

THE PORCH

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doesn't last...

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Cover photo by Marcia McFee

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*Think of the small as many and the
large as few - The Tao de Ching*

WELCOME

In an interview about his vital new book ENLIGHTENMENT NOW, Steven Pinker says that amidst his deeply grounded optimism about the progress that has brought us thus far, his three top concerns are climate change, the threat of nuclear war, and the rise of authoritarian populism and fascism. Seems to me that if we want to make some kind of impact on all three, that our priority should be tribalism - the climate change conversation is diluted and resisted on ideological/tribal grounds, the threat of nuclear war is firmly rooted in a notion of group identity that wants to reduce or eradicate the space for “others”, and authoritarian rule appeals to isolationist beliefs.

I think this raises two challenges/opportunities: the first is to question how my own beliefs and practices might manifest as tribalism - in other words, where does the way I want to belong overlap into causing harm to other people? The second is whether or not I am willing to take one small step to dissolve tribalism by trying to get to know someone whose beliefs I oppose, and seek some common ground.

If you think differently from me, which ultimately means, if you're *human*, would you be willing to have a conversation in which we listen to each other about our hopes and concerns, and maybe figure out something we could do for the common good, together? It's not rocket science. At least I think it's not.

Welcome to *The Porch*, Issue 11. **We're glad you're here.**

SEEKING PLEASING - Carla Ewert

I believe I ought to be pleasing. Pleasing means being quiet—making you feel witty and smart by keeping conversation within the bounds of your skills—not saying what I think because it isn't what you think, and maybe what I think is sharp enough to undo what you think, or maybe it's dull enough to pollute the space between us.

But then pleasing means being assertive—because women today should be bold—the one to fill the silence, make the point that needs making to prove I'm as smart as you. Pleasing means being invisible—a blank sheet onto which you can write the story that suits you: desire, angel, sweetheart, mother, friend. And then means being visible, clearly marked so you know what to expect: the ring, the age, the roles, clear categories.

Pleasing means being groomed so that when you look you think, that, that is what I wanted to see. Like the man who patted my little one's head and shook her father's hand, "such a pretty daughter," as if her beauty was a gift to him from her father—or as if in congratulations, her beauty an achievement.

Pleasing means being effortless, so that my trying isn't too obvious lest you feel threatened even by that or I become uninteresting in my acquiescence. Pleasing means burying my talent, the last fearful servant, sometimes not afraid of losing but of outdoing—shining can be unbearable. But sometimes because my talent will never match yours, first servant of investment and returns. Means whatever things were gain to me, I have counted as loss that I may know you—know you by not knowing myself, allowed proximity because conflict is impossible as I am always already emptied and erased.

Pleasing means being fifteen and kneeling on the floor to prove there is only one inch between that floor and my hem to a teacher with a ruler. Means measuring with three fingers to make sure my neckline is a modest distance from my collar bone.

Means being nineteen and wearing the shorter skirt because you told me not to be a prude.

Means being thirty-eight and changing ten times because everything feels like too much: too tight, too low, too sweet, too old, too young, too revealing, too intimidating.

Means seeing articles titled *Ten Things a Woman Over Thirty-Five Should Never Wear* and reading them.

Means my body is for your pleasure not mine, my pleasure dependent on your whim, my responses and aches molded to yours.

Pleasing means my feelings ought to reflect yours.

If you love, I love. If you distance, I distance. If you smile, I smile. If you want, I want. Never ask, never need, never want anything other than what you would have me want.

Means only worrying when you have the solution.

Only emoting when you have capacity.

Only wanting what you can give.

Means narrowing my feelings to the constructs in which we live, not letting them overrun the boundaries, and if they do, drawing them back quickly, hoping no one saw.

Pleasing means being just a pretty face.

Means being more than a pretty face.

Means smiling when I'm angry.

Means comforting you when I'm undone.

Means breathing deeply when I want to scream.

Means saying yes when I feel no, saying will when I feel won't, saying do when I feel don't.

Pleasing till I'm sick with my own sweetness.

Sick with swallowing unsaid words and choked down feelings. Sick with wanting to know what I know.

Wanting to hear my own ache, my own wit, my own soul. My own frequency turned up up so I can hear it over the din of demand. Sick with fear that pleasing is the only pleasure I'm offered. A pleasure hollowed of substance, my senses undone, capitulating to yours.

And then there it is.

And I know I'm seeking what can't be found. Trying to grasp what can't be held.

Your pleasure is a thing I cannot feel. I can only feel my own. And mine lives in
MY body—senses alive and curious.

And my body knows already...

the way rain feels on the crown of my head, the piercing of a rock on my bare
foot, the pink halo around my baby's hand pressed against the sunshine in the
car window, the arc of lamp light on the wall, soft at it's edges, the sound of a
plate being placed on the wooden table, another's forehead leaning against mine
and a shared breath.

This is pleasing.

TO BE FREE - Mike Riddell

[Note to readers: This beautiful piece of very personal writing refers to traumatic events in the author's life, and doesn't hide from pain, but is ultimately an invitation to more life.]

In my early life, I wasn't aware of privilege. I entered a working class family in one of the poorest socio-economic settlements in New Zealand. My three siblings had been sexually abused by an uncle. My parents didn't own a house, but lived in a shabby property provided by the Railways where my father worked.

It was not immediately apparent that by virtue of my birth, I was blessed with choices unavailable to others. I was a White Anglo-Saxon Heterosexual Protestant. I sometimes joke that I changed what was least painful to alter, and became a Catholic. The fact is that my heritage brought with it an endowment of cultural power, through no effort of my own.

Education increased my elite status. Through something of an historical accident, I attended a prestigious single-sex college. The teaching was good. I was alert, questioning, and able to navigate my way into a universe of ideas. But it was also an environment in which racism, homophobia, classism, and misogyny flourished – subtle accompaniments to the schooling of the ruling classes.

* * *

I become a chameleon. I can fight, swear, play rugby, and drink like a working class man. But I also get good grades, read widely, and learn to write well. I'm regarded as something as a freak by my family. Trouble follows me, but courtesy of a few good teachers I'm picking up tools that will allow me to shape my destiny.

Education is the biggest lever of them all. It allows its beneficiaries to navigate their way through the world. The fact that I receive it is a consequence of my privilege, which by now is obvious to me. Experience is the spring that irrigates my dawning self-understanding. I do drugs, join protest movements, raise a middle finger to society, spend time in a Moroccan prison.

None of which cripples my future as it would if I was black, gay, or poor. I listen to Dylan. I understand what the stakes are, and how fundamentally unjust is the society we live in. Oh, I eventually become “normal” – I marry, have children, become a clergyman. Fortunately the quiet rage within me is not extinguished by this lapse into convention.

* * *

I listen one day to the leader of our Baptist denomination claim in a small group that he may be male, but that he has no power. It’s one of the most ludicrous statements I’ve ever heard. The denial of cultural power most commonly comes from those who are exercising it to silence others.

I’m totally aware of my own advantages. Awareness is the foundation of liberation. I try to use my power alongside others. I help to establish a Housing Trust, primarily for people who have traversed the mental health system in my city. We design it not “for” others, but alongside them. These are not clients, but friends who we eat and drink with regularly. We name our movement *The Community of Refuge Trust*.

As it grows, I use my writing abilities to protest against a heartless health system which ostracizes the ‘mad’ and isolates them from participation in the community. My background allows me to front politicians and decision makers

on their own level, and carve out a space for those who are sidelined to speak for themselves.

* * *

At eleven years old, my daughter is raped. As a consequence, by the time she's fifteen, she is on the streets, and with a habit. Numerous overdoses and suicide attempts fail to end her misery. The suffering spreads out through our small family, threatening to drown us all. My privilege is of no use in providing healing. I am broken entirely.

I discover that it is not useful to speak of such things in the presence of successful people. They routinely want to change the subject, and ascribe some sort of failing to us as parents for causing the problem. Where I do find help is among others who are themselves broken through the circumstances of life. With these friends I find love, grim humor, and healing.

As New Zealand poet James K. Baxter put it: "Women who think they have ceased to be Christian shack up with dying alcoholics and wash their piles with warm water. Men who think the same extricate the head of their neighbour's wife from the gas oven and find they have a new woman to look after and another mark on their crime sheet."

This experience is my unsought wound. Now I am in a position where I learn about stigma from the inside rather than as an intellectual concept. For the first time in my life I am emotionally hobbled in a way that no amount of power will cure. It is both a curse and a new freedom. I have joined the ranks of those who have nothing to lose. Those who sustain me are indwellers of pain.

* * *

I coin my agony into words, becoming a writer. Always I am reaching for some sort of understanding, but it never comes. While I consider myself a liberated male, I still find it difficult to ask for help. Instead I pour my sorrow into the bowl of a paragraph, and lose myself in the mystery of meditation. Who can heal what can't be healed?

To bastardize those resplendent words of Leonard Cohen, "There's a crack, a crack in everything: that's how the truth gets out". I seek humility and humanity in my swamp of self-doubt. I prospect for kindness and mercy and tolerance. My armor is rusted, my helmet broken, my loins ungirded. No doubt I could still employ social power, but the ambition has gone.

The simple act of living is sufficient. I feel the sun on my face, the breath in my lungs, the wind in what's left of my hair. I am content with these. There's love at loose in the world, and I often experience it. I continue to dribble sentences into my soup, but no longer feel that I need to convince anyone with them. I recognize that my own need to write is more vital than finding readers for my scribblings.

* * *

I have a tendency to feel guilty for my own stupidly lucky life. It's the equivalent of 'survivor guilt'. None of us are responsible for the way we come into life; only how we leave it. I could spend my time cultivating shame on behalf of my privileged contemporaries, but I choose not to. To quote Cohen, faithfully this time, "I have tried, in my way, to be free".

We are all called to be alchemists – to take the raw material that has been inherited, and make of it what we can. I admire deeply those who have managed

to transform oppression into leadership, but I don't regret that I'm not among their number. I was and am deeply privileged by birth. It would seem pathetically tragic and hypocritical to envy the struggles of others. But I do admire them.

If at times I feel an outsider in my own society, it's because of my own choices and mistakes rather than through prejudice. This is a hunger for belonging, and one that I suspect every person on the planet feels keenly. My true wealth lies in having people around me who love me for who I am. In that regard I am the most charmed of men.

OLD LIGHT DOESN'T LAST - Marcia McFee

As I set off for five weeks in Ireland this summer I had only two intentions: wandering and wondering. The very simplicity of this was unusual in my life, to say the least. The entrepreneurial life of a spiritual teacher is often not very... uh ... spiritual. In fact, sometimes I think that I have spent more time planning, producing and promoting than actually getting to ponder my own spiritual journey. Teaching—not to mention embodying—living with intention, noticing with astonishment, seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary and creating artful symbols that point to mysterious realities doesn't actually happen without a lot of hard and relentless fecking work. (And if you need evidence that I've been in Ireland, there you "fecking" have it.)

Seven years ago I had set foot on the Emerald Isle for the first time. It was one of those bus tours with an agenda, and a time limit, for everything. Instead of opportunities to fall into brief yet never-to-be-repeated encounters with the people who actually inhabit the place, it was a lot of talking to my fellow Americans on the trip. It was a good introduction to the land of my ancestors, for which I'm grateful, but pretty early on in the ten day tour I vowed to myself that I would return one day alone, and for a significant chunk of time. That it took me seven years to get back should tell you something of the priority I have given to promises made to myself. But then perhaps this was the right moment after all. Major changes in my life, accompanied by a magnitude of grief I've never before known, were calling out for a rite of passage of sorts. I wasn't sure what it would be, but I sensed that the land of "thin places" would provide.

For this trip, I set for myself a long enough duration to allow for having no plans beyond the first stop. Again, set against the backdrop of my usual rhythm of life with deadlines and planning months in advance, this was nirvana—or would it be? Could I make the adjustment and let go of fear of missing out enough to slow down and let the journey unfold?

It took an unexpected epiphany for the answer to be yes.

*

My first stop—the planned one—was a series of stone-age burial passage tombs in County Meath just outside Dublin. I had been there for a rushed couple of hours in that bus tour seven years ago, but the experience marked me enough to consider this place the most beloved ritual spot I had ever visited. To a ritual scholar, this is like candy. I loved it so much that it inspired a tattoo I’ve been sporting ever since—a spiral, the most prominent symbol of these stone-age mounds that pre-date the Egyptian pyramids. I couldn’t wait to get back to this place, to trace the spirals with my fingers and “report back.” In a pre-trip moment of thinking I could not possibly take a trip just for myself, I had promised this correspondence to my website subscribers, so I knew there were people following me on social media. Shouldn’t I be sure to drum up some promotional excitement for the biz? So before going into the passage tomb, I dutifully and enthusiastically did a Facebook Live broadcast, pontificating on the human yearning for ritual, for symbol, for making sense of the cycles of life... blah, blah, blah.

Then it was my turn to go into the dark, cool womb of the mound's interior. Only about 20 people fit in at one time to get a taste of what those early humanoid ancestors created as their ritual space. The light is simulated for daily visitors because only on the Winter Solstice does the tomb do what it was built to do. There's a lottery to pick the 20 lucky people out of tens of thousands who will be present when the sunrise aligns perfectly with the opening above the doorway and the light shines all the way back through the passage into the place where the deceased were laid to rest. It is extraordinary evidence of the human yearning for a sign of light piercing the darkness, signs of rebirth and renewal of life, as the days then get longer. This was going to make a great follow-up broadcast after I exited, I thought, as I prepared to enter.

But once inside, rather than planning reflections for the post-exit broadcast that may or may not have been deeply meaningful; instead of me reflecting on the rituals of these ancient people, the ritual of entering and being on the inside claimed me.

I noticed something I hadn't noticed the first time I was there—a fern frond unraveled from its spiral.... perhaps the natural inspiration for this ancient spiral art. It was etched on the rock-face tissue of this vagina-like opening. And in a visceral opening of my heart, it unfurled me, like something long dormant being reawakened.

I had made it a long time in my life without experiencing the death of someone very close to me. It has always made me wonder if, when I did, I would survive it. I'd always heard about the kind of pain that leaves you curled tight into a fetal position, unable to move on. Then grief did hit and there it was—the urge to wind up tight in the corner of a bathroom floor in the middle of the dark night. And then there in the dark womb-like tomb of Newgrange with its wound-up spirals and unfurled fern frond, I was reminded in an unarticulated gut-feeling kind of knowing, that the trips we take to the dark places are necessary if one hopes to open to life and light once again. Old light doesn't last. As one who has studied rites of passage, I knew this, of course. But experiencing it... well... it changed me.

Then I was out again, birthed into the light of this nascent journey, my tears lubricating the passage. I kneeled in the grass outside the tomb not knowing, at that moment, how or why this outburst was happening. It didn't matter. *Feck*



whatever it meant and *Feck Facebook Live*. It just was. And it was mine.

In my field of Ritual Studies, we say that rituals themselves are *first-order meaning-making*. The reflecting upon the rituals that participants or scholars subsequently do is *second-order meaning-making*. You cannot substitute thinking for experiencing. Not that the two are dichotomous or estranged, but there is a difference between having an experience and interpreting it. The distance between those can be a split-second. But there was a difference, I believe, between having the experience in anticipation of telling the story and just having the experience. I can be so in love with the science of experience that I don't let myself rest in experience's womb.

As a direct result of that moment, the rest of my five weeks in Ireland became a cascade of moments of infant wonder. The wandering became effortless and the wondering less goal-oriented. Whether the events, places and people I encountered along the way were manifestations of the universe gifting me with the extraordinary or whether the state I allowed myself to be in simply allowed the ordinary to be more extraordinary, it doesn't really matter. It was a time of allowing the heights and depths to work in me and on me. This doesn't mean I didn't do *any* reflecting upon the experience. I am a symbolist by nature and by training. We humans have evolved to be meaning-mongers; so to reflect on our experience is not something we can, or should, deny. I call it "metaphoraging" and we are all wired for it. But I was making sure to have my experiences as well as reflect on them—wandering and wondering.

*

In the days following that visit to the Newgrange passage tomb, a drought and a drone camera enabled discoveries of new, even larger, passage tombs that had not been seen in thousands of years. My host used to work at the passage tombs and so one mystical night we had an over the fences adventure to look at the new archeological digs sprouting up as a result of the once-in-a-lifetime findings. What, I wondered as I wandered those places, was lying undiscovered in my life, ready to be excavated?

I wandered over to the Wild Atlantic Way of the west coast of Ireland. There I stayed with a couple who had been married by a Celtic monk who lives on the Aran Islands—home of monks and monasteries for centuries. This couple had gifted me with an exchange of vulnerable life stories over lamplit home-cooked meals—one of the stories revealing that, like so many in Ireland, they had wanted ritual and symbol in their wedding but they hadn't wanted the church. And, this being a second marriage, the church of their upbringing did not want them either. So compassion for human experience led this ex-Roman Catholic priest turned Celtic monk to bring his rich ritual to their lives. They put me in touch and I spent a day with him on his island talking about the deepest things we know and I watched him perform a joyful marriage ritual in the ruins of a tenth-century monastery with no roof. What capacity for joy do I have that is just waiting to blow the roof off my life?

*

I wandered down the coast and found myself in the home of a woman in the midst of life and relationship changes not unlike my own and within five minutes we were sharing things that only someone else in the midst of that shit can understand. She told me of her father's recent wake in that very house, and the way they had lovingly, joyfully, woefully held vigil with his body laid out on that very kitchen table where we sat drinking tea. It was a table of transition—her father's, her family's, and now ours as we talked of the “what's next” of our lives. Later, we were joined by one of her best friends, the cave-diver from Ireland who had just returned from helping save those boys trapped in the cave in Thailand. You meet all sorts. The kitchen table again became the place of bearing witness to the story of the miracle of life. How will I open the doors of my home wider so my own kitchen table can become a place of story, witness, and transformation?

I wandered to one of the sites of a natural well named for St. Brigid, a saint who may be just as famous to the Irish as Patrick. While there I began a conversation with the men who were mending the failing concrete walls around the perimeter. Because I lingered a long time at the well, pilgrims came and went, walking five times around the shrine as the sign suggested, or scooping out water to take home and use all year long for blessing people and things. At a lull in the visitors, the workmen dipped their buckets in the well so they would have water to make the concrete. “Gonna be the holiest concrete in County Clare,” he said with a laugh and I winked that his secret was safe with me. Indeed, the place between the ordinary and extraordinary is very thin. How might the sacred be closer to me than I know?

There are many of other metaphorizing-madness-giving-way-to-bliss moments I could write about here because these magical moments just kept coming for five weeks. The Tidy Towns gardener who had transformed a blighted urban corner into blooming bliss that brought neighbors together, the courageous Northern Ireland peace builders and poets who revealed to me the power of risking confessional vulnerability even and especially in the face of revenge-worthy pain, the roller derby girls who are bad-ass and giggly at the same time, and the ukulele band that is more like church than church. But I'll finish with this.

I wanted to mark my journey with a tattoo. Knowing that the journey often continues as an evolution rather than a decisive breach, I decided to build on the image I already bore. In honor of my epiphany at the Newgrange burial passage tomb five weeks earlier, I went to get my existing spiral tattoo adapted into an unfurling fern frond spiral. As the tattoo artist began her work on the fern spiral, she asked about the symbolism.

I told her the story.

Her name was Charlotte.

She was purple-hair pretty and young, though already with years of tattoo experience having been mentored by the shop's owner who was, Charlotte proudly told me, the first woman tattooist in Ireland. Already I felt my choice in tattoo shops was as mystically right on as the rest of my journey had been. And then, this:

She listened to my tale, of a seven-years-in-the-making pilgrimage, the pain in the background, the wandering, the underground rite of passage, the leaving of an old light and emerging into a new one, and the wonder.

She paused, needle point ready to pierce my skin.

And then she said, "Oh, Newgrange. I should tell you about the time I won the lottery and got to be in that tomb at sunrise of the Winter Solstice. It changed me."



HIGHER CALLING - Gareth Higgins



Jack Lemmon and Željko Ivanek in Mass Appeal (1984)

The first priest I remember, at least the one who really made a difference, was a tall man with piercing eyes and a slight high pitch to his voice. He was my grandmother's minister, not mine, although he showed as much care and attention to my parents and myself and my siblings when she died, and too young, that we might as well have been his parishioners. He was strong-framed, tight-bodied. When he entered a room, you could feel it. Grounded. Alive. There for you. The memory reminds me of Jack Lemmon in *Mass Appeal*, the little-seen 1984 light drama about heavy subjects - a priest who loves, but doubts that he can let his loves overcome his questions enough to admit them. He's a man of kindness and doctrinal rectitude, but when these seem to collide, his kindness finally wins.

With this reverend, I was young enough to not know what a 'vocation' was; but I was human enough to understand that this man loved us, loved me. Would listen. I remember sitting with him and pouring out my teenage angst through hot eyes and strained throat. He, hands lightly clasped, one leg crossed over the other, perhaps the only adult outside the cohort of my schoolteachers who still wore a suit after hours (because, I guess, he only ever had 'during' ones), paying ever so careful and tender attention to my articulation of pain. His already soft eyes reddened and leaked a little too. His words were few, but his heart was enormous; what he said was that sometimes there is no explanation for suffering, but that he loved me, and he would do everything he could to support me through the emotional storm that I feared would consume me. He meant it. And twenty-five years later, despite not even living on the same continent, and seeing him very rarely, I still feel the safety he induced; I experience the dignity of having my fears respected; I am moved by this authority figure who acknowledged his own doubts in the very moment of offering me security. He was prepared to risk appearing uncertain in the exercise of caring for another; he was the kind of man who might step in front of a train to stop it hitting someone else. Like Trevor Howard in *Ryan's Daughter*, David Lean's follow-up to *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*, and a film so poorly received at the time that Lean couldn't get another film made for fourteen years. It's clichéd and overwrought, to be sure, but *Ryan's Daughter* has two great things going for it - the first is the landscape shots of the Dingle Peninsula, which make Ireland look almost too mythic; but I've been there, and it really does look like that. The second is Trevor Howard, rumped of face, slightly wonky of accent, resplendent in cassock and authority. His Father Collins is a marvelous creation, the robustness of his catechistic questioning of wayward villagers never divorced from his compassion for them; and in perhaps my favorite cinematic clerical moment, the solidness of his body serving as a bulwark against injustice. When a misguided warrior tries to harm someone, Father Collins gets in the way, putting his body in front of the vulnerable, thrusting a sturdy elbow to challenge a scapegoating fist.

“You’re taking advantage of your cloth!” complains the warrior, indignant that a priest would block him. “That’s what it’s for”, announces Father Collins, a decisive rejoinder that declares, depending on your point of view, either the undeniable value of the priesthood, or that even a broken clock is right twice a day.

I guess being willing to acknowledge that you might only be right twice a day, but that when you see broken things being trampled on you’d be willing to step in front of the next boot is indeed what a good priest is for - or at least that’s a baseline for what clergy vocation fully realized might be. We don’t hear many stories about good priests these days - this is partly a function of the very real traumas surfacing as our culture (thankfully) evolves a lack of tolerance for the abuse of the vulnerable; partly because of the psychological myopia that leads human beings to regress to the mean (in both senses of the word - because we predict probability based on how easily we can recall examples, a false perception of how bad things are arises when we pay disproportionate or unbounded attention to an information media married to (or at least living in a dysfunctional community house with) the military-industrial-entertainment-anxiety complex); and partly due to the fact that the dialogue between science and religion is often dominated by those who see it as a competition in which one cancels the other out, rather than a spacious place in which - to use Flannery O’Connor’s magnificent idea about what happens when good form and good content meet - two plus two equals five.

I hate priests. (Priests are brilliant.)

God is dead. (Stalin is dead.)

All the wars in the world are caused by religion. (All the peace in the world is made by religion.)

Oppositional energy always recreates itself. (No it doesn't.)

Yes it does.

And so on. *Ad infinitum. Ad nauseum. In nomine patris, et filii, et spiritus sancti. Et cinema.*

This cultural moment calls for an artistic response that seeks to transcend such upmanship. If the purpose of art is to help people live better - and I can't think of a better definition of its purpose than that - and if we accept that we live in an age where anxiety threatens constantly to spill over into mass destruction (which ultimately also means self-destruction) then we need stories that affirm the possibility of holding two or more things in tension at the same time. Some terrible things have been done in the name of the church. Some miraculous things have unfolded precisely because some people responded to a vocational call to service. My sense of transcendent possibility, openness to sharing in binding the wounds of the world (and have mine bound too), connectedness to community, understanding of the interdependence of all things came to me through my experience of church. And in church I also experienced the shaming of my body, condemnation of my desires, humiliation of my aspirations, and what might be called a culture of low-level repeated exorcisms which tried to expel things from me so I could be "whole" and ready for life as a leader in the big world and that I now believe to be akin to amputating a leg the day before putting me as a national representative in the Olympic marathon. It hurt me. It healed me. It clarified things to me. It confused me. Bono says she's a whore, but she's still my mother. What is often neglected in citing that remark is that it also makes me her son. I inherit the light and shadow. I must be conscious of how I might transmit them. Clergy more so, perhaps.

I may have never seen clerical life portrayed in cinema with such a sense of realistic nuance as that found in the writer-director John Michael McDonagh's *Calvary*, in which Brendan Gleeson's Father James stands rock steady and open - he's enormous and strong, microscopically interested and tender, a believer and a doubter, a Santa Claus with a salty mouth, as if Mount Rushmore had a sense of humor or the Grand Canyon could weep. Father James knows from the first minute of the story that he's being threatened with murder - a symbolic act being planned by a victim (not yet, I think, a survivor) of monstrous injustice who believes that killing a decent priest would be more noticed than killing a bad one. It's a mythic hook - and not just biblical myth, for *Calvary* is redolent with the history of cinematic portrayals of lonely men framed against a chorus of disapproval - *High Noon* comes to mind, with one good person trying to keep it together amidst the projections of multitudes. A priest friend told me once that he seeks to cope with the temptations of ego by recognizing the distinction between vocation and persona - presiding at a celebrity wedding should be no more important than doing it for the folks down the street; it's easier to stay emotionally healthy and avoid the traps of selfish ambition when he sees himself as working with the grain of vocation. Father James, in *Calvary*, seeks to serve, but he's not innocent nor illusioned - he's the kind of priest that the Jesus of *The Last Temptation of Christ* might ordain. Just ask yourself how can I be of service, and try to do your best in that moment, and you'll be ok. Even if they kill you. Emotionally healthy service is like radio waves in a perfect acoustic chamber - it bounces back on the one serving, like a smile from the face of God.

I was smiling, and crying, at *Calvary*, and not just because it captures its part of the Irish landscape in such exquisite fashion. No, because it reminded me of the priests I have loved, and the priest I want to be. (To those readers who have taken ordination vows, I offer respect, and also the notion that if we're all called as members of the human family to serve each other, then I think calling us all priests may not be too much of a stretch.) Father James knows that the answer to

some questions is both 'yes' and 'no'; with Karl Malden's Father Barry in *On the Waterfront* that there are times when railing against injustice is the only choice, with Jeremy Irons' Father Gabriel in *The Mission* that part of vocational call is to suffer with your people, like Lothaire Bluteau's Daniel in *Jesus of Montreal* (a special kind of priest) that sometimes one must break some vows in order to keep more important ones (the monsignor in that magnificent French-Canadian film is perhaps the best/worst cinematic example of religious authority washing its hands of - or being complicit in - evil). Father James wants to use power to liberate, like his fellow Irish priest the late John O'Donohue said, to train people's fingers to unpick the knots that oppressive religion has tied them up in. He's willing to give everything if it will help free someone else. He's made his peace with God and himself, and he knows that nothing beautiful is ever really lost. The film in which he comes to life is one of the best I've seen this year, because it knows how to tell the story of an individual in a way that somehow tells the truth about everyone else. The first priest that I remember, at least the one who really made a difference, was the one with strong hands and a soft voice. He was my grandmother's minister, not mine, but there was a sense in which the whole world was his parish, and while he wanted to be faithful to his clerical vocation, he also wanted us to know that each of us, in becoming human and learning to serve the common good, had an ever higher calling than that.

THE POWER OF GIVING UP THE POWER **- Kyle Meyers**

Each of Wes Anderson's short & feature length films since 1994 (including his recent *Isle of Dogs*) follow characters who inevitably experience failure & forgiveness. Anderson seems incompatible with cynicism, though not an idealist either. He unpretentiously "knows how to convey the simple joys and interactions between people so well and with such richness" says Martin Scorsese. Anderson's fifth film, *The Darjeeling Limited*, was released in 2007 amidst a harsh & abrasive "war on terror" environment that produced several masterpieces that same year. Being critically dismissed in favor of films portraying serial killers and greedy psychopaths, there seemed minimal margin for Anderson's lack of pessimism. His film about three wealthy, self-indulgent brothers traveling across India on a spiritual journey appeared politically obstinate. To that end, however, I believe it was significantly subversive. By shedding a humane light on a microcosm of white male narcissism (as portrayed by regular players Owen Wilson & Jason Schwartzman with newcomer Adrien Brody), Anderson subsequently allows for the possibility of transformation. He paints a graceful picture of personality disorder, remaining compassionate about how we heal these (not-so-hidden) emotional wounds infected with fear & shame.

The first striking example of wounding in *The Darjeeling Limited* is found in the prologue (*Hotel Chevalier*), when Natalie Portman's naked body reveals a variety of dark bruises that deter us away from sexualizing her character. Wes creates for us an uncomfortable invitation to humanize her by recognizing the un-named suffering that brought her to Paris to visit her ex-boyfriend Jack (Jason Schwartzman). While initiating sexual intimacy, they wrestle through their codependency: "If we f*ck, I'm gonna feel like sh*t tomorrow." In the end, they

opt to not exploit one another to cope with their loneliness. (How often does that happen in movies?) Having conjured up some dignity, they move from the 'inside-out' (from their room to the balcony), no longer needing to hide from the larger world around them.

Jack will write this experience into a short story that he will later share with his brothers. He is sure to clarify it as 'fiction', which is his way of communicating about himself minus vulnerability. This basically sums up the entire first half of the film. Fear, mistrust, dishonesty, and pain killers cover up an underlying need to belong, to feel known. Oldest brother Francis (Owen Wilson) is humorously controlling, his face covered in bandages. He has engineered this 'spiritual journey', which for the duration of the train ride, is nothing more than a tourist adventure complete with laminated itineraries and scheduled temple stops. As tension increases and things begin to unravel between the brothers, the illusion of control is symbolically & literally shattered as two mysterious absurdities happen. First, the train itself gets lost. ("How can a train be lost? It's on rails." asks Jack) Second, a deadly poisonous snake bought by Peter (Adrien Brody), escapes its lock box, endangering the passengers. Having been blamed for this strange phenomenon (seemingly beyond their control), their privileges are revoked. They are kicked off the train and cast out 'into the wild' with all their luggage.

Lost in the desert without an itinerary, they are left to deal with life on life's terms. What follows is one of the most sacramental (which means 'preparing us for grace') sequences in cinema history. The Whitman brothers encounter a set of young Indian brothers crossing intense rapids on a small river. Francis passes judgement on the boys ("look at these A-holes") for their lack of safety, and sure enough they are in trouble. The raft pulley system snaps in the water, and the young boys are left clinging to the overturned raft in the harsh current. The Whitmans drop all their 'baggage' to jump in and rescue the boys. (This is the

first we have seen of them get beyond their petty narcissism, which seems linked to 'the things they carry') Francis and Jack are able to get two of the boys safely to the edge, but Peter finds the other tangled in the rope. In an effort to free him, something breaks and the two of them are sent down stream into a waterfall. A loud crack is followed with silence as the others run to find them. Peter emerges (frightened, traumatized) with the child covered in blood saying, "He's dead. He's dead...I didn't save mine". As they gather, they acutely recognize how far beyond their normal boundaries & limitations they have come. We see that their true Spiritual Journey has begun.

The remaining Indian brothers lead the Whitmans back to their village, where Peter releases the flaccid child into the arms of his father. Despite the trauma, the village welcomes the Whitman brothers with gracious hospitality, caring for and feeding them. This whole event is particularly exceptional for Peter because it forced him to confront a fundamental fear within himself. Earlier we learned that his wife Alice is pregnant. This is distressing for him because he has always assumed divorce was inevitable (part of his childhood experience), though he admits to being in love with her. This reality of fatherhood has thrown him into an existential crisis, which until recently has looked like avoidance. But now we witness a post-trauma Peter timidly holding an infant child on his lap. He is sitting in view of the bereaved Indian father, who's engaged in an intimate ritual, soaking & massaging his son's lifeless body with oil. These actions reflect a compassion & empathy that Peter has likely never experienced. Like Kurosawa's 'Dreams', grief here is practical, engaged, hospitable, and contemplative. This old, traditional (death is part of life) way-of-being seems more grounded on one hand, less fearful & anxious on the other. The spiritual profundity seems almost inadvertent. Peter is being transformed by it, and something new is being born. The following funeral sequence becomes a rite-of-passage for the Brothers, scored by The Kinks singing "Strangers on this road we are on...We are not two we are one." It's quite revealing in it's tender simplicity. Off the rails now

completely, the Whitmans truly learn to trust one another. No longer a slave to what Richard Brody calls "their absence of guilt but crushing burden of shame", they each begin the process of reconciling the damage caused by their wounding. As Francis later removes his bandages, he states, "I guess I've still got a lot of healing to do". It's a perfect metaphor for those of us (like myself) who prefer control to vulnerability. Our internal wounds are not always so obvious, but left unattended they cause us to seek power & dominance over our environment. This might suppress our anxiety, but often blinds us to the wounds of others, becoming a barrier to empathy & connection (something we ourselves crave). Men especially (but not exclusively) have historically struggled in this way. Wes Anderson knows this well, courageously choosing to cultivate a cinematic universe where individuals like Francis, Peter, and Jack are willing to look in the mirror, connect with something larger than themselves, and journey towards reconciliation. This is a unique & worthy narrative accomplishment for a popular American filmmaker of the last two decades. On a silver screen, true light.



OTHER WAYS OF REMEMBERING - Elisabeth Ivey

There are times the body demands movement and the mind must listen. Like when the pitter patter of someone's palms slapping a drum send an invitation to the joints and muscles that know the language of rhythm. One afternoon in Thailand, my body stirred me outdoors and onto a bike. After a full day of academic lectures, muscles coiling tighter with each hour we spent just sitting, setting my feet on pedals felt like the physical trigger that would release my mental tension. I spoke to no one as I flew from the class room, feet crunching on the pebbles while I walked towards the stairs and up to the fourth floor to change my clothes. I notified no one of my plan as though the release of whatever was inside me couldn't be wasted on spare words. Descending, I surveyed the row of bikes clustered by the staircase, each standing upright but not looking much more promising than that. Tires wilted, cobwebs clinging to the handlebars, they were a motley crew from among which I selected the strongest. Grabbing it, I mounted and rode away as that tension unwound from me in the wind I left in my wake.

All that day, the sun had waged against us, a small group of students and our lecturers sequestered in a classroom. Even in our shelter of the house, the heat found ways to saturate me in a way that enticed sweat from my pores before I fully noticed the scorching air around me. Even with the barest of movements – an arm drifting back and forth as my hands inscribed notes – by the end of class, I still felt like I'd emerged from an intense workout. Yet, when I actually moved my body, urging my legs to pump the bike forward, the sun could not daunt me. More exposed than I'd been before, I basked in the freedom of the Thai countryside even if it also meant the sweat poured from me more freely.

I pushed my way up the winding inlet and out onto the street, making a turn right before the corner store and down a country road that always framed the

setting sun at the end of the day. It didn't take long before I came upon a field. The road narrowed into a bridge that had looked out upon dirt in the beginning of the semester. Now, I looked out on grass that I could guess contained rice. I slowed and pulled to the shoulder. In response to these glimpses of beauty I saw, my fingers wanted to reach for my phone without any conscious prompting. As I passed houses or people on the road who would acknowledge me with a smile or head nod or some such gesture, I wished for a camera. And I dwelled again on what I'd been noticing since the beginning of my trip to Thailand: that there was an instinct in me to capture what I found interesting, intriguing, beautiful.

*

This tendency wasn't new. I grew up coaxing the curious creatures, roly-polies, into containers of dirt I'd constructed for them. Once, I even caught a worm and made it my pet. When I see someone whose outfit I admire, I'm likely to ask where the person got it as if I can bound off and procure one of my own. Just as it is not new, the yearning to feel, to know, and to hold what intrigues isn't limited to me but is as universal as a baby whose tiny fists open and close to grasp a shiny toy held in front of their faces. As I pedaled on and came to a field of sunflowers, I knew the vibrant petals with their dark faces were no mere shiny toy. But I found some part of me reaching out and grasping just as if I had been a baby, perplexed by the unknown, yet wanting to hold it with me forever.

I suppose that's why I wanted my camera. Because with an adequate lens and a couple gigabytes, we can contain the mysteries our minds cannot solve or hold firmly in the moment. The camera yields a concrete mold into which we pour our abstract emotions. The close portrait of a face reveals the pores and wrinkles of humanity that traipse across the skin of every person. The head thrown back in laughter reminds us that joy still exists. The tears that gather in the eyes of a groom when he first catches a glimpse of his love, provide the same reminder

about love. And perhaps awe. I knew this as I passed an alleyway down which I could see children dancing around and laughing. I recall that moment with uncertainty, though, because I refused to take a photo to remember the joy I witnessed. With a resolve I have yet to decide is self-righteous or pure, I did not want to take any photos that day. I did not want to pluck a bit of life from the world and set it alongside the other treasures I kept in my phone's memory space. I wanted to revert to the lenses I already had and train my mind to inscribe the photo and feeling into my own memory. Yet as I write, I cannot picture how many children played around. I cannot hear any of their laughter. I find myself questioning every detail like the countless times I wonder if what exists in my mind comes from dream or memory.

And that, I imagine, is why we have cameras. Because the strain of remembering negates the fulfillment of what the memory is supposed to provide: re-experience. Long before the brain begins deteriorating with old age, most of us will find ourselves questioning where we just laid the keys a moment ago or if we responded to that message. How, then, can we be trusted to document that moment when a child blows out the candles of her first birthday cake or when she dances in her last recital? No wonder photographers get paid so much for the wedding gigs because on what's claimed to be a couple's happiest day, the brain should not receive the highest responsibility of reserving evidence of happiness to be inspected later.

And so, we take selfies. We post about the first bowl of spaghetti made in the new apartment on August 31, 2016. But we don't document only for ourselves. We make comments about how we've lost the ability to enjoy what's happening in the moment even as we send snaps of a concert to our friends. Perhaps that sentiment is true.

*

I grappled with the thought as I urged my bike onward, taking a turn past a church and riding beneath a row of trees that lined the road. Perhaps I had gotten so caught up in conveying my trip to others, when I could use that energy to heighten my senses as I took everything in around me. I suppose the ride that day was as much to ease my tension as it was to test a theory. In part, it worked. I can still recall that this bike ride happened, some several weeks after it did, but my brain cannot recall the minutiae that could recreate the experience for me like a photo could.

We have forgotten that there are other ways to remember. Of course, that's a romantic notion. I can train my eyes on the trees in the field, counting how many ovular papaya fruits dangle beneath its leaves, yet forget it the moment the wheels of my bike keep moving. I can learn about Marxism many times, as indeed I have, yet forget exactly what it means, as again I have done. Even if I could recall facts and details about what I'd seen and learned, there's no guarantee they wouldn't come out as much more than trivia. I remember meeting a woman in Thailand whose face had high cheekbones. She smiled widely, and her hair had been pulled up out of her face. But in that recollection, I revealed nothing of the pure joy that emanated from her as she welcomed our group into her home. No wonder, then, that we rely on our cameras to capture what our minds no longer can.

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Still, I wonder if even the camera can satisfy that craving within us. As much as a picture can help us recall the feelings of a moment, we are bound to time and thus doomed to never fully re-experience it. We take selfies, anyway. Because a resilience or stubbornness pushes us to persist in capturing what we feel to store up for later times. The camera has aided our efforts. There are more we could try,

though. When grappling with the dilemma between taking photos of people or not out of respect, one of my professors shared insight with me. She told me that I could paint portraits with my writing in the times that snapping a photo would be inappropriate. Words enabled me to describe the serene planes of a man's face when I didn't want to make him feel like a tourist attraction.

We can write. We can paint. We can speak to each other of the experiences in our lives that will cling to us even as we move on and have more. These methods and more may require greater focus and time than we possess or are willing to spare. And in the end, they may create a depiction even hazier than the photo we can snap in an instant.

We know that these approaches have their shortcomings, yet we can use them all to piece together a depiction of the human life akin to the blended, blurred, yet brilliant images of the Impressionism movement. These paintings lack sharpness. The lines are less clear. The images, missing the edges of a more defined replica, are the visual equivalent of memory, creating an entirely new entity, one imbued with the essence and emotion of the original image. To remember in a similar way requires labor and trust. It requires that we slow down and focus, acknowledging the beauty in life without clinging to it, trusting that we'll encounter it again.

POEMS FOR FINGERTIPS:
How Games Can Help Us Live Better - Andy Robertson

I've never been keen on silver linings. How can Heaven compensate for Auschwitz? On a smaller scale, the lesser misdemeanor of video game killing has often been justified because of supposed secondary benefits of staring at screens and shooting people in the head.

Whether learning pseudo history while killing people in Assassin's Creed, developing strategic thinking gunning down opponents in Fortnite or teamwork as we teach teenager Ellie to kill in The Last of Us, these benefits miss the point. Games are important, but not because we learn dexterity and cunning while we kill sex workers in Grand Theft Auto. They are significant, but not because we gain organisational skills while we set up mafia outfits to terrorize villagers. Like waiting for the compensation of an utopian afterlife to mitigate the darkness of the world, this completely misses the point.

Video games create other-worldly realities, sure, but they are enriching places to go because of how they receive us now, not because of skills or knowledge they teach us for the future. As we continue to return to their virtual streets, buildings, star-fields and caverns they become places in which we know ourselves better. They receive us, and let us walk around the worlds they create. We get lost in the folds of their stories in a way distinct from books or films. To play a game is to poke around in a world in progress, with themes and narratives. It's unlike any other media.

This is true, to some extent, of all games, no matter how simple or complex. The best examples used to be found mostly on PlayStation and Xbox consoles, but increasingly these experience are on smartphones, tablets and computers.

Many won't have read this far. My perspective on video games jars with culture's assumption that they are only for entertainment and usually played by juveniles. Meaning, value, spirituality and, let's say it, art, aren't what usually comes to mind...([click here to see more](#))...

The misunderstanding stems from video games appearing similar to other media. Games often include short non-interactive narrative movies between the action. They address the player like the reader of a novel. They are sold like summer blockbuster films.

Video games are also, let's say this too, spreadsheets. Just underneath the living breathing ecosystems they paint are the brushstrokes of checks and balances; winning and losing. Sometimes these marks distract, but like brilliant brushwork the best games use these marks to build believable mechanics that match the storytelling.

In spite of appearances, then, games don't tell stories like books or films. Narrative has to be searched out and overheard in the game world. The game creator isn't in control of the camera or pacing like a director. The player dictates how fast the story proceeds and how much of it they engage with.

The experience of playing a game, and how games impact the lives of players, is much closer to poetry and painting than films, books and TV series. They are art objects: unlike other objects in our lives they don't have a purpose. It's their capacity to receive us into the virtual spaces they create that is so exciting and compelling for the player.

Like poetry, games help us live better not by the facts or skills they teach us, but by confronting us with what it means to be human. They create spaces where we

not only discover who we really are, but hear — maybe for the first time — our own voice.

I love Mary Oliver's poem *Wild Geese*, because it reminds me that I don't have to be good to be accepted in the world. I deeply enjoyed playing *The Last of Us*, because it gently insisted I needed to compromise truth for the sake of living meaningfully in the world.

Another poem, *Tree* by Jane Hirshfield, came into my life when I needed to know the unsettling nature of life was inescapable. Another game, *Journey*, took me by the hand into deserted desolate lands that were suddenly made tolerable by the presence of a stranger.

Like poetry, games aren't always easy to understand. The beauty of their form can make us feel like outsiders. Where do I start if I don't understand rhyme, stanzas, form, meter, alliteration or other poetic elements? How do I start playing if I've not grown up with aiming, camera control, circle strafing, dual sticks or other video game basics? "Perhaps", we tell ourselves, "games and poetry are simply not for someone like me".

Good games, like good poetry, cross these boundaries and connect with us whether we are literate or not. Or, better still, good poetry teachers and game enthusiasts can illuminate what is happening in front of us and make it essential, vibrant and compelling.

Like moving beyond "If you can keep your head when all about you" and "I wandered lonely as a cloud," finding games without the advertising budgets of *FIFA* and *Call of Duty* is a revelation. It's here, in the broadening of our gaming diet, that we really start to discover what games have to offer.

I can save a land from monsters in *Shadow of the Colossus*, but become deeply unsure whether that was good. I can look after a child in a city under siege in *This War of Mine*, but have to choose between reassuring her and finding food. I can experience the passing of a lifetime in a few minutes in *Passage*, and be floored at the death of my wife. I can help my spouse flee from Syria in *Bury Me My Love*, only to discover my advice has lead her into the arms of brutal men. These topics can be robustly addressed in film, novels and TV series, of course. In a video game, though, there is a unique fragile unpredictability. Our presence is required for the game to work its magic. We have to be in the right place at the right time, and not distracted in some other corner of the world.

So, when you encounter something meaningful in a game, the weight and significance of it is greater, because it so easily could have been missed or simply never happened.

Creating and advertising these kinds of games is difficult work that doesn't turn an easy profit. It's not by chance that gamers usually first point to big blockbuster titles as their poison of choice. That's what industry giants wants them to do. It's easier to make money selling the masses a rebadged version of the same game each year, than directing them to beautifully fragile experiences I've been talking about here.

You have to go looking for this broader pantheon of games. Over the last ten years I've been helping families, communities and faith groups find unusual games. It's been fascinating to observe and document what's happened. We've celebrated communion in a cathedral, using a PlayStation game, *Flower*. We've contemplated life in devotional services in big tops. We've journeyed at the Greenbelt festival with *That Dragon, Cancer*, one family's game about their child's story of illness. We've contemplated the death of our parents with a poetry world in *Minecraft*.

My favorite moments are unrepeatable. Not that I can't tell you, but that they were unplanned beautiful moments which emerged because we relinquished control of proceedings and trusted the game to receive us.

There was the moment in the Cathedral during breaking the bread when whoever was controlling the game triggered an explosion of blood red flowers behind the priest. There was the apocalyptic storm raging outside the Greenbelt Big Top while we battled cancer in a tiny rowing boat ([click here to see more](#)). There was the online visiting player who helped lead our congregation through a desert and then decided to wait and sit with us, without knowing we were breaking bread and sharing wine.

*

Spend time playing a game and you can be surprised what it will teach you. Walk hand-in-hand with a game for a number of years and it can become a second home. Play and replay it like you would a poem. Gaze and move your eye over it like you would a text.

It's this, not some secondary ends-justify-the-means silver lining, that make games - violence and all - important not to dismiss. The history of the human species has always depended on not letting the killing and murder in our big stories eclipse the value of life.

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