories with the ultimate goal of defining who is an “us” and who is a “them”.

Unfortunately, we take these over simplifications, these short cuts to human interaction and imbue them with significant power. We assume

that these labels we wear mean exactly the same thing to the other people who have also chosen them and we will defend, at times literally to the death, someone who wears that same label while causing harm to others who do not. I was lucky enough to learn fairly early in my life that the assumption that I share the same core values and beliefs with people who wear the same label with which I was born was clearly false. In the end it led me to a place where I shed that original label and was, in a way, obligated to choose another.

So many of the labels we carry around with us are fixed from birth and we feel unable to escape them. We are branded permanently on the surface and we will encounter many who never look deeper. It is a unique and rare experience to transition from one way of being categorized by others to another. In my case it came when I transitioned from the Christian faith I grew up in and believed with sincerity to

how I identify myself today, as an atheist. I found that with most of the people I knew well who deeply understood my core values and beliefs there was little change in my feelings of acceptance and belonging. For some it changed what that label meant to them, for some I became an anomaly, accepted as an individual but not for that belief, and for a smaller few, their perception of me, changed, even though I had not. In those few cases fear entered, walls were erected, and any chance of vulnerability and real human connection dissipated. I became other. Not one of us. Progress halted and any potential good we could have accomplished together out of the still shared values and vast acreage of common ground ceased.

Thanks to this experience, whenever possible I do my best to avoid labeling myself when I meet new people. Not out of fear, or out of shame, but because I recognize the power I have to change perceptions if first people know me, then learn the labels. It is a privilege that many do not have. I hope by helping make cracks in

those fixed perceptions that people carry I can help those who carry labels that they cannot hide, be seen. As a thought experiment I will tell you some of the categories I fall under and let yourself experience the assumptions you might make when meeting someone for the first time and hearing these basic human descriptors. I am in my mid-forties, single, never been married, never had children, never owned a home, no pets, never had a significant other, and I live alone. Explore what assumptions you are making right now about my level of happiness, quality of life, mental health, and level of success based on these descriptions. Whatever those assumptions are, unless you settled on happy, fulfilled, loving and loved, they probably are not true. It is thanks to my profound level of "aleness" in my life's journey and my inability to mold myself into belonging with any one group or person that I have had the opportunity to explore the profound vulnerability of finding connection in unknown, unfamiliar, undefined places. Because I have not had the comfort and safety that comes with belonging in one place

or with one group, my adaptation has been to be more open, find common ground, and recognize the threads that connect us all. I find connection more easily and everywhere, in a way that is resilient and can withstand change. This has been a profound gift that has enriched my life beyond measure. I would not change my story but I know because it is such a different path than most people choose it is a challenge for some to see my story as a happy one, to see the things we have in common, to consider me anything other than an “other” who challenges their comfort level and world view. When this happens, even if we have some common values, or a shared goal, fear comes in and divides us and diminishes the power we could have to enact positive change if we were united.

It is this reliance on categories, this need to over simplify our human interactions that is causing a major stumbling block to what should be the next evolutionary step of our species. We have the capacity to produce enough, to adapt, to find sustainable ways of living, to ensure that all members of our

species are cared for, housed, and fed and that we are maintaining a healthy sustainable planet, but first we have to want to. We have to see the common threads that bind us and recognize that protecting and preserving a global version of “us” is the only path to accomplishing this. We can start small. In America we are more united than we realize on the issue of gun control but our loyalty to the political labels we wear keep us from hearing that we actually agree. Good, kind people are choosing loyalty to a label, to a name, to a “team” at the expense of their actual core values because they are afraid to release the crutch these shared categories provide and look deeper. We need to find the courage to approach new relationships with vulnerability and without short cuts. To trust that with most people we will be able to find common ground as long as both parties are willing to try. We must hope that as long as we remain open we can become a more connected and more caring global community.

As an atheist, I do not expect you to take this on faith. I know it is



possible. I have both experienced and witnessed people moving past labels, letting go of assumptions, and letting go of their fear to reach across borders, boundaries, and divisions to experience our common humanity. It just takes two people who are willing, and then two more. In time, the complex Venn diagram we have created to “simplify” our interactions by adding category on top of category, line over line, will be seen clearly for what it is, an unnecessary, divisive mess. People talk about human nature as if it is a fixed thing that we cannot struggle against but all living creatures evolve and change as a response to external environmental factors that necessitate change. Certain traits become more useful to survive and thrive and over time those traits

become fundamental to the species. I believe we are at a place where that change is necessary for our survival. There are people out there everyday showcasing the beautiful, inclusive, accepting possibilities that come with basic human nature. Even though the news cycle creates a different narrative, I believe they are the majority. The more open, accepting, safe spaces we cultivate in our lives the more it will resonate. Start at home, tell good positive stories about your fellow humans, seek those stories out for yourself, find people willing to speak, and listen in order to find common ground. Cultivate open, inclusive, connection in your life. Make it a fundamental part of your human nature. Start at home, at work, start now.

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## Unteachable Lessons - Carl McColman

The days following our daughter's death were a blur. At our pastor's urging, Fran and I left Atlanta to spend several days with friends in Asheville, leaving as soon as the funeral arrangements were made. It was a lovely respite, but we hit the ground running when we returned, putting together a slideshow for Rhiannon and writing our eulogies, or "words of reflection" as the priest called them. The vigil and funeral were, likewise, kind of a surreal kaleidoscope—hundreds of people at each event, with out-of-town family vying for attention with friends we hadn't seen in years. It was beautiful, wonderful—and for two introverts, exhausting. Rhiannon was the extrovert in our family—she would have just kept going, but Fran and I had to be mindful of our limits. We carefully designed the funeral to reflect music and readings that embodied Rhiannon's joyful, playful spirit. From the lyrical beauty of "All Creatures of Our God and King" and "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" to the exuberance of an upbeat workout

of "I'll Fly Away" (probably Rhiannon's favorite go-to-heaven song), every detail of the Mass was designed to emphasize celebration before mourning, joy before lamentation. Given who Rhiannon was, it was an easy liturgical feat to pull off.

Then, on the Monday after the funeral, Fran returned to work, and so did I—although for me that meant adjusting to a new sense of silence and emptiness that surrounded my home office since Rhiannon and her many nurses and caregivers were no longer there. I threw myself into my work, trying to find distraction from my grief rather than allowing it to overwhelm me. I figured I'd just as soon encourage the grief to come in waves over time, rather than all at once. I wasn't sure that was even possible, but it was my preference. As a strategy, it worked for about two months, and then I hit a wall. But maybe for those first two months, distracting myself was just what I needed.

What surprised me more than anything else was how grateful I felt in the midst of the grief. I knew enough about grief—and about how I grieve—to expect feelings of being overwhelmed, of sadness simply swallowing me whole, a sense of emptiness that seemed like it would never subside. Yeah, all of that rolled over me. But in the middle of it all, I just kept feeling wave after wave of appreciation, gratitude for the privilege of having been part of Rhiannon’s life for over twenty-two years. For how much she taught me, about playfulness, about humor, about zest, about dignity in suffering, about letting life be imperfect, about forgiveness.

When I was working on the slideshow for Rhiannon’s wake, I found a picture from her middle school years. At the time she was a cheerleader for the adapted sports program, supporting the wheelchair basketball team. She did this for two or three years; and each year she had a homecoming game with the usual half-time

festivities. Twice, she asked me if I would escort her (and both times Fran, worried that I might not see how important this was to Rhiannon, spoke privately to me to make sure I would do it). This picture was from one of those years. I was smiling in the picture, but she was radiant. Such simple joy. I gazed into the picture and sobbed and sobbed.

I soon realized that all the talk about “stages of grief” was, at least for me, largely meaningless. Denial, anger, depression, bargaining, it all slammed me at once. I don’t know how many days—certainly a few weeks, maybe longer, maybe even the first few months—I just kept walking around in a daze. I cried a lot, of course. I got sad. And then I also felt that luminous gratitude, for the amazing gift that my daughter was (is) to me and so many others, gratitude for how much I learned from her, gratitude for all the people who did and still love her and her mom and me.

Well-meaning friends and loved ones would say things like “At

least she's in a better place now" or "She's no longer stuck in a wheelchair" or "Well, her suffering is over." That's all true and I believe it (thank heaven for my faith). I don't mean to criticize the genuine love and concern from the many people who cared. But every time I heard a comment like that I wanted to scream, "I'm not crying because I don't have faith or because I don't trust God. I'm crying because I miss my girl."

So maybe I still had a little bit of Charlie Babbitt in me, after all those years. Maybe, I suppose, grief has a self-involved quality about it. I don't think that's a bad thing.

Because it all pointed to this: Rhiannon taught me more about living and love and spirituality and compassion than just about any person or any relationship I ever had—including Fran, including the monks and spiritual directors I've worked with, including the countless books I've read over the years. And one of the things I've learned from Rhiannon, and our journey together, was just how

messy it all is. I was pretty much self-centered when I first met Rhiannon. And somewhere along the way, that diminutive girl, whose mind was compromised by a stroke and whose body was diminished by paralysis, taught me how to love.

I wish I could explain it. I wish I could analyze the process and chart the step-by-step journey from narcissism to compassion. But it isn't anything neat and tidy, and there's no making it tidy, either. To begin with, I wasn't entirely heartless, even at my Babbitty worst. And even during Rhiannon's final weeks, I was hardly cured of my narcissism, even if on most good days it seemed to be in remission. But there's no boiling this down to "Seven Steps to Learn Compassion" or "Action Plans for a Post-Selfish Life." The lessons I learned from Rhiannon are simply unteachable lessons.

It's been several years now since her passing, and I tell her (our) story from time to time. Almost at

every telling, I meet someone who has a similar story to tell, of the unsung perseverance of caring for a sick child or grief that felt like gratitude or slowly discovering that love blossoms in our lives even when we're not expecting it. I've come to see that unteachable lessons are available to just about all of us—and I suspect that the more we need these unteachable lessons, the more likely they are to

show up in our lives. Maybe they don't always entail suffering and loss, but I suspect they always involve some sort of deep interior transfiguration that is messy and unchartable and just can't be put into words. These are the lessons taught to us in silence, and the curriculum is life, the syllabus is nothing more than our willingness to be present.

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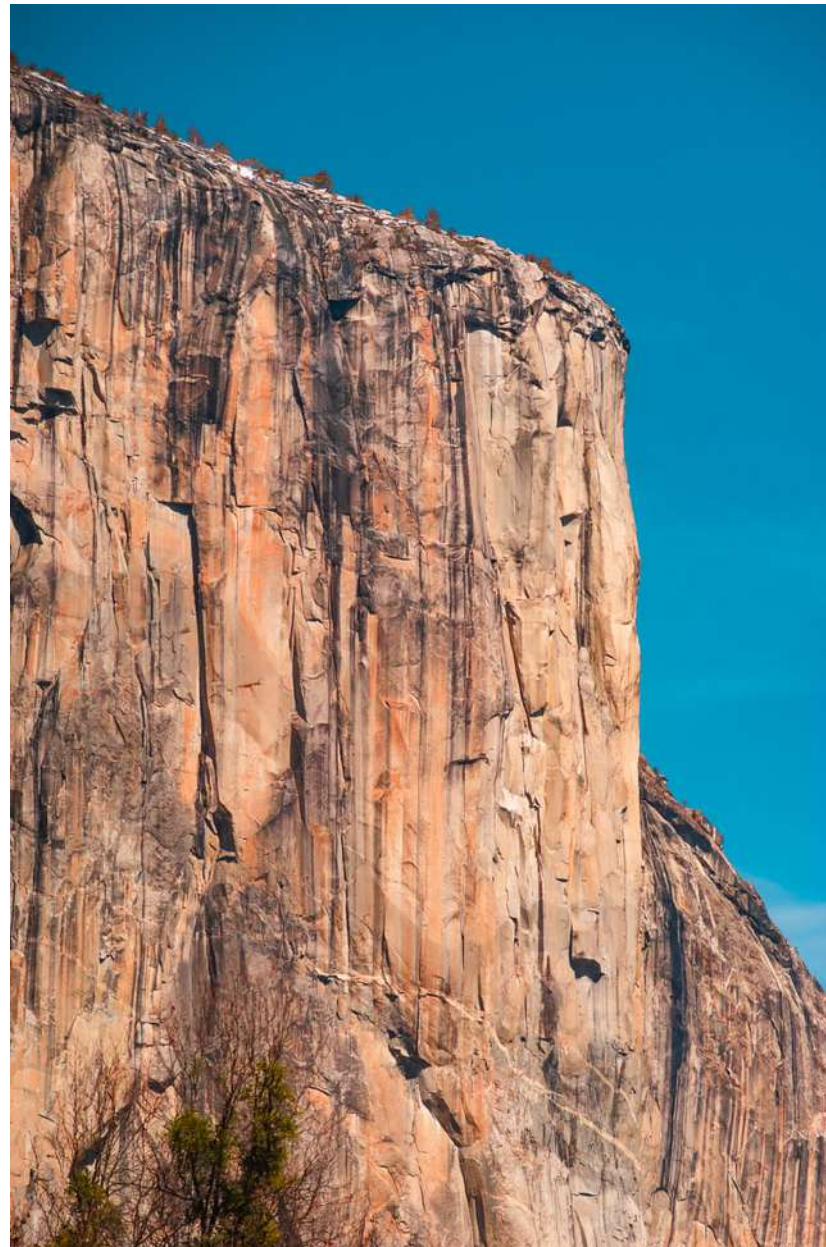
## The View from the Edge - Mike Riddell

I observe the world from an unusual perspective. The land I live in, New Zealand, is so small and insignificant that it's often omitted from global maps. It's surrounded by sea, a long way from anywhere. And within that land, I live in a village containing just thirty-four souls – five of whom are part of our family. It's described, rightly, as being in the middle of nowhere. And it may even be in the middle of that.

Sometimes nowhere seems to be a good place to reside. It's far enough away from cities with their light pollution that we're able to see the magnificence of the night sky. The water from our local spring is as pure as any I've ever enjoyed. The dome over our head is vast and wide, with the landscape stretching from horizon to horizon – an ever changing roof that is evocative and inspirational.

Our little town is on the edge of the world in every sense. And from this isolated perspective, we often look at the mainstream of global activity and shake our heads. It

seems some sort of madness has infected the world. Greed and avarice have become virtues rather than vices. We seem to be intent on trashing our planet for the sake of making another dollar.



Of late my wife and I have needed to spend time in some of our bigger cities. It's salutary to observe the culture that persists there. Ordinary conversations seem to be driven by personal agendas rather than friendship. Many people are in a hurry to achieve and get somewhere – perhaps to the grave. I try not to stand in their way.

The companion of my disquiet is a sense of powerlessness. When I was younger I had a sense of hope that an ordinary person could work for change. But that has eroded over the years. Now it seems that a form of social Darwinism has corrupted the soul of humanity, and we see our fellow citizens as competitors rather than neighbours. What can one person do?

\* \* \*

In the face of such despair, my wife and I tour a visiting friend around the magnificent landscape that surrounds us. On a whim, we head down a gravel road toward Cambrians – a tiny settlement of 13 houses. At the end of the track is a sign which declares 'Here' in one

direction and 'There' in the other. We opt for Here.

It's the first day of Spring. The sky is a Tibetan blue, the sun flooding the world with tentative warmth. We drive past a traditional mud brick cottage and park beside a gate. We get out and walk among the trees – most of which have yet to show any signs of the nascent life contained in their plump buds. Tracks lead across the property, allowing us to wander through a magic patchwork of bulbs. There are snowdrops, bluebells, daffodils.

We find ourselves beside a gurgling stream, overhung with sheltering trees. Even down here, alongside the river, bulbs are everywhere. Climbing the bank, the land opens out onto a serene pond, which fat and happy ducks make the most of. A sign greets us:

'Welcome to Cambrians Commons, feel free to wander'.

We're delighted to do so.

Another mud brick cottage awaits us. This one has a rough table and some chairs in front of it. We sit for a while, feeling the sun bleaching the winter's sorrow from our

bones. There's no need to speak. Eventually we're approached by a man with wild white hair and beard, wearing a felted cap on his head. He introduces himself as Bob, the owner of the property.

He sits with us, and asks each of us what our story is. He wants to know what we do, who we are, and why we've come here. Bob engages us in a gentle and unhurried way, with nothing on his mind except talking to some strangers. We fill in the gaps, and talk about a few mutual friends from the local area.

Then Bob shares a little of his own life. His early days as a teacher and a hippie, some failed relationships, and his move to the deep south of New Zealand. There were early struggles to feed and look after his children after he purchased the current thirty-acre property many years ago. It was bare farmland. As we look around the Edenic gardens we're sitting in, we understand that this is all the work of his hands and heart.

He's planted the trees and the flowers, and shaped the land with a gentle vision and love. He's been pretty much self-sufficient all that

time, though confesses that life was easier because the government provided various benefits for him. "That's what I love about this country," he says. "We understand that we need to look after each other at times in life, and it enables us to live together."

He can't understand why many governments are so afraid of socialism. His response has been to make his small corner of the world into a Common, where people can come and go and enjoy the beauty without charge. You can see the generosity of his heart in his eyes. Before we know it, more than an hour has passed with this wonderful conversation. Our souls are singing.

He sends us on our way with a gift to us of bulbs. Rosemary had wondered how he got the money for the thousands of flowers that surround us. "Oh, I don't buy them," he smiles. "I simply split them up each year, and nature does the rest." Nature, and the love and work of a quiet man who simply hopes to make the world a better place.



Up in the rafters of his cottage, we were surprised to find Bob's coffin built and waiting. The end of it bears the legend 'He was nowt but friendly'. Underneath is a sign bearing a limerick.

This coffin was made with much levity

Its owner desires longevity

but regardless of health

irrespective of wealth

Don't stuff around with negativity

\* \* \*

I left Bob's Common full of hope and gratitude. The life's mission of one man had created beauty and refuge, freely available to all who might want to enjoy it. This was a small act of resistance in a confusing and contentious world.

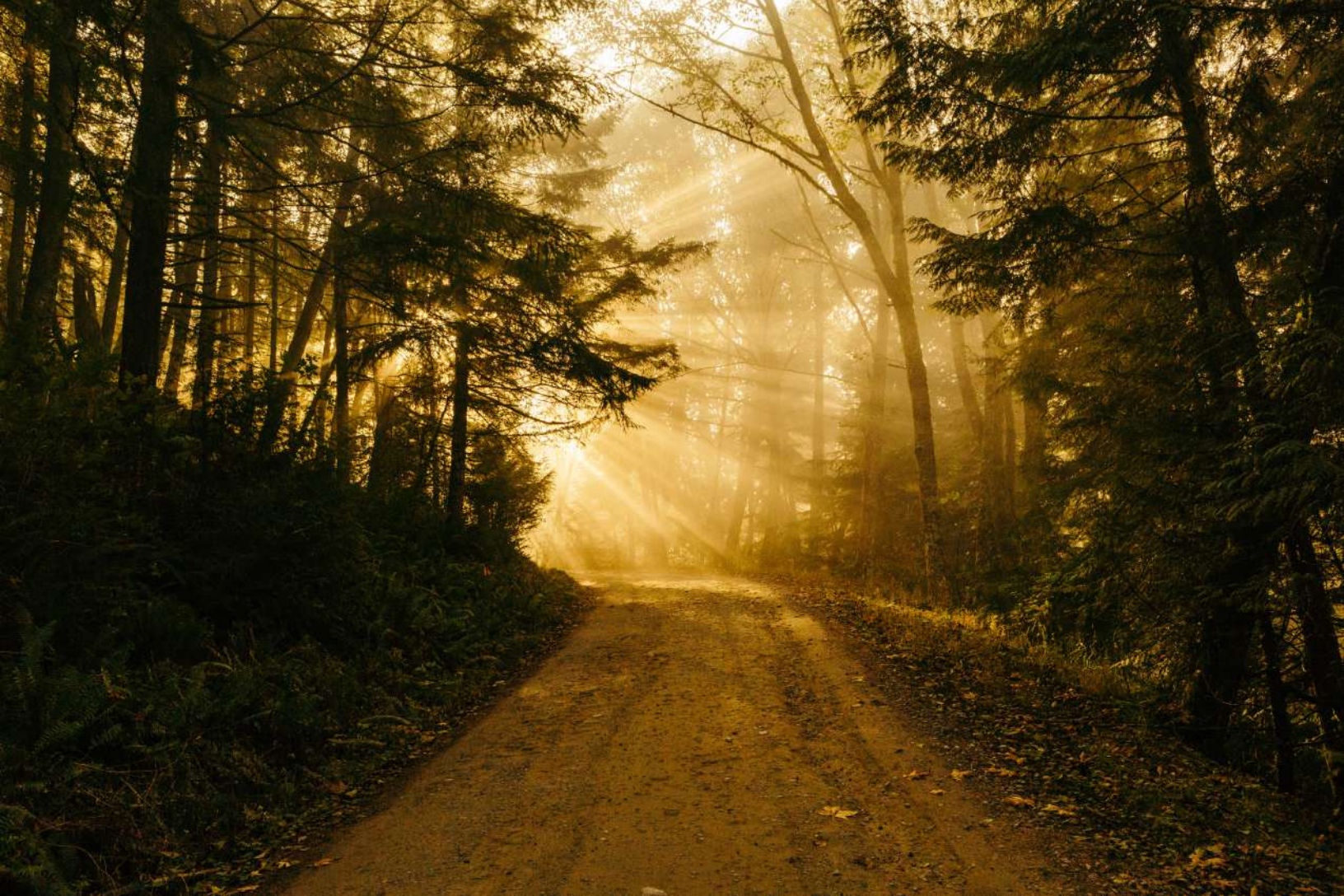
*Mike Riddell is a Kiwi writer.*

One person, living on the edge, bearing generosity and love.

I was reminded of the value that each of us can contribute through our own small work in a remote corner of the world. And I considered again the concept of the Commons; that whatever the powers that be may say or do, we're all in this together. If we are to retain our humanity and live peaceably on the earth, it will be through sharing our love and endurance.

Last week I planted some more trees on our property. With luck, they will outlive me. Sometimes all you can do is make a small investment in the future of the planet, and hope that others will be around to appreciate it. The view from the edge is wide and long, and I'm grateful for it.

## Not All Who Wander Are Lost, But We're Trying - Steve Daugherty



I texted Jonathan to tell him that I would be late. I knew he'd immediately understand, and he did. He knows that I'm a man of my word, but that I'm also a man who thinks the shortest distance

between two points is generally a shitty story.

There's a house on the right as you drive north to Jonathan's. I've driven past it for thirteen years, watching it go from an isolated

farmhouse to one flanked with vinyl villages starting from the low \$400s, eventually becoming that quaint ranch with the enormous front lawn kept up by a very old man on an undersized lawnmower. For a few years there was a sign offering fresh garden vegetables at the end of the long gravel driveway, with an honor system cashbox on a rickety school desk. I never carry cash, so I never stopped.

I looked to the right as I passed that house. I've done this thousands of times. Square in the middle of that predictably manicured lawn, fifty feet from the road, was a large mass, with a periscope.

A turtle. An absolutely colossal snapping turtle.

"Wow," I said, slowing down to take in the size of the thing. And then I added "Oh no," as I recognized the scene playing out.

This ancient reptilian Buick was scouting for a new pond. Of all the ills that come with plowing down nature to build indifferent mansions that wheelbarrows can barely roll between, it's the dislocation of centenarian snapping

turtles from the old farm ponds they've reigned over since God was young that really gets me. Too stupid to understand the risk, they traverse busy, deadly roads in the process to find new ponds over which to reign. Every week I see these dead giants on the side of ever busier roads, shells shattered. It breaks my heart every time.

I pulled off the road into the gravel driveway, considering how one might move a turtle that was many pounds past picking up to safely relocate. I texted Jonathan that I was going to be a little late. That a giant turtle had just jumped out in front of my attention, and I needed to go off script for a minute.

"Totally get it, man," Jonathan said. "I'll be here."

When I got to the animal, out there in that freshly cut grass, cars whizzing by, I couldn't help but laugh in shock. The turtle might as well have had a saddle. One of the biggest snappers I've ever seen. There was no way I could do more than what I was doing: standing there, pissing off the poor thing, stalemated.

So I gambled on the turtle's slow speed and drove up to the house to knock on the door. Maybe these folks had a large sheet of cardboard I could slide the turtle on. Or a giant box. Or a crane. The woman who answered the door was twenty years my senior. This I would learn was Judy, the daughter of the elderly man who owns the home and cuts the grass. I explained the strange situation and my Franciscan intent.

"Oh how wonderful of you!"

Thanks Judy.

"Daddy," the woman yelled into the house. The elderly man appeared. Steel-toe boots, blue Dickie coveralls. Said his name is Howard. In the ensuing half hour he would tell me that he'd retired decades ago, and his North Carolina farmland had long ago become other people's neighborhood. Yet at three o'clock on a Friday, Howard still answers the door in steel-toes and coveralls. Like they say; be ready so you don't have to get ready.

Howard was as impressed as Judy with my intent. He shook my hand, his skin thin and storied like the

turtle's, his grip impossibly firm. Howard produced a large plastic bin and told me to get in the little 4x4 Gator he kept parked in the garage. As we bounded across the property, we exchanged our mutual appreciation for the flora and fauna that has been, in recent years, on the ropes.

"Hoo boy," Howard said when we got to the gigantic bump in that otherwise smooth lawn. "He is indeed a big'n!" Howard laughed, boyishly like I had. He was as excited about this interruption to the day as I was.

Howard and I slid the bin under the rear of the turtle. In turn the turtle reminded us why his species has "snap" in its name.. The old beast still had it, delivering a lightning flash attempt at our hands. Howard laughed. I counted my fingers.

Soon we had the turtle wedged into the plastic bin and were roaring through the back part of the property to an old pond much farther from the road. As we grabbed the edges of the bin, the turtle made another attempt at Howard's thumb. Another lucky

miss, and Howard laughed again. Just then, thunder grumbled overhead, and Howard got a surprised look.

“Say!” Howard said. “You ever heard that if a snapper clamps ‘hold of your finger he won’t let go till it thunders? I think if he gets us we’re gonna be alright,” Howard laughed.

As we coaxed the little dinosaur toward his new digs, I asked Howard about all the new houses, all the change. Then, I braced myself for negativity. But I was projecting. “Yep, seen a lot change. But, it don’t do no good to get upset about it. Everything changes.” Howard shrugged. That was the whole sermon.

“That’s a good way to see things,” I offered.

“Yep. Plus I got to meet all kinda new people. A lot of them Indians moved in to these neighborhoods.”

Uh oh. Here we go.

“Sweet people. They bought mosta my garden vegetables when I did the veggie stand out front. Best

customers I had, everyday. Real sweet folks.”

The turtle had accepted his new pond by this point, so we climbed into the Gator and went back to the house. His wife, Beth Anne, echoed what their daughter had told me earlier; that I had done a good thing — the Lord’s work — because I took care of His creatures. This prompted Howard to ask Beth Anne about giving me some fresh picked green beans, as sort of an early jewel for my crown I guess. She clapped her little hands and squealed, then darted off through the creaky screen door into the house. A minute later she reemerged with a plastic bag so packed with fresh green beans it could’ve been reasonably confused for a lumpy beachball. In the midwest, we called this measure a mess of beans.

There were handshakes and genuine hoping that we’d talk again soon. I was headed north once more, back on the road to Jonathan’s, about 45 minutes later than we’d planned. But now with a mess of beans and a story.



~

I can't stress enough how important it is to be where you say you're gonna be, when you said you'd be. But let me also be heard stressing less than enough about how important it is to leave some openness on both sides of your plans, so you can pull off the road when asked to. When an unscheduled story invites you.

People keep telling me they're bored. So very bored. But they're also so very unwilling to pull off the road they've been on because that road became more like a set of rails after a while. No one chooses this consciously, I don't think. It just gradually happens and most people don't even realize that it did. Like being handed a menu with dozens of great options on it, you forget after a while that what you really want isn't on this menu, isn't even served in this restaurant. After a while you believe you are ordering what you want and will even brag about the meal, your appetite firmly on rails now, too.

I'm not saying that we've merely come to lack spontaneity. And as I

hope I've made clear, I'm all for having a plan and having the integrity to stay committed to it. But I am saying we're bored and story-broke because we stopped valuing wonder and the parts of us that crave it. And when we stopped valuing wonder we stopped valuing wonder's habitat; uninhibited availability. And that habitat is generally off road, and probably won't fit the schedule as you currently have it written. Our commitments and our dignity and our mortgage make the hard-to-justify nearly impossible for us to choose. We've had to numb our sense that some things should be done for the very purpose of them not fitting our plans, for them not seeming perfectly rational, for them not providing assurances of some payoff. Many of us have forgotten that a good story is its own wage, but the work is unpredictable, and terrifying, and silly. So we get to work on time, plan our vacations down to the minute, and even get some of our Christmas shopping done by November.

But my God we're getting bored. And the turtles are getting

smashed. And the beans are going to someone else.

I know, some of us have our calendars packed to the corners with good things and have the unassailable momentum of a degree, and debt, and familial expectation that exempts us from doing anything other than what's in the script. But maybe, whether it's when you realize most of your stories are actually TV show plots or when all your relationships reveal themselves to be other people stuck with you on the rails, you'll decide you want to get to the end of your life able to say you did more than everything you were expected to. Maybe it's then that you'll start putting yourself off script, off map, off balance. Maybe then you'll get a few others in your life who love you and life so much that you can text them, "Change of plans. I'm saying yes to a silly, childish notion. Might be nothing.

Might be everything," and they say, "Oh good. I'll be here. Hoping for a good story."

~

Two nights later, my wife Kristi prepared the mess of beans with a garlic oyster sauce for our side dish. We, and our three kids, each had an obscene heap of them loaded onto our plates. I have no memory of what the entree was.

"So, kids," I offered as we dug in, moaning in affirmation of Kristi's work. "We have these beans because, despite not really knowing what I was gonna do, and despite it meaning I had to inconvenience Jonathan for some sorta bizarre reasons, I said yes to an unexpected invitation to help a turtle and got a new friend named Howard in the bargain."

"You named a turtle Howard?"

*Steve Daugherty is an ordained minister, award-winning storyteller, and author hailing from the Research Triangle NC with his wife Kristi and three children. Make his interests yours at [stevedaugherty.net](http://stevedaugherty.net)*

## Fluidity - Laura Hope-Gill

When the little red light lit up, they didn't raise their hand. Instead, my sixteen year old child rested their hands on the edge of the physician's examining table, as though the hearing test was over. They repeated the test. Again, at 500 Hz, my child did not respond. The other four tones were fine, but I knew from my own two decades of Audiology, that you only have to lose one frequency for your whole world to change. Signs had been showing. There'd been more requests for repetition, more instances where they would slide out of a chair and walk toward me as I was talking. All behaviors I have indulged in order to hear what someone is saying. My child has learned these skills from me, these skills of communication, these skills of concealment and survival. I had hoped it would skip a generation, but here it is. Here we are.

The emotions feel almost impossible. This morning, after taking them to school equipped with Bose Hearphones I purchased

yesterday, I curled around the steering wheel of my car in the driveway and wept. The deafness tears. Old Friends - but the kind of old friends you avoid because they carry with them so much knowledge of all you've done and gone through - are forgiving in that they don't bring it up, but you know what they know. You know the truths they carry. That even though you have grown "used" to it, that even though you wear your hearing aids and lateral Bluetooth devices with a sort of ADA-flare because the hearing aid casings are in fact "Merlot" in color, the earmolds zebra-striped, there are Times. You don't talk about the Times. You don't let anyone see you during the Times. The Times are the moments when you sit absolutely bare with difference. Usually, something technological brings it on. When I go to the movies, the person managing the closed-captioning device fumbles with it then hands it to me for me to figure out. When I can't remember where I placed my hearing-aids in their gray, circular case and panic



because I have to be at a meeting. When the closed captioning device at the movies begins to hurt my face because there's too much tech weighing on my nose. When someone says "I'll call you in two hours," and I have to charge my Bluetooth interface. When I am face to face with the ways that deafness impacts my life, I feel myself enter the Times. It is a drop in frequency, a full-body form of deafness. I feel my sinking. I am sinking. My soul is sinking, shrinking into the frame of my form, and the form is flawed. There's no rapid raising of the vibration, of course. There is only the honesty of the descent, the dwelling at the river basin until the water rises and lifts me out. Doing this as the mother of a child is different from doing it just as myself.

My child is gender non-binary. We are accustomed to living between worlds. Between the he and the she of it, between the hearing and the silence of it. My child never had to "come out" to me because while there have been phases of princess dresses and phases of flannel shirts with buttons on a particular side, I have always had enough sense to

keep it open. There was a rough phase during which they wondered if they might be trans, and I assured them that gender is fluid and whatever they feel they need I would always listen. My only goal in being a parent has been to be there for them. That was the promise I made the first five seconds I held them in my arms when they were born. With the exception of being very late to pick-up from daycare when they were seven, I've done a good job of it.

Living between worlds has also been part of our shared life because of deafness. I started signing with them immediately, just as I was also getting accustomed to the thought of my own deafness. I had ASL books in every room in the house and would look up signs as I taught the words. They signed their first sentence at nine months as we watched a Baby Einstein video, "The corn is hot like the fire is hot." I only ever scolded them in sign language because it seemed much more peaceful than raising my voice. We know enough sign to have a conversation, and we often communicate under the radar at public events, but we have always

skewed back into the hearing world between us. We have stood on the edge of spoken language together. And it has been like the phenomenal chalk drawings I've seen on the internet featuring a chasm in the pavement. We know ASL is literally at our fingers' tips, but we have clung to speech. Speech is our "known," even if it has never been wholly comfortable.

I think of Wilderness. I think of the voices that dwell inside the Wilderness. I think of a hike I did once with a young woman named Jane across Cradle Mountain Valley National Park in Tasmania back in 1991 just before Christmas (it was summer, there). Jane and I were both solo travelers hitch-hiking around Tasmania. The problem was that Tasmania is rather small, and given our shared fondness for camping on wineglass bays, we kept meeting. First on Bruny Island, again on Maria Island where we had each hiked an additional 10 miles to get away from the other campsite. So, we decided we would do something together, something bold, something we could not do advisedly as single women. We

hiked for eight days, on the last of which the sun finally shone, and we could look back from the peak of basalt cliffs called The Labyrinth and see all the magnificent scenery. Miles replaced meters of what we could see in an instant. All our photos of that hike, though, tell a story not of bad weather but of a heightened state of attention. Lichen and wildflower fill entire frames that, had we better weather, would be filled with vistas. The images remind me how to walk in the wilderness of any unknown. Allow the world to shrink in its scale. Attend to the details. Our eyes adjust.

Learning to lipread, too, was a shift in attention, though an unconscious one at first. So unconscious and powerful was the switch that once I got hearing aids, I didn't understand spoken speech and actually preferred the made-up language my neuroplasticity had invented. I had to forge through, though. The shift taught me more about the mind than I wanted to know. It doesn't even tell us when something is wrong and instead adjusts our perceptions so we can pretend nothing is. A little bit here,

a little bit there. And soon I was watching people's faces and mouths for cues without knowing it. Once aware of my deafness, I grew more conscious of lipreading. Almost comically, I focused on lips. Later, I relaxed into speechreading where the whole body and face reveal the cues. Not the specific thoughts or words all the time, but the general wave of meaning washes over me. Hardly a rational science. More ideation and gesture, more aqueous, more, well, fluid.

Yesterday when my child walked toward the car from the school steps, I could see the fatigue that neuroplasticity causes: a whole day of lipreading wears you out. I opened the headphones I had dug myself a little more into debt to secure, and once the app was downloaded, my child's eyes opened widely, contently, and then we both pursed our lips as deafness rode between us all the way home like an enormous, loyal but slightly unwieldy dog. That dog's name is fluidity, I realize. We are in the presence of fluidity once again. Of mist, and fog, of unknowing, of being constantly open to a new shift in decibel's relationship to

frequency. This is something deafness teaches, and something I shift back into when the technology fails or someone wants to phone-talk and I lose the self-assertion to remind them, "I can't do that." Deafness is a limitation without being a fixed limit. I can force the boundary. Also, the boundary can force me.

A gift (front row seats at various events) and a curse (you actually need them), my old friend deafness may now be befriending my child, my child who already walks among worlds that others clearly define as being separate. Many would also clearly define "deafness" from "hearing" and "silence" from "sound." We know better. We both know so much better. Balance is maintained by fluid in the ears that shifts and redistributes its weight without our controlling it. The vast vistas of Tasmania extended forever around us while we could only see the bright lichen on the gray stone in the forest.

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At the audiology appointment, I accompanied my child into the audiometry booth. They sat and

listened to instructions. The audiologist attached the headset and the wires then went to the adjacent booth, visible through the pane of glass. It was all so familiar. What did I feel? Like I was on a rocking boat, like our lives were about to “go about” as they say in sailing. Turn around. I watched and listened. When it was over, the audiologist informed us of the nearly perfect audiogram. My child’s perplexed expression prompted the audiologist to explain there might be an auditory processing issue that the headphones are addressing.

In the car on the way home, my child wondered if they’d imagined the whole thing, if maybe they wanted to be deaf like I am, if maybe we have become mirrors of one another. They wondered if maybe they were a hypochondriac. I stopped them. What had it been?

An auditory hallucination? A prolonged daydream from which it was challenging to surface when spoken to? Was it a journey we simply needed to take together, some deep dive into experience that would bring us closer together but otherwise leave no souvenirs? Were they owning their own deafness, having been made aware of the vicissitudes of hearing by growing up with me? We will never know.

One part of me thinks about the morning I wrote this essay, beginning with tears and moving into acceptance. If all things are fluid, did my writing alter the waves? What waves were they? Sound or reality? In such matters as listening, I’ve learned to drift far beyond what science says. I shall take the same course across the water in this matter. As a parent, it is the only course I know.

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# Taking Movies Personally - Jim Crosby

## *A Brief Introduction to the Cinema of Terrence Malick*

Terrence Malick has been making movies since 1973, beginning with *Badlands*. I don't remember hearing of the filmmaker or that first film until Thanksgiving 1978, when I saw his second effort, *Days of Heaven*. Soon after that I saw *Badlands*, and on the basis of those two, I was hooked for life. Their similarities, especially the way voice-over was employed, intrigued me. I learned that Malick was an alumnus of my high school alma mater, St. Stephen's Episcopal School in Austin, Texas. He graduated in 1961, I in 1970. I met Terry at a school reunion, I think in 1979.

Through the 1980s we would meet sporadically for lunch. Whole Foods and Luby's Cafeteria were his go-to eateries. I was struck by the way Terry and many of the workers in those buffet lines were on a first- name basis with each other. I was writing screenplays part-time. He humbly called himself my Dutch uncle, giving me the advice I solicited, all the while

admonishing me not to take it too seriously. Chiefly he would draw me out, asking about the stages my kids were going through, urging me to write based on first-hand experience.

During the 1986-87 school year I took three courses at the Seminary of the Southwest, Austin's Episcopal theology school. I was steered toward a local priest to be my spiritual director as I pondered pursuing the priesthood myself. I remember telling Terry at that time that he had been my spiritual director over the previous few years. He demurred, flattering me by saying that, on the contrary, I had been his.

Terry is a famously private person. Being both famous and private is a tough combination to pull off, especially in our celebrity-hungry society and in the entertainment business that caters to it. I honor the balance Terry has struck.

And so there are only two chief instances of what could be considered "insider information" that I want to share. Two directors Terry encouraged me early on to familiarize myself with were Jean Renoir and Eric Rohmer. It was his wife Ecky who told me that Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* influenced Terry's "nature and grace" theme in *The Tree of Life*. Beyond those two examples, I have tried to respect and value Terry's privacy by sticking to facts that are publicly known and focusing on the movies themselves.

Terry sojourned from St. Stephen's to Harvard, where his teachers there included philosopher Stanley Cavell. Terry went on to study at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, translating Martin Heidegger's *The Essence of Reasons* for publication, and briefly teaching philosophy at MIT. Turning to filmmaking, he was part of the first cohort of students at the American Film Institute.

His eight dramatic films to date are:  
**BADLANDS (1973)** -- Based loosely on a murder spree through the Midwest in the late 1950s, Martin

Sheen and Sissy Spacek play young lovers enamored of each other and of actor James Dean's iconic public persona. Spacek's romanticized thoughts in voice-over are oddly askew with the violence perpetrated by her beau.

**DAYS OF HEAVEN (1978)** -- During The Great War, the wheat fields of the Texas Panhandle are the setting for a love triangle, and nefarious plans gone awry. Again, a youthful female narrator reflects on the events in ways that are both wise beyond her years and wonderfully naïve.

**THE THIN RED LINE (1998)** -- Malick's WWII epic is based on a James Jones novel about the Battle of Guadalcanal. The sprawling cast features Jim Caviezel, Sean Penn, Nick Nolte, and Elias Koteas. Natural beauty wars with human destructive power. The voice-over becomes more directly philosophical than before.

**THE NEW WORLD (2005)** -- A take on the U.S. founding myth of Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher) and John Smith (Colin Farrell), this film becomes another love triangle of sorts, with Smith followed in

Pocahontas' affections by John Rolfe (Christian Bale), who marries her. It is a reflection on love in its different forms, and the meeting of worlds, with Europe serving as a new world for the Native Americans just as surely as America is new to the Europeans.

THE TREE OF LIFE (2011) -- Arguably Malick's masterpiece to date, the story moves in time and place from 1950s Waco, Texas, to decades later in Houston, and all the way back to the Big Bang. Like Augustine's *Confessions* juxtaposed with *The City of God*, it examines side by side the life of one individual and his family and the history of the universe and life on earth. The story spurs us to ask, "Are grace and nature to be reconciled in human life?"

TO THE WONDER (2012) -- A man of few words, played by Ben Affleck, falls for a lovely Parisienne (Olga Kurylenko), bringing her along with her young daughter home to Oklahoma, where they struggle to make sense of their life together. She returns to France. He begins a relationship with an old acquaintance. Then his French love returns without her daughter and

the original pair try again to make their relationship work. Javier Bardem plays the local priest, going through his own dark night of the soul and echoing the ideas of Søren Kierkegaard on the nature of love and marriage.

KNIGHT OF CUPS (2015) -- Interweaving Plato, the Tarot deck, a gnostic tale of loss of self, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, this story finds Christian Bale playing a screenwriter in serial relationships with numerous women. It picks up the examination of love from *The New World* and *To the Wonder*, setting the question of the relation of love to self-knowledge in the dizzyingly glitzy contexts of Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

SONG TO SONG (2017) -- Austin's contemporary outdoor music festival scene is the setting for this further study of artistic creativity and excess. 19th century French poet Arthur Rimbaud serves as mentor in bohemian license as Rooney Mara and Ryan Gosling, the film's central couple dance between self-discovery and nihilistic self-destruction. Again, what is love, and can it aid in righting a life out of balance?

Looking at the films themselves, the uniqueness of Terry's body of work to date lies in its dialogic nature, its distinctly Socratic quality, in which viewers are invited into significant, rich, deep conversation, the only requirement of them that we come up with our own answers. It helps to know that, as you watch Terry's movies, you are entering with him into engagement with the vexing and exhilarating existential questions humans have always faced. Academic philosophers find much in these films to discuss and celebrate. (If you're inspired to follow up on this thought, one would do well to start with Stanley Cavell's Introduction to *The World Viewed*, Simon Critchley's essay "Calm -- On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," and especially *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, by Robert Sinnerbrink.) Terry's works are an extension of the legacy of idea-laden films of the sort created not only by Renoir and Rohmer, but Bergman, Fellini, Truffaut, Godard, Tarkovsky, Kieslowski, Kurosawa, and Wenders, as well. For filmmakers and cineastes, they are part of movie history's treasure trove.

Be that as it may, Terry Malick's movies seem to go underappreciated on a popular level or, perhaps better put, greatly appreciated by a much smaller audience than they deserve. For me, the key to engaging with Terry's films is to begin with his background in philosophy and to grasp that his approach to "the love of wisdom" ("philo-sophia") has much to do with the Socratic approach of asking and refining questions, resting lightly with answers received, and remaining open, on the quest. (Part of his "Dutch uncle" counsel to me three decades ago was to repeat the old saw that if you want to convey a message, send a telegram. When he saw that my didactic tendencies went undeterred and undiminished despite his best efforts, one of his final encouragements as my informal spiritual director was for me to jump at the chance to teach Senior Theology at our high school alma mater. I have been happily ensconced doing just that ever since.)

Things that stand out about these movies from the outset are creative use of voice-over (one hesitates to



call it narration), exquisite cinematography coupled with fascinated, even rapt, attention to natural beauty, and rich use of music. Regarding the voice-over, Malick's experimentation began with a single, callow, female perspective in the first two films, expanded to multiple GI voices in the WWII movie, then settled on using three diverse points of view represented in each of the next three productions. I contend that, in this creative evolution, Terry has honed cinematic expressions of inwardness in ways parallel to Shakespeare's discoveries as a playwright and Henry James' development of the portrayal of interior monologue in prose fiction.

*Days of Heaven's* Oscar for Best Cinematography was won by Nestor Almendros on the basis of extensive use of natural lighting, making the most of what has come to be called "magic hour," and sustained focus on buffaloes and birds, wind-swept wheat, and expansive skies. The lush, green jungle enveloping the GIs on Guadalcanal in *The Thin Red Line* was as much a character as they were. The action sequences were

choreographed and captured on film in a way that viscerally put us there as viewers. John Smith's point-of-view during his surreal early experiences in the Powhatan village in *The New World* likewise enable us to empathize, to see things through his eyes. Terry's partnership with cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki in his more recent films has involved increased use of hand-held, moving camera, and greater freedom to experiment in the editing room with techniques like the jump-cut. Characteristic of all Terry's films is a Taoist determination to observe with us the play of sunlight, the plumage of birds, water rushing over rocks, grass bending to invisible forces, and trees reaching toward glory.

Musically, *Badlands* captured my imagination with two pieces of pop culture wonderfully employed: "Love is Strange" over Holly dancing in curlers on the dirt near her tree house home; and "A Blossom Fell," as she and Kit dance with each other in the headlights near the end of their journey. James Taylor's guitar in *Badlands* carries over into Leo Kottke's immortal train music in *Days of Heaven*.

Ennio Morricone's wistful symphonic score for *Days of Heaven* when the trio of interlopers is living the high life on the farm gives way to strident and stressful orchestration when the wheat harvest goes up in flames. The low rumble of the soundtrack at the beginning of *The Thin Red Line* as a gigantic crocodile disappears beneath dark waters perfectly sets up the film's focus on the "war in the heart of nature." Composition and love of music become explicit themes in *The Tree of Life* as the father, Mr. O'Brien, extols the work ethic and perfectionism of Toscanini and goes on to mourn the death of his own early musical ambition. In *Knight of Cups*, recurrent uses of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Thomas Tallis Theme," Wojciech Kilar's "Exodus," "Solvieg's Song," by Edvard Grieg, and Hanan Towshend's original pieces for the film, weave a dreamlike spell perfectly adapted to the themes and scenes of the movie. *Song to Song* is all about music (and love...and mercy).

Most of my thoughts about Terry's films have come after seeing them initially on a large screen, then

multiple times on DVD. If at all possible, I recommend seeing these movies first in a theater. At home, heed the recommendation of the producers and turn the volume loud. See each film at least twice. The first time, let the story wash over you, carry you along as you simply go with it, experience it. The second or third time, watch it on dvd with subtitles on. (I was delighted to find the lyrics to choral music translated on the *Badlands* DVD, especially in the house afire scene.) I also recommend seeing the films in the chronological order of their making. This makes clearer the development of both recurring themes and motifs, on the one hand, and stylistic elements like the use of that ruminative voice-over, on the other. Enter into the Socratic spirit, raising questions along with Terry. Enter into the journey ("to the wonder!"), as well. Be patient. Try not to be frustrated with Terry's questions. They are meant to encourage us to take our inquiry deeper, to find our own answers, to stay on the trail. Terry doesn't seem to consider himself in a privileged position with the desired answers. As his friend and erstwhile teacher Stanley Cavell has put it: "One is

responsible for finding the journey's end in every step of the road, in one's own gait." (This *New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*, p. 17.) These movies seem to adhere to that perspective. Remember that the films can be seen as invitations to a Socratic dialogue.

Finally, I am acutely aware that, while Terry's chief academic concentration (before filmmaking) was in philosophy, my own has been in theology. Paul Tillich would say that both fields deal with the ultimate concerns we have as humans. A chief difference would be that, where philosophers approach matters of ultimate concern via discursive, logically argued essay, theology examines myth, ultimate concern embedded in story. It strikes me that Terry's films have remained quite philosophically rooted, yet grown more explicitly theological over time. Perhaps the philosophical and the theological can be subsumed

together under the heading "wonder." Ecky Malick returned to St. Stephen's in January 2016 to regale my senior students, sixty-some 17-, 18-, and 19-year-olds, with stories of her own high school days there, film shoots with Terry, and famous people humanized through friendship. What stood out to all was the question Terry asked her. They had known each other in high school, then gone their separate ways. When they got together again, both in their forties, Terry brought her up short with the query, out of the blue, "What do you wonder?" Ecky conveyed the way that simple question opened her vision not only to her husband-to-be's uniqueness and depth of thought but also to her own journey of self-understanding. The students afterwards remarked on numerous directions that question steered their own self-examinations. My continued enjoyment of Terry Malick's movies do the same for us all.

*Jim Crosby serves as Lay Chaplain and teaches Theology to high school seniors at St. Stephen's Episcopal School, Austin, Texas. An Episcopal Third Order Franciscan, he started Nonviolent Austin, an affiliate of Campaign Nonviolence, a year ago.*

## Dear Ancestors - Elisabeth Ivey

*Ancestor Alexis, I've heard about you.*

So begins Alexis Pauline Gumbs' short story *Evidence*, which appears in the science fiction anthology *Octavia's Brood*. The story unfolds through a series of episodic documents that reveals the link between Alexis' world and the one of Alandrix, who lives five generations into the future. In this first letter, Alandrix writes with gratitude. Because of the "silence breaking" of her ancestors, Alandrix now lives in a world where she can't imagine that acts like "sexual abuse...used to happen all the time." Writing back through history, Alandrix reveals herself as the manifestation of new paradigms. Aptly-named, *Evidence* is a story of connection – the connection through time between one person's actions and the evidence that it mattered.

In the foreword of *Octavia's Brood*, Sheree Renée Thomas writes: "*With incisive imagination and a spirited sense of wonder, contributors bridge the gap between speculative fiction and justice, boldly writing new voices and*

*communities into the future.*" Its editors Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha call the anthology a work of *visionary* fiction, distinguishing it from "the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power." That's why the book stood out to me – it was an unusual project of the imagination.

It reminded me of the time I first met Gareth Higgins - founder of *The Porch* – and the piece of wisdom that has informed my framework for life and storytelling. During a guest lecture at the Glen Workshop in 2017, Gareth shared about "[The Seventh Story](#)" project in which he and co-author Brian McLaren identify six main stories of the world and how they "fail to answer the question of how to make a better world." He spoke of the seventh story, the one that reaches beyond the narratives that pattern our view of the world. And then he said, quoting Richard Rohr, that "the best criticism of the bad is

the practice of the better.” At first, you want to snap your fingers. *That’s it – that’s what I’ve been missing.* Then the words seep in. And they leave you wondering, *What, exactly, is the “better”?*

I’ve struggled to answer that question. At first, pushing for a better world sounds suspiciously like a utopian undertaking, and [plenty of people have outlined just how disastrous past attempts at utopia have been](#) (think: oppressive regimes or cults). [Still others have pointed out](#) that the very word *utopia*, credited to Thomas More, contains a satire within itself as “a Greek pun on ‘ou topos’ (‘no place’) and ‘eu topos’ (‘good place’).” Glimpses of utopia in cartoons like *The Jetsons* showed me a future that was bright, shiny, and white, but not one that had space for people who looked like me. With the challenge to grasp the elusive concept of the future, it’s much easier to ground our visions in the possibility of the dystopia. Dystopian landscapes have their function, and often through the bleak magnification of oppression and disaster emerges a hopeful resilience. The revolutions that

arise in the face of these injustices creates a version of hope through the reminder that people who believe in good will always push back against people who embody evil. This is the world that Gumbs recognizes, that of our twenty-first-century world, and it’s one that she situates in the history of her fictive creation. By doing so, she provides a vision of a world in which goodness thrives. That inclination can seem naive and idealistic. After all, even the Bible warns of trying times through the apocalyptic book of Revelation and Jesus’ claim that his followers will encounter trouble in their lives.

Still, practicing the better means pushing back against the acceptance of damaging stories as an inevitability. It reminds us that is that in our pursuit to expose problems, we can recreate cycles of the very structures we work to oppose. In her poignant memoir *I’m Afraid of Men*, Vivek Shraya pinpoints one complexity of fidelity to truth:

*If I open Twitter or Facebook on the way to work, I brace myself for news reports of violence against women and gender-*

*nonconforming people, whether it's a story about another trans woman of color who has been murdered, or the missing and murdered Indigenous women, or sexual assault. As important as it is to make these incidents visible by reporting them, sensationalizing and digesting these stories is also a form of social control, a reminder that I need to be afraid and to try to be as invisible as possible.*

I didn't interrogate my relationship to such representations until my final year of college, when I based my senior thesis on the study of representation of women of color in young adult literature. My results may not have been groundbreaking, but my findings proved useful for myself, if not for anyone else. I'd expected the stereotyping and marginalizing themes, but what surprised me was the pattern of violence woven through nearly every story.

At first, it didn't seem significant – of course female protagonists would face the same gender-based challenges that women in reality do. But my findings found a home in a broader body of literature that

made me face the implications of these representations. Theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out how

*defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into 'objects-who-defend-themselves,' men into 'subjects-who-perpetrate-violence' and (every) society into a simple opposition between the powerless (read: women) and the powerful (read: men) groups of people.\**

I started to examine my own stories, and I noticed that same thread of violence. I didn't write these stories in a vacuum; different versions of them had been woven into the fabric of national narratives. I wrote them as a way of exposing systems of oppression. But when it came time to shift to a new kind of story – one that envisioned what could be rather than what was – my imagination failed me.

It's a curious dilemma, and yet one that might not be entirely necessary if we expand our capacity for narrative. Some stories serve as guides for fighting oppression and reveal the stark need to dismantle

existing systems, but we also need visions of a future in which we flourish, where the work of “silence breaking” takes effect. The *Evidence* contains both: the exposure of existing problems with a depiction of what it could look like to continue that work through generations.

We learn from those who come before us and from the figures, real and fictional, who can conceive of blueprints for what can come after us. While touring for her new release *The Beautiful\*\**, New York Times Bestselling author Renée Adhieh disclosed that she conceived of one of her main male characters out of necessity; writing during the time of the Kavanaugh hearings, she wanted to create a character whose growth could model a form of healthy masculinity.

jackie sumell\*\*\* similarly works to bring about different models. Recently featured in [Orion Magazine](#), she created *Solitary Gardens*, as a way of connecting people in solitary confinement to people and nature through letter-writing. She practices the “better” and uses her imagination to make it

happen: “By design, *Solitary Gardens* inverts the coercive labor practices of chattel slavery....The arrangement models another way of being, an economy rooted in generosity, not capital.” Straddling the present and the future, jackie facilitates the imaginative capacity of inmates while advocating for the kind of structural change that would transform entire communities and their orientation towards justice.

During a time of past political upheaval, Toni Morrison shared her discouragement with a friend who reminded her that “This is precisely the time when artists go to work—not when everything is fine, but in times of dread.”\*\*\*\* To create is an act of faith – we cannot know the end result of the endeavor until we have thoroughly engaged with it – and in many cases, we will not know how if anything will come of our efforts. More than a few points exist between an ideal and its lived interpretation, but the relationship between fiction and reality doesn’t exist as mere wishful thinking. Imagination will be the first act of reclaiming a future from the inevitability of ruin.

Inspired by Gumbs' story, I wrote a letter to my own ancestors, the ones on the side of my family that had been slaves in this country. I rarely acknowledged this truth beyond the impersonal statement of fact. Due to erasure, my history has often felt out of reach, and I've struggled with this feeling of alienation. But sitting down to write this letter, I liked the thought that my imagination could serve as that connection I hadn't been able to feel.

"Dear Ancestors," I began.

I wondered if they'd thought of me, and I wanted to tell them I existed. That I am evidence of the imaginations they had,

imaginings that reached beyond the truth in front of them.

\**Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.*

\*\* A historical fantasy centered on vampires in 1870s New Orleans – a subject which prompted its own line of discussion about the stigma around women's and girl's interests in literature (i.e. romance).

\*\*\* Who intentionally does not capitalize her name.

\*\*\*\* "[No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear](#)"

*Elisabeth Ivey writes literary non-fiction and young adult fiction. She has contributed to The Odyssey and Messiah College's The Swinging Bridge, and she has presented research on representation in youth literature at the PA NAME and IMAGINE Social Good conferences.*



## **Five Notions, Five Steps - Gareth Higgins**

I've been thinking about finding simple ways to understand the world around us - or at least to look at it in a healthier way, because understanding it may be asking a little too much right now. I've distilled it to five notions that help me think about what's going on, and five steps to participate in making it better. They're not comprehensive, they're not perfect, but people tell me there's something to these - and I'd love to hear yours. So maybe try these on, and see what happens.

### **Five Notions**

1: We are not alone.

2: Grief, fear, and anger are normal. We are invited to seek ways to hold space for them in a healthy way, so they do not become depression or aggression.

3: Something good is unfolding, even amidst the pain and trouble; it's normal to forget the good news when overwhelmed by the brokenness, but the story doesn't end there.

4: We may be in the early stages of a series of unprecedented global nonviolent revolutions that are only just getting started.

5: Without us, these nonviolent revolutions won't fully take flight. Each of us has a part to play.

### **Five Steps**

1: However, and to whomever you pray, pray to ask the right questions, to face the best truths, to not be distracted by unnecessary or unhelpful things, and to ask where you fit in all of it.

2: Focus on what is beautiful more often than what is ugly; look for sources of information that are at least as emotionally mature as you are, and as committed to the common good.

3: Discern and commit to \*one\* common good cause that you're willing to devote more energy to.

4: While protecting the vulnerable, try to love your enemy. Whatever that may mean for you in practice, don't make tribalism worse.

5: If Advent and Christmas are traditions you mark, then celebrate them as if they really mean something! This is a season when we welcome Love being born again in us. Whether you affirm that as a religious belief or practice, or you simply let your heart be warmed by the story of Scrooge, I wonder if this year we might share our burdens, our joys, and our gifts, for the sake of the common good, which includes our own well-being. Let's do it, shall we?



# The Porch

A slow conversation about  
beautiful and difficult things.

*Thanks for Reading*

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