

THE BEST
CRITICISM
OF THE
BAD
IS THE
PRACTICE
OF THE
BETTER.

R. ROHR



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Welcome to *The Porch*, Issue #3!

Action over words always, otherwise silence - Last Days in the Desert

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say - King Lear

It's a paradox, right? Action over words depends on knowing what the right actions are; yet sometimes the right actions are also words. And sometimes the right words are the ones that reveal as much vulnerability as strength, that risk the radioactive reactions of a crowd that demands the kind of language that denies ambiguity, promises the destruction of opponents, and never admits to failure. Words like "I'm sorry." "I don't know." "Difference is not the enemy." "Everyone has their reasons." Much of the time, however, words are better used sparingly. I know that's a strange thing to say in an article welcoming you, our beloved reader, to another issue of a magazine that rather depends on words, but like I said, it's a paradox...

We live in times that ache for more beautiful stories to be told, and more often. When we think of the state of the world, many of us feel tempted to despair. The despair is deepened when we allow ourselves to believe that activism often seems to begin and end with merely naming the problem; or with generic invocations of resistance.

We get it.

It's much easier to know what's wrong with the world than how to fix it. Or at least to *think* we know what's wrong with the world. There's no quick fix for the problem of how to discern what's truly real, especially amid the bombardment of images and words that have given birth to the idea of fake news and alternative facts. Wisdom takes its time. Living in the present is best done with a reflective eye to the past. Looked at through the lens of how far we've come, then the current moment of confusion and challenge can be seen as an opportunity, not a catastrophe.

The past few months have seen an outpouring of energy and action toward the common good - the

most good for all people - that is unprecedented. Really. It hasn't happened before: a movement seeking to re-humanize the world involving folk from such a range of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, all genders, spiritualities, shapes, sizes, abilities, and loves. Marches around the world, led by women to resist oppression and champion love. People making visible their desire to be in solidarity with vulnerable others. People asking for help. Some people even recognizing that moving forward depends on not degrading people who think differently, but upon building bridges instead of walls, and perhaps even loving our enemies. To "oppose without hatred," as the magnificent British actor Mark Rylance has said.

The wounds of the world deserve better than just making space for more complaints. We need to create places for new dreams to be born - the dream of protecting people who may be in danger, the dream of introducing our privilege to the integrity of sharing power with others, the dream of listening to the still small voices otherwise ignored.

Many of us long for spaces that facilitate us in healthily lamenting the suffering of the world, educating for action toward the common good, celebrating a community that takes the necessity of such action seriously, but doesn't take *itself* too seriously, and inspiring the next steps, and the next, and the next.

That's what we're trying to do here at *The Porch*. We don't think the glass is half empty. We think the glass of our perceptions has been shattered, and a new, larger vessel is taking shape for humans to co-create. A vessel in which the interdependence of the human race is so obvious it cannot be ignored. A vessel in which the truths of what we have learned as a species about how to reduce violence guide us in our activism and use of words, helping us to avoid being overwhelmed by the fake, the divisive, the hoodwinking. (When does violence reduce? For a start, each time men step aside and women lead, each time access to creative and artistic endeavor is shared as widely as possible, each time the public visibility of people who have been historically marginalized is expanded, each time gifts are exchanged among and between communities,

and each time anyone stands in solidarity with anyone who lives with less privilege. It's not easy, but it's simple.)

Violence has been reducing over time, human rights have been expanding, women have been empowered, both the process and the fruits of creativity are more widely available than ever, and the possibility of gift exchange between people living at the furthest distances is now a mouse click away. We are closer to each other than ever.

Another paradox: the connection to "the world" which most of us experience through mobile devices also means that the "big story" we tell about politics and the planet can seem more risky. What a president says is easier to take personally when that president lives in your pocket. We are closer to each other than ever, and therefore we have more opportunity than ever to build bridges to beloved community. And we may also feel more vulnerable. What will we do about this? Will we hide? Will we allow ourselves to be overcome by the fear of the present moment, because we are unable to read the past accurately, or imagine a different future? Will we be shut down by the inertia induced by the knowledge that no matter what good may be right in front of our noses, there's always something painful happening somewhere else? Or will we take steps on the path toward *integration*: of the fact that life is lived between the steeple and the gargoyle, between the sacred and the profane, the light and shadow? And that in this moment, we have gifts to celebrate, challenges to face, work to be done, community to inhabit.

Stephen King has one of his characters say the following wise words:

"We did not ask for this room or this music. We were invited in. Therefore, because the dark surrounds us, let us turn our faces to the light. Let us endure hardship to be grateful for plenty. We have been given pain to be astounded by joy. We have been given life to deny death. We did not ask for this room or this music. But because we are here, let us dance."

It's not the state of the world that causes us the most concern, but the often despairing *stories we're telling about it*. Is the world getting worse, or are we actually uncovering empathy for people who are suffering, and unable to ignore it anymore? Are we learning to ask for help, to see vulnerability as strength, to connect across lines of difference, to oppose without hatred, instead of merely attacking our enemies to embody something better?

In this issue, among other things, we reflect on the unsung "patron saints" who inspire us. I have several such saints, but the one I return to most often is probably Jim Henson, the artist who gave us the delirious, wild and joyous *Muppet Show*. I heard once that Jim Henson told a production meeting that he wanted to make "a children's television Christmas special that brings peace to the world." The funny thing is, with the invitation to welcome and include *everyone* - from the green frazzled host, to his best friend the clumsy comedian, to the self-serious eagle, and the angry glamorous pig, and even the two grumpy guys in the balcony - what Jim Henson did actually does make peace in the world. At *The Porch* we don't expect to have the impact of someone like Jim Henson, but we trust that our vision occupies a difference only of scale. Each of us can do what any patron saint did, in our own lives, right here, right now. For a few thousand days we get to choose what to do with the music we have been given. There is action to be taken, there are words to be spoken, and there is silence to observe. No one can get between you and the choices you make about what to do with the music you have been given.

Keep in touch!



Gareth Higgins, Publisher & editor, *The Porch*

PRACTICE, BETTER

CHRISTINA LEE

(Students names have been change to preserve anonymity.)

I sit in my empty classroom, cradling my coffee cup in my hands, searching for words.

Yesterday, I'd chirped out to each departing class, "Encourage all the adults in your life to vote! Remember, this is the first time ever they've had the option of voting for a female president!"

In my classroom, I've always stayed politically neutral. But it seemed like I could indulge in this one small outburst. We'd made it through the election season, after all.

I'd voted by mail a few days earlier. My husband had snapped a picture as we walked down the block to mail our ballots after dinner.

"Take another one," I'd pleaded when he showed me the grainy image on his phone. I angled to face the floodlight outside the taco shop. We saved that shot: my face all washed out in the light, ghost-like, grinning as I leaned against the mailbox.

It almost feels wrong to be enjoying the coffee. I sip it guiltily and listen to the morning: the hum of my projector stumbling to life, and the low, constant rumble of student gossip out in the quad of our public middle school campus.

At the bell, my seventh graders clatter in, looking bleary. They blink up at me from their seats. They seem younger this morning.

What do I say to them?

"It's been an...intense night. Well, I'm not sure if that's the right word. It's been a night. Um...who stayed up later than usual?" I fumble. Every hand shoots up. I raise my hand too.

Around eleven o'clock the night before, I'd curled up in our bed, pulled the wrinkled sheets around me, and cried until I fell asleep. My husband woke me up when the coverage ended, and suddenly our small apartment bedroom felt stifling. We lay still, nowhere near sleep, listening to the fan tick and spin, useless against the heat.

Finally we dragged our mattress out into our living room, right in front of the swamp cooler. This was our summer ritual, but the heat stroke had made November feel just the same as June.

We fell asleep eventually. When I opened my eyes again, it was morning.

"I don't have much to say," I tell my students, "but I know that what I need to do right now is to write. And I happen to know, from this figurative language writing exercise I just graded" (I brandish the stack for good measure) "that you are very strong writers. So we're going to approach this morning, although we may be divided in our opinions, as writers."

I give them ten minutes. I put on music. I'm not even sure they'll do it...but after a few minutes, pages begin to fill. Shoulders drop a bit. Students let out tight sighs, like tires leaking air.

When we're done, a few volunteers read their work aloud. In fourth period, Solomon, whose voice is so newly deep that it still crackles with the change, reads, "I think we will still be okay." He speaks as low and as strong as he can, as if to protect us.

After the fifth period bell rings, Steven Chen* pads up to me. He stands by the sink, one hand on the door. He frowns at me slightly...it's a friendly frown, like a doctor examining a tough patient.

"Are you sad?" he says, after a beat.

"Yeah," I say. "I am. I really am."

"Me too," he says. We both sigh, and then nod at each other, and a sort of quiet settles over us. He pushes open the door and is on to his next class.

In sixth period, Amber reads, "I watch the TV screen and wonder...is this how the Germans felt watching Hitler?" The class lets out a little gasp. They look to me for a response. My eyes, aching tired now, fill with tears of frustration. I don't have the energy or the will to correct her, to stop her and tell her she's wrong. I think the class is waiting for me to do that, but I just say,

"Thank you for sharing your emotion. It's valid." I tilt my head back a bit and the tears don't fall.

We finish off the calendar year by reading our usual set of stories, which include Ray Bradbury's "All Summer in a Day" and Rob Sterling's *Twilight Zone* teleplay "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street."

These stories decry prejudice and mob mentality. They were written long ago, in response to old tragedies: the McCarthy Era and World War II.

In “All Summer in a Day,” an eerie story set on Venus, a bully picks on a quiet, depressed girl who is different from the rest. He rallies the whole class to lock her up in a closet during the one day the sun will visit the planet. No one speaks up for her, and then they all forget about her. The story ends with the students eventually remembering what they’ve done. The last line, “They open the door and let Margot out,” leaves the class asking me if a page has fallen out of our photocopied packet.

“No,” I say, “that’s how it ends.” We’re left to imagine Margot’s fate.

They flip past the photocopied pages I’ve given them, looking for something more. A happy ending.

The students aren’t used to reading such sad stories. We work together to articulate the themes. (The initial class suggestion was “stay away from closets.”)

But these stories are set on different planets. They are not too scary because they involve aliens, space travelers. Not us.

There are moments when I think of bringing in news articles to pair up with our fiction, but I don’t do it. I’m too exhausted. I figure I’ll let the stories speak for themselves. My coworkers tell me they feel the same way. I’m ashamed of my silence, and yet I don’t know where to begin.

I have no answers for these kids, I tell myself as I drive home from work. I don’t even have recommendations. I have opinions, but they are personal, emotional, mostly garbled in anger and fear. They don’t feel safe for twelve-year-olds. They don’t feel safe for me.

It rains through most of December. As I weave through traffic and gutters swell with rain, I switch off NPR and blast *Frosty the Snowman* all my way home.

**

The Tuesday after Winter break, I help chaperone the orchestra’s Disneyland performance.

Backstage in their wrinkled dress clothes, 170 junior highers draw their bows over damp strings, trying their best to tune. It’s still rainy, but just now it’s at a fine drizzle instead of a downpour. They march toward the band shell and hold their instruments to their stomachs to keep the strings dry. They hunch over like tiny, concerned parents.

Once they’ve settled in on stage, they begin their first song. They’re just about glowing with pride. Can’t we stay here, in the warmth of this smattering of applause after this slightly sharp concerto? In this moment with all these kids grinning out at the crowd, sparkling with the raindrops and their pride and their anticipation of the next few hours they’ll have to roam the park? Can’t we just ignore the world around us?

**

I don’t want to stay silent. But what do I have to say? And how do I contribute to such a divided conversation?

Of course, words have power, and I trade in words. It is largely words, so far, that has our country so nervous and so divided. Why, then, is it so hard to feel the strength of my own words?

Every teacher is given ample opportunity to make a daily impact.

It’s there when a girl blurts out *I’m done living*, and when a boy too smart for his own good makes a lewd gesture at a girl who doesn’t know better than to laugh uncomfortably. It’s there when a straight-A student furtively copies her friend’s paper before the start of class.

Yet as I field all this, trying to respond to each kid with love and respect and concern, I still struggle to feel I’m making any real impact, especially as the actions that I’m taking so seriously in my classroom go unpunished on a national scale.

What’s more, I don’t want to use my public service job as a blanket release from a larger duty. And yet, if I’m always dreaming of dramatic action I *might* take in the future, I will cheat the present.

Ultimately, I have to return to Dostoevsky, who reminds us “active love is labor and perseverance.”

Yet it’s easy to feel defeated. Now more than ever, wealth seems the final measure of success. Wasn’t that how so many justified this president—his financial success? It seems he has bought the rights to all the words in the world, and also to so much silence.

“Avoid lies,” Dostoevsky also said, “all lies, especially the lie to yourself. Keep watch on your own lie and examine it every hour, every minute. And avoid contempt, both of others and of yourself.”

To believe that I matter—to step beyond both corrosive anger and air-sucking apathy—requires a bold imagination. But when I do, I realize that my classroom is my opportunity—not to preach any political agenda or to drum up fear or anger, but to model a better world.

Claiming my worth as an educator is a subversive act. When I move beyond the lie of my insignificance—a lie I'm all too willing to believe—I realize that I can give my students what I am most afraid they will lose. I can give them a voice.

The week of the inauguration, I put a question on the board for my students to answer: "What does it mean to be an American?"

They do not like this prompt. They shift in their seats. They poke one another. I ask them to raise their hands if they are finding the question difficult. Every hand shoots up.

So we look at some poetry. I start with Whitman. Then I pull in Langston Hughes, "I, Too," Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," and Naomi Shihab Nye's "Gate A-4." Then Denice Frohman's "Accents," which begins, "My mother holds her accent like a shotgun," and Alex Dang's "What Kind of Asian Are You," which ends, "I still feel Chinese, I still feel Vietnamese, I still feel American." We finish with John Legend's "Glory."

These are our American voices, I tell them. They belong to all of us, and we can join them. You may hear yourself in one of them—you may not. If you don't, it's your job to add your own voice there. That's why Whitman told us he was hearing "each singing what belongs to him or her." If there's a voice you don't identify with, can't understand, it's your job to listen closely. They are all a part of us.

I ask them to find quotes from the poems that show us how to be American. They find "English sits in her mouth remixed," and "always stay rooted," and "still like dust, I rise," and "we will be one again," and "they tell us sit down, but we stand up."

And then we add to these voices by writing our own poems.

As I teach this lesson, the footage from a congressional hearing rolls in. I watch a multi-billion dollar heiress quietly acknowledge that she "may have confused" the terms of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

"You matter. Each voice matters," I tell my students. I say it twice: once for them and once for me.

A few mutter under their breath that they've never written a poem before. "I know it's scary," I tell them, "but it's important to try."

And my students, some serious, some excited, and some sulking in the way only junior highers can sulk, begin to haltingly bring these poems into the world.

The poet Li-Young Lee has said, "You're creating value when you write a poem. And I mean material value!" He explains poetry as "a field of carefully negotiated harmonies and disharmonies and tensions and resolutions; it's in the world, whether or not it gets published or seen. You're bettering all the body of humanity."

In what feels like a Herculean effort of imagination, I have decided to believe him. Even as the news comes of plans to defund the NEA, I believe him.

**

Back on November 9th, as we journaled about the election, Steven Chen sat staring at his paper.

After a minute, he asked for a thesaurus. I pointed him to the teal-colored stack. I watched him lug one back to his desk and flip to the word *intense*.

He methodically copied each synonym into his journal, pencil clutched tightly, as if just learning to write.

I am tempted to stop searching for the words for this time, tempted to give in to anger or apathy, to doubt my own voice and slip into silence. But I will keep trying.

It is good to know that twelve-year-old Steven is trying, too.



The Risk it Takes to Blossom

Boysen Hodgson

A couple of weeks ago in a men's group, I was in a process in which a man said to me, "In my circles ... you're known as a misandrist."

I hadn't heard anyone say that word in such a circle before. I knew the word. I've been seeing and hearing it for years in my efforts to be aware of all the different conversations happening around men, women, and gender. I've been sitting in men's peer-support groups for over a dozen years now. I've dedicated a lot of time to my personal growth and to helping men discover and live authentic and purposeful lives. So I've tried to think about that word, but still, I hadn't heard it directed at me before.

The person facilitating the group had to stop and ask what he meant. Here's a dictionary definition:

mis·an·drist

mi' sandrist/

n

a person who dislikes, despises, or is strongly prejudiced against men:

"the counterpart to a misogynist is a misandrist"

I have spent the last two weeks digesting this statement.

It definitely brought out some old voices. Loudest at first was the urge to hit back. "How dare

you! You don't know me! Well you're a" Later came the questions. *What if he is right? Do I really hate men? What have I said that has led people to feel this way about me? How come no one has ever brought this to me before?*

It has gotten clearer through writing. All this talk in my head, the feelings of disconnection and defensiveness, the desire to lash out, the desire to seek reassurance, they're all part of my desire to be accepted as part of the group.

Back in 9th grade, I was walking down the hall past a group of juniors in the hall, hearing the snickers and that one word. Faggot.

Lightbulb.



It's the old story being retold; prove your manhood or lose it. It is the self-regulating program of gender-stasis cooked into Western masculinity. Gender is self-policing. Creating doubt is key to this construct. Boys (and girls) taunt and attack other boys, getting them to doubt their worth, their sexuality, their friendships, their right to experience emotions. Men (and women) belittle, shame, compete with, and ridicule men, getting them to doubt their manhood and loyalty: to men, to their gender, to each other.

The old words that worked in school no longer work on me. Most men I associate with have moved beyond fear and hatred of men who love men, at least the most overt expressions of such fear and hatred. But in the world of men's work that I am in, being labeled a misandrist is an attack on my credibility.

I don't hate men. I love them. I believe in them. I do, however, hate the often unquestioned systematic emotional indoctrination of men that regularly and viciously harms people of all genders and orientations.

Maybe this is *misogendrist*?

“The murders at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando were carried out, in part, to make sure that LGBTQ people (especially gay men) remain dehumanized, not worthy of life. The person who carried out these killings seems to have thought he was proving he was a “real” man, in the most gruesome rebuke imaginable, to the reported homophobic insults directed at him by his father.”

I want this to end. This is not just about men. It is about me, and also not about me. It is also about us. I am for the introspective and proactive transformation of male socialization that is leading us to a more just, equitable, and loving society. I have witnessed men’s tightly woven chainmail of masculine invulnerability unravel. I have seen hard men open their hearts to embrace the tenderness of their children. I’ve been with straight men and gay men crying together in the pain of suffering and loss. I regularly hear men supporting and challenging one another to build empowering partnerships with the women in their lives. I am part of a community of men that is doing ongoing remedial work to help men undo decades of masculinity brainwashing, the only goal of which seems to be to deny our inherent human vulnerability.

I am a traitor to what is often called “traditional” gender programming. The good news is that this brand of gender armor hasn’t been around all that long, and environmental pressures of all kinds are furthering its undoing.

Michael Kimmel, who wrote “Angry White Men,” “Guyland,” “Manhood in America: An Anthology,” amongst others, coined the phrase “aggrieved entitlement.” This is an existential state of fear about having my “rightful place” as a person with privilege (as a cisgender male, as white, straight, educated, able-bodied ... the list goes on) questioned, challenged, deconstructed. Aggrieved entitlement is being told ‘No’ when the prevailing mythos of the culture has taught me that I have a ‘right’ to something. Usually it’s ‘always’ been that way, or it ‘used to be’ that way, and I want it to go back.

mis·o·ne·ism
(mīs’ə-nē’iz’əm)
n. Hatred or fear of change or innovation.

Because men are not well programmed to allow fear or to process grief, sometimes we compress it —this loss of meaning, perceived stability, and power — into rage, violence, aggression, demonization of “others.” The compression finds outlets. It seems beyond ‘phobia’ or ‘ism,’ though it will often be tagged as such. When men go off-course, toxic masculine code enforcers, deeply embedded in the soul of our nation, start breaking things.

The hate crimes in the USA since November are manifestations of this war against change. Nationalism, reinforcement of systemic economic oppression of women and minorities, xenophobia, all are evidence of the aggrieved masculine trying to reassert dominance. The election results are a battle front in a far

deeper cultural war. The blow-back against our growing pluralistic society is being energized by the aggrieved, both men and women, who are terrified of losing their perceived cultural power.

I see the recent Women’s Marches as a hopeful example of women stepping into power far outside of the feminine programming that some would like to reinstitute as the norm, and the response to it has been largely predictable.

Being called a misandrist invites me into further awakening. I may still be restricting the healthy expression of human maleness (and other acts of policing) that deny people the agency to construct their own identity and the space to be heard. What’s true in his words is that I have frequently written off my brother because he does not conform to my standards of “wokeness” around gender. And that dismissal is part of the problem, because it’s going to take intense and deep engagement to shift the norms.

And it’s not just masculinity. The [imposed] duality of gender that we have tied to physical sex organs, masculine and feminine, are two sides of the same complex coin.

Femininity is also a straight-jacket. Women (and men) also police what is acceptable and approved for women. And though women have made significant gains, and led the way for men to break damaging social norms, the facts of gender

inequity and the targeting of women in myriad ways shows how much distance we still have left to travel.

The broad scale inability of our society to honestly talk about the complexity of gender leads us to where we are right now, standing on a fault line that is sending wave after wave of fracturing energy through our culture.

And it runs all the way to the highest office in the land.

Constant behavioral reinforcement of the masculine mask of invulnerability inevitably leads to what we see: mass destruction. Killing of LGBTQ people. Killing of brown skinned people, of women and children. Mass self-destruction through suicide, drug addiction, eating and drinking ourselves to death.

Mass killing through our (unconscious?) nihilistic urge to extinction that seems to be most frequently enacted by men.

But this is not about men. I love men. I have dedicated my life to working with men. This is about the cultural and systemic construct called Masculinity. Toxic shadows of once sacred gifts that have long been infused into masculinity are intimately, economically, and politically tied to systemic oppression, violence, and destruction. In the past we understood less, and there was no movement or population broad enough to say an effective *No* to the terror inflicted.

Now there are many of us saying *No*. And that response can lead to consequences. Being called a name by a man in an otherwise safe and supportive place, good lord, whatever. I am privileged beyond belief. I suffer the hardships of the occasionally trolled. But breaking

the masculinity code for some people can be a life-threatening risk.

This wake-up is reminding me that in my standing up to say *No*, I am also responsible as a man with privilege to define, acknowledge, bless, and embrace all the beauty about men that I am saying *Yes* to. When I fail to draw clear distinctions, I make the world less safe for those in target groups, and I leave little for the non-target to see the good in himself and a path toward greater understanding.

When we don't leave space for those men who are struggling mightily in this rapidly shifting world, we are limiting our chances of manifesting a better future. Some men feeling trapped will explode, some will implode. Either way, they do great harm. Others will disappear, their flame extinguished. You know the ones? Hollow men trapped in a trance of transactions marching toward the grave.

As Anaïs Nin so elegantly stated, "And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."

There is staggering potential in the creation of a new culture. The most successful examples of masculinity for the new world aren't dominating and disconnected soldiers-of-fortune. We are seeing the last gasp of this era. Research done by social sciences for over thirty years, continuing today, finds that people who overcome rigid gender socialization are happier, live longer, and are more likely to be successful in workplaces and families. These are men and women remaking organizations, families and institutions across the country and around the world. Far from being constrained by this shifting culture — they are truly liberated. They are free to take and harness

the best of our rich human experience and turn it into fuel for creating a new kind of sustainable society.

Many men are rising to the challenge. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that we are digging our feet into the soil and taking root for our mutual liberation. The new masculinity is grounded in men's full humanity, in our healthy expressions of human emotion, power, tenderness, responsibility, and interdependence.

When I fail to recognize the seed of this liberation in others, I miss the greatest opportunity to be what I want to see — loving manhood.

Here are three things that have helped me when I'm feeling the sting of this shifting landscape:

I strive to listen more deeply: first to myself. I listen for what I care about. And from my caring, I am able to begin listening to women, to people of color, to other kinds of men, to the gender nonconforming, to LGBTQ folks. This is a choice.

Question my loyalty and affirm my personal values. Loyalty is an unthinking motivation, and often inherited without deep consideration. When I can untangle my loyalty and begin to focus instead on what I truly value and how I want to live, I feel far less constrained by what 'should' be happening.

When I see the reflection of aggrieved entitlement in my reactions to what's happening in the world, I make an effort to slow down. I create silent space and time to allow rather than react to the stimulation. See what emerges. Take days. Take weeks. I try it on. I am mourning the loss of something I have taken for granted. What new opportunity could this create?

Litanies of Hope

Celia Alario

Hope. “Oh I’m all about hope!” I thought to myself at the invitation to contribute a missive on the topic. I got this. My clients, colleagues, activist friends, and students often share with me how inspirational and hopeful I seem to them, so this should be a breeze, right? My hope is huuuge. I’m terrific at hope. Seriously, my hope is fantastic. Come on, I just need to write about it, and I’ll spread so much hope to others!

But in this complex political and cultural moment, my writer’s block has been painful.

Where were my words of hope?

For a pep talk, I reminded myself that when I was in the fifth grade I played *Hope* in the school play! True Story! I was part of a trio, *Faith*, *Hope*, and *Charity* incarnate. I only remember a few things about it. There were three of us, dressed in angel costumes, carried over from the recent holiday recital, and we were all convinced we were only chosen for the parts because our dads had made the nicest cardboard wings that year. I also remember that in some point while we were on stage the lead actors burst into song, and this was the chorus:

*Virtue won't hurt you, it's easy to be kind
Easy to be generous, it's a joy you'll find
So take a look around you, and try to help along
Try to straighten out a mess, to right a wrong
Because virtue always pays*

But thinking of my time as a childhood thespian didn’t help me feel like an authority on the topic, especially when I remembered one other thing about my brief role as *Hope*. The gig was a walk on. Yes, though *Hope* (along with *Faith* and *Charity*) stood on the edges of the stage in many a scene, *Hope* was never in the spotlight. *Hope* had no lines. *Hope* never got the mic.

Oh the irony now—decades later—to be yet again, without a script for hope.

So I did what always seems right at moments like this, I sang that refrain from the school play over and over, **and I danced**. I danced, not just because I agree with Emma Goldman’s famous injunction that the revolution should feature dancing, but because this is what I’ve been taught to do. Over the years, women activists and mentors from many different movements and cultures have taught me this: when times get tough, when the odds are rough, when hope feels in short supply, dance. So I shook my bootie, as I’d been taught by *Mothers Against Drunk Driving* and *Mothers of East L.A.*; by *Art in Action* and the *Radical Cheerleaders*; by *One Billion Rising* and most recently by the *Women’s Global Call for Climate Justice* and the *Women & Gender*

Constituency at the United Nations Climate negotiations.

Once I was moving, my body remembered what my brain had temporarily forgotten: hope is everywhere. She is the leading lady in our movements for peace and justice. Dance brings us into our body temples, into connection with our true selves, and into step with one another. Dance clears the mind, soothes the heart, and in itself inspires hope. And from that place I could look around again and recognize the wonder and resilience of my most recent dance troupe compatriots: the women’s movements working for climate justice.

These are women who make the dance of kindness and generosity look easy. Even in lean times, where scarcity of funding or fear of scarcity of the column inch can set groups to arguing over who gets quoted in the press release or slotted into the radio interviews, these women share power with elegance and grace. And when it comes to righting wrongs, they have all the moves! Understanding the intersectionalities that connect our struggles, their dance weaves together calls for peace with calls for climate justice, work for human rights with work for intergenerational equity, quests for the rights of Indigenous Peoples impacted today with calls to uphold the rights of future generations. These women know there is room at center stage for racial and economic equality for the two leggeds, two-stepping alongside the call to uphold the rights of the more-than-human world. And they are helping to redefine the experts, in the eyes of the public and in the eyes of the media, elevating the voices of those most disproportionately impacted by climate chaos but until now least heard on the issue.

These women dance for a “just transition” in times of climate chaos, a transition from the dirty extractive economy to an economy for life, an economy of justice. That means workers in earth-damaging industries are supported as they seek new work via retraining initiatives, and that we shift the way we related to our commons (soil, water, air), and how we manage our food and transportation systems to methods that are more fair!

These women persist. They are resolved. They do their dance in the streets and in the policymaking halls of power. They are always recruiting new dancers and exploring the latest new beats. And they do it all with joy, with playfulness, with fierce resolve, and with contagious enthusiasm.

There is hope to be witnessed in every corner of the women’s movements for climate justice. Look around for them, they are likely offering a dance circle in your bioregion, and they will teach you some moves. No auditions are required. And to be certain, hope is truly the star of their show.

REQUIEM FOR THE CUT

Tony disappears behind the abandoned house at the curve, and he doesn't reappear for a while. Another fellow follows him a couple minutes later, and also stays gone. In fact, he never reappears. Must be trouble, one assumes, given all the negative assumptions about this neck of the woods. Some illicit activity is going on - drug deals, probably, or perhaps prostitution. Maybe some guys just hanging out, playing dominoes and wasting their days away.

A few weeks later, Tony and I are walking together. As we round that same curve, he says, "Come on, let's take the cut." He is teaching me a bit of secret knowledge today. Behind the abandoned house we go, toward a small thicket. As we near it, I begin to see a well-worn path cutting through the privet, underneath the old oak trees. The leaves have been swept away by footsteps, so that the path is made clear by the emergence of a thin line of Carolina red clay. A few steps later we are in the backyard of the matriarch of the neighborhood. We traverse her property line with great care, trying to match the care she has shown to multiple generations of children and parents here. She lives on the next street over, and now we have moved quickly and efficiently onto her street to visit with the family next door to her. "The cut" is simply a shortcut. It saves us a quarter mile of traversing our neighborhood's uneven street network.

Not too long after that walk, a couple of youths introduce me to another cut. We're out on a warm spring day, but the weather has not yet been warm long enough for the kudzu to spread. We head to the dead end of a particular street, where they show me yet another thin line of Carolina clay. To the right, a long hill descends to a stream. The opportunistic vine occupies every available space between us and the water. The power company keeps it this way to provide clearance for high-tension lines above. To the left, an older neighbor waves to us from his porch, his watchful eye noting who comes and goes. He is quickly out of sight, separated from us by a thicket that will become forest if left alone for much longer. As we round the bend between kudzu on one side and the tangle of bushes and vines and the

other, our destination comes into view: Cook-Out, the local burger and shakes chain, stands flanked by our mechanic and a small grocer.

The youths show me the way, but offer an important tip - no one uses this cut during the summer. It gets too overgrown with kudzu. The fear of ticks and snakes and creeping, crawling things makes the long way more attractive. But with the first frost, the kudzu gives way again to the rusty orange path. The critters go underground. The dead end street begins to make connections once more.

In Charlotte, like many other Southern cities, neighborhoods do not always have urban form. They are not densely built or easy to walk. The patterns of automobile dominance that characterized the time of rapid growth here led to neighborhoods that do not connect, either to other neighborhoods, or even within themselves. Covering what is a short distance "as the crow flies," as we say in the South, to a neighbor's house or to the corner store, can require a lengthy walk. With time, as neighbors develop intimacy with the places that become home turf, they can imagine how to make these connections for themselves where planners and builders have failed them. And so they do, mingling private and public space, reclaiming dead places and making them human again.

Cities and towns like Charlotte built neighborhoods that made human connection difficult, particularly without the assistance of an automobile. Long blocks, lack of a simple street grid, separation of uses, ever-larger lots, lack of sidewalks, and emphasis on single family housing rather than a mix of housing and commercial types: all of these factors created spaces that put us at greater distance from one another. In the 1960's and 70's, as middle-class people moved from these neighborhoods, out into even less-connected neighborhoods, the poor were left to occupy these spaces where infrastructure stifled connection. Connection is the currency that keeps the economy of urban life flowing. So, the so-called "inner-cities" of Charlotte got double bad news with "white flight" - all of the negative policy

and disinvestment decisions that made inner-city life tough around the country, and none of the diverse, walkable, human-powered infrastructure that facilitates the creative vibrancy and opportunity of urban spaces.

Facing these significant barriers, poor people did what they always do in the face of oppressive circumstances. They acted with imagination, creativity, and resiliency to create what they needed for human life. The cut is do-it-yourself urbanism. It is the resilient human spirit finding ways to build connection where planners and councils and developers failed to deliver. The cut is what happens when people who have always had to improvise look at what is given and use their imaginations to improve it.

Enderly Park, the Charlotte neighborhood where cuts have helped to nurture my sense of neighborliness, is now being gentrified. Which is to say, speculators are now circling, and those imaginative, improvisational folks that have lived here for decades are being banished. They are deemed hazardous to profit margins, and must be displaced to other parts of town. Among the collateral damage of this kind of neighborhood change is the cut. Our cuts are being blocked by a new feature: fences.

Gentrifiers love their privacy fences, and they build them really well, and thoroughly. Soon we will all be cut off from one another. The lessons of improvised urbanism are being ignored, replaced by the assertion of private property rights and the false assumption that a few pickets around our yards can protect us from each other. The poor people and children who build cuts are visionaries for our neighborhoods. They challenge the middle-class affinity towards individualism, toward the belief that one's property is an inviolable castle. Poor folks build the infrastructure for solidarity instead. The cut is engendered by the learning that private interests are deeply commingled with the good of the whole neighborhood. This knowledge

lives in the ground in Enderly Park and in places like it. It is not taught, but caught, by walking in the steps your neighbor walked before you, that your children will walk after you. Neighborliness is a quiet inheritance in this way. It gets passed up through the soles of your shoes and takes root in your heart and eyes.

It is winter again. The rust colored path reveals itself once more. My walk to the grocery is a bit shorter, and on it I bump into a neighbor. Amid the sprawl of receding vines, we talk - kids, work, local politics, what's for supper. The things of life. I did not know that I needed this conversation until it

The lessons of improvised urbanism are being ignored, replaced by the assertion of private property rights and the false assumption that a few pickets around our yards can protect us from each other.

happened, and I felt my shoulders softening, and my soul with them. I need to walk this way again. As walls and fences and borders come to define more of our spaces, the more secret, unmapped spaces that defy those boundaries will multiply.

Ready to move again, the narrow cut forces us to touch one another. We brush shoulders. We bump hands. What might it be like, I wonder, if our lives were built like this kudzu hill: covered in wild connections, as far as the eye can see; quietly observing seasons of growth and rest; sometimes revealing paths for gently brushing against one another?

To the untrained eye, it is obvious that fences are in a season of growth. But on this quiet winter day, I can imagine that we are more creative than fences. That we still need to run into each other. That there are more cuts to build across the landscapes of our neighborhoods and the terrain of our hearts. That we will still find new ways of getting to our neighbor's door.

A CONVERSATION WITH NADIA BOLZ-WEBER



Nadia Bolz-Weber is a preacher, pastor and writer whose work inhabits a space between liturgy and life. She talked with Gareth Higgins at the Greenbelt Festival in England, and they began by discussing the radical concept that *The Porch*, among others, is seeking to embody: friendship with your own soul. Learn more about Nadia at www.nadiabolzweber.com

Gareth Higgins: In the religious world because we're supposed to be really humble and ego-free and not rate our own skills. Let's just drive a bus through that false humility and ask you: What do you know you're best at?

Nadia Bolz-Weber: Preaching.

GH: What's preaching?

NBW: I mean really my primary vocational identity is not that I'm a writer or a speaker or even a pastor. My primary vocational identity is that I'm a preacher. So, that's how I think of myself and it's how I orient almost everything I do. When I'm doing pastoral care in my parish, I do it so that I can be their preacher. So, I don't know how to sort of

express, how to proclaim good news to people if I don't know what kind of good news they need, what that package needs to look like. And so, I don't know how to preach to them if I don't know their stories. So, I don't do pastoral care to be therapeutic necessarily because I'm not that good at it, like I'm not like that quivering mass of emotional availability some pastors are. So, I'm not into the like...

GH: Really?

NBW: I know it's hard to believe - I really give off this super nurturing come-to-me-I'll-take-care-of-you vibe. *[Laughter]* But I do pastoral care so I know how to be people's preacher. I just feel like people are weighed down and they're in bondage and they need some freedom. And to me, preaching is about freedom. It's about letting go of your projects and your machinations towards saving yourself or making yourself worthy. Lay it down and hear that everything you're trying to do for yourself has already been done for you.

GH: So, I know you preached before you were a professional priest. Do you remember when

the first time you did something that you could define as preaching?

NBW: Yeah, for sure. So, I'm a recovering addict and alcoholic, and I had been a comic during a period of my life. And another comic who was a recovering alcoholic who I was close to, lost his battle with mental illness. His name is PJ, and he hung himself. And at the time, I hadn't been to seminary but I was Christian, and all of our friends just immediately sort of turned to me and said, "Well, you can do his funeral, right?" And literally just because I was the only religious one in my friend group, and I said, "Yeah, I could do that." PJ's funeral was in this Comedy Club in downtown Denver and it was packed with comics, and academics, and queers and recovering alcoholics. [I was] giving PJ's eulogy and speaking about PJ as a child of God in that environment [where] it smelled like stale beer and bad jokes. And I looked out and I saw the people and I thought, these people don't have a pastor. And then I thought, "Oh shit, I think that's me."

[Laughter]

So, it was [as if] everything in my life has been just set in front of me. I don't have this sort of ambition. What I've been able to do is not due to "I had this goal out here and then I took steps." I've just responded to things put in front of me over and over and over again whether it's writing or speaking or pastoring or any of that; I try to pay attention and respond to it.

GH: So, I'm wondering if you maybe even preached earlier than that. Were you a preacher as a child? What was your childhood like?

NBW: I was precocious as a child just because of the situation of being a sick kid and having a particular lens on society. There's a particular lens on society that comes from alienation. And so, I had that lens really early, and so...

GH: Why were you alienated?

NBW: I was alienated because I had an autoimmune disorder that caused me to look abnormal. My face was abnormal and couldn't be fixed till I was sixteen. And so, I really couldn't go out in public without people being like, "Oh my God, did you see that?" I mean it was very shocking the way I looked when my eyes couldn't close. So, my eyeballs bulged out of my head so far that my eyes couldn't close.

GH: So, alienation granted you...

NBW: It grants you a lens on society and specifically it gives you a way to understand bullshit very quickly. And so, I became sort of cynical and critical of culture very young, I could say that. And I was sarcastic and funny and sort of caustic at like twelve. So, in that way, I think I told the truth about stuff in ways that was, I think, uncomfortable for people to hear out of a kid.

GH: So, a lot of mainstream psychology might say that people overcompensate for the wounds they experience as children and then they do something in reaction to that, but I'm not so sure that's true. I wonder if at times the things that look like wounds were actually the acorn of the gift.

NBW: Oh, no question. All the pain from that, every ounce of pain I've experienced in my life, I would not wish away, none of it.

GH: Why?

NBW: Because it's all been useful, every single piece of it. Every single thing that has happened to me - good and bad - has in some way been useful to other people and to myself. And so, I would never wish as hard as all of it was, I wouldn't change any of it, nothing in my life. I'm not given to morbid reflection, because I see the way God redeems our crap. So, why

would I say, "Let's not have crap" when it ends up being redeemed in ways in our lives and for the benefit of other people? So yeah, it's all useful. God uses the whole buffalo.

GH: One of my oldest friends said to me once, "You know you have such an interesting life. I wish I had an interesting life like you." And my reflex response was to say, "Well, if it's what it takes to have a stable relationship and be financially secure, I wish I had a boring life like you." *[Laughter]*

NBW: Yeah. That's right.

GH: And you can have both. You can have contentment and also have that dissident perspective.

NBW: Yeah. I'm super glad that the crazy is mostly in my past. So, I mean there's very little drama in my life. The drama in my life comes from my parishioners. So, I don't cultivate it nor do I welcome it in any way in my private life. So, my relationships now that I cultivate are with people who are solid and stable because I have enough drama and chaos in the life of my parishioners. I don't create it my own.

GH: So, you say that most of the crazy is in your past, what are the spiritual practices that have invited you that have been helpful?

NBW: Well, I just cannot do the contemplative thing in the morning, like that “quiet time with the Lord” or whatever people call it. That is not me at all, like it doesn't work for me. And so, for me, I see really particular things as still being spiritual practices - I think taking care of my physical body is a spiritual practice, I only eat food made out of food which is very strange for an American. [Laughter] I've always been very physically active. So, taking care of my physical body is how I take care of my inner self as well. And for years, I did a thing called CrossFit which is a very intense training regimen. And I was very competitive and I was ranked internationally, and I could lift 150 pounds over my head which is not entirely necessary to do, but I just like to know I could lift a grown man over my head if I need to. [Laughter] It was really intense, but seven months ago, I don't know why, I stopped doing it and I started doing yoga. And if you told me a year ago, I'd not be doing CrossFit and I'd be doing yoga, I'd tell you were insane. But it's become my contemplative practice to practice yoga in a really sort of rigorous way every day.

GH: What does it do for you?

NBW: The part that's hardest for me is there are literally postures in yoga called heart openers and I'm like, “No, thanks.” Like I want to protect my heart and yet this practice makes me open it and yet that's what I really need. I don't need

to protect myself anymore. I think my instinct my whole life has been to protect myself. And I actually need to do that less and less in some ways. I felt my heart being more open in just this physical practice of yoga that I've been doing.

GH: Thank you for opening your heart to tell us about it. Now, can I just ask you what happens when you open your heart?

NBW: Well, it's terrifying. I'm on the road so much and I would just protect myself. I'm not an extrovert so it's hard for me to interact one-on-one with a lot of people, and I'm around a lot of people. So, I would just shut myself down as much as possible, and then I was losing these opportunities that were in front of me. I don't know how to explain that any better, but I just don't feel like I have to protect myself as much as I used to. And I don't know why that is. But it feels like my spirit's been exfoliated in some way and I don't know why. I don't know why anything happens. I just try to pay attention to the fact that it is happening.

GH: There's something here about how the way spiritual practices are talked about sometimes that suggests if you're not able to do the quiet time in the morning that there's something wrong with you. By the same token, if you feel really drawn to that more traditional contemplative practice that you're either better or there's something

wrong with you too because you're weird and you *can* do it.

NBW: I think you shouldn't be afraid of “it seems like there's definitely something wrong with you.” Just embrace it. I think that really it comes down to like almost a certain personality. I was raised in a Christian tradition where you weren't really supposed to have a certain personality if you were a good Christian. You know like super-duper positive thinking and really clean cut, and you talk a certain way, and you look a certain way, and you live a certain way, and you listen to certain music.

GH: Good at making casseroles and hiding everything real.

NBW: Yeah, and I was like, I totally don't have that personality, what am I going to do, you know? It's fine if you're actually wired to be like that. There's nothing wrong with being that particular type of person; but [there is something wrong] when we say that's what spiritual looks like. We have the same problem with yoga culture - it's like having painfully good posture and the passive-aggressive half whisper ... If I have a yoga teacher who I think is even vaguely pretentious I'm like, “I'm out of here, I can't do it.” But my yoga teacher who I like the most came into class a couple weeks ago. He's been teaching yoga forever and I love this guy. And in his little dharma talk at the beginning of the class he

actually said he got so angry at his teenager right before class, he threw his yoga mat across the room. I was like, "Dude, you are the perfect yoga teacher, let's do it. I'm all in because I trust you."

So, I think in spirituality whether it's Christianity or yoga or whatever, there is this temptation towards pretension. And I don't have a taste for that. Like I would just rather have you be totally honest about why something is hard for you and then I'll trust you. Then I'll listen to what you have to teach me. If I suspect you're pretending to know it all, or pretending to have it together, I can't listen to anything you say.

GH: What have been some of the challenges?

NBW: I adore Richard Rohr, and he is my go-to source for wisdom. But he can be a bit much around the whole like, if you're a real contemplative it means 20 minutes of contemplation every morning. And I'm like, *Kill me. Kill me.* And so I had this long walk with Richard a month ago and I told him about that yoga thing. I said, "I feel like I finally have the contemplative practice that works for me but it comes through rigorous physical activity before I can get into the space." And he literally stopped walking and looked at me and he goes, "Oh, my gosh that totally makes sense," because you're an eight on the Enneagram. And eights are all

about the body and you feel everything in your gut and there's this passion to being an eight. And so, it was affirming. When Richard Rohr [says], "That's okay that you do yoga as your spiritual practice," I [feel] "I win." [Laughter]



GH: I grew up in that kind of tradition too that said, you know, you [have] to do a period of time before you do anything else in the day where you read the Bible and you pray in the traditional out-loud-way, preferably with a series of notes that have been produced by a company in England, because we didn't know there were other people who did Bible reading notes. And I felt terrible shame throughout my teenage years in early twenties until I got over this because I didn't realize it just comes down to the kind of person you are, to the way your psyche is built.

There are many beautiful profound spiritual practices that are life-giving to me that [Enneagram] eights wouldn't find life giving. I'm a four in the Enneagram. I'm married to an eight, and he's really into his yoga, whereas yoga for me is a nightmare! The last time I did hot yoga, I spent four days in bed and needed to see two chiropractors and one Chinese herbalist. I think the lesson the universe wanted to teach me was don't do more yoga!

When I wake up in the morning, I need to kind of gently ease myself and do a lot of self affirmation because my brain resets when I sleep and I tend to wake up feeling heavy. And I need to do a little bit. I need to create some space to let that lift. And what I do is really simple. It's important to note I work from home so this is possible for me. It's okay if you have a job or other commitments that require you to be doing something else in the early morning, it's okay to carve out time elsewhere. It's also okay to find spiritual practices that are life-giving for you in mind or one of them is I'll get up, I'll make a cup of coffee. I go and sit in my little office. I put on a piece of music. And then that kind of eases me into the chair and I just start to breathe slowly. It's Ralph Vaughan Williams *The Lark Ascending*, which is one of the greatest pieces of music ever composed, I think, and it's fifteen minutes long. And I listen to that piece of music every single day, sometimes

three times. Sometimes I just let it play three times and I write a little bit in the journal and I try to hold myself to just one page in the journal because otherwise I start to bore myself. And then I read something life-giving. It doesn't matter what it is, fiction, nonfiction, there is no sacred-secular divide, so it doesn't have to be written by a "spiritual person." And then I'm ready for the day and I get into work, and it happens to work with the rhythms of my life.

It's ok to find permission to engage the practices that will be life-giving for you; the totality of who you were made to be, not what someone who has a different psychological makeup to you *thinks* you should do. It seems similar to when people say wow, your church is amazingly creative, how do you respond?

NBW: Well, we do crazy stuff that is just fun and just makes sense for us and then people are like, "Wow, you must have a lot of creative people in your parish," which we actually don't. I think what people are attracted to isn't creativity, I think it's freedom. We actually have the same amount of freedom as any other church. I just don't think most churches know how free they are. I think most *people* don't know how free they are. I mean I'm into this thing for the freedom. And we want to take Christianity and turn it into the high commission on worthiness at every turn when really Jesus came to give us life and life abundant. This is about *freedom*.

GH: Can you pinpoint a moment or two in your life where that where you took a step forward into that freedom?

NBW: Well, certainly going through the twelve steps, being a recovering alcoholic and addict, that gives you freedom from the bondage of self to a certain degree because you have to really excavate your insights in order to tell the truth about how you got into the situation you got into. I don't understand why it feels like in the church we're so afraid to speak the truth, like to be really, really honest when Jesus said it's the thing that would set us free. I mean truth is the thing that sets us free. And so, the more honest we are, the more truthful we are, the more free we are. Because if we're not, what we're in bondage to is having to keep *pretending* something is true. And that's a project I'm not interested in undertaking anymore.

GH: A lot of people don't think we're addicted to anything because the addiction isn't obvious or external, it doesn't manifest through alcohol or other substances. That seems to me to be unfortunate because most people are then forfeiting the possibility of receiving the benefit of a twelve-step community. How have you encouraged people who don't feel they're addicted to benefit from the kinds of things that the Twelve Step Movement offers?

NBW: Well, actually I suggest everyone read the first 164 pages of *The Big Book* of

Alcoholics Anonymous. There is so much profound spiritual truth in that book. I'll tell you my least favorite thing in *The Big Book*. It calls resentment the dubious luxury of ordinary men. Alcoholics can't afford to be resentful because then we drink over it and so you have to get rid of resentment. So what happens in this is it says if somebody has done you harm in your adult life, not like as a child, but if someone's hurt you and you resent them, maybe they were very wrong in what they did, fine. But if you look back far enough you will find that at some point in the past you made a decision based on self that put you in a position to be harmed.

Oh my God! Is that the worst thing you've ever heard in your life? Like isn't that the last thing you want to be true? I want that guy to be an asshole and that's the real point, right? So, this person hurt me like they did something they shouldn't have done, whatever, and I want the whole point of my hurt to be the fact that that guy is a jerk and was wrong, right? But you know what? There is no freedom for me in that project, none. I [mistakenly] think I'll be free if I can detail to as fine a point as possible why the other person was wrong, and they could very well be wrong, that's fine. But that's actually none of my business. My business is what part did I play in it? Because what happens is I know on some deep level what part I played in it. Maybe it's only five percent of the whole situation, but if I know that it's there I will

try even harder to pretend it's not there and to blame that person fully because I can't stand the hurt of the fact that I participated in someone else hurting me.

Do you see what I'm saying? This is personal work. This is doing personal work. It's saying what is yours and what is not yours. And that project of doing personal work is what gives you freedom. I say this in pastoral care: people will come to me and they'll have some kind of crisis or drama going on, and I'll listen as compassionately as I can for up to ten minutes. I'll have a totally open heart.

GH: You did this to me once. I remember in a cafe early morning in Denver about four years ago you actually said to me, "Okay, the question is what are you going to do with this?"

NW: Right, totally. No, it's like we'll go on and on about some horrible thing in our lives, and why we are the victim, and it's this thing that goes over and over and over and over and over again. So, I let them get it out and I sit there in a space of compassion, and then I go, "Okay, what part did you play in that? What's your part of that?" Because there is no freedom for you in going through the cycle over and over and over again. We think there is and there's not. The only freedom we have isn't being able to honestly say, "What was my part even if it was this much?" Then you're free, right?

It was painful being raised a fundamentalist Christian and there were things that were very difficult about that and things I resented for a very long time. They gave me these black and white categories; this dualistic thinking to look at everything in the world. You're either good or bad, you're saved or not, you're Christian, you're - whatever.

And somebody who was raised in that same tradition came to my church and was so still angry about it. So resentful and reactive about all that crap. And they noticed that I wasn't. They just noticed I was sort of free from it. I don't have that anymore. They said, "When did that happen for you? When did you feel like you were free from all that resentment and anger from your upbringing?" I realized when I was able to look at my religious upbringing and not think dualistically about it, not use the way of thinking I inherited from them, when I could see there were good things even though that's not to discount the bad. When I was able to confess that I was actually still loved in that place or see the good in it, when I was able to sort of transcend that dualistic thinking, then I was free from it.

GH: And it's important to say that owning your part does not mean you're on your own in it?

NW: Right.

GH: Because it seems to me we all know now that at a neurological level the repetition of the story isn't just boring. It's digging a groove in the neural

pathways and keeping us stuck in it. So, just shifting one part, we might be to say, "Hey, I don't know what to do with this. Can you help me? And the response might be simply like, "Get a better night's sleep tonight." And of course it's one moment at a time, but asking for help is a courageous act.

NBW: I think one of the reasons we don't want to forgive people who've hurt us is we feel like it comes perilously close to saying that oh it was okay when they did, right? But it's not. It's saying, "Actually, what you did was so not okay. I refuse to be tied to it anymore," because as long as I resent you, I'm tied to it. It's a chain. I'm just -- I'm in bondage to that thing that you did, and who you are, and all of your stuff. And what that is, is so bad that I refused to be connected to it anymore. So, I'm going to be free by saying I'm going to cut that chain.

GH: A couple more questions. What's a movie or a book or a piece of music that nurtures you?

NBW: Well, I got to be a fan girl at Greenbelt. I try to not embarrass myself too much but Francis Spufford was here and he wrote a book called *Unapologetic*. And that book, Francis Spufford says all the things I try to say but better by half. And so, I feel like being able to read that book was just like pure light in life to me because it helped me further articulate what I believe to be true. That's a brilliant piece of work that I'll return to over and

over again.

GH: My last question for now is, what would it mean to you to be your own best friend?

NBW: I don't think I'm far from it to tell you the truth. I really don't have - shame is not something I have a lot of. Actually my dad was talking about, he said, "Honey, you really have something special with your speaking and your writing and being honest about yourself." I said, "No, daddy, I think technically I have something missing." I think it's called shame, like it doesn't bother me to say these things about myself. So, I do not allow myself, I do not allow people just to treat me disrespectfully. I take care of myself. I have a million ways in which I take care of myself, so I can do the work I'm called to do.

GH: And to anyone who might be thinking, "Yeah, that's alright for you, but there's no way I could do that." What could you...

NW: Well, I haven't always been like this. I mean, there have been times in my life where I've chosen to have damaging relationships around me, or that I've not taken care of my physical body, that I haven't slept the way I should, that I didn't respect myself. But honest to God, I think it has to do with vocation. Whatever effect my work has, my preaching, my pastoring, my speaking, my writing -- whatever effect that has on people in the world, I don't feel responsible *for* that, but I feel responsible *to* that. So [the question is] what am I going to do to honorably be

responsible to whatever is happening in my work? So, I have to be able to show up for it, I have to be well rested I have to have -- so, I don't travel by myself. That's just one thing, right? Like I told my publisher, I will not do a book tour alone. It's not mentally healthy for me to not have people around me, to not have someone who truly knows me with me. And so, I almost always travel with somebody who knows me, and that's a way of friending myself by saying like this is something I need, and I need it to be able to do the work, and I think the work is important. So, it's really tied to vocation for me I think.

GH: The last question, Nadia, looking out at this group of people, if you were never going to see them again, what's the blessing you would give?

NBW: I think I was taught that being in right relationship with God meant making sure I was so good that I never had to bother Him. But I think being in the right relationship with God means understanding that God is a forgiving redemptive God that we need to be in relationship with because we need forgiveness and redemption, and there's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with needing forgiveness and redemption. Because when you can lay bare why you need it, you get to be in right relationship with God because God gets to act upon you in the way that God seeks and desires to act upon you, which is to forgive and redeem.

And there's no shame in any of that.

I always wonder how the Garden of Eden story would have been different if when God said, "Where are you?" And they said, "Well, we were ashamed of our nakedness and we hid." And God said, "Who told you were naked?" I wonder if instead of them hiding and they were filled with shame and they hid and they blamed and they were fearful of God. This is what shame does. So, how the story would have been different if they just went, "Oh yeah, we fucked up."

[Laughs]

Because then there's no shame, there's no place for shame. No place for shame at all. What if shame hadn't come in? What if, when they did those things they just said, "We listened to a voice other than you tell us who we are and we did these things," and God could then be God. God wants to be for us and forgive and redeem and restore and make new. How that story would have been different.

That is to say *Fuck shame*. I mean if there is something that's broken in you, if there's something that you feel like hasn't gone well or some brokenness, some pain, there's no reason for shame. It's only an occasion for God to do God's thing in you. Why be ashamed of that? So don't be afraid of the truth because it is the thing that will set you free.



UNSUNG SAINTS

We asked four friends of The Porch to write about unsung saints, the people in their lives who made a difference, but who might not be household names. Perhaps there's a person in your community who lives the kind of life that invites others into a better world?

Abhishiktananda, A Mystic of Union & Joy

Carl McColman

Emma Goldman is renowned for saying, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” This has long been a motto of mine, not only for its obvious political sense, but also in terms of any cause I support or choice I make — which, for me, often includes spiritual commitments, both inside and beyond the boundary lines of religion.

It’s important for activists and agitators, who work hard to promote peace and social justice, to remember that joylessness, too, can be the enemy. Alas, religion all too often also succumbs to a kind of glum primness, that seems to say, “Bow down before our God — *or else*.” Is it any wonder that so many people in our time opt for being spiritual, but not religious?

The purse-lipped guardians of dour religiosity seem to forget that folks like Buddha and Jesus embodied, and proclaimed, *joy* as a portal to divine mystery. Cultivating an interior life filled with light and delight — that, they say, is the real goal; rather than the abstract submission to an external moral code (and institution) that seems to characterize too much “religion.”

Thankfully, a mysticism of joy does not just belong to the spiritual masters of the past. One more recent exemplar of a “dancing” mystic is Swami Abhishiktananda (born Henri Le Saux) who lived from 1910 to 1973. Born in Celtic Brittany (western France), Le Saux spent nearly twenty years as a Benedictine monk before leaving his native land to dwell in India, where he pursued an almost seamless integration of the contemplative spirituality of Catholic mysticism with the joyful cosmology of Hindu nondualists. Indeed, his

adopted name, *Abhishiktananda*, means “Bliss of the Anointed One.”

Studying with Hindu sages like Sri Ramana Maharshi and Sri Gnanananda Giri, in 1950 Abhishiktananda founded an interspiritual ashram where Christians and Hindus could come together for meditation, contemplation, and silent communion. Eventually he abandoned the communal setting, retreating into a life of solitude for the final five years of his life.

I can’t recall where I first heard of Abhishiktananda. He’s not the only Christian author renowned for doing deep, contemplative, interfaith work (although arguably, he has the coolest name). Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, Sara Grant, Cynthia Bourgeault, Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, Mary Margaret Funk: the list of creative spiritual cross-pollinators is as long as it is unsung. Nevertheless, something about Henri Le Saux grabbed me when I stumbled across him: perhaps it *was* his name, which reveals so much love for eastern wisdom that he was willing to even immerse his identity in it. Or maybe I just felt a kinship with his hunger, deep enough to impel him halfway around the world (even though my spiritual searching is more of the armchair variety). Perhaps most of all, Abhishiktananda seems to be the closest we have to a “Christian guru” — someone who loves the message and teaching of Jesus, but who wants to immerse that wisdom in the shimmering silence of eastern forms of meditation. As someone who has been rather imperfectly pursuing my own meditation practice for, well, a long time now, Abhishiktananda represents a hope that ordinary folks like you and me really do have a shot at enlightenment — or if not enlightenment, at least joy.

Abhishiktananda's bliss is not characterized by striving, grasping, or effort; rather, he shows the way to joy through simplicity, silence, and uncovering the essential divinity found deep within. He sees spiritual practice as a means "to realize God's presence in the depth of our being, in the depth of every being, and at the same time beyond all beings, beyond all that is within and all that is without". And while it might be an impossible project to find commonality between the web of doctrines and dogmas that separate different religions, in the serenity of silence and the unity of meditation, such artificial barriers fall away, and we are left with the essential unity of all humankind — a unity which is the foundation of joy.

Make no mistake: immersing oneself into a practice of silent prayer is no guarantee of unending bliss (or if it is, I never got the memo). For me, daily devotion to silence and inner exploration is less about stimulating perpetual happiness, and more about taking the edge off of my normal tendency to grasp: which includes grasping after material objects, or emotional states (I get hung up on fear and anger, especially when looking at our current political climate), or even grasping after my own hunger for enlightenment (something one Tibetan

master calls "spiritual materialism"). The joy that someone like Abhishiktananda offers is not a kind of escapist ecstasy, but rather a willingness to face the ordinary "stuff" of life with enough breathing-room for a sense of balance, trust, and even whimsy to color my world. So when I'm stuck in traffic (an ordinary experience of Atlantans), am I always at peace with it? Not hardly. But I do believe I'm *more* willing to roll with life's little surprises, thanks to the kind of spacious prayerfulness that teachers like Abhishiktananda have offered me. And yes, it even makes me more capable of entering into the political fray. Meditation, it seems, helps me to remember to dance.

Perhaps spirituality without religion is a conscious choice many make to escape the dogmatism and dualism that seems to ensnare many practitioners of traditional, institutional religions. Mystics like Abhishiktananda offer a different strategy: rather than *rejecting* all religions, *embrace* them — but in silence and contemplation, compassion and kindness. Language that is hostile or exclusionary (an unfortunate shadow found in all religious traditions) wilts away in the light of such compassion, leaving an invitation to a blissful union. And from this union we can join together to craft a better world.

Isabelle of France

Marcelle Clowes

Some of my friends will be surprised by my saintly choice—mostly because I, a founding member of the Spiritual-But-Not-Religious-Club, chose an actual "Saint."

Not a famous saint - anyone can praise the likes of Francis or Patrick or Thérèse. Likewise, it is easy to look to Bono, Meryl, or Michelle for guidance in practicing the better, but easy has never been my style.

That's why, when I need help to show up in the world the way I want to show up, I often chat with Saint Isabelle of France, a 13th century French princess. Isabelle lived at a time when France dictated European culture, her older brother, Louis IX wielded much power, and women were property best used for political gain. A few years ago I discovered her by accident when I found myself exploring a site about Catholic saints. That is when I discovered that her death and my birth inhabit the same square on the calendar. Her story enthralled me. I instantly fell in love. Years later her life remains wondrous and inspiring and increasingly relevant to me.

Isabelle was not your run of the mill everyday princess. She was a politically important one, whose marriage stood to bring France and the Catholic Church wealth, land, and power. However she had no interest in marriage and refused several marriage betrothals brokered by her brother. Isabelle knew exactly how she intended to live her life. She believed it was God's plan and no one was going to stop her from living humbly, caring for the poor, and remaining chaste.

History tells many remarkable stories of women who acquired land, wealth, and power despite oppressive patriarchal laws and cultures. I think of women like Queen Isabella of France who was referred to as the "She-wolf" of France, Joan of Arc who had to lie about her gender in order to follow her heart, or any one of Henry the VIII's wives and the struggles, sacrifices, and harsh judgement they faced. Most of these stories required women to allow a man to take credit for her work, resort to dangerous political games and trickery, or surrender a part of herself by capitalizing on her sexual power to manipulate her standing in society, and often all three. Not so for Isabelle.

I haven't found anything fun like Isabelle's diaries or poetic tales of the French Princess sung by balladeers. Who knows how Isabelle convinced powerful people like Blanche of Castile (her mother), Louis the IX (her brother), and Pope Innocent IV that her future was ordained to be chaste and pious?

There are many documented times when Isabelle went against the social conventions of her era. Among such departures from expectations: she refused to become a nun, instead maintaining her life of piety in her own home so she could maintain her wealth and continue supporting the monastery she founded. Isabelle also worked with Franciscan Friars in writing both the original and the updated rule for her abbey, giving the abbess greater power and increasing the stature of women within the Franciscan order. Isabelle is always described as a person of conviction and intellect who was willing to compromise but never cave.

The gaps in her story are where I am most captivated, even awestruck. It is hard to imagine that such an important princess of the Middle Ages could gain agency over her own life without accruing even a hint of scandal – not so much as a nasty nickname of the kind so often attributed to women who gain control over their own destinies. That achievement in and of itself is saintly. But how did she do it?

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I like to believe Princess Isabelle possessed a confidence, rooted in her intimate knowledge of who she was and what she had to offer the world, a confidence that is rare in women, even today. This self-knowledge allowed her to unapologetically profess her will with passion, conviction, compassion, and a radiant grace. The men who had every legal right, within civil and religious law, to force her compliance instead willingly submitted to Isabelle's will and even provided immense financial, political, and theological support for her endeavors.

Isabelle lived her life on her terms at a time when saying no to your brother, let alone your king, often resulted in harsh imprisonment, torture, or even execution. Yet from a young age she transcended the fear of saying "No" to her Queen or her King or her Pope. This "No" came from a position of inner strength and grace, inviting collaboration rather than division and isolation. It seems she never accepted her position was anything but equal, regardless of messages to the contrary (that were considerably less subtle than the messages women receive today).

I am slowly learning to approach life as I believe Isabelle did. Deepening my connection with my inner world and therefore my true self. Practicing showing up in life radiating the unquestionable truth that my gender does not render me inferior regardless of the daily intended and unintended messages that would oppose or challenge that truth. Working toward a time when all women and all men, all over the world, pursue their individual purpose as Isabelle did – with confidence, grace, compassion, and the unwavering belief that doing so is every human's right.

So, for me, Saint Isabelle is not only the patron saint of the sick and the poor, she is also the patron saint of feminists. Some days, as I strive to show up with compassion and grace while accepting no less than full professional, financial, and social equality for all people, I have the feeling that she's watching over me, and I can keep smiling.

MY FATHER, CURT HICKLE

Karen Moore

There was nothing of a material nature that one could call abundant. The house had been first constructed as a dugout in the side of a hill near the bank of the Cimarron River in central Oklahoma. Fifty years later, with the addition of two rooms added to the front, it was to become home to me, my two older brothers, and my mother and father.

There was no running water in the house, no electricity, no telephone, no radio. The sounds I remember are of birds and the wind in the cottonwood trees lining the banks of the river.

That is how I first came to know the voice of the energy I now call God in the world. For the first six years it was all I knew of the world, and of God. Living on the bank of that river with the sound of God in the cottonwoods, I have no memory of ever feeling insecure.

Such a lack of all things material and physical amidst such an abundance of all things immaterial and invisible was the story of my life then. Love, joy, and peacefulness were abundant, the foundation of my security. Especially the love—always the knowing that I was loved. Loved by my family, which was my community, and by the wind in the cottonwoods.

My father was from the foothills of the Ozark mountains in southwest Missouri and a man of deep emotions and few words. Loving was easy for him, saying words was not. But when I was three years old, he gave me a gift that I have never forgotten.

I was afraid of spiders and snakes. I would often come out of the outhouse crying because of an encounter with one or the other, or both of them. It hurt my daddy to see me cry.

Behind the house on top of a low, sandy hill stood a lone peach tree, giving the hill the glorified name of "the orchard." The orchard provided me with a natural option for my bathroom needs, one which did not, usually, include spiders or snakes. My dad understood this and wanted to make it easier for me to avoid spiders and snakes and to avoid his own pain of seeing my tears.

So he cut a tin can in half, attached a stick for a handle and gave it to me to take with me on my treks up the hill, thereby giving me the tool I needed to take care of myself and clean up my own shit. I doubt either of us knew at the time the greater gift he was giving me was self reliance managing my own self care. It was a gift for a lifetime.

I've been trying to, as they say in the Twelve Step movement, clean up my side of the street ever since. I have never found comfort nor security in material things. There is a bedrock of security that I find within because of those first few years by the river, and because of the first gift I remember receiving.

It cost no money, but it was a valuable gift.

A gift of love.

A gift of endless value and endless love.

David Drysdale

Nick Thorpe

I FIRST met David Drysdale in the year of my 40th birthday, at a time when being a man still felt to me like a guilty admission.

As father of a newly adopted son, I was determined to defy gender stereotypes and throw myself joyfully into shared parenting, but I found the exhausting frontline reality was triggering all kinds of emotions I struggled to process.

My resulting male shame was not helped by Homer Simpson or the image of patriarchy playing out in the evening news: perpetrators of most wars and violent crimes, oppressors of women, and unfairly advantaged in almost every sphere, men were also killing themselves in a seeming epidemic of suicide and loneliness.

So I was intrigued to hear about a men's "initiation" in the Scottish Highlands. It promised to be a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, to challenge your limitations, your wounding, and your impaired vision of your life as a man." Wary but desperate, I met the organizer for coffee, seeking reassurance that it was not misogynistic, health-endangering, or toe-curlingly woo-woo.

A friendly, progressive, and smartly-dressed Scot with a distinctive mane of reddish hair, David Drysdale heard my anxieties but playfully refused to rescue me from them, in a way that made me absolutely trust him. I signed up to the weekend even though he told me almost nothing about it.

I'm not going to reveal much either, except that it was the strangest, wildest, most difficult, sacred and liberating 48 hours of my life. It stripped me down and rebuilt me, earthed and transformed the male shame I felt and plugged me back into my own emotions and shared humanity.

It was the same rite of passage David himself had undergone at the age of 40, after his outwardly successful life as a multimedia designer left him inwardly lost and unequipped to deal with the apparent suicides of two male friends.

He had resolved never to be a stranger to his own emotions again, and even on our first meeting he

encouraged me to check in - to cut through the surface banter and say what I was feeling. It became one of the rituals of our friendship, and of many men's meetings we attended together.

The emotion David most often checked in with was joy - a rarer emotion for me, but he believed all of them were to be welcomed: fear, sadness, shame, and anger as much as joy. He could not have known back then that this spiritual discipline would soon undergo the ultimate test.

In the meantime, welcoming cropped up again in his inclusive vision for Fathers Network Scotland, of "a safe and compassionate Scotland where all children, their families, and communities are enriched and strengthened through the full and welcome involvement of their fathers."

He had started his charity after his determination fully to share parenting of his baby son with his wife revealed a societal bias against men as caregivers. He saw this simply as the flip-side of the inequality women experienced in professional life - and avoiding the polarizing arena of gender politics, decided to do something about both at once.

By the time I joined him to help with communications in 2014, his little start-up was a widely-respected, gender-balanced organization with its own research base and funding from the Scottish Government for what he was calling *Year of the Dad*.

2016 would've been an inclusive celebration of the difference a great dad can make, with family events, media campaigns, conferences, and creative collaborations showing how supporting dads as nurturing caregivers benefits everybody: children, families, and society as a whole.

What none of us knew was that David would not get to see its successful conclusion. In March 2015 a persistent backache turned out to be Ewing's Sarcoma, a rare cancer which left him paralyzed from the chest down.

How do you welcome cancer? From the initial blow of his diagnosis, and then paralysis, David modeled something extraordinary in the way he chose to react to his illness. He drew a distinction between pain and suffering. "I wouldn't say I'm suffering," he told me after months in hospital. "Because I don't waste energy thinking this shouldn't be happening to me."

We continued to check in each time I visited, and now he often named feelings of sadness or anger or fear as well as joy. Moved by the "miracle" of his baby girl, conceived only days before his paralysis, he nevertheless grieved the loss of his hands-on role when she was born in November 2015; he hoped, right till the end, to regain the strength to get back in his wheelchair, go home and be an active dad – because he loved his family more than anything else in his life.

When it became clear that wasn't going to happen – the initial tumor disappeared only to be replaced by inoperable lung cancer – and even his fall-back

playfulness was threatened by the steamroller of his exhaustion, I think he faced his biggest test.

But the last time I saw him, a week before he died, it seemed to me that even that dark weather had passed through, and there was a lightness about him, a sweet surrender to something bigger than him. "I'm looking forward to what's after," he told me. "Because it's either nothing, or it's something spectacular."

I hope it's something spectacular. I hope that even now he's getting the welcome he deserves. I hope he's got his legs back, that he's dancing.

Because when he finally checked out, halfway through Year of the Dad on July 4th, aged just 50, my friend David had done more than anyone I know to celebrate the beauty and positivity of being a man.

"Become who you are," ran his favorite quote from Nietzsche. "Make what only you can make." I think David Drysdale died knowing he had done both.

Got an Unsung Saint?
We'd love to hear all about what they
mean to you at
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American Beauty



Mike Riddell

In Sam Mendes' and Alan Ball's wonderful film *American Beauty*, the story closes with a reflection by Lester Burnham, the anti-hero who was shot and speaks from the other side of the veil:

I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me, but it's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst... And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain, and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life. You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure. But don't worry. You will someday.

During the troubled times we live in, my own stupid little life constantly threatens to overwhelm me with its worries and fears. I live in angst about the state of the world, the rising tide of intolerance, ecological exploitation, and the rampant inequality that leeches hope from the meek. It's as if I imagine that I could prevent it if only I could summon the strength to resist.

For people like me who struggle with depression at the best of times, such grandiose and futile delusions only invite a more complete despair. The fond idea that I am somehow responsible for all that happens in my life is a toxic neurosis. Left unchecked, it keeps me awake at night and anxious through the day.

The only antidote that seems to work for me is awareness – the conscious capacity to notice everything that is on the periphery of my self-

absorbed life. I need exposure to “casual beauty” on a regular basis. As Lester says, “It's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world.”

A few days ago I sat drinking coffee on the patio (here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the equivalent of our porch) with my wife. We'd thrown out bread on the lawn for the birds, and in the interest of free food they were content to tolerate our presence. I watched in silence, observing the social dynamics of our feathered friends.

There were a variety of birds attending the feast – blackbirds, starlings, mynahs, and the ubiquitous sparrows. One of the blackbirds took issue with a compatriot – perhaps it was a long lasting feud – and spent the entire time attempting to drive the enemy off. He was so busy being angry that he missed out on the bread in his attempt to make sure his opponent was denied.

Meanwhile the sparrows happily pecked away, grateful for food that had appeared without effort. They were content to share, three or four of them peacefully feeding alongside each other on each slice. If some of the bigger birds tried to see them off, the sparrows simply hopped across to another piece of bread, untroubled.

It seemed at the time an illustration of the futility of conflict, and I smiled at the ridiculous angst of the blackbirds that prevented them from sharing. But more important to me was the sheer joy of observing the enthusiasm of the sparrows, none of whom could give a toss whether Trump was president or the world was turning to shit.

For sparrows or people, the best things about existence are gratuitous. Rain, sunlight, air, stars, dew, mist, sea – they simply are. None of these demand our consideration. They await our acknowledgement and attention. But when engaged, they open a portal through which beauty flows.

Awareness comes through mindfulness, or what has more traditionally been known as contemplation. Thomas Merton described such a relationship with the world as spiritual wonder – “spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being.” It’s a learned practice of attention, one that has the potential to free us from the mechanistic mindset that besets so much of human misery.

To be aware is to open the soul to a healing beauty. As Lester enthuses, “it flows through me like rain, and I can't feel anything but gratitude.” God knows we could all use a little gratitude right now in the presence of such shadows we seem to face. Still, even shadows are part of the landscape, and have their part to play in a complex whole.

Without them, how could we marvel at the luminous world? Whether they dance across the world or cast gloom in the soul, shadows are invitations to embrace the totality of existence, rather than the select parts of existence we might prefer to encounter. Our call is not just to see, but to see truly and honestly.

There are those who regard contemplatives as quietists and escapists, who spend so much time navel-gazing that they are of no practical use. I’ve come to think the opposite – that it is only those who pay attention in a disciplined way who, if lost, are able to find the way out of social and political chasms.

True resistance entails focus, and the ability to recognize that which is worth fighting for in the midst of an encroaching culture of death; part of the task is discerning the difference between real violence and doomsday propaganda. None of us are victors if the struggle for justice results in a loss of humanity or the desacralization of the world. “My religion is kindness,” the Dalai Lama says perceptively. Perhaps the test of a true revolution is that of kindness.

We learn kindness through knowing ourselves. We come to know ourselves in the company of others. We find compassion in the presence of awe. We discover awe by being aware of the beauty around us. Only then do we understand the beauty within, equally profound as the beauty surrounding us.

I write these words for myself, as a reminder not to succumb to a sense of futility. I share them on the safety of the porch, trusting that the slant of the evening sun and the spice in the air will lead us into conversation, an engagement with the mystery of life. There is so very much beauty in us and around us.

OUR LOVE IS OUR RESISTANCE

Mona Haydar

When the ban was announced, like many people across the country, some folk from my graduate school cohort made their way to JFK airport where folks had gathered to protest. Many friends who speak different Arabic dialects or have law degrees have been donating all their free time helping affected people. One of these affected is a young man who was returning from visiting his family in Algeria, a country not on the banned list. This young man has a green card and has never been in any trouble with the law. In fact, he was essentially invited to come to America when his name was drawn in a green card lottery. My cohort overheard that this young man had just been released from being detained at JFK and needed somewhere to stay. They invited him to stay with them and, since his English was limited, I became the point person/liaison/translator. We had him over for dinner recently, and he shared some of what happened to him while he was detained. I felt a wave of panic overwhelm me while listening to his story. Here I was, talking to someone who was detained, discriminated against and ultimately abused, his rights challenged simply because he came from a country where people utter prayers the same way I do. Such a soft spoken man with such heartbreak and trauma visible on his kind face. I was caught off guard by how traumatized he was as a result of this humiliating, dehumanizing, and unjust debacle.

I often feel immobilized by the prohibitive force called perfectionism. If I can't solve the whole mystery to complete the puzzle, I feel like I've failed. Even a simple Facebook or Twitter post can linger on my home screen for hours as I labor over it, tweaking it, noticing little errors and making sure my messaging and content are exactly what I want them to be. People always seem to mistake my meaning no matter how much time or energy I spend trying to make sure my language is perfect. I've come to realize that I must make those posts, even imperfectly, because their spirit is true. They communicate something to the world which flows from my spirit and in that is its authentic magic. I must send out my love into the ether no matter how damaged or incomplete my own judgements deem it. I must do something and sometimes that something is having the courage to be truly present to the person sitting in front of me or practicing loving kindness despite what is being directed at me. I've come up with this idea of the "love economy" which I'm sure others have thought of too. Investing in the love economy means that my returns are eternal and infinite. It is for this reason why all of the great religions of the world are essentially built on the qualities of "*hesed*" and "*emet*." *Love and Truth.*

A certain form of power is currently held by people who lack a sense of what it is to invest in the economies that actually matter. By attempting a “total shutdown” of Muslims entering the country, this power is creating much psychic and spiritual discord. Instead of making America and Americans safer, what this ban does is in fact the opposite. By investing in the economy of fear, this deepens the pathways and avenues which allow fear to travel in our minds and through that, in our society. The young man I mentioned earlier was deeply traumatized by what this ban did to him. I can imagine someone who is not as emotionally stable or generally kind might be so deeply traumatized that they would lash out in response to being mistreated in this way. We have people at airports offering *pro bono* assistance on legal matters, and this is good; but what really needs to happen is the cultivation of a support network for those who’ve been so deeply affected and wounded. Imagine all the young Muslims in America who are being told through legal action and policy that people who offer prayers in the same fashion they do are not welcome in America. I’m not asserting that this can or will “radicalize” people. Instead I am asking the question, what are we doing to create a culture of remediation and healing after we so disastrously create chaos and disease? Is it enough to wear a safety pin and go to a rally? I don’t believe so. And beyond that, policies which are exclusive and discriminate against certain people may actually embolden terrorists to perpetrate acts of violence against that very community. Instead of protecting us from terrorists, is this misuse of power actually creating terrorists? A mosque was set on fire in Texas the night after the Muslim ban was signed. Later, another mosque in California was also torched and completely destroyed.

...what are we doing to create a culture of remediation and healing after we so disastrously create chaos and disease? Is it enough to wear a safety pin and go to a rally? I don’t believe so.

People keep asking me what they can do to support Muslims? What can we do to prevent the harm being sown by people in positions of power? People have been sharing with me such feelings of heartbreak, of despair, so many have asked, but what can I do? Surely, just I alone can’t really affect anything? Well perhaps the inaction that can stem from this false belief, or from feeling immobilized by despair is the greatest threat to our survival. For every policy that has the potential to hurt our mama earth, might we each vow to plant a thousand trees? For every policy that is unfriendly to the “other,” betraying the best of America’s aspirations, might we send our hard-earned dollars to groups seeking to nonviolently oppose and transcend the tyranny? For every act of violence might we be intentional in performing double that in acts of love? For every outrageous, offensive, dehumanizing statement made by people with loud voices and bully pulpits, might we commit to reaching out to someone who does not share our political perspective, seeking to have conversations guided by curiosity and listening, rather than judgement and condemnation? Every act of love is a means to our liberation, a means to freeing us from the disempowerment, disenchantment, disconnect, and disease we all feel. No matter how imperfect, small or mundane, every kindness is a move of resistance against the economy of fear which is designed to depress us to the point of inaction. Our love is our resistance.

What do we do now?

Michelle LeBaron

This question resounds daily here at a South African Institute for Advanced Studies where some of the world's most renowned scholars – mostly scientists – gather for daily meals before again burrowing, squirrel-like, into their work. Dystopic visions of artificial intelligence gone diablo, climate change-related epidemics, global food shortages, and imminent cataclysmic conflicts are our daily bread. Though everyone proffers goodwill and determined optimism, despair laces nearly every meal we share. As the leader of a group of artists and arts scholars, I find myself reflecting often on how to maintain direction and anchor hope in these conversations.

Are we naïve? Or out of touch? Hardly. One of our members, artist and scholar Kim Berman, started a print-making studio with Nhlanhla Xaba in Johannesburg to “counter...the suspicion and division left from the apartheid years and, as a democratic medium,...to help to build a truly egalitarian society.” Another, Kenyan scholar Kitche Magak, used photography to document and help shift violent narratives in response to post-election violence in his country.

We take our cues from visionaries who were both permeable to what was all around them, yet refused to be constrained by their times. One of these was American artist M.C. Richards, who asked, “Can we imagine a kind of peace that includes the freedom to conflict, a kind of warmth that includes the freedom to withdraw, a kind of union that asks for free and unique individualities, a kind of good that grants the mystery of evil, and kind of life that bears death within it like a seed-force?” Richards here points to permeability between apparent opposites, and the importance of acknowledging even what repels us, lest it grow larger in the shadows.

Permeability is necessary for survival. Humans' cell walls are semi-permeable boundaries that allow fluids and nutrients in to nourish us, and waste products out so they do not harm us. Highly selective, our cells continually regenerate in very particular and fluid processes of exchange. Socially, we live in a time of decreasing permeability, when the line between who is “us” and who is “other” is darkening and thickening. When cell walls thicken, impeding permeability,

individuals die. Societies, too, grow sicker when permeability malfunctions. One of the casualties is hope.

Hope is always a personal mission, conceived and maintained in relationship with others. It arises as we let the voices that surround us permeate and touch us, albeit with a discerning filter. One of my richest learnings about permeability arose when I was offered a job that would take me and my four children from Victoria, British Columbia to the US capitol. Looking one direction, the answer was clear: stay in place, embrace our quiet, quotidian life in a Victorian home near the sea. The other way, I saw uncertainty and challenge in an opportunity to dive deep into my vocation as a teacher of conflict resolution.

I sought the counsel of others, created lists of pros and cons. Each choice would involve certain and uncertain losses, and this awareness kept me stuck in indecision. Finally, I decided to invite the Christian scriptures to point toward an answer. Far from a scriptorian, I was familiar only with archetypal passages and a few oft-quoted psalms. After sitting in silence

with my question, I let the Bible fall open and looked down with curiosity and not a little trepidation. There on my lap was the first chapter of *Jeremiah*, in which the prophet is assured by the creator that he is known to him and is asked to teach his people. Jeremiah's protests of "I am too young!" are met with clear reiterations of the call. From this moment, I knew we had to go.



Horace Vernet, *Jeremiah on the ruins of Jerusalem* (1844)

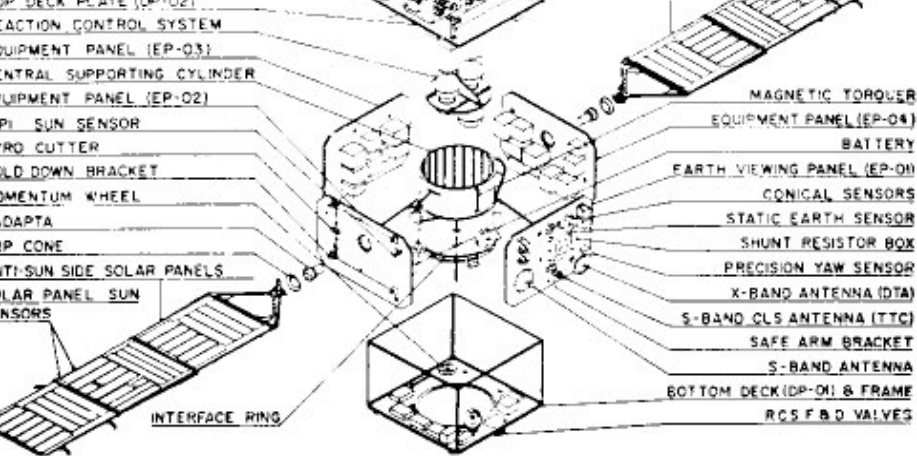
And so we lived ten years in Washington, DC, the city famous for – in the words of JFK – Southern efficiency and Northern charm. My mentor Jim Laue, a Harvard sociologist who had worked with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, died unexpectedly a few months after I arrived. Still, I was surrounded by people who had pioneered conflict resolution. For a prairie girl from Canada's heartland, the learning was enormous.

As my work progressed, my quest to scientifically and analytically understand conflict still felt incomplete. The best mediators did not necessarily follow the frameworks we taught. Many conflicts slipped, eel-like, through our grasps. In crises, we

were sidelined. No one called conflict specialists after September 11, 2001 to talk about how to respond, at least none among those who believed they were in charge. Instead, the dominant focus shifted quickly from shock to retributive action. In our collective responses to this and other traumas, the seeds of our current politics were born. It is a time of mean me-first grasping and of demagoguery masquerading as religion. Generosity, respect and co-creative inquiry – all essential to healthy societies – are missing. Jeremiah, and his model of yielding to an ethic of service, is missing too.

Reflecting on my vocation-informing encounter with Jeremiah, it was there that I found the bigger grid that cleared the fog of my indecision. A simple act of surrender, it rendered me permeable beyond rational thought and the voices immediately around me. Without being able to articulate exactly what I needed, I sensed a need for something beyond the voices around me and analytic approaches to decision-making. Within six weeks of this experience, our family was navigating the huge freeways of the DC area, the children were attending schools in which the lunch staff called them "sugar," and I taught my first classes on conflict – the first of a career that continues to be compelling and challenging. Though the magnitude of change was massive, I had the comforting, nearly constant experience after that encounter of holding a thread that not only pulled us surely into a new neighborhood, but also lent coherence to the process. These moments, lived as they were in surrender to unsettling, anchor me now whenever I am afraid to relinquish control.

Permeability to more spacious narratives and images is needed now more than ever as the foundations of kindness, civility, and empathy are being challenged. In listening permeably to singular stories we can return to equilibrium and find, again, ways to engage and surrender in counterpoint in the paradoxes that surround us.



Between Everything & Nothing.

Steve
Daugherty

Jason's dead.

That fact was still landing for all of us. We could do little more than shake our heads at each other. My dear friend's eyes were so full of pain one moment and emptied of light the next, I wondered if she, a new widow, was broken forever. She didn't speak and neither did we. I've never attended a funeral where grief and shock competed so fiercely for human happiness.

Jason was, by all accounts, one of the smartest human beings you could ever meet. Even as we gathered in that cemetery, our heads hung low, a satellite Jason helped invent pirouetted above us in the exosphere. There's a good chance it's over your head right now. There was more. Jason is reported to have achieved a record high SAT score. He spoke savvily about how the internet will work in years to come, the role of quantum physics in computing, alternative fuel sources, and so on. He didn't speak as one quoting from a science magazine thumbed through before a haircut, but as one actually involved in bringing these things into our "regular-people" lives. Jason was one of the first people I knew to drive an electric car, his house was solar-powered, and he could explain how a *Star Trek* style replicator might be able to work long before anyone was talking about 3D printers. Brilliant man.

Those poised enough to speak at his funeral last fall shared things like this. Jason was so smart, they said. So intelligent. Just brilliant.

But this wasn't the final point anyone made in their eulogies—a fancy term that literally breaks down to "good words." And these things weren't what I

drove away from the cemetery wishing I had more of. Everyone who spoke made sure we knew of Jason's kindness. Even as we reminisced how phoning Jason for assistance with a computer issue meant a few seconds later your cursor would begin moving on its own as he remotely took the wheel—it was his kindness, his gracious way of never leaving anyone feeling less than loved, that we agreed we'd miss the most. The eulogy, the *good words*, were that there were far more than words to Jason's legacy.

I spoke to his wife a couple days ago. She said, "I'm his wife, and in the three months since his death I am only now finding out what a genius he was." I took this at first as her way of saying Jason's depth was discovered by degrees. But after a beat I realized she was saying that what he knew wasn't why she married him. I realized all over again it's not why any of us are devastated at losing him.

It was his kindness in all things. To everyone. It is as Jason's Christian tradition believes, and the order of things we all intuitively prefer; The world is better when word becomes flesh.

I'm still arrested by this, despite having already known it; achieve and learn what you want, but you will finally be measured by your kindness. I don't remember a single thing Ms. James "taught" me in fourth grade. I just remember that her classroom was an oasis of kindness in a love-parched, gimme-your-lunch money world. I dare you to remember someone fondly and tell me that fondness is rooted chiefly in that person's cold accurateness, their mere precision of thought.

I've spent the last month struggling to think clearly about the world, as though perpetually in the fog of a previous night's bender. Here in the US, up has been temporarily renamed down, and facts are gelatinous things put into the shape and service of the beholder. Every time I think I have something right to say about the world, someone—often someone I love—counters it with an opinion and some link to a blog, both of which I struggle to believe were forged in an oxygenated room, and then declares themselves the winner of our exchange. I've felt disoriented, some days cycling through emotional survival responses like someone who believes they are on the front lines of battle. I go from wanting to fight with people online about some or another veiled (and often not at all veiled) xenophobia, to fleeing to solitude because *to hell with it it's over we're all going to die*.

But then something reminds me that Nietzsche warned me not to become a monster while fighting monsters, and to remember that the gaze of the abyss follows. Ok, Nietzsche, fair enough, I'll do my best. Should I call another senator? Should I blog about Fredrick Douglass? How many more people can I unfriend? I can't make it to the protest, but I could pull all my money from my bank because they fund DAPL. Gosh that's a pain in the ass, will it actually affect anything?

Hence comes that third survival response between fight and flight: *freeze*.

I don't feel educated enough to participate in making up up and down down again. I'm too interested in love to embrace fleeing. I'm too interested in thoughtful responses to merely join the latest fight, or Netflix my way into hiding. So I stand, staring, unable to move. I'm a privileged white heterosexual male, and I know that doing *nothing* is an option reserved for the shruggingly advantaged. And I know that doing *something*, when the scope of all of the somethings is so vast, can feel like bucketing water off the *Titanic*. What do I do? What do I say?

The Dalai Lama says something really profound, or really flakey, sometimes I can't tell. He says, "My religion is simple, my religion is kindness." As I typed that, I botched a letter and it autocorrected to "...my religion is *blindness*." Exactly my point. Do I actually believe kindnesses accumulate into an improved humanity or does believing that require me to close my eyes and wish upon a star? Do people who can actually perceive clearly believe this, or is kindness the doctrine of the willfully blind?

Well, dammit, Jason seemed to see better than all of us. Not just how the world worked when deconstructed to ones and zeroes. He could see our humanity, what it was that actually made things work.

The former US Poet Laureate Kay Ryan begins her poem *Least Action*, "Is it vision or the lack that brings me back to the principle of least action...adjusting little parts a little bit — turning a cup a quarter inch or scooting up a bench..."

There may be more value than I realize, or more than we're used to celebrating, in the incremental kindnesses of a well-lived life. Perhaps the thank-you cards I don't send and the names I don't take the time to learn are worth returning to, despite my paralyzed overwhelm that insists *I'll do all that later—I have a world to save!* Perhaps holding doors and remembering to laugh and buying lunch for someone I know can't afford it and showing up with a casserole just because and giving a shitty landlord the benefit of the doubt and being okay with being the only one that ever initiates phone calls with parents—maybe these little increments, these little quarter inch turns of a cup, will help keep Earth on her rails.

To say nothing ill of the important work that needs to be done—the protests, the calls to representatives, the work of paying attention to the voices and lives unnoticed all round—I must remember that, in the end, we will also celebrate the ongoing activism of ordinary kindness. The radicalness of kindness, consistent and independent of merit, and undergirding all our amazing and menial works, is enough activism for a day. Indeed, many of us are being radicalized by kindness if for no more complicated a reason than the conspicuous unkindness pervading public life. This cultural moment—it is not an *era*—is one in which the veil between private life and public pretense has been torn; and so we finally don't have any more excuses not to be kind. Not to be vulnerable with each other. We already have the words, but perhaps we've forgotten the simple, cumulative beauty of letting those words become the flesh of our actual lives. We've all lost someone like Jason. Let us not also lose their most precious contribution; a quiet reminder that there's nothing flakey at all about the simple, moment-to-moment kindnesses we deploy in a world trying to break us. As the coda of Kay Ryan's poem offers, *It is tempting for any person who would like to love what she can do*.

Undying of the Light

Teresea Pasquale Mateus

The United States is my country, and I am an immigrant. I am a naturalized citizen from Bogota, Colombia. I am Spanish and Indigenous in origin. I am bisexual. These things are what make me an American and what make me endangered in America.

My country is divided — this isn't hyperbole, this is just a fact. In the wake of the election of the 45th President, the United States is divided across lines of belief and ideology but also of experience. The divergent lifetime experiences of millions of people so deeply disagreeing with each other about the way to govern the country are dramatic.

The poverty and hopelessness of many poor and working class white communities are part of what created the dramatic political shift we see today — but the landscape of what exists in this moment, a near oligarchy ruled by xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, and classism impacts most acutely those in the margins and the margins of the margins.

It cannot be denied that this country was founded partly on the principles of slavery and genocide. People who have already been historically victimized by the violence and hate in this country are endangered in ways that many of us thought were being left in the past. We see new legislation that demonizes, marginalizes, and excises them at a national systemic level.

Those of us in brown and black bodies, immigrant bodies, queer bodies (most especially trans and people of color bodies across the intersections of racial, gender and sexual minoritized status), Muslim and Middle Eastern bodies, live in an environment that is now systemically and socially less secure.

So many of us I think, also, are tired of watering down what is true because it isn't hopeful or gentle or aspirational enough for others — who may be emotionally impacted, but whose personhood is not threatened by these events. There is less urgency in that

space and so I understand that the greater inclination would be hope over fact.

Don't get me wrong — I think there is hope in this moment, and beauty and grace. But the challenge is just as real as the hope. In an era where facts are being watered down or "alternative" versions are being presented as reality — as a trauma therapist, a healing provider, a contemplative teacher and an advocate of the burgeoning wide scale resistance to hate, I also think it is important to be in full truth and transparency before we can be in anything else. There is catharsis in this. There is beauty in this. In this moment, truth-telling about who we are is crucial. And I am tired of watering down my own reality to make it more palatable to those that would wish to see it less, to find their own hope prioritized above that experience.

Yes. We are a divided in this moment. By ideology and by experience. Let's own it. Then, let's find what we do next.

One of the greatest principles of the logotherapy created by the psychiatrist and survivor of the concentration camps Viktor Frankl was simple and clear — we cannot control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond. In this moment, how we respond is everything.

Although ideological and experiential differences still cloud some of the way forward — and increased need for conversation in a widening movement of social justice needs to happen around these differences, around white privilege, and radical intersectionality in the lived experiences of marginal identities — people are responding. Protests have erupted in sanctuary cities, with legislative stakeholders (like the mayors of those cities) standing with the protestors to fight the legislation that would try to coerce these cities into giving up their undocumented immigrants or lose federal funding. Protesters amassed at airports as families, children, refugees, and immigrants were held by Homeland Security for the crime of not being born in the United States. Lawyers swarmed the airports to donate their time to get these families into the U.S. while federal judges in four cities called for a halt to this unlawful presidential order. Scientists and National Park Service employees went rogue after their information to the people was blacked out — despite the risk to their jobs.

And I have seen beautiful expressions of love and beloved community showing up in the landscape of the margins. Specifically, for me, in the communities of women of color in my neighborhood and those across the country — women supporting each other, loving each other, feeding, and nurturing each other. This intimacy of interconnectedness gives me the greatest hope that lights the inside of the deep wells of darkness. There is a knowingness of experience that doesn't even require the energy of words to explain it, or the need to qualify it, but just the presence to hold it with and for each other.

The movement is growing. Loving each other in the marginalized spaces is part of *our* resistance. And the way forward will be led by such people as this — strong and brown and beautiful.

New Years in Cuba with Someone Else's Mother

Peterson Toscano

Dear Isabel,

I felt so American traveling to Cuba for the winter holidays and renting that large, sunny, cheerful room in your daughter's house. Trips abroad remind me of those parts of me I overlook or forget about at home. Winter travel also provides an escape from the stressful highly commercialized season and the frenetic family holiday gatherings.

During the holidays most Americans visit family. Nuclear families that have split off, fuse back together again in myriad configurations. The thought of not being with family for the holidays seems almost un-American, something to pity or feel guilty about. The plaintive cry of the old Christmas pop song promises, "I'll be home for Christmas," followed by the singer's lament, "if only in my dreams."

My partner Glen and I felt content and relaxed in your daughter's home. We went to bed early and slept late. We never attended the night time salsa dancing in the village center, although we peeked in once. We lingered briefly in the plaza where internationals and locals congregated. Strangely when I strolled through that Spanish colonial plaza, framed by the church, community center, and tourist buses, most people there did not seem to notice me or each other. They sat hunched over, detached, sucked into a wifi wormhole. Your daughter told us the plaza is the only wifi spot in town. It looked like a watering hole for zombies.

I realize for Cubans access to the Internet is new and possibly very bewitching. Does your daughter feel a little like Alice transfixed by this looking glass? In addition to organizing bookings for her

guests, does she explore new worlds? I wanted a vacation from it all. I came to Cuba to be alert, engaged, and present in a whole new culture, a world with no American corporate imprint other than the 1950s Fords and Chryslers sputtering and cruising past. I wanted to leave my American life behind.

"You too?," you asked at New Year's Eve breakfast when I mentioned that both my parents are dead. I think you used a phrase like "passed away" or "passed on," when I initially asked you about your own mother and father. In Spanish I end up speaking more directly. I lack the vocabulary necessary for delicate phrasing during polite conversation. "I don't eat pig." "I'm stuffed." "My parents are dead."

"Yes, me too," I affirmed. Then we had that moment, that softening between us, that unspoken communion of the survivors, of adult orphans. We didn't speak of it again, but our shared loss hovered between us like incense or the exhaust from diesel trucks and antique cars, pollution that trails like smoky ghosts on the street outside the house.

You explained how each Cuban citizen gets a monthly allowance of basic food supplies—rice, beans, a little meat, oil, and coffee. You added, "It's not enough, but it helps." Glen read in the *Lonely Planet* that state-sanctioned *casa particulares*, what we might call a bed and breakfast, are part of a new economy allowing families like yours to earn more by hosting tourists. We also read the government takes half the income from our stay. You and your daughter tap into your entrepreneurial side by offering the little extras like preparing meals and doing laundry.

Glen and I do not usually visit family during the winter holidays. His parents live in South Africa, a long expensive trip, especially during the Christmas/New Year season. He and his siblings chipped in once to bring their folks over one summer, and we try to visit every other summer.

I remember the Christmas Eves of my youth, when, after midnight mass my sisters, our parents, and I gathered to open the presents we had for each other. How we wanted and often failed at making everything special and magical. More than anything else we all wanted to give gifts that delighted mom. She worked hard in the family restaurant—over 70 hours a week. The few days off for Christmas was a gift in itself as she got well needed rest, and we spent time together without the constant presence of customers demanding her attention.

Besides the fancy gifts—perfume and scarves—what made our mom light up were the almost childish gifts we gave her—a Mickey Mouse Christmas figurine or a tiny crystal bear. Her heavy lidded eyes widened, and a full warm smile spread across her face; for a moment she almost looked like a child. Perhaps she liked these gifts so much because her own childhood was interrupted at age nine when her mom died. Whenever I asked her about her mom and what she was like, she'd tell me the few stories she had, adding, "No matter how long ago it was, you never stop missing your mother."

During the winter holiday season parents and children reunite and share traditions, feel some of

the old insecurities or remorse, and enjoy just being with people who do not need to be impressed or entertained. But for me these people—parents and children—no longer exist or never did. I instead leave home and go far away to new exotic places. I fill my days with unfamiliar sights, sounds, and flavors. I take in all that is on offer. Yet even as I dive into a new world, the strangeness brings into sharper focus those parts of me that go unnoticed in my day-to-day life. This travel reminds me of my roots and those people who have been uprooted.

I enjoyed my trip to Cuba. It was one of the most significant travel experiences of my life, one I will revisit in my mind for years to come. Even so, I'd trade it all in an instant for another Christmas with my mom and dad, even knowing I would probably end up bored and frustrated during the extended visit. I'd likely feel claustrophobic in their house and annoyed that there are no easy places to hide. I'd complain about the food. I'd feel bothered by the TV blaring and the crappy Internet connection. I might even wish I had decided to be selfish and gone off somewhere exotic for the holidays. Even so, I would have given up Cuba without question for another complicated holiday with my parents.

Don't get me wrong, being with you and your family on New Years was lovely, so memorable, so interesting. Still, it was not enough, but it helped.

Con cariño,
Peterson



NEW MOVIE: NERUDA

Neruda Meets The Muppets and Saves the World.

David Wilcox

In 1948, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda was forced into hiding and barely escaped into exile over the Andes into Argentina through the snow. Not because he wanted to have a great story to tell; he was just trying to stay alive. Yeah, there were real bullets in the gun of the obsessed police officer who led the hunt. Of course they were enemies. They were on opposite sides of a huge battle of ideas that pulled the whole country into war, and only one side could win. And yet in Pablo Larrain's film *Neruda* they have soulful gratitude for one another; the police officer and Pablo Neruda quietly thank each other. They each appreciate having a noble foe to shape their character and bring significance to their story.

I loved the beautiful perspective on adversity that *Neruda* gave me. In the middle of the struggle, there is a soulful peace that comes with having a larger view. I want that peace. That peace has always been my goal. Why do I not pursue that peace? Well, unless I'm on my deathbed, I've got no time to be gazing at the conflict from my one cool remove. There's too much at stake. The people in the movie, however, have an advantage over me: they are historical characters who are already dead. They can thank each other for providing the perfect foil. They can see - the way a novelist would see - that in order for characters to come

alive, a good story requires conflict. In the movie, there's not an absolute line between good guys and bad guys. There are only contrasting characters who need each other in order to define themselves. They can respect each other because they know that their dignity cannot be threatened by their adversary.

They somehow remember that they are writing their story together as they live it, and only together can they complete the transformation from two-dimensional paper characters into flesh and blood. Yeah, but who has the courage to claim that he is the author of his own story? I don't feel in control of all that. I'm busy just trying to dodge the disasters that befall me, like everybody else. If the stack of bills you have to pay overshadows your income, who among us would smile as if that was merely a foreshadowing of bootstrap brilliance?

Who among us would see our current poverty as proof that prosperity must be coming, even though every good story about genius inventors always starts that way? If huge cracks in the political ground split the land underfoot, who is going to feel blessed and grateful to live in a time that gives our actions meaning?



Well, I would like to. I want exactly that. I need that. Give me the occasional bliss that heals my vision regarding the pain that's too easy to see, because that's the only way I will be able to function and get stuff done, rather than tightening up in anxiety. If that relaxed wisdom can only happen on a deathbed, then fine: I'll die first and get it out of the way so I can live my life. I want to have access to a deeper well at those times when my heart and soul are dry in the desert. I want to be stabilized by a love for my enemy that is bigger than the events I am living through. I say YES to all this, and I think it is possible.

I have tasted it before. I have been in that state of mind, and it really does change everything. When I'm in it, it feels easy. And it didn't lead me to take life less seriously; it made me brave and pushed me into action. Back when I was first dreaming of playing music, I would dare to try stuff that would wind up actually working because I told myself that I was embarking on the hero's journey. I didn't mind pounding down the freeways of America to go play two songs at an open mic. I didn't mind sleeping in the car. I could have wasted my time being ashamed of the squalor, but I was able to lift myself out of that debilitating worry by imagining that I had already lived these tough years before. I imagined how I would feel if I was a time traveler revisiting my life as a young man. After working hard my whole life with my head down in the struggle, somehow at the end I got the chance to come back to my twenties and not just revisit my early years, but also have the blessing of not knowing how everything turns out. That way there's no spoilers. I get to feel the uncertainty and suspense all over again, but this time without the distraction of fear, because in this imagined scenario, I knew that I had chosen to come back and live the best part over.

Wait a minute. The best part? What's so great about sleeping in my car and getting woken up by a cop shining a flashlight in my face? What's so great about getting ignored by a talkative crowd as I play for tips at the health food store? Granted, the events by themselves aren't very pleasant, but I was able to really enjoy that part of my life because I pretended that it was going somewhere. I imagined

it was part of a bigger story. I guess it could have been a dangerous lie. It was creative self-deception. Luckily, I persevered and my gamble paid off. I got a record deal and have continued to play music for appreciative crowds ever since. But it could have gone very differently. I could have fooled myself into blindly following a dream down a dead end for years until I woke up to an existential crisis - suddenly realizing that all the suffering was for nothing. And yet that second interpretation would also be just a story. Both ways of seeing it can feel equally true: 1) Adversity makes a good story and gives life meaning, or 2) suffering for a deluded dream is an absurd waste of time. The same events can read either way, even while living them.

I assumed it was a choice that I had the authority to make. It was my life. Even if those two divergent lives were to end in the same meaningless death in a random crash, the lived experience of those two paths would be worlds apart, and it was my choice. Even if the meaning I attach to adversity is only in my mind - even if my blissful story is some kind of an altered state, who would deny this dying man his morphine? We are all dying soon enough. I decided there was no shame in using my creative mind to take the edge off reality. I mixed a little imagined nostalgia into my adversity. As if I was a time traveler who had come back to enjoy the hard years of paying my dues. It was just a story. And after all, I would be telling myself a story one way or the other. So let's make it a good story. No one will sue me if I spice up some dreary events with a soulful backdrop. Put a little bed of music under it. Picture a long crane shot pulling back... Hear the musical number start with an orchestra swell: Life's like a movie. Make your own ending. Keep believing. Keep pretending. Hey wait a minute. That's the last song in *The Muppet Movie*. Am I really going to explain my life's philosophy with Muppets? Am I going to give myself confidence to endure the hard times by pretending that my story turns out OK? "Somebody thought of that, and someone believed it, and look what it's done so far."

Even if those words were sung by a little frog puppet, the philosophy was still an effective weapon against my personal horde of demons. And I didn't need to dignify my self-delusion with more legitimate philosophers. Muppets would do just fine. I knew I was mischievously hacking reality. But reality was never all that respectful of me either. I hadn't found any dependable source of believable hope, and I did not want to be drowned in depression. Depression runs deep in my family. That river was gonna rise. What's the harm in building a raft out of some imagination? Why not tell myself a story that changes my view of adversity? It's not reality. It's just an altered state, but instead of chemical leverage, I change my mind with imagination: I tell a story. Maybe I could steal a few good years of life before the consequences killed me. That was a fair trade. But hacking reality with story did not kill me. I enjoyed that soulful time. I actually look back on it with nostalgia, just like I pretended I would.

Today, there's a comfy bed in the back of my new car. I bought a brand new mattress and soft pillows and a down comforter. It looks good to me, there in the rearview mirror as we cruise out for dinner. Our house is home, but the bed in the car reminds me of that time when I was good at telling a different story about adversity. The way I told my story, I could sleep in the car and not feel at all like a homeless failure; I was snug and dry through the storm in my tent with wheels that were made out of metal. I avoided getting swept up in the flood of judgement from the mainstream. I was not pulled under the dark current of shame because I read accounts of those who had lived this way a long time ago. Maybe they were assassinated or crucified, but they had big lives while they lived. I wanted that.

I still want it. Whenever I catch a glimpse of that soulful boldness, it reminds me how my heart used to feel when I was actively counteracting hopelessness. I did pretty good with re-framing adversity in my past, and I still feel the hunger for that kind of creative adventure. This time I want the boldness that I saw in *Neruda*. I want the ability to look at my adversary with new eyes that see beyond the battle lines. I want to trick the bitterness and be able to see my story with the eyes of a writer. I know

that the battle is on. Yes, it feels like the land where we stand is cracking open, and yes, it would be easy to fall into some dark chasm of grief. The political story plays out so slowly, I will never get to see my side victorious. I probably won't live that long. But that is not the only way to win. The conflict does not have to go away in order for me to have peace. I can live a dignified life in the midst of our divided country by viewing my noble opponent as the one who offers to help give my story meaning.

If I were to imagine that I am a time traveler choosing to re-live these tumultuous years, it would help me see the struggle through the eyes of an adventurer. I could strike up conversations with the enthusiasm of a traveler. How else to enjoy these times except my imagining that they end well? This does not guarantee that we will enter an age of wisdom and compassion, or that our nation will even survive. Those big stories are longer than one human life. But for the years I have left to live, it is my choice whether to live in hope or fear. The means of tipping that balance is how I picture those big stories ending. Who gains from my hopelessness? The forces of darkness. If I give in to the cynical spin and picture society sliding into a dystopian hell-scape, I will squash all my motivation to push for good. No matter how it ends, what harm would it do if I hack reality with a little creative imagination? It may not guarantee that the story of our current political conflict will have a better ending, but it will surely make me feel more adventurous about living through these times. And with an adventurous attitude instead of hopelessness, I may in fact be more effective in helping the big story end better too. Generations from now, when the history is taught about the time ahead, our descendants may be grateful to the people who held a vision of a beautiful future. Those dreamers who were able to enjoy their lives and work with purpose and tenacity because they imagined the story ending well, as if they knew. And if that future comes true, it will be thanks to the lovers, the dreamers, and you.

***Neruda* is directed by Pablo Larraín, written by Guillermo Calderón, and stars Gael García Bernal and Luis Gnecco. We think it's pretty wonderful.**

a Hundred Movies That Help Us Live Better

Friends of *The Porch* are becoming a community gathering in the spirit that the stories we tell and the images we make can help us live better. We read books and listen to music and watch movies together as icons that illuminate, inspire, challenge, and help us to rehumanize ourselves and the world.

And once a year we host the Movies & Meaning Festival at the KiMo Theatre in Albuquerque, one of the most beautiful cinemas in the world, an exquisite space for watching iconic classics, recently overlooked masterpieces, and new films that help us live better. We've hosted artists including actor Hal Holbrook, director Godfrey Reggio, poet Jessica Helen Lopez, and contemplative activist Richard Rohr, and offered an exquisite platform for films such as *The Tree of Life*, *Good Vibrations*, *Koyaanisqatsi*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Make Way for Tomorrow*, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *Tocanda la Luz*, and *Love is Strange*. This year we're delighted to be joined by the distinguished writer Alice Walker (author of *The Color Purple*), wisdom teacher Malidoma Somé, and our own Mona Haydar for an extraordinary weekend of storytelling, community, and hope. You're invited! Find out more at www.moviesandmeaning.com

In the meantime, here's our first survey of the *Movies That Help Us Live Better*, or perhaps even the *Movies That Save the World*. Based on a combination of a poll of the M&M community and the contributions of critics and film makers, this list is a contribution to the conversation about art and life, and we hope it serves as an invitation to watch more, think more, and live better. (To expand the diversity of our list, when a director has been nominated more than once, we identify their highest ranked film and then add their other nominated films in parentheses.)

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| 1: Babette's Feast | 26: Once |
| 2: The Tree of Life (The Thin Red Line, The New World) | 27: Jean de Florette/Manon des Sources |
| 3: Wild Strawberries (Persona, Fanny and Alexander) | 28: The Secret Life of Words |
| 4: Wings of Desire (Paris, Texas) | 29: American Beauty |
| 5: Lone Star (Limbo) | 30: The Red Balloon |
| 6: Schindler's List (Munich, AI Artificial Intelligence, The Color Purple) | 31: Field of Dreams |
| 7: Life is Beautiful | 32: Central Station |
| 8: Beasts of the Southern Wild | 33: All that Jazz (Cabaret) |
| 9: Spirited Away | 34: Inside Out |
| 10: Three Colors Trilogy (The Dekalog) | 35: Do the Right Thing (Malcolm X, 25th Hour) |
| 11: Cinema Paradiso | 36: Me and Earl and the Dying Girl |
| 12: Amelie | 37: La Strada (8 1/2) |
| 13: Dead Poets Society (The Truman Show, Fearless, Witness) | 38: Into Great Silence |
| 14: Of Gods and Men | 39: The Act of Killing/The Look of Silence |
| 15: Groundhog Day | 40: Singin' in the Rain |
| 16: Tokyo Story | 41: Breaking the Waves |
| 17: Lost in Translation | 42: It's a Wonderful Life |
| 18: Short Term 12 | 43: Babe Pig in the City |
| 19: Magnolia (The Master) | 44: Calvary |
| 20: Interstellar | 45: La Règle du Jeu |
| 21: The Fisher King | 46: No Country for Old Men (A Serious Man/O Brother Where Art Thou) |
| 22: Before Sunrise/Sunset/Midnight (Boyhood) | 47: The 400 Blows |
| 23: To Kill a Mockingbird | 48: Kundun (Shutter Island, The Last Temptation of Christ) |
| 24: Vertigo | 49: Stories We Tell |
| 25: Nostalghia (Andrei Rublev, Stalker, Solaris) | 50: Secrets and Lies (Mr Turner) |

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| 51: The Visitor (The Station Agent, Spotlight) | 76: Casablanca |
| 52: Lawrence of Arabia (Dr Zhivago) | 77: Quiz Show |
| 53: Monsoon Wedding | 78: Milk |
| 54: Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence | 79: The Conformist |
| 55: Yi Yi | 80: The Apple (Blackboards) |
| 56: After Life (Like Father, Like Son) | 81: Love & Mercy |
| 57: Wall-E | 82: 4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days |
| 58: The Hours | 83: Last Night (McKellar) |
| 59: Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives | 84: Seven Samurai |
| 60: Stranger than Fiction | 85: Take Shelter |
| 61: Brokeback Mountain | 86: Creed |
| 62: In the Mood for Love | 87: The Darjeeling Limited (The Royal Tenenbaums) |
| 63: Smoke Signals | 88: The Mission |
| 64: The Apu Trilogy | 89: The Game |
| 65: The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada | 90: The Remains of the Day |
| 66: Selma | 91: Koyaanisqatsi |
| 67: Being There | 92: Two Days, One Night |
| 68: 2001: A Space Odyssey | 93: Make Way for Tomorrow |
| 69: Unforgiven | 94: The Great Dictator |
| 70: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind | 95: Tootsie |
| 71: Rabbit Proof Fence | 96: The Burmese Harp |
| 72: Network | 97: Caché |
| 73: A Separation (The Past) | 98: Au Hasard Balthazar |
| 74: Crimes and Misdemeanors (Annie Hall) | 99: The Straight Story |
| 75: Whale Rider | 100: Smoke |



NEW BOOK: The Deep Gladness of Effective Altruism

*Peter Singer's The Most Good You Can Do, considered by
Jasmin Morrell*

When I was a teenager, my parents decided to switch up our Sunday morning church-going routine. Convicted by the idea that we needed to be more actively engaged in serving others, we left our quietly comfortable church in the suburbs and began attending church in inner-city Atlanta. In this barely renovated warehouse that was our new church, the ceiling leaked when it rained, and buckets were placed on the ground in an attempt to catch the water. But nevertheless, puddles bloomed on the concrete floor, and I was always careful to watch where I walked.

A large piece of the church's mission was outreach to the local community, and a meal was served after the worship service and sermon. Many people from the neighborhood, some experiencing homelessness, wandered in, waiting for food. As the aroma of steamed vegetables and fried chicken filled the room, the atmosphere would occasionally grow hostile whenever the pastor spent longer than usual in passionate appeals to save people from sin and bring them to faith. The message was clear: You were not welcome to eat unless you listened first.

The pastor was a man with a fiery desire to bring hope and healing to the community. He believed he was doing the most good he could do. My parents believed that we were doing the most good we could do by supporting this ministry, both financially and through the work of our hands. But there wasn't much that felt good to me about it, despite everyone's best and wholehearted intentions.

In his recent book *The Most Good You Can Do*, the philosopher Peter Singer makes a bold claim about how to live ethically as an "effective altruist": Earning money in order to give a majority of it away is a powerful way to effect change in the world and to live in true alignment with one's altruistic ideals. If you believe it is within your power to save a life, and you could do so by financially supporting an organization that is quantifiably saving lives, then adopting a mindset of earning to give is quite possibly the highest use of your time and energy.

Consider contrasting, perhaps even clichéd, images of an investment banker and Mother Teresa. No doubt the picture of one feels more magnanimously *good* than the other. Is it truly moral to turn oneself into a capital-making machine for a far-away greater good? If you choose to become a banker in order to donate half of your income to charity, is there something lost by the distance between you and those you seek to help? And on the other side of the equation, is it truly effective to be hands-on engaged and risk the almost inevitable burnout that follows after years of such service work?

I have no easy answers to these questions. I suspect, though, that an integration of these extremes would lead to a fulfilling and satisfying life, a life that effectively and positively impacts others, a life that is a true wave of goodness in the world.

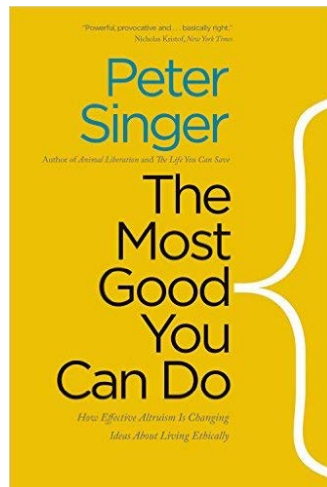
My family didn't last long at that church in Atlanta. Though I don't know if I ever really knew my parents' motivation for leaving, I suspect it had

something to do with the fact that we were never able to foster relationships and community there. Though a church is, by definition, a place of sanctuary, I never felt particularly safe there. We served ladles full of spaghetti to the nameless poor, but it was easy to fear those whose stories we did not take the time to know. And perhaps, easier for someone who felt fed, but not seen or loved, to threaten and harass those that held places of religious and economic privilege.

The case could be made that this was not a good scenario for anyone, and would not qualify as effective altruism. Yes, whoever came in walked away with a free, warm meal, and those of us serving felt the free warmth that comes along with giving. But we also participated in perpetuating a system that is dangerously dehumanizing and worked against building the better world we hoped for. When my family finally left the church, I was relieved to never have to sit in the damp, dimly-lit warehouse again, facing bodies which held my unknown fears and suspicions. I told myself that I couldn't be with people experiencing homelessness anymore, and I certainly would not be in the business of saving souls.

And as it so happened, years later, I found myself working at a Community Engagement Center in the city of Raleigh, North Carolina, whose primary mission is to be a safe space for people experiencing homelessness. No one was coerced into hearing a sermon before they could have a meal, though a chapel service was offered for those who wanted it. We knew each others' names and hugged like old friends. And though disagreements happened from time to time, it was more akin to a family arguing because they knew too much about each other, instead of strangers caught in a web of suspicion. On my first day of work there, a community member offered me a snack from his backpack because he saw that I'd forgotten to bring one. I saved my tears inspired by his generosity for later. This was a much better environment to be sure.

I question whether or not Singer would recommend this local, relatively-small charity as an organization that would give hopeful effective altruists the most "bang for their buck." I also wonder if he'd say that the work done there is as valuable as the Against Malaria Foundation which gives families in sub-Saharan Africa life-saving mosquito nets to ward away malaria. The Against Malaria Foundation dramatically reduces the likelihood of contracting a preventable deadly illness. I might argue that both organizations are saving lives, though one is doing it through creating and maintaining relationships, which changes lives but often not in clearly measurable ways. Sometimes, the ripple effect of goodness remains invisible to the naked eye – mysterious, and buried like a seed.



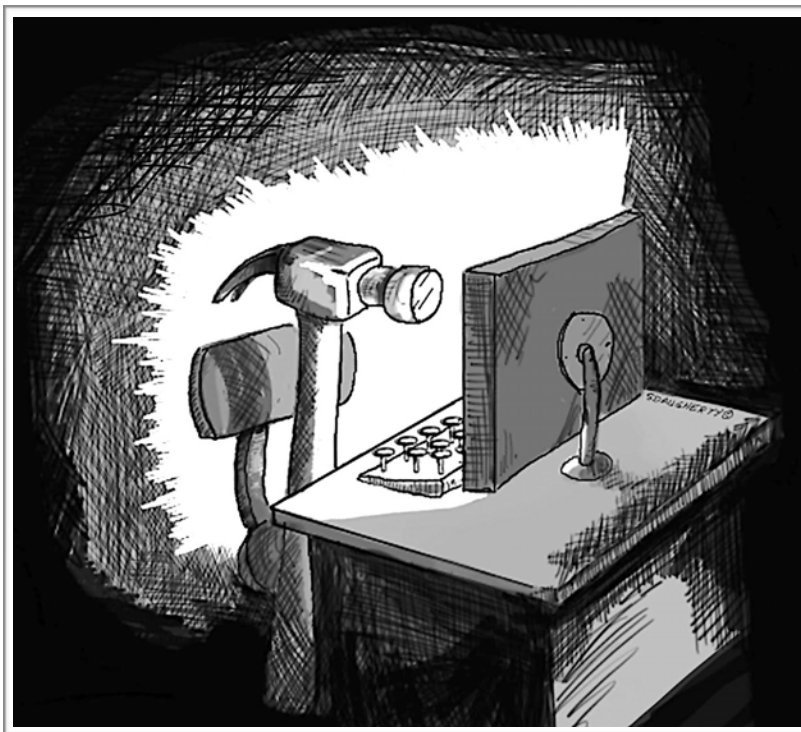
Would I have been better off working instead for a corporation, which might've allowed me the income to give enough to guarantee the Engagement Center's doors remain open for years to come? Or, despite the amount I earned, would it still be possible for me to budget enough money to send thousands of malaria-fighting nets to families in developing countries while *also* maintaining relationships with people in my own country experiencing extreme poverty and homelessness?

Singer ends with this remark: "If we have a clear understanding of what we can do to reduce some existential risks but not others, it may be better to focus on those risks about which we do have an understanding..."(176).

What better understanding can we have than, in the words of Frederick Buechner, our own deep gladness? We tend to investigate and pursue those things that bring us deep gladness, giving ourselves a healthy sort of internal education. And when we act from the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger, we can't help but practice a better way of living and being and breathing on this planet of ours. We can't help doing the most good we can do.

“We did not ask for this room or this music. We were invited in. Therefore, because the dark surrounds us, let us turn our faces to the light. Let us endure hardship to be grateful for plenty. We have been given pain to be astounded by joy. We have been given life to deny death. We did not ask for this room or this music. But because we are here, let us dance.”

–Stephen King





CLASSIC BOOK: *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self Recovery* by bell hooks

- Micky ScottBey Jones

This book saved my life.

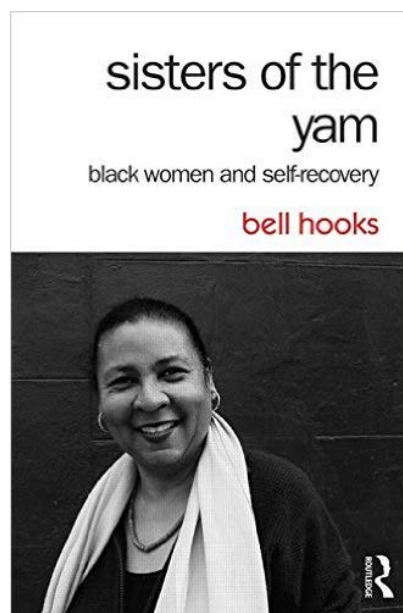
I am not in any way exaggerating. This book saved my life. I was in seminary. I was taking a class about trauma and grace and the book we read that was supposed to facilitate our exploration of trauma - especially the trauma of sexual violence - felt like it was traumatizing me as I read it. I love to read. I love to gather information. I will even sift through an okay book to find the gems packed inside mediocrity. But this book? It was just full of so much psychological ickiness (how's that for a fancy seminary term?) that I could barely steady myself to read the required chapters each week.

It became a regular way of coping to chat online with fellow students - sharing frustrations about the book and the wounds being opened by the course topic in general. And then a classmate, a white guy (that's important to the story), asked if I'd read bell hooks' classic work: *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-recovery*. My classmate knew I was a bell hooks fan but as I revealed to him, I had not yet read that book. If he was shocked, he didn't show it. Mercifully, he did not attempt to snatch my Black card for not being familiar with this work from hooks - one of the most well-known Black feminist authors and public intellectuals known for her sharp tongue and generously distributed critique of culture, education, and white supremacy.

At first, I was skeptical. I mean, I knew it would be a good book - I have yet to read a hooks book that I

even deemed just alright—Mama bell never fails to deliver wisdom with a side of right-between-the-eyes—but what could this white guy know about evaluating a book on Black women, our emotions, and healing?

I ordered the book. It was the classics edition: Dark purple cover with ebony letters and a picture of a Black woman with her back to me, pouring water from a pitcher and a jug. At less than two hundred pages, I was more likely to read the whole thing than most of the books on my shelves.



Devoured. I didn't read it; I devoured that book. I don't mean that I rushed through it frantically - no - I feasted, chewing on the chapters hungrily and swallowing what I could a little at a time. I tasted the words as I underlined passages that turned into pages and flagged pages in nearly every chapter. Each chapter explores different ways in which Black women can explore healing from learning to love our bodies, the earth, meaningful work, and more. The reader is encouraged to explore the relationships that shaped them in childhood and the relationships that currently impact their lives. As I read hooks' theories and experiences of the personal and collective emotional and relational healing of Black women as key to liberation and political resistance, I began to realize my calling as a healer isn't simply auxiliary to justice movement work - it is essential. Reading *Sisters of the Yam* felt so different from how reading the assigned book had made me feel. The concepts hooks offered nourished me. It was as if I had been fasting and cold clean water and juicy, fresh fruits and vegetables had just been set before me. I am always reading *Sisters of the Yam*. I carry it with me to my office. I re-read it when I travel. I refer to it when writing or developing events and programs. When I read that "Black female self-recovery, like all black self-recovery, is an expression of a liberatory political practice," my personal struggle for individual and communal healing was affirmed. My growing realization that I hadn't stopped doula-ing when I stopped attending births made sense as I saw myself in the pages. Yes, I wanted healing - I had and continue to have my own healing work to do as part of my resistance to empire and oppression. I also have gifts to give as a doula, a space holder, a spiritual worker in the ancestral line of Black women healers who choose, encourage, and facilitate wellness as a part of a political resistance that is just and healing.

Superheroes...villains...cultures...nations...religions...you...and me....we all have one thing in common: origin stories. Actually, we often have more than one - we are given the stories that root us in a particular culture, nation, religion, and family. I'm less and less interested in the time and place a people group or religion began, even though some people use origin stories for that type of data. I'm much more interested in the messages within our origin stories - what they tell us about who and why we are.

In chapter six, hooks offers an origin story she made up for a little brown girl - a girl like the one who lives inside of me. The one who still needs a reminder of who and why I am. In her story, the world emerges from "a thick blanket of darkness" that is warm and loving and filled with touch that reached out to hold those who were lost. It is a place to return to when feeling is lost. As a woman with skin labeled Black - associated with darkness, which in turn is labeled badness - a label I embrace and others reject - it is powerful to embrace an origin story of a beautiful, dark loving place. This is the place where my skin and soul was born. It is a story that reminds me of who and why I am. I am a child of that "beautiful dark space before time" and my life extends the warmth, beauty, and embrace of that place out into the world. It isn't that I am Black but still somehow useful to the world. I am Black - and carry all the pain, sorrow, resilience, courage, and ingenuity that entails. To embrace this is to inhabit exactly the place from which many of the spiritual gifts I have to share with the world bloom forth.

On some days, it is that story, that reminder of where I really come from, that saves me again. And any book that saves my life over and over again, has my love.



NEW MUSIC: *Singing Saw* - Kevin Morby's third album, wondered about by Lyndsay Dyk

*I sing who is my creator
Not my mother,
Nor my father
But before the universe burst wide on open*

- Kevin Morby, "Water"



Anxiety has a great appetite for your attention. When it visits, it asks for everything. Future dreams, intimacy with your partner, the dishes in the sink; all of these become obscured, perhaps impossible to see, behind anxiety's demands. By the time I came to understand that I had a problem, anxiety was already deeply submerged underneath what felt like water. To cope and keep my head just above the deluge, I became a very good swimmer.

There is a flight path that goes right over Seattle, where I lived at the time. At night I would listen to the long boom of passenger jets streaming over my head, unable to sleep or work because I was frozen in a terror that This Was The End. The best way I can explain it now is that after a long childhood diet of American Exceptionalism and a Christian practice of the Golden Rule, I began to uncover stories that took those two paradigms and set them up in arms against each other. Hiroshima, seen through Yasuko's eyes in Shohei Imamura's film *Black Rain*; a ship named *St. Louis*, full of Jewish refugees and turned away at Miami in 1939, sent back to Nazi-occupied

Europe; the birth of drones and their indiscriminate bombings of Iraqi civilian centers; these were the violent failings of a country that was supposed to keep me safe. Safe from what, I was left to ask, and did I deserve this safety at the cost of others? The law of reciprocity, a tenet at the core of many religions, followed to its logical conclusion, told me no. Anxiety, happy to have a realized home, whispered this in my ear every night. It materialized in the form of some 1950s Americana nightmare; the sound of jet engines ringing in the atomic obliteration of Seattle, and the end of my little life.

So what do you do, when your body and mind are all locked up in their own terminal set of laws? I think, sometimes, that musicians know the answer. Kevin Morby, an artist whose third studio album, *Singing Saw*, came out in April of 2016, knows of life interrupted by anxiety. His father, a General Motors company man, moved the family around the Midwestern states until landing in Kansas City, where they stayed for most of Morby's teenage years. He talks about finding there a brimming punk scene, veganism, and Bob Dylan. But anxiety was in Kansas too. From fifteen to seventeen years old, according to his interview with *Vogue*, he was haunted by panic attacks. He was hospitalized and put on pills. At eighteen he left Kansas City with a GED and an impulse to be in Dylan's New York.

Ten years later, he recorded *Singing Saw*. After listening to it on repeat all year, I still wasn't quite sure why I was so drawn to it. With so much compelling new music out in 2016, why was this the album I kept on my phone and in my car? The album itself feels like a mix of things. *Singing Saw* moves along like a soundtrack to an acid western, and though it is not a concept album, it feels narrative, like reading a book. It is not political, but there is a message:

*Have you heard my guitar singing?
As it rises from the earth
And the company it's bringing
Is beautiful and nothing worse*

*Have you heard the schoolyards singing?
I swear they're calling out your name
And beauty is something that's fleeting
It comes to touch, never to claim*

Each song displays Morby's keen understanding of the history behind American music's rag-tag cast of instruments. All our favorite characters are here: the sound of violins, growing and dying behind the chorus, the trumpets, with their happy/sad call, the Bacchanalian piano. And of course, the singing saw—its two-sided face glowing "Up the hill, / past the houses." When reasons and systems fail us, when we hit the rock on the bottom, when we are exhausted, the sounds of these entities are often the ones who find us first, and remind us we are still alive. "Stay with us, stay awake," is the antidote's whispered voice. If you think about it, I know there is an aching guitar solo, or a chorus of angel-voiced singers, who reached you in a time of great need.

Morby doesn't showcase suffering as an answer, and I don't believe that great music can only come out of great pain, or sleepless nights obscured by death-ringed panic attacks. But it is in the breakdown of heuristics that no longer work, and in the reclaiming of the attention stolen from us by insurgent anxiety (or depression, rage, grief, etc.) that art and presence is made possible.

Using his best tools, the sounds of those who went before him (I think of the Dylan of *Blonde on Blonde* and Nina Simone's *Forbidden Fruit*), Morby's *Singing Saw* works to make visible a person's journey towards presence. It's put most plainly in the final song, "Water"—the poetic zenith of the album. His measured cadence sprawls over lyrics that have Whitman's hope and Auden's enigmatic mourning. At the opening, the singer endures a panic attack of epic proportions, somewhere between waking and sleeping. His response to the terror is to "pick his body up, and aim for home." As he walks, he sings:

*But these boots have seen better
Can't make sense of this weather
Rolling over me, up in the sky
But I was warm like a fire*

*For I was full of desire to hold on, to not let go
Thought of friends, thought of family
And all who surround me
Those enemies I danced with, so long ago
Let them know*

*If you find water, please call my name
Put me out like a fire, cover me in rain*

We can't stop anxiety from rolling in, no more than we can prevent, with all our human advancements, the weather. We can learn, however, to prepare for the storms, and watch them come in across the plains. When my anxiety haunted me at its worst, it followed me out of the night and into the day. Anytime I became quiet, in a church service, at a poetry reading, in a Shakespeare class, I would hear a jet engine and feel paralyzed. When I despaired, when I thought maybe it was too late for me—that I would never be able to break the voice that spoke to me only of obliteration, I got a therapist.

After a few sessions she told me that, perhaps, this paralyzing fear, this demand on all my attention, was a last resistance to my deep, deep desire to be alive, to be here, to be awake to myself and to the world. I was reminded of Wendell Berry's words in *How to be a Poet*: "There are no unsacred places; / there are only sacred places / and desecrated places." Everything, then, is part of some kind of whole. If you desire to see it, you need to adjust your vision. Morby moved to LA and made an album about the city, but what he saw was the mountains, rain clouds, black flowers in a garden. When I began opening up my own sight, fear and anxiety pressed me back into a corner. The thing with vision, however, is that you cannot own what you see. You do not control the thing you hear. You are only a witness. With this in mind, my goal became not safety, nor reciprocity, but to see life as clearly as possible, though I knew, many times, I would fail. Presence is the act of trying.

I am further along on the journey now, and I sleep most nights. I still get the storms, though, and I watch them come in. Singing Saw reminds me that I am not the only sentinel at the gate.

*Thought of stars and the planets
Wondered how they could have planned this
And what were they thinking
How could they have known?
I felt small but full of pride
I felt tall for my size
My eyes were black and fixed on the night*



OLD MUSIC, GOOD MUSIC, TRUE MUSIC
I STRUGGLED WITH SOME DEMONS

Barry Taylor

"I struggled with some demons/they were middle class and lame."

All hail, the poet theologian Leonard Cohen. The musical canons of many artists are closing, they will give us no more songs, they will sing us no more melodies, they will tell us no more tales. What we hold of them now is their disembodied voices.

All hail Leonard Cohen who wrote eighty verses for *hallelujah*, dressed in his underwear banging his head on a hotel floor

All hail Leonard Cohen whose songs wrap around you like a cloak that hides you in the dark recesses of their melodies

All hail Leonard Cohen who spent years sitting in silence in a Buddhist retreat center yet never considered himself a religious person

All hail Leonard Cohen who sings songs of things too deep to be spoken of

All hail Leonard Cohen the godfather of gloom, the grocer of despair

All hail Leonard Cohen who started a music career aged 32

All hail Leonard Cohen whose credo was *there is a crack in everything, thats how the light gets in*

All hail Leonard Cohen he knew about life and if you listened you could learn

All hail Leonard Cohen who declared that the perfect and the broken hallelujahs have equal value

All hail Leonard Cohen whose demons are like mine: middle class and lame

All hail Leonard Cohen.

The Cannon

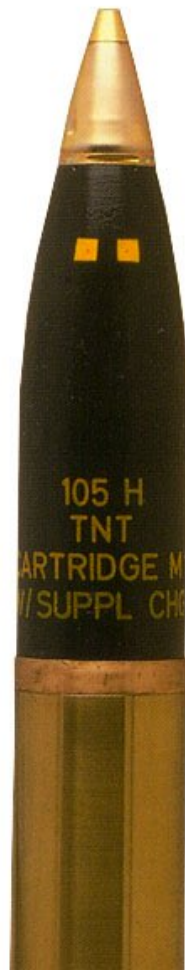
There is a cannon now in the park
on the corner of Main Street and Greenville Street
where the nativity scene used to go.
A howitzer from the Korean War and probably Vietnam as well,
dull army green, the barrel now filled with concrete
pointing downtown toward The Grade Café.

At Christmas the nativity scene is put up in the park across the street.
You can see it if you look to the left past the swing sets.

The veterans put up the cannon so we would remember the men and women in the service who died for our country.

The crèche is there, I guess, so we'll remember the birth of Christ, who came to bring us peace.

-Ben Coonrod





CELIA ALARIO



BEN COONROD



MARCELLE CLOWES



STEVE DAUGHERTY



LYNDSAY DYK



MONA HAYDAR



GARETH HIGGINS



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CHRISTINA LEE



TERESA PASQUALE MATEUS



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JASMIN PITTMAN MORRELL



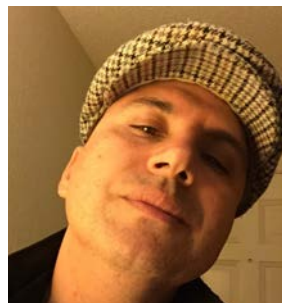
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