



THE PORCH

ISSUE 17

A slow conversation about beautiful and difficult things

Welcome to The Porch

We're glad you're here.

We're having a slow conversation about beautiful, and difficult things.

We believe that because oppositional energy always recreates itself, that the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.

So we try to think about what we might build, more than how to destroy, what we might imagine, more than what we want to disappear, how we might each step into co-creating the world we want to see, right here, right now, imperfectly playing a part in the imperfect whole.

We don't deny the suffering, nor the anxiety, nor the sheer scale of the task of overcoming an old story of separation, selfishness, and scapegoating.

But we're also seeking a proportionate measure of what it is to be alive today. To be able to see the wisdom of the past, and live from it. To hold lightly to the resources we've received, and serve the common good from there.

To get clear about the resources we lack, and ask for help from there.

Three years into this lovely experiment we call *The Porch*, we feel like we're just getting started - but it's not a race, or a competition. *The Porch* is a place, and a path, and an invitation.

Thank you for saying Yes.

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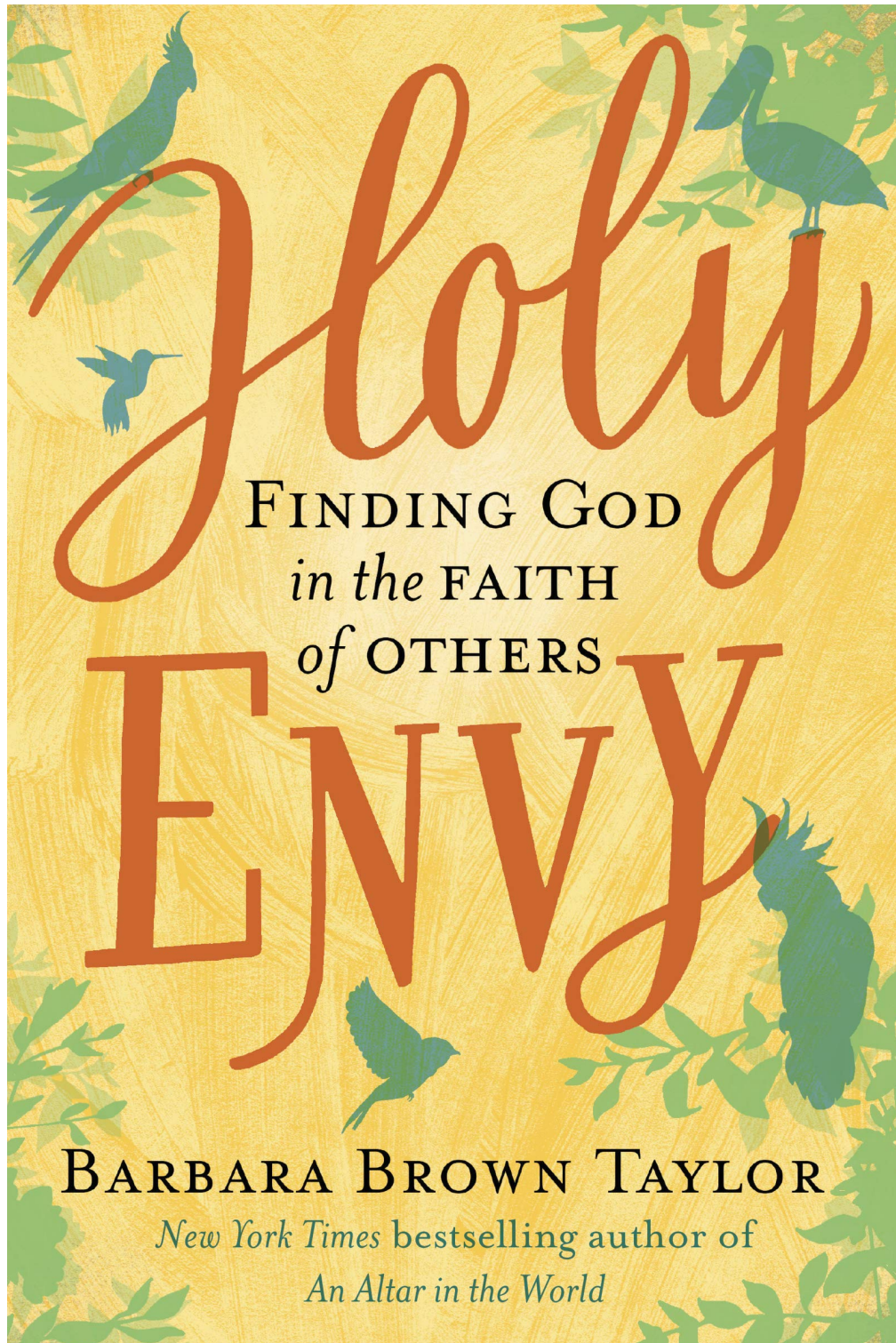
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Holy Envy - Reviewed by Carl McColman



It's such a well-worn story that you don't have to look very hard to find lots of bad news in the name of religion. At the time of writing a cursory stroll through Google revealed these headlines:

- *"Ethnic and Religious Violence Surges in Sri Lanka"*
- *"Clergy and Religious Among Catholic Dead in African Violence"*
- *"Indonesia's Election Exposes Growing Religious Divide"*
- *"Blocking of Mosque Reveals Religious Intolerance"*

In addition to the new headlines that appear every day or week or so, there are the "legendary" stories that never seem to go away. Stories about entrenched forms of religious hostility — from Northern Ireland during the Troubles, to the ongoing hostility between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, and of course the long shadow of the Holocaust, a crime against humanity driven as much by religious intolerance as by ethnic or cultural hatred.

Even when the stories don't involve violence, there still seems to be plenty of bad news: how religious fundamentalism can create hostile environments that are unsafe for LGBTQ+ people, or women, or members of minority faiths, for example. Or how authoritarian and charismatic religious leaders too often seem to become implicated in scandals involving financial malfeasance or sexual impropriety. Is it any wonder that more and more people — especially younger adults — opt to disaffiliate with religion altogether? When the Pew Research Center conducted a study of changing religious identities in the United States, was anyone really surprised to find out that "Spiritual But Not Religious" marked one of the fastest growing ways that people identify their spirituality — with "None" also showing robust gains?

So is there good news about religion anymore?

It might be helpful to consider that the stories about religion that create national or international headlines often are by no means the full story. I remember attending an Iftar Dinner where the conversation turned to the frustration my friends felt over how few stories presenting Islam in a positive light ever seemed to make the national news. What's ironic is that I know many Christians who feel the same way — that only the shadow side of their faith ever seems to get any oxygen.

Such perceptions are subjective, of course, but it's not hard to get a sense of how our perception of things might get skewed by our appetite for controversy and conflict. If a Christian fanatic threatens to burn a copy of the Qur'an, everyone hears about it. Meanwhile, when Christians and Muslims reach out to one another in neighborhoods all across the nation to work together to make neighborhoods safer, no one pays it much mind.

We seem to need several new stories — or, should I say, we seem to need to do a better job at telling the already existing stories that connect the dots between faith, tolerance, and hope. With this in mind, I am so thrilled to see Barbara Brown Taylor's latest book, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, hit the bestseller chart on both Amazon and the New York Times. Not only in this book an eloquent call for religious tolerance and understanding, at the same time it makes the case that one of the best ways to foster religious tolerance is by practicing one's own faith with integrity and conviction.

Forget the fundamentalists of all religious persuasions, who insist that their way is the only way. But rejecting all religion as mere superstition or tribalistic thinking doesn't help matters either (among other things, if all liberal-minded people abandon religion, the fundamentalists and chauvinists are the only ones left to speak in the name of God — a role they happily embrace). Taylor is careful never to criticize those who choose to be spiritual but not religious — in fact, she expresses a real sense of understanding for why people make that choice — but she makes her own compelling argument for how the solution to religious intolerance and violence needs to be a spiritual solution — anchored in the religions rather than at odds with them.

Taylor is an Episcopal priest who became nationally known when in 1996 Baylor University named her one of the most effective living preachers in the English-speaking world. At the time she was the rector of a small Episcopal Church in rural Georgia, but she left that position to become a religion professor at a small private college. It was in this role as a professor — of world religions — that she found the voice she would use to write *Holy Envy*. It is the story of how she approached the study of world religions, often navigating the resistance that her more conservative students displayed toward anything other than evangelical Christianity — while, at the same time, learning about all her own blind spots and subconscious biases when it came to religions other than her own.

Taylor recognizes that perhaps the best way to teach world religions is to allow her students to encounter actual practitioners of other faiths, along with their places of worship. Since her school was located within an easy driving distance to Atlanta, she soon made connections with mosques, syn-

agogues, Hindu temples, and Buddhist centers where she could bring her students to learn, to listen, to ask questions, and to explore entirely new ways of experiencing religion — and spirituality — beyond what they may have known before. Since most of her students were white Americans from either Christian or secular homes, these spiritual “field trips” became a significant part of the student’s learning experience. But Taylor soon realized she was doing a lot of learning herself.

The book’s title comes from a term coined by the Biblical scholar (and Lutheran bishop) Krister Stendahl, who worked to defuse hostility between Lutherans and Mormons in Sweden when the Latter-Day Saints built a temple in Stockholm. Taylor describes his actions like this:

Stendahl aimed to defuse tension by proposing three rules of religious understanding, which have by now made the rounds more often than any of his scholarly work on the apostle Paul. Here is the most common version of what he said:

- *When trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.*
- *Don’t compare your best to their worst.*
- *Leave room for holy envy. (p. 65)*

She goes on to admit, “No one is positive what he meant by number three,” but she shares her own sense of what “holy envy” might be: the experience that a person might have when they discover something about a faith, other than their own, that they find particularly attractive or appealing — especially when that same quality seems to be absent or under-represented in their own faith.

A few examples of how this might play out: a Methodist might feel a sense of holy envy toward a Buddhist who uses meditation to cultivate a serene and peaceful life; a Baptist might experience holy envy when considering the strong commitment to social justice that characterizes Unitarian Universalism; or a Catholic might feel a bit envious at how committed his Muslim friends are at praying multiple times every day.

I know the last one, for it is a holy envy I myself have felt. And I suspect there are many other ways that people — of all faiths, not just Christianity — might feel drawn to, or appreciative of, religious traditions other than their own.

Taylor spoke with a number of her students to get permission to tell their stories in the book. Unless the student explicitly gave her permission to do so, she protects their identity by using pseudonyms and/or combining the details of multiple students into a composite “character” in her book. She is careful to show how students often had differing experiences of the study of world religions. Yes, some had that sense of holy envy — but others could never get over the idea that any religion outside of their own was just wrong, and its adherents needed conversion, not dialogue. Clearly, the study of religion is a messy business, and everyone can only embrace it according to their own values and perspective.

Still, the book is filled with inspiring stories of how the students — and their professor — discovered that, in learning more about the religions of the world, they found their experience of their “home” faith changing and growing as well. Perhaps nothing brought this home more forcefully than

the segment on Christianity — when Taylor invited her mostly-Christian students to try to see their own faith through the eyes of others.

Taylor acknowledges that holy envy can, for some, lead to a desire to change religions, or to adopt a religionless spirituality where one can cobble together one's beliefs, cafeteria-style. But in the end she acknowledges that neither of those options appealed to her as much as simply letting the study of, and encounter with, other faiths help her to deepen her faith and practice as a Christian. And that, it seems to me, is the real treasure hidden at the heart of this wonderful book. But not just for Christians. Whatever faith we may hold — if we can open our hearts to learning about other religions, other faiths and practices, we can find in that learning process, paradoxically, an invitation to move more deeply into our faithfulness to our own spiritual path. This deepening is a process, and Taylor warns that an honest exploration of world religions will not leave your own faith untransformed.

Envy, after all, is a challenging emotion, with its own capacity for lurking in the shadows of our heart. Envy in relationships can lead to bitterness or unhealthy competition, at its worst, it can fuel unloving behavior (toward oneself or toward the object of our envy). I've encountered at least one person who found the title of Taylor's book to be disturbing. How can *envy* — which is, after all, one of the seven deadly sins of Christianity — ever be thought of as *holy*?

Part of what makes Taylor's writing so compelling is her commitment to telling the truth and to exploring nooks and crannies of the spiritual life that other, less intrepid authors, might leave untouched. She recognizes that there really is something holy in the recognition that somebody else's

faith might just have something that one's own faith lacks. For those who perhaps have never deeply examined their own faith, this insight might seem explosive, perhaps even dangerous. But for those who are willing to follow the golden thread wherever it might lead, holy envy can take us to a place of truly profound appreciation — not only for the gifts we find in the “other” faith but also for a renewed appreciation of our own faith, even if that deeper insight also includes a more honest assessment of how our religion — like all faiths — has its own limitations.

A while back, I heard Cynthia Bourgeault lead a retreat for a group of centering prayer practitioners in Alabama. 9/11 had happened only a few years earlier; Bourgeault brought it up, and suggested that contemplation is the only real antidote to religious violence. I am in broad agreement with her, in that I think a contemplative approach to faith and spirituality — contemplation being a roughly equivalent word for “mindful” — is perhaps essential for creative interfaith and interspiritual encounters. But we need to be more than *just* contemplative or mindful — we need to step into the messy unpredictability of real relationships with real people whose faith and spirituality is not like our own. This requires trust and vulnerability — spiritual values, to be sure. But if we, collectively, can enter into these kinds of honest encounters, perhaps there will be benefits far beyond our own individual growth.

Taylor quotes the British rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who says “The greatest single antidote to violence is conversation... speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in that sharing of vulnerabilities discovering a genesis of hope.” I think he's right. We will never legislate away religious violence. But we can inoculate ourselves — and our societies — against it, if

we only are willing to risk telling a new story — that begins with friendship and love.

A World of Better Choices - Elisabeth Ivey

“Home is wherever I am,” my mom likes to say. She means to reassure me, telling me I can always return to her, though I’m now a young adult and eager to prove my independence. Besides, I want to tell her, home is not just made up of people, though the author Robin Hobb may disagree. In her book *Fool’s Fate*, she writes, “Home is people. Not a place. If you go back there after the people are gone, then all you can see is what is not there any more.” And if not people, James Baldwin muses that “Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.” We utter platitudes like “home is where the heart is,” and maybe it’s true that we can sprinkle parts of our hearts through the world as we go, but I’m not convinced that’s all there is to it.

Abstractions about home cannot account for what happens when the ground beneath our feet starts shifting, when no amount of burrowing into the safety of each other or our minds can negate the fact that we have bodies that will always put us in contact with the material world. “The Trinity is known as the Godhead,” writes Terry Tempest Williams, “But where is the Motherbody?” In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, her memoir recounting the simultaneous deterioration of her mother’s health and the landscape of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, Williams dwells in the earth and the body. She lovingly applies attention to the specificity of hundreds of birds and the land with which she shares an intimate connection. And through each moment of loss, she does not recede into the sanctuary of the mind but turns outward to the Great Salt Lake, calling it “My refuge.”

In 2018, while working for the Center for Public Humanities at Messiah College and helping with preparations for a symposium centered on

this theme, [I called home](#) “the ambiguous and emotional concept [that] doesn’t exist merely as the immediate walls that provide shelter but as the land that sprawls beneath us, the people that surround us, the language that runs through us.” Home is holistic, indivisible. It ceases to be itself when split into fragments. Presumably, we can make home wherever we are and with whatever people we’re surrounded by, but there comes a point when not even the most creative resourcefulness can make a home from the patchwork given, nor salvage the home that’s left behind. If home is the full embodiment of people, place, and self, it becomes fractured with the subtraction of even one of those components.

There are many ways to lose a home. Transition. Foreclosure. War. Hope - that what lies ahead will be better than what chases from behind. And because home is not just a physical entity, we can lose home even within ourselves. In her oft-quoted poem, [“Home,”](#) Warsan Shire writes: “no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark”

How can one make home from the cement floor and the impossible choice to use your one blanket either for warmth or as a cushion?

How can one make home in the sea of faces as young as your own, left to care for each other though none of you are old enough to care for yourselves?¹

At the Southern border of the United States, families have become fragments as [“hundreds of immigrant children who have been separated from their parents or family members are being held in dirty, neglectful,](#)

¹ Chotiner, Isaac. “Inside a Texas Building Where the Government Is Holding Immigrant Children.”

[and dangerous condition.](#)² In isolation and detention, these people cannot find refuge. They cannot find home.

“And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’” Luke 9:58

I wonder if Jesus noticed the pattern. I wonder if he recalled stories of his birth, perhaps told by his mother, about how they could find no refuge among people when the time came for him to enter the world. I wonder if he remembered his father speaking of the dream that warned him to take his family to Egypt to escape a ruler who was threatened by the idea that a toddler could grow up to overthrow him. I wonder if Jesus foresaw the moment when he’d be torn from his mother’s side and hoisted upon a tree, able to see her but unable to rest his head against her shoulder. Or, I wonder if he looked ahead even further, to the many times he’d relive this story of a child with no home.

Before They Knew My Name

Before I huddled with my brother
on the endless gray cement, trying
to ignore the itch - little bugs, he said,
crawling through our strands of hair, trying
to find a home like we were - before
I wondered if these creatures missed
their parents too or just wanted to use
my hair for warmth - I would let them cause
I was cold too - before the guards yelled at us
for losing the yellow comb, I could almost
remember Mamá’s face and her hand push back

² Chotiner, Isaac. “Inside a Texas Building Where the Government Is Holding Immigrant Children.”

my hair before leaning in to kiss my forehead like
a thousand times before and the thousand times
we thought still lay before us.

Before I slept in piss and darkness,
rocking about with no clear sight of up -
wanting to see the stars that I used to
think I could touch if I just reached up
high enough - before the heavy gray chains
brought my hand back to my side -
pinned in by the sides of my brothers
and sisters who I could not see - before
we entered the light that could not shine
on any good thing but could only show
my mama far from me - and I couldn't
reach far enough - I could almost
remember her arms around me
and the promise that freedom would
never be a question.

Before they turned me away to the shadows
of forgotten places, chasing me with death
by decree, into new country - before they caught
up to me, put me on a tree, I could almost
remember my mama's hand holding mine.
Before I died every death of the forgotten child,
they took me from my mother and my father,
trampled me then turned back up to Heaven

with a plea for mercy on this, what they deemed their god-given land that they soaked with the blood of their God before they knew my name.

We are, each of us, trying to find a home in this world, forgetting to extend hospitality with the space we already have. Instead, we worry that we'll find someone else in the spot we meant to fill. Scarcity warps reality, convincing us that there's not enough room in the inn, not enough food to eat, not enough resources to go around, though family detention is more expensive than alternatives [“that adhere to child welfare principles and maintain family unity.”](#) In a report about family detention, the [Detention Watch Network](#) lays out [several reasons](#) for dismantling this systemic approach to immigration:

1. “Detention runs contrary to our values of basic dignity, due process, and human rights. Detained families are seeking protection from sexual assault, trafficking, and violence; our default should *not* be to put children in prison.
2. Children and families require specialized medical, educational, and legal support, all of which are severely impeded by detention.
3. [Department of Homeland Security] DHS is legally mandated to place families with children in the least restrictive setting possible by the 1997 settlement in *Flores v. Reno*. Family detention violates this settlement and other legal precedents **which demand that the government actively and continuously seek the release of each child in custody.**

4. Family detention is a wasteful use of resources at \$343 per family member per day. During a fiscal crisis, **it is unacceptable to be spending billions of taxpayer dollars to needlessly detain refugee families.**³

But the cost is not just summed up by numbers. The United States has long claimed to be a land of dreams, and though the American Dream often relies on the idea that individuals can carve their own way in the world, in the words of John Lennon, “A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is reality.” Dreams cannot thrive in a place designed to stifle. For children, especially, as the outer world becomes the mouth of a shark, inner peace will also recede to the recesses of a mind still growing. For people who have already “undertaken a dangerous and traumatic journey seeking safety,”⁴ detention then “poses a serious threat to individuals’ psychological health and further aggravates isolation, depression, and mental health problems associated with past trauma.”⁵

There comes a point when not even the most creative resourcefulness can make a home from the patchwork given, nor salvage the home that’s left behind. Perhaps put most simply, these migrant families at the border deserve more than the patchwork they’ve been given. They deserve the safety to find home within themselves, in each other, and in the places - the real and tangible places - where dignity and freedom are not questions.

In *The Winner’s Curse*, Marie Rutkoski tackles the dynamic between an oppressive empire and a conquered nation through the prism of two individuals who love each other, but ultimately find that their love cannot let

³ It’s unclear what year this data was collected.

⁴ [Backgrounder](#), *Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service*.

⁵ [“Family Detention.”](#) *Detention Watch Network*.

them forget their context. In the third installment, *The Winner's Kiss*, they argue about war, about death, and about the choices they've made, and they say this:

"I want better choices."

"Then we must make a world that has them."

Resources for Further Reading

AP News: [Attorneys: Texas border facility is neglecting migrant kids](#)
[Detention](#)

[Detention by the Numbers](#)

[Southwest Border Migration FY 2019](#)

CNBC:

[Want to help migrant children at the border? Here's how to donate](#)

[This is how much it costs to detain an immigrant in the US](#)

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service:

- [LIRS Bears Witness to the Conditions of Country's Largest Detention Center](#)
- [Maintaining Family Values](#)
- [PRESS RELEASE: As One-Year Anniversary of Family Separation Approaches, LIRS Releases Report on How to Address the Humanitarian Crisis at Our Border](#)

Petitions:

[6 Petitions To Protect Migrant Children Being Held At The Border](#)

[MoveOn Petition](#)

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

Bird Chess - Ted Lyddon Hatten

Bird chess is an infinite game.

*It is played for the
purpose of continuing play.*

*This is not international chess -
a finite game pitting two players against one another.*

Bird chess has one rule:

Turns must alternate.

*By consensus among the players, other rules may be added,
amended, or erased.*

Bird chess has no board, no boundaries, no clock.

*There are no requirements or limitations
on what constitutes a turn.*

*It can be played anywhere,
anytime,*

by any number of players.

The game may be paused at anytime.

To watch is to participate, thus there are no spectators.

*Simultaneous games may be merged,
larger games may be cleaved
into smaller ones.*

*The object of the game is to keep the game going,
indefinitely.*

Welcome to bird chess.



Interruptions - Richard Coble

A few years ago, I was in a doctoral seminar, as a second-year PhD student in religion. The thing about being a second year PhD student, is that it means you have survived your first; you've learned the lessons of your first; and, having weathered two semesters of rather daunting work, you think you have something important to say.

I thought I had something important to say.

So I'm sat in this doctoral seminar, on this brilliant spring day, in Nashville, TN, where spring always comes early and beautifully. The sun shone through the windows. It was an unusual setting for me, for us, on this day, because we were actually in a church, not the university. We were visiting a local, white progressive Baptist congregation to learn about their church, to interrogate their ways of being church through the sophisticated theories we were learning.

In the moment, we were already talking about white progressive Christianity and how white progressives often say they would like more diversity in their congregations. One of the pastors of this white progressive church where we were visiting was also a guest professor for this class, because it was being taught by a group of academics and practitioners, and, if I'm remembering this correctly, she had lamented how *white* her community was, and a few of my black classmates had pointed out that this yearning for more diversity was something that they heard over and over from white progressives. And they were asking, who does that wish serve? Would black people really enjoy coming to this white, progressive

church? Would they benefit from it, or rather, was this wish for more diversity, in reality, a wish simply for the benefit of the white people already there, so they don't have to feel guilty for going to their all-white church, so they could pat themselves on the back for going to a diverse church?

Then, one of my black male classmates, a friend of mine, eased some of the tension in the room with this joke: he said that his father had pastored a black church. This was the church that my friend had grown up in, and he said he remembered quite keenly, that, growing up, he and his black parishioners were not always *saying* to themselves, "Man, I wish there were more white people here." To which we all laughed.

I don't know what it was inside of me that made me think, well, Richard, I guess you have something important to add to this discussion, but I was the first to speak after we stopped laughing. And then I said this dumbass, racist thing. I said to my friend – now, keep in mind, to understand this story, you are going to have to remember the fact that I am a white man. I just need to point that out, in case you all haven't already picked that up. So, as a white man, I asked my black friend, "I wonder if class has something to do with these different attitudes about diversity." To which a black woman in the class rightfully responded, "What makes you think his church is low class, because they're black?"

And in response, I just became white and fragile all over the place. I tried to respond. You know, I *could* have responded, "Oh, yeah, you're right, that was a dumb, racist assumption," and I could have thanked my classmate for interrupting my racism and moved on with the class. How I wish that's how I had responded. But if this story is going to be true, I have

to confess to you all that I didn't respond that way. In fact, I didn't respond coherently at all. In fact, what I remember is that I couldn't put two words together for the rest of that hour.

And you know, wouldn't it have been great, if, having been helpfully interrupted, and thinking about it, I had realized that I had some work to do with my white racism, like I still do today, like everyone who is white and reading this has work still to do on our white racism. Wouldn't it have been great if I went home to collect myself and came back the next week having realized I'm not as sophisticated and cool as I thought I was? *Instead*, after that class, I got white and fragile all over again. I argued with my black colleagues and made an ass of myself, trying to twist my words to show that, no, of course, I understood, I was totally down with the black church. So, I argued and argued and argued. Because, after all, I was a second-year doctoral student who had everything figured out, right?

And that's it. There's no happy ending to this story. If there was, if I told you I'm now an enlightened white progressive Christian, a pastor in a white progressive Presbyterian church, who never falls on his face when talking about race, who has arrived to the mountaintop of anti-racism, well, you would know that I was lying to you, or at the very best, that I am deceiving myself, casting myself in an innocent position that makes me feel good.

I will say this, though. On my better days, I'm no longer denying that dumbass, racist things come out of my mouth from time to time, because they do – if you are socialized as white and male, they come out of your mouth too. Most days, well, *some* days, I can admit, how they go through

my head, how they blind me; how the racist frameworks given to me by my family and the news and my classrooms and our country still show up. I don't like it. These experiences don't match with the image I have in my head of myself, as an enlightened progressive, as a Christian, as a pastor.

But, you know, when I ignore them, if I excuse them, then I can't interrupt them. I can't walk beside my own fellow white congregants as they too interrupt their own racism, and sexism, and homophobia.

I initially wrote this story down for a story-telling event on the theme of *interruptions*. When I heard the event's theme, I immediately knew I had to tell this story, but I waited; I procrastinated; I tried to think of any other story to tell. But you know, I don't get interrupted that often, which is a pity, but again, and this is the last time I'm going to remind you all of this – I'm a white dude.

And that means people don't interrupt me as often as they should.

So when I heard that the theme was *interruptions*, I immediately thought of this story. But I didn't know if I should tell you about it, because I wanted you to like me. Because I didn't want to get up here and show you this shadow side, this broken side of me.

The day before that story-telling event, I was working my day job as a Presbyterian minister. I helped lead our congregation through the first Sunday of Lent, which for the Christian calendar is a time of laying things down that get in the way of our relationship to that creative and transformative love that we call God. I recalled that handsome image I have of my-

self, of someone who is blameless, of someone who is innocent and smart. During worship, I realized that I needed to take another step in laying that fictive image down. And so this is my story for today. Thank you for listening to it.

Richard Coble serves Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, NC as their associate pastor.

Your Vision is Your Home - Gareth Higgins

One of the most provocative theories about the inner life comes from the French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose writings on the development of the self are a foundation for questioning unearned authority. Foucault explains the paradox of how fear-inducing authorities taught us how to understand ourselves through a fascinating observation: that humans took a leap forward in defining ourselves through the repetition of confessing our sins to a person to whom we ascribed the very power of God: the priest. Thus we reinforced the notions that what is most important about ourselves is a bunch of things we are ashamed of (or that we have been told we *should* be ashamed of), that to feel ashamed is a “sacrament” and therefore good for us, and that there is a higher power who is more interested in our mistakes than our beauty.

As Leonard Cohen says, everything contains “cracks” for the light to get through, so it’s worth noting that healthy confession (in conversation with an emotionally mature, non-shaming confessor) is indeed good for the soul. Keeping guilt and fear bottled up inside is no good for any of us. There is healing in facing our inner darkness and making amends—and what you think about higher powers depends on how you’re looking at them (compare the vision of Alcoholics Anonymous with that espoused by Al Qaeda, for instance).

But many people experience confession merely as a mental checklist or a superficial game, a kind of spiritual tallying we employ to feel better about ourselves, or because it fits the culture we’re try-

ing to be accepted by. Healthy confession includes the liberation of knowing you're not alone, the opportunity to learn from your mistakes, and the forging of new agreements so you can walk a little taller next time. But unhealthy models of confession, Foucault contends, have created the self as a little shame receptacle, unable to take responsibility for its actions, needing a magician in the sky to pronounce us clean. The lenses through which we identify "sin" or "darkness" derive from the whims of the authorities despite the fact that this means giving away what Simone Weil called our greatest power: the power to say "I."

Given the power we cede to religious and other authorities as our surrogate decision-makers, many of us have inherited shame-filled notions about ourselves, and we have a lot of unlearning to do about when to surrender power and when to take it. Growing up amidst the violence and often repressive religious culture of the north of Ireland/Northern Ireland, confession, for me, was first equated with naming my darkness rather than my light, my shadow rather than my gold. So I still tend to over-read the darkness and curse it rather than noticing the million candles already lit. Some say we become what we pay attention to; for John O'Donohue, "your vision is your home." It's no wonder, then, that when my vision was restricted by the culture of confessing only the darkness, darkness was all I could see. It's no wonder that I thought I was ugly and greeted the concept of innocence with incredulity rather than wonder, a sign of weakness rather than understanding innocence as a sign of the true immensity of what it is to be human. As both beginning *and* destiny.

We all have the experience of an authority figure or institution that we've been afraid of. For some of us, it's one of our parents, whose love for us sometimes became confused and twisted in harsh discipline, or in some cases, whose brokenness had not been tended to, and who acted out their inner darkness on us. For some it is a religious culture which bound us up in ropes, tightly knotted at one end, but ensuring just enough freedom of movement to flagellate ourselves with the other—never good enough, one step from hell, sin and Satan everywhere all the time, even today. For some it is fear that the authorities will break their promises, that we will find ourselves in danger through no fault of our own, but we won't be protected. Some recoil from the very image or idea of God. And that's okay—knowing these things allows you to begin to be gentle with yourself. You perhaps live in a society that has taught itself to repeat lies about everything, highlighting horror and devaluing beauty, making the real unreal and the unreal real. You perhaps grew up in a culture where well-meaning people were still transmitting the dehumanizing legacy of old and broken ideas about original sin and the depravity of children. You perhaps were born into a world full of people trying to get it right, but whose imperfect conclusions gave you a gift: the need to figure things out for yourself. So you get the chance to co-create the next stage of human evolution, rather than parroting the mistakes of the past.

What co-creation looks like, of course, is up to you. It can be no other way. Fear of external authorities can only be transcended by the

human being taking authority for herself. Imagination, in the end, may be the only thing that cannot be held prisoner except with the prisoner's consent. The bittersweet opportunity for you, for me, for everyone we know, is to recognize we are our own jailers. And from your jail, where you shackle yourself to a vision of the world that ascribes power only to invisible spiritual forces that can create wars, poverty, political oppression, and the DMV, the amazing gift is that no one holds the key to your prison but you. You can take steps to free yourself by nurturing the authoritative voice within. Consider this:

If you lack mercy for yourself, be more merciful to others. Do it for long enough and you will start to forgive yourself.

If you are a harsh critic, consider offering yourself feedback by first identifying what you think you did well and then identifying one suggestion for a better way to do it next time—without even mentioning what you think you did badly.

If your community tends to curse the darkness before lighting candles, consider that you might be the one who can buy the candles.

If you have given power over your own life to external authorities, try to retrace the journey that led you there and take back one piece of power at a time.

And if you need help, start to ask for it.

Some parts of our culture, especially the political parts, teach us that asking for help is a sign of weakness. And so we find ourselves in a further bind; needing help becomes another source of fear. We fear we will look incapable or be shamed. In fact, so much violence proceeds from a single source of someone needing help, but feeling unable to ask for it. (The three largest genocides of the twentieth century proceed from the inner brokenness of just three individuals: Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Pol Pot. Imagine a world in which any of them had learned to ask for help to discern what he really needed.)

When I was not long out of college, I needed to borrow money from my dad. I borrowed £1,000—about \$1,600 at the time—and made an agreement that I would pay it back on a certain date. But I couldn't pay it back, and as the day approached, I was weighed down by the fear of telling Dad, as well as the pressure of the story I was telling myself about my financial circumstances. I did not try to do anything about my situation, which is a typical response to the fear trigger—the prehistoric sabre toothed tiger projected by our reptile brains is coming at us, so we freeze and squeeze our eyes tight in the adorably futile hope that not being able to see will somehow make us invisible.

I went over to see Dad on a Saturday morning. He was expecting a repayment. I was expecting D-Day. We sat at opposite ends of

the kitchen table as I told him that not only could I not pay him back today, but that I needed to borrow more money.

Two remarkable things happened that morning. The first was that as my dad told me, tears welling, he did not have any more money in the bank to lend, I took another step toward adulthood. Toward taking authority for myself. He was no longer the invincible god whom I relied upon (and blamed) for everything, but a man, beautiful and vulnerable, just like me. The second was that in the very same moment he embodied the kind of grace, generosity, and tenderness that only authentic authority figures can. After leaving the room for a few minutes to think about what should be done—while I stewed in anxiety in the kitchen—he returned with a smile. A few months prior I had loaned him my bicycle, which I did not like nor use, and which he himself had given me in the first place. It was worth about £80. My dad said he really didn't have any more money he could loan at the time, but he really liked my bike, and if it would be okay with me, he wanted to purchase it. He said he thought it was worth about £1,000, and if that price were acceptable to me, we could just call it even. So we did, an £80 bike and fear going for £1000 and love. It was an enormous gift, a healing moment, which not only took away my anxiety, but saved us both from our shame. Our relationship has never been the same since.

Because shaming, scapegoating, and aggression have become go-to modes of cultural exchange, I think we should declare help-askers the heroes of our time. The very request for help should be an occasion for rejoicing, for another human being is setting themselves

free from the death-dealing oppression that says we are alone and must fend for ourselves. This is the gift of innocence battling with fear of the authorities. For when external authorities seem to threaten, the trick would then be to see this as an opportunity for liberating inner work.

Think about the times that you have experienced debilitating fear.

I'm willing to bet that the thing that you thought was going to happen probably didn't. Or if it did, it wasn't nearly as bad as you expected. Or if it was, that you can at least claim today you are a survivor. The most likely truth is that you were not primarily afraid of the thing itself, but of your ability to cope with the thing if it happened.

Another way of putting this would be to say that you were not so much afraid of the threat, but of yourself. The gift of fearing the authorities is the opportunity to deepen your authority within yourself. And there's a special bonus prize: sometimes the authorities end up healed too.

~

There are kind authority figures in the world: ministers who lay down their lives to lead nonviolent movements for social transformation, flight attendants who return lost iPhones, counselors who extend the session by an hour when clients are in distress, community

group leaders who stay behind to sweep the floor, teachers who forgive instead of punish students' wrongdoing, nurses who nurture, car mechanics who refer customers to a competitor who would do the job cheaper, prison guards who let visiting hours last as long as they need to, judges who refuse to uphold unjust laws, the bishop in *Les Miserables* who buys a man's freedom with candlesticks, and my dad who paid much more than a bike was worth in order to buy me back my dignity. We all get to experience kind authority, perhaps more often than we notice. More importantly, we may not notice how often *we* get to exercise authority in a day. We cannot even get out of bed without authority over our own bodies, and as the day continues, every act we make is an act of authority. In this sense, there is no difference between you and the President. You both have authority over a realm. You both get to choose how to use it. Much has been given to each of us; the realm of human life, "a little lower than the angels," is a significant realm indeed. Some of us have become inhibited from taking authority; some of us struggle to use the authority we have without lording it over others. So we hide or bully; most of us probably do a bit of both. And for both, the path to healing begins in the same place. The invitation is to begin again, and begin again, and begin again, every day, maybe even every hour. Another word for this is *innocence*—which doesn't mean *never having failed*, but something more like the *humble authority of self-knowledge, lived through amends for the past, and the invitation to take one step forward at a time, into the unknown, into wonder*. The best, most whole authorities are the ones who embody power within the range that is appropriate to their responsibility, and who commit to using such power only for the common good. They love their neighbors as themselves. This re-

quires innocence, or a “beginner’s mind”, or whatever term most invites you into the spacious place in which power is exercised in this manner. We humans know this when we see it, because the very same mechanisms that operate in governments and multinational corporations already exist every time an individual human being makes a decision about anything.

All authority figures are relying on your projections, wounds, and gifts for their power. There is a reason great spiritual texts assure us we need not be afraid of those who can, as they say, “kill the body.” That teaching is rooted in the idea that there is a human core that cannot be touched by anyone except the soul that contains it. You can access this through practices as simple as sitting still and thinking for ten minutes. All you need is a body and a place to sit. There are fathomless gifts and mysteries waiting for you to discover them. They constitute the real you, and they will grant you entrance to ever-deepening levels of authority over your own life. And when you befriend the authority within, external authorities will begin to settle into their rightful place—sometimes inconveniences, sometimes challenges, sometimes kindnesses, and always gifts. Because every instance in which you confront an external authority will become an opportunity for you to deepen your own sense of inner power. To experience the gift of self-knowledge, and to settle into the comfort and security of your own innocence. It is there, just waiting for you to ask it to help you notice it.

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The Gift of a Long Marriage - Donald W. Shriver and Peggy L. Shriver



Don & Peggy Shriver, not so long ago...

In David Lean's film version of *Doctor Zhivago*, a boxcar load of Moscow-fleeing refugees includes an elderly couple in their 'nineties. Bearded, tired, dislocated, he leans over and kisses her.

It is an image of a long marriage. Married now for 66 years, we identify with that. These days a few friends wonder, "It seems real for you. What makes love last so long?"

We have to be cautious as we attempt to answer. Every marriage is unique. Its meaning for others is not easily analogized. Further, we now

know that forms of human affection are so varied that one risks insulting that variety by suggesting that one's own experience should model anyone else's. We hope that same-sex marriages, too, can also be gifted with love that lasts. Second marriages, too.

In any case, the question deserves honoring: *"What made it work for you?"* Our answers should get nested in careful social research. But here are brief answers we are likely to offer if anyone cares to ask about us two. In a time when American young people are well aware that half of marriages seem fated for dissolution, distrust of the promise, "Till death does us part," has statistics on its side. But a few testimonies to the long-lasting seem in order. Impressive is the fact that most divorced people, having tasted marriage, however short, are hopeful enough to give the adventure another try.

Here are a few of our sources of long loyalty to each other.

1. We two were raised in homes unbroken by divorces, and our wider families were mostly intact, too. Monogamy and fidelity ran in our families, one might say. We are fortunate to be unencumbered with histories of single parenthood. We believe that single parents deserve special recognition for all who maintain loyalty to their offspring in the absence of the partnership that gave birth to them. We think of successful single parenthood as heroic.

2. Secondly, we met each other in the context of the youth organizations of the Protestant churches. Our celebration of marriage concurs with biblical views of the relationship. We both majored in liberal arts in small colleges, with the result that, early on, we enjoyed discussing the dialogues of Plato and how our births in Virginia and Iowa made for different

takes on Civil War history. If and when we argued, we searched for the reasons in our disagreements. Early on, we enjoyed each other's thinking.

3. Which is to testify that we enjoyed several dimensions of our personal communication - physical, intellectual, and emotional. In the dating culture of the 1950s conversation between the two sexes around philosophical issues did not flourish. But politics, world affairs, and theology were not exotic for us. Once, after we acquired a second home on a woody hillside north of New York City, a friend asked, "What do you talk about with all that time on your hands?" Antoine de Saint Exupery said: "Love is not just looking at each other. It is looking outward in the same direction." For us, books, music, the newspaper, world travel, and those red-turning maples on our hillside furnished many a "same direction." A rich mix of experience protected us from Freudian reductions of romance to sexual arousal. We came to believe that careful intellectual exchange is also a rich glue of marriage, along with the glues of body and spirit. In his recent book "The Road to Character" David Brooks quotes the poet Spencer Reese: "The more he loved me the more I loved the world." Brooks adds: "Love expands with use."

Without talk, romance can become empty. After the death of his first wife and marriage to his second, John Milton defined marriage as "an apt and cheerful conversation."

4. Romance grows with enjoyment of each other's various gifts—musical, literary, know ledge of history. To be sure, the work of marriage for us has often concentrated on the rigors of parenthood, so subject to "the thousand natural shocks that flesh and blood are heir to." Children suffer, and we suffer with them. They get sick, they leave home earlier than we hoped. They have minds and wishes of their own. We are told that, when a child dies, marriages often fall apart. We know that crisis only too well, for we

had once to endure it. But we know that it is best endured in a two-parent partnership that survives the rigors of care for children, whether or not that care seems reciprocated.

5. Successful single parenthood really is an achievement. We think that Milton made in mistake in observing that, after their fall into temptation, Adam and Eve left Eden to go “their solitary way.” Not really solitary: The biblical text says that, fallen they may now be, but they leave together! Fortunately for them - in view of the crisis they would soon confront - the murder of their second child Abel by their first, Cain.

6. It meant that they were soon to share each other’s suffering. A member of the staff of the seminary where we lived for two decades commented to one of us, “Around here, there are two things we admire about you, Mr. President: Your marriage and your capacity to absorb hostility.” It may disappoint supporters of religious organizations, but the fact is that theologically learned people have resources for fueling a lot of anger in their disputes. All sides have divine support! For the endurance of this phenomenon an administrator is fortunate to go home every night to a secure love. We suspect that the staff member who made this double observation surmised that the one side helped to make the other possible. Sharing in each other’s troubles is surely a source of long marriage.

In sum, too few they may be, but many we hope, are the long-married. The gift of such love is easy to receive as a gift of the Creator who announced, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” (Genesis 2:18) Nor the woman, nor any human. We believe that the rule of shared suffering obtains in same-sex marriages, too.

We wish that the famous text of Genesis 2:18 had read: “I will make them helpers to each other.” That concurs with the requisites as we know

them from our 66 years. It concurs also with the theme of Marilynne Robinson's eloquent essay, "The Givenness of Things." One of the given things is human love that lasts, "till death does them part."

We do not believe that "marriages are made in heaven." But we do believe that a marriage, long lived on earth, is an anticipation of a love worth a heavenly resumption.

We think of the two English students who visited Egypt in the star-punctured shadow of the Sphinx. One asks the other, "If you could have one question for this old wise fellow, what would it be?" The other answered, "I'd ask it: is the universe friendly?"

For the long married, at least one corner of the universe is friendly: the one they have waked up to for hundreds of mornings. It is a truth from the deep beginning of things: "It is not good for the human to be alone." *And we gift of love that is a gift of God.*

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Gardening - Duggan Flanakin

We are supposed to be
Children
All our lives
Even as we handle grownup
Things
But hurt and lies and vanity
Make us doubt
Our childlike nature
And so we pursue
Things that make us
Jaded.

Faded
Are our memories
Of when we were
Free
To be
To explore and see
The beauty
Created all around us
And in each other
And in ourselves.

Most times
We wear a grownup face
Which is to say
We adopt conventions
Full of intentions
To live and let give
But not to give
Ourselves away.

All the while
We starve
Our childlike heart
Behind the art
Of hiding
Our vulnerability
And our reality
Gets submerged
In the mishmash
Of "getting along."

We can't be strong
Because our power
Our joy
Is an offense or a threat
Or just an ugly reminder
Of the lives not dared
In the faces
Of those around us.

Some challenge, some boast
But the most
Good
We can do
Is to disarm
Those hurting the most
To be so real
They dare to enter
Where only fools survive
That is, to come fully alive.

Joni was wrong
In her song
We can't get ourselves
Home
By striving, conniving
Scheming or even dreaming.
We just have to let go
So we can grow
Younger again.

The Garden never left us
We ran away
But today
I say
Click your heels
Stop making deals
Stop spinning wheels
And FEEL
Touch, smell, listen and sing
Get into the swing
And dance
And the romance
Of breathing deep
Will show the yellow path
Back.

Duggan Flanakin, from *Infinite Galaxies: Poems from the Dugout*

Duggan Flanakin is a small-town boy from the segregated South whose love of freedom matches his love of people. He has fought for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam (and other needless wars) and against the takeover of America by an insensitive bureaucracy. His life's real work though has been equipping and encouraging those in his orbit to find their futures through love and trust to become their best true selves.

The Problem with Building Bridges - Jayme R. Reaves



I'm tiring of the talk of bridges.

Well-meaning, lovely, peace-loving folks use the metaphor all the time. I used to say it too. But, after these last couple of years of hearing a lot about *burning bridges*, *bridging the divide*, and *building bridges*, I feel the need to call bullshit. What do these terms even mean? I think we need to be much more careful and articulate about what we're calling for in this state of divided communities, politics, and ideologies.

The Christian theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas once said "There are two Americas and we have no contact." Responding to this quotation on Facebook, a commenter asked "Aren't we called to bridge this divide with love, grace, and compassion?"

Short answer to the post's question is "Yes." Of course. Absolutely.

But the long answer is "bridging this divide" between two places that have no meaningful contact requires quite a bit of planning, forethought, measuring, surveying, and considering issues of consent before we go charging in with our love, grace, and compassion.

Consider with me geography that lends itself to bridge building:

- Is a bridge necessary?
- What two entities are we trying to connect? Islands? Two sides of a river gorge? Two buildings?
- Is one perceived to be a mainland, or are they equal in size and power?
- Are you building a bridge in order to talk to each other or to support trade, and, if so, is a bridge necessary for that just yet?
- Is the bridge going to be used as a link but will separateness be maintained?
- Do you have planning permission or consent?
- For whose benefit are we building this bridge?
- Do you want to build the bridge in order to take over the land on the other side? Is the land cheaper but more fertile for your own ambitions over there?

- Are you willing to build the bridge from dirt off your own land, making a causeway? Or is it made of materials neither side has?
- What about a ferry or cable car - are those acceptable alternatives?

Of course, I am being deliberately provocative and pedantic here. *Of course*, I support peacemaking and reconciliation between divided communities. Bridges can be a good thing. They often support free movement, communication, relationship building, and integration.

But I'm not naive about bridges, both in the figurative and literal senses. I've also stood in silence marking the spots on two different bridges in Sarajevo where both World War I and the 1990s Bosnian war started. I've sat on the bank of the Danube in Novi Sad, Serbia and memorialized 1,300-1,500 Jews, Serbs, and Roma who were pushed out onto the icy river and drowned near the Vardin bridge in the middle of winter in 1942. That same bridge was destroyed by NATO bombing in 1999. I think of the marches over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. I spent my high school years 15 miles from where Emmett Till's body was found in 1955 after most likely being thrown off the bridge into the Tallahatchie River, but never heard a word about it until I was an adult and had been gone a decade or more. And I've learned about city planners who used highways and bridges to bypass, cut off, and otherwise contain poor neighborhoods in Charlotte, North Carolina and Belfast, Northern Ireland. I know that bridges, in and of themselves, are neither a good or a bad thing, but it is how they are used that dictates whether they are of benefit to the communities they supposedly connect or not.

It's no surprise that I spend a lot of time talking to, reading, and listening to folks who are legitimately under siege, whose bodies are being abused, whose spirits are being crushed, and whose communities are in pain. In times like these, you know what people who are under siege do to bridges? They raise the drawbridge or they burn it down.

At times, bridges are burned through sabotage, either to disrupt, hamper or limit movement, or to isolate. Other times, burning bridges is often a tactic for survival. A black, queer clergy person I follow on Twitter declared recently: "I might need forgiveness but I've just stopped having certain conversations. I can't handle it anymore. I need to live." Similarly, Robert Jones Jr., known as Son of Baldwin, has famously said: "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist."

Regardless of why, bridges don't burn themselves, and, in the same way, bridges don't build themselves. They are a product of our own activities. They expedite travel and communication, making it safer. We place our trust in the foundations, which hold the pilings in place in the midst of strong currents. Bridges collapse when we fail to pay attention to and maintain those foundations. That strong relationship we thought we had until we see the bridge collapse? Yeah, maybe not.

Here's the thing: we can't go around building bridges without decent foundations if we expect them to last any longer than the next storm.

A relationship will not last – a bridge is not viable – if it is rooted in someone’s oppression. The systems upon which many of our bridges were built are rotten and need to be replaced.

Building bridges is a risky, expensive, and time-consuming business. You’re not just slapping a bit of pavement down. You have to assess the depth of the water or chasm, the quality of the bedrock underneath, the strength of the current or wind through the gorge. Temporary structures have to be put into place, measurements have to be correct, and everything has to be anchored securely. This is not a job for the faint of heart or those looking for something quick to feel good about.

So let’s drop the bridge metaphor for a little while.

The great Anthea Butler, associate professor of religious studies and Africana studies and graduate chair of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania, spoke in 2016 at a Presbyterian Church USA conference on race and she had strong words to say to the majority white denomination:

“I can’t fix this any more. You have to fix this. You...That’s white supremacy that asks me to come and bare my heart to you...We’re still cleaning up your mess. We’re done. I’m done.”

When we talk about building bridges, we must remember that there is no peace without justice, and there is no reconciliation without peace. By calling for bridges to be built and for communities to be

reconciled without dealing with the justice issue underlying it all is, at the best of times, naïve and, at its worst, damaging.

It can be damaging because when we call for reconciliation without addressing justice, we are telling those in pain that their need for justice is subservient to our need for reconciliation. In the majority white, middle class audiences I speak to, there's a pervasive spirit I hear that equals to a deep, but erroneous, question: "Why can't we all just get along?" It is borne out of a desire to see their communities and world at peace, but lacks an awareness of the injustice that prevents their desired peace from blossoming. And while their desire for peace may be legitimate, it is also often tinged by what peace *for them* looks like: a return to the status quo, a return to comfort, order, and control. What looks like peace for you may not be peace to your neighbor.

And, in the end, we cannot force it: both sides have to want it. Reconciliation, like everything else, requires consent.

So, what's my point?

Slow down.

Ask questions first:

What assumptions do I have about those who are on the other side?

Do I know why they do what they're doing?

Do I know how they feel?

Do I understand and see things from their perspective?

Am I willing to submit myself and my privilege to their need for justice?

When I call for peace, love, and forgiveness, could it be interpreted as silencing their pain and calls for justice?

Listen.

Demolish rotten structures and systems.

Work to build better foundations.

Then – and only then - let's talk about building bridges.

*Jayme R. Reaves is a public theologian. You can check out her book, *Safeguarding the Stranger: An Abrahamic Theology and Ethic of Protective Hospitality*, or follow her on Facebook or Twitter (@jaymereaves).*

Frog-Giveness - David Lynch



I stood outside the grey vacation house, a few blocks from the ocean. I was impatient and wanted to go to the beach, and couldn't understand why my mother was having trouble getting out of bed. The morning fog had burned away. My sister toddled around in the living room. I had been up since 5:45 a.m., anticipating making multi-spired dribble castles with

wet sand. Now it was almost lunch time. I was eight years old, and it seemed like a month had passed since I awoke.

I wandered to the creek alongside the house with my red plastic bucket and scooped up some algal water and a few dozen tree frogs. When I returned, I put the bucket on a brick patio shaded by a large eucalyptus tree. The roots of the tree had lifted some of the bricks; many of them were loose.

The tiny green frogs were frisky. A few leapt out of the bucket and onto the patio. I picked up a loose brick and dropped it on a frog. I heard was the >bink!< sound of brick hitting brick, not the squishy-crunchy noise I expected to hear.

I lifted the brick and examined the splat. I felt grey and dispassionate inside, like I imagined a scientist would feel. The surviving frogs stared from the red plastic bucket. Their blank, primordial faces and widely-spaced eyes had no qualities that might have evoked empathy in me. Another frog escaped the bucket and I compressed it with another cascading brick.

A few months before, I felt like my innards would implode when I stepped on my pet chameleon by mistake. *Rag Doll* by Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons was playing on the radio when I stepped on the chameleon. Even now when I hear the chorus of that song, I remember the crunch of the lizard beneath my shoe. My mother rushed out and found me crying. She and her sister-in-law interrupted their visit and bought me another lizard at the pet store, but it did not comfort me. My carelessness had caused the death of a creature, and I couldn't forgive myself.

But *this* was way worse. With the frogs, I had delivered death with purposeful intent.

I was still reeling from the school year. I had been initially excited about skipping from grade one to grade three. My excitement was literally batted away by the older, burlier boys who delivered gut punches with taunts of “Poindexter” and “brainiac.” I purposely made mistakes on my school work, underachieving to try and fit in. The boys only beat me worse.

I implored my mom to let me transfer back to second grade. She refused. My teacher didn’t understand why I was under-performing, and thought a whacks with a wooden ruler might motivate me. The beatings in the classroom and on the playground continued until the end of the school year. A few days into our stay at the beach house, the last of the bruises faded from my skin.

I stared at the cluster of splats that had been frogs. I thought of my pet chameleon, and emotion returned to my belly like an electric shock. What had third grade done to me? I had become a monster. Tears filled my eyes as I released the bucket of surviving frogs back into their habitat. I apologized for annihilating their comrades. I sobbed under the eucalyptus tree until 1:00 pm, when my mother emerged from her amphetamine hangover, fed me, and took us to the beach.

As I swam in the ocean, I hoped a leviathan would glide in on a foamy wave and consume me in righteous revenge so I could release the guilt that slithered in my gut.

For years afterward, I couldn't escape the image of the daisy-shaped splats of custardy guts on the patio. The memory became my Dostoyevskian burden, resurrected whenever I felt like I didn't deserve to walk the planet, a notion the nuns reinforced in my catechism class.

The nuns seemed to think that none of us deserved to be alive - not even the kids who hadn't sinned as gravely as I had.

The Catholic Church teaches that murder is a mortal sin. Lesson Six of the *Baltimore Catechism* (the rigid Catholic guidebook I was expected to memorize and recite), states that mortal sin "deprives the sinner of sanctifying grace, the supernatural life of the soul...mortal sin makes the soul an enemy of God, takes away the merit of all its good actions, deprives it of the right to everlasting happiness in heaven, and makes it deserving of everlasting punishment in hell."

I figured that if mortal sin takes away the merit of all good actions, then there was no way I could redeem myself on earth. It didn't matter how many times I spun the rosary, or helped little old ladies across the street, or went into the little dark booth to confess my sins. And if I no longer had supernatural afterlife, then I couldn't do time in Purgatory to pay off the frog murders. So according to the catechism, my fate was an eternity wearing a brimstone leisure suit while Satan's imps jabbed me with their tridents.

The frogs haunted me constantly for a few years, then less often after I finished parochial school and went on to high school and college. I focused on

getting passable grades, chasing girls and getting high (not necessarily in that order).

I had managed to tuck the amphibian assassinations into a deep fold of my brain's temporal lobe. The recollection emerged every six months or so, waving a banner emblazoned with the word MURDERER in frog-green letters. I had since decided that the Baltimore Catechism was blessed bullshit, though there was still a niggling voice in my head asking, "What if it isn't?"

In the summer of my 20th year, I took my first trip to Yosemite National Park with my friend Chuck. After a tedious Greyhound bus ride that stopped at every drink-water town in California's inland valley, we arrived at Yosemite Lodge with all our possessions stuffed into the backpacks we lugged on our shoulders. We headed for Sunnyside Walk-In Campground, where backpackers could camp for free.

Sunnyside was located in a grove of majestic Lodgepole Pine trees. The floor of the camp was covered in a bed of pine needles 6" thick. Walking on the pine needles was a joy. The springy carpet cushioned every step. Moisture quickly wicked down through the needles, leaving the top layer dry and comfortable. We rolled out our sleeping bags on the natural cushion and slept better than in our own beds at home.

We made Sunnyside our base camp, and from there explored the upper rim of the valley. We slept at the top of Nevada Falls and Half Dome. We hiked up Yosemite Falls and over to North Dome, then down to the mouth of Tenaya Canyon.

As I backpacked through the national park, I bore the pain of my inability to travel light. I had loaded my pack with 85 pounds of food and gear, half of which I didn't need. My legs cramped halfway through each day.

"Why are you carrying so much stuff?" Chuck asked. "Is it a Catholic thing? Some kind of atonement?"

"Catholics call it penance," I told him.

"You should convert," Chuck said. "We pray and fast for one day: Yom Kippur. We atone, we repent, and then we're good for the rest of the year."

When we returned to the walk-in camp, a thunderstorm roiled in the distance. I took our clothes to the park's laundromat while Chuck stayed behind. It rained sideways in every direction as I washed our clothes. When I returned, I found Chuck slumbering under a neighbor's lean-to.

"You were lucky! You missed one hell of a frog-drowner," Chuck mumbled as he stirred.

Even though it had poured all afternoon, the water percolated down through the carpet of pine needles, leaving it bone dry. As dusk fell, I sat with my back against the thick trunk of a pine and rolled a joint. A young woman named Marianne came by to beg a few tokes. By the time the last smear of deep blue left the evening sky, we were mellow and content.

At the far side of the camp, a group of people began shrieking.

“What’s all the hubbub?” Chuck asked. “They’re messing up my mellow!”

The high-pitched squeals approached closer as campers nearer to us joined in the yelping chorus. Their screams approached us like a shock wave, and I, too, wondered what the ruckus was about. Within 30 seconds, we knew.

I was instantly covered with tree frogs — hundreds of them. I was wearing shorts and no shirt. I felt hundreds of clammy knob-toes on my exposed skin. As soon as a frog landed on me, it sprung away, quickly replaced by the next frog in the lineup. Hundreds of frogs leaping on and off my body felt oddly sensual, like a clammy shimmering.

I wished it wasn’t dark, because I wanted to see this mass of a million frogs forming a viridian, buffalo-esque, mini-stampede.

“Tck!” Marianne yelped.

“This is gross!” Chuck said.

“I think it feels kinda cool,” I said.

“You’re weird,” Marianne laughed.

As everyone around me writhed, shouted and flicked away the frogs, I sat calmly and let the frogs flow over me.

I hoped it would last longer - I knew the odds were slim that I would ever again experience such a phenomenon.

The event was over in a few minutes. The clammy, green charge moved Westward. I was sad to feel them go.

As I expelled a sigh of mixed delight and disappointment, I swear I heard in the air a faint, croaky voice whisper, "We forgive you."

I immediately thought of the frogs I killed when I was eight.

Over the years, I had I tried unsuccessfully to rationalize my crime: if I hadn't killed the frogs, maybe a hungry crow or snake would have eaten them anyway? No good — I wasn't part of their food chain. I didn't kill the frogs for my sustenance. I killed them to feel powerful. I killed them because after third grade, I felt like I had been squashed by a few bricks myself, and I wanted to feel un-squashed. But that was no excuse for marching to the bottom of the vertebrate order and killing tiny creatures simply because I felt tiny inside. All these years later, I could find no acquittal for what I had done.

Yet in that moment at the campground, the frogs had granted me absolution — an absolution I was convinced I didn't deserve. I told myself that this was some nonsense rationalization I had concocted in my mind — but in my gut, I knew it was so.

I still think back to that evening at Sunnyside Walk-In Campground, when the throng of tree frogs danced across my skin. I remember the voice that whispered in my head, soft as the evening breeze that brushed the tips of the Lodgepole Pines: the voice that murmured, "We forgive you."

Forty years later, I know all I need do is accept their forgiveness. I'm still working on it.

David Lynch is a graphic designer, writer, Appalachian fiddler, choruser, and proto-hermit who lives with his Boston Terrier Oscar in a Civil-War-era cabin in West Yancey County, North Carolina.

My Roots - Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam shecheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higyanu lazman hazeh. Amen

My roots extend wide across lands that my feet have not touched, but my mind and heart claim as home.

My green–orange–purple roots connect and intersect. They push through layers of soil barriers that relentlessly try to stop the need for each root to need each other.

My roots wrap me with the sounds of the ancestors,
with the words of honorary mamas and *titis*, who held me,
who hold me,
who scold me,
who let me know that even when the tunnels are dark and uncertain,
confia en Dios, Samantita – trust in God.

My roots name me – claim me – they inspire me to never burry my dreams and grow only what is safe, easy and convenient.

No, this year gotta grow a revolution.

This year gotta grow something new.

This year these old sacred roots will grow fresh beginnings.

My roots, my roots, my roots.

Hold me tight, pull shamelessly at my arms and legs.

Hold me accountable, Roots.

Don't you let me - let you go.

My roots break open the box that boxes me in, with an explosion of shapes, sizes and colors – setting **me** free.

These are the roots of green-eyed Abuelo Arturo, who was disowned for falling in love with the illiterate indigenous black skinned maid– my *abuela* in Isabella, Puerto Rico.

These are the roots of my namesake Great-Grandma Ann – who fled her Russian village just in time to hear the screams of her school-mates - as Anti-Semitism turned to Holocaust and all that was left of home was a graveyard of murdered dreams.

These are the roots of Presbyterian and Atheist grandmothers.

These are the roots of my *Mamá*, who pushed through tough city streets into college classrooms, who despite being called nothing more than a dumb *spik*– graduated and became top in her field!

These are the roots of the activist, fired up Catholic women from Valparaiso, who have adopted me into their fight to give their Chilean sisters a right never afforded to their bodies – a chance to choose.

These are the roots of United Nations campaigns:

“End violence against women!”

These are the roots of Youth group meetings with teens:

“Don’t give up, you’ll get through it.”

These are the roots of my Muslim, Jewish, Christian neighbors, who raised me on a block where I learned that we could not only dialogue together, but actually live, love and thrive together.

They are the roots of slaves, of Tainos, of Ellis Island immigrants, of “No dogs or Jews allowed,” of perseverance, of education, o hell, of **celebration!**

My roots name me – claim me – they call me to not burry my dreams.

These roots carried me to this place, where now my feet are **rooted**.

Rooted but never still.

These roots like Salsa steps tell me to get movin’.

Paso a paso, don’t give up – confia en Dios,

Samantita.

These roots every day are watered now in this place –

and grow fast in directions that terrify and excite me.

May they break open every box.

May they grow onward.

May they grow outward.

Until every root in my body can stretch me far into tomorrow,
while still holding me fast to **home**.

My roots, *mis raizes, my kornia*

Blessed are you, O Lord for you are the giver, sustainer and enabler who has allowed these roots to reach this moment.

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha’olam shecheyanu v’kiy’manu v’higyanu lazman hazeh. Amen

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YESTERDAY: the inversion of INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS -
Andrew Johnson



NOTE: The following article contains spoilers for both *Inglourious Basterds* and *Yesterday*.

Yesterday, the new film from director by Danny Boyle, is a movie of hidden depths. While it superficially appears to be a lighthearted romp about a musician who is knocked unconscious and awakens to find he's the only person who remembers The Beatles, writer Richard Curtis infuses the proceedings with melancholy and pathos. Oddly enough, it reminds me most of the work of Quentin Tarantino. Though their work is tonally dissimilar (Tarantino is famous for his violent tales of crime and revenge, while Curtis is best known for his work on romantic comedies like *Notting Hill* and *Love Actually*), both filmmakers share a worldview that prioritizes art as essen-

tial to our human story. In this respect, *Yesterday* feels like the spiritual successor to Quentin Tarantino's 2009 war film *Inglourious Basterds*, with YouTube taking the place of machine guns and dynamite.

After all, both Tarantino and Curtis understand the power of art to function as wish-fulfillment. Tarantino opens *Basterds*, his Second World War tale of personal and historical vengeance, with the heading "Once Upon A Time In Nazi-Occupied France," foreshadowing that, while he may subvert the fairy tale formula to violent ends, he is explicitly playing in the realm of fantasy. His fantasy is that of alternate history, one in which the sins of the past can be violently corrected – slave owners murdered by a slave in *Django Unchained*, for example – through righteous bloodshed. Curtis is a far more optimistic storyteller than Tarantino, though he also offers no explanation for the fantastic outside of its own existence. The protagonist of *About Time* can travel through time because it runs in the family. The erasure of The Beatles in *Yesterday* is justified as simply "an act of God." Like Tarantino, Curtis positions himself as the Creator who determines what is and isn't possible in his universe. How the fantastic occurs is less important than what it reveals about us as human beings. For Tarantino, it often uncovers our capacity for cruelty. For Curtis, it awakens the possibility of joy and fulfillment.

If *Basterds* and *Yesterday* share a common theme, it is this: Art matters. For Tarantino, film is so powerful that, when wielded irresponsibly by those in authority, it can be a tool to manipulate the masses. In *Basterds*, he reckons with Joseph Goebbels' use of propaganda to stoke anti-Semitic hatred and prop up a dictatorship. Would the Holocaust have happened without art that encouraged it? It's precisely art's potential to create *unreality* that makes it dangerous. Curtis, in contrast, posits that art matters less on a national and cultural level than on an individual one. In *Yesterday*, musician

Jack Malik ultimately discovers that a world without The Beatles (and Coke and cigarettes and Harry Potter, for that matter) is otherwise very similar to a world with them. His friends are still affable and supportive. His parents are as absent-minded and kind as always. His central conflict is an ancient one: a Faustian bargain for his soul. In an economic system that views personal expression as an opportunity for profit, any work of art will do. When a high-powered record executive offers Jack the “poisoned chalice” of fame, he accepts it and passes the work of the Fab Four off as his own, for he has bought into the lie that the best art (and the best version of yourself) is that which has a global impact.

And yet, as Ursula Le Guin once said about the role of the artist: “Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth.” Jack discovers that though he may be a fraud, the music is not. The only other two people who remember The Beatles aren’t angry at him for plagiarizing their work; they’re overjoyed at being able to hear them again. The songs’ quirky specificities (which provide more than a few moments of comic relief) may feel inauthentic coming from Jack, but they’re still honest expressions of longing and malaise, and as such they are universal. At every opportunity, Curtis resists the urge to claim Jack’s rise to fame would be a positive thing if only the songs were original. He understands that fame, whether bestowed by a government or a record label, idolizes the messenger, and in doing so can undermine the message.

The climactic sequence of *Inglourious Basterds* is also a lie that exposes a truth. It depicts a group of high-powered Nazis, including Hitler himself, gathered for a screening of a Riefenstahl-like propaganda film. As they cheer on the murder of Allied soldiers, the theater’s Jewish owner uses flammable celluloid to burn the building to the ground as undercover Allied agents slaughter Hitler and other top-ranking Nazi officials in their

seats. It is a stunning scene, a moment in which the authors of one propaganda film become victims in another. *Basterds* is, ultimately, a movie about itself, about the power of art to lie, manipulate, and destroy. It is Tarantino at his most reflective, positioning himself as a con artist and acknowledging the artifice of the myth of redemptive violence even as he encourages the audience to revel in it. There is truth in its sadistic fantasy, for it expresses a genuine concern with what our narratives reveal about ourselves.

Yesterday takes a cue from Tarantino and rewrites history, but for more hopeful ends. Just as Tarantino offers the audience catharsis by murdering a financially unsuccessful artist-turned-dictator in *Basterds*, Curtis provides it by resurrecting one of our most famous musicians sans fame. In the film's most provocative sequence, Jack finds John Lennon living a quiet life in a house on the beach, surrounded by unsold paintings. "Are you successful?" Jack asks. Lennon responds that happiness is its own success, and that he has spent his long life doing work he enjoys, traveling the world, furthering causes he believes in, and fighting for love. It's an astonishing moment of beauty that honors Lennon by imagining a better world, and it reminds us that art is personal and has the power to stir the better angels of our nature regardless of the size of its audience. "All you need is love" may be a cliché, but there's more than a grain of truth in it. (Incidentally, Tarantino's latest film, *Once Upon A Time in Hollywood* does something similar, resurrecting Sharon Tate and depicting her simple existence as inherently beautiful and worth protecting. His insistence on violence—particularly cinematic violence—as righteous entertainment is still present, but it feels like a means to a more hopeful vision of the future rather than the end itself. It's his most mature work in a decade, and his most tender since *Jackie Brown*. Perhaps a Tarantino movie in which love wins is not entirely out of the question.)

Both *Basterds* and *Yesterday* climax with a protagonist's face on a large screen, projected to a crowd, speaking their respective truths. In the former, the truth brings wrath on evildoers, including those who spread lies and propaganda, as the film reel itself starts a blaze that burns the theater to the ground. In the latter, Jack's confession of plagiarism at first earns the audience's ire, but by sacrificing fame and uploading the entirety of The Beatles' oeuvre online, he defeats his capitalist temptress and gains fans' respect. *Yesterday's* final montage opens with the word "Today..." and shows Jack living his most successful life – one in which he is truly happy. He commits to the woman he loves, tells people the truth, and brings the joy of The Beatles to the next generation. He is no longer a global sensation. This is juxtaposed with a final image of the film's title over a black-and-white photograph of Beatles fans screaming their approval. It's both a nostalgic homage to a band whose fame stemmed from its authenticity and a call for viewers to reflect on the possibility of an even better future. As good as the past may seem in hindsight, we should let it be: it has nothing on the present.

Andrew Johnson is a freelance journalist, educator, and the co-founder of the North Carolina Film Critics Association. His writing has appeared in numerous print and online outlets, including The Winston-Salem Journal, Syracuse New Times, The Post & Courier, and Film School Rejects.

Rejoicing in a New Morning: The Pope and Patti Smith -
Shan Overton

The news that punk rock musician Patti Smith would perform at the Vatican's annual Christmas concert in Rome in December 2014 was greeted with some rejoicing. However a wide assortment of believers and non-believers, of punk fans and critics, questioned Smith's audacity and Pope Francis's invitation. *How dare she?*, they asked outright. *How dare he?*, they implied. I wondered why Christians and atheist or agnostic music devotees, who typically agree about little, were upset about the same thing. But mostly, I wanted to know why Pope Francis asked and Patti Smith accepted. It was not a pairing I would have expected.

I first found amongst detractors an Italian Catholic lay association, *Portosalvo*, that publicly denounced an earlier invitation for Smith to sing at a Neapolitan church. They called it "potentially blasphemous" and hinted that the Pope should not welcome Smith to perform, either. Around the same time, American columnist Kathy Schiffer told her *Patheos* audience that she had scrutinized Smith, hoping that the musician had become a devout Christian. But Schiffer's search bore no such happy fruit. While a few low-level Catholic church leaders saw Smith's performance as an opportunity to evangelize the unchurched and fallen-away, Schiffer insisted, "There are many Catholic performers who are worthy of that honor, and the God-mother of Punk is not one of them. In fact, to my ears, her music is screechy bad." It seemed clear to me that Schiffer's vision of Christian orthodoxy and aesthetics were offended.

Rock music enthusiasts, journalists, and diehard non-believers were, by turns, amused, confused, or disappointed by the prospect. Some suspected that the report might have been concocted by *The Onion* as a piece of satire. *Vanity Fair* imagined that, when the Pope and Smith met, they must have “traded anecdotes about their punk-rock days.” A television producer who admired the alleged atheism of *Gloria*, the first song on Smith’s first album, *Horses* (1975), shared his dismay with his friend, *The Guardian* journalist Vivien Goldman: “And to think I believed her when she sang, ‘Jesus died for somebody’s sins, but not mine.’” I decided that this was another example of orthodoxy coupled with aesthetics, this time articulated by fervent believers in a musical culture shorn of religion.

What seemed an odd and unlikely collaboration by the Pope and Patti Smith turned out to be for real – and to have deeper roots than I anticipated. I learned that, with little fanfare, Smith had *already* sung at the Vatican’s Christmas concert the previous year. Somehow, that first performance went relatively unseen in the excitement and haste of the months immediately following Pope Francis’s election as Bishop of Rome. I then located a photograph of Smith, who wore a dark watch cap over her flowing grey hair, clasping hands with Pope Francis, who was clad in the papal white cassock and zucchetto. They were smiling warmly, familiarly, even, into each other’s eyes in the greeting line on St. Peter’s Square. This was April 10, 2013.

To outside appearances, neither Pope Francis nor Patti Smith was adhering to expected beliefs and artistic taste. So why was Smith on the roster for the Vatican Christmas concert? Getting to the heart of the matter led me to Saint Francis of Assisi, the preacher, poet, and patron of the natural world.

Rewind to March 14, 2013, the day when white smoke curled up from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel to announce the election of a new Bishop of Rome after the resignation of Benedict XVI. Smith waited on tenterhooks at home in front of her television to learn the identity of the new pope. For a number of years, she had hoped that, someday, there would be “a pope named Francis, who would embrace the idea of disseminating material things [...] but becoming close to nature and understanding how important it is to respect the Earth,” she told Amy Goodman in an interview for *Democracy Now!* When the cardinal previously known as Jorge Bergoglio was presented on the papal balcony above St. Peter’s Square, his name was announced as Francis. Smith was delighted. “I’m not a Catholic,” she told Goodman, “but I still wanted a Pope Francis. [...] So I was quite happy because I knew anyone who took on this name was taking on a great mantle of responsibility.”

For his part, Pope Francis chose the saint’s name because the new pontiff found Francis of Assisi to be an inspiring role model. He wrote in his May 2015 encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, “I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. [...] He was a mystic and pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself.” The new Pope followed this example by choosing to wear simpler clothing than many of his predecessors, to live in the Vatican guesthouse, not the papal apartments, and to eat common meals with guests instead of feasts cooked for him alone. *Laudato Si* bears a title taken from a phrase from Saint Francis’s *Canticle of the Creatures* (c. 1224), which is translated *Praise Be to You*. The papal letter, subtitled *On Care for Our Com-*

mon Home, quotes Saint Francis's canticle: "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us." Later, Pope Francis writes, "this sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her." In the letter, the Pope establishes his own approach to **integral ecology**, linking it to deeper spirituality, ecological education, and harmonious living with all of creation.

As it turns out, Smith is also committed to a spiritually-grounded integral ecology. She had thoroughly researched Francis of Assisi while preparing for her 2012 album *Banga*. Her study gave her a sense that he "was truly the environmentalist saint because he called upon the people, even in the twelfth century, to have appreciation and respect Mother Nature," she told Goodman. In the liner notes for the album, Smith says that, while in Arrezo, Italy, searching for the painting *Constantine's Dream* by Piero della Francesca, she discovered connections with the eco-friendly saint. One night, she "had a troubled sleep and dreamed of environmental apocalypse and a weeping Saint Francis." The song that resulted from this exploration, also titled *Constantine's Dream*, traces a history of human exploration and exploitation and eventually weeps with the saint and Sister Mother Earth, who sustains us.

At the Christmas concert on December 13, 2014, Patti Smith stood humbly on stage at Conciliation Auditorium, backed by a large orchestra. Appearing and sounding nothing like a blaspheming punk rocker, she wore her

grey hair in multiple long braids and a cross around her neck. She sang tenderly, hands clasped at her heart, to the audience in Rome:

*O holy night, the stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth;
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
'Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

The Patti Smith who sang this hymn before a huge audience was not the same person who rejected Jesus in 1975's *Gloria*. It is plain to see in the YouTube videos that she was transformed spiritually and meant every word she sang.

What the Pope saw in Patti Smith, and what the American musician saw in the first pontiff from the Americas, was something that many of us missed as we looked through the lenses of our blind orthodoxies, aesthetic assumptions, and blithe mockery. They saw in each other a fellow pilgrim on the spiritual path, united by a love for a saint who cared for animals and plants as much as people, helped the poor, and perceived divine footprints everywhere. Pontiff and musician were drawn to the saint because of his simplicity and observant detachment, peace and kindness, and his dedication to the way of Jesus. Because of this mutual recognition, the Pope and Patti Smith gave us a glimpse of divine possibility in a cynical and weighted world groaning for change. Listening to a recording of Smith singing *O Holy Night* for Pope Francis and his guests on that Advent night, I wondered if the spiritual transformation they modeled for us could lift our

weary souls to rejoice with them and Saint Francis in a new morning, a new hope.

Shan Overton teaches writing and directs the Writing Center at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Her own writing focuses on spirituality, the arts, nature, theological imagination, and creating a new world together.

Phases of Home - Olivia Bardo

I sat on a train reposed in Philadelphia, awaiting the *cha chink* and soft lurch of my body before “OUR FINAL DESTINATION WILL BE NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK CITY OUR FINAL DESTINATION.” It was the first time I had ever skipped lectures for something that would not count for class credit. My boyfriend and I had hopped on the Amtrak from Harrisburg and were heading to a Hippo Campus concert. It was my first gig not by a Christian band, and my first train ride. I sat back in my seat working on homework, trying to chameleon my way into seasoned travel- hood, and to lessen the guilt for skipping three classes.

It was October, and three days earlier, my parents had announced that they would be separating. What had always been crowned home had been suddenly dethroned and given a few days to find a new place to live. I was feeling a bit numb to the news. Ella Frances wrote that “When one is considering the universe, it is important, sensible even, to try and find some balance between laughter and uncontrollable weeping.” So I followed her words and went to a concert, a small act of revolt against a home I could no longer reach.

I kept thinking to myself, “I should be feeling remorse. I should be shut away, poking at a piano or becoming ‘one acquainted with the night’ as Frost might have suggested.” Maybe (definitely) another day I would succumb to such acts. But I wasn’t there yet. For the time being, I would continue to unintentionally embrace the cold leather jacket ahead of me. To be pressed up against so many strangers in the violet light fused the simultaneous feelings of unity and isolation within me, a feeling with which I would soon become intimately acquainted. I was the wasteland among incandescent bodies.

The band pinned a few lyrics to my headspace that night:

“This simple season is all ours.”

But what did I want it to be?

“Wait and see, I’ll be making my own way now. I’ll be making my own way now, to where I’ve got to be.”

But where was I going? In that moment, I had no inclination, but it didn’t really matter. All I cared about was swaying to the music and feeling my boyfriend’s arms safely around me. I was limitless and would experience no collision with sorrow.

The sentiment wouldn’t last. I was soon swept up into a season of sorrow, of feeling no security - desperately trying to uncover some form of comfort. I was under the impression that everything would bounce back, be resilient and supple again in time. When I realized how often I had been obsessively looking into how much it would cost to furnish my own apartment, I began to accept the fact that I was trying to return to my pastoral state, or at least its understudy.

The first time I returned to my childhood home, I felt like a trespasser to my own past. I expected to be surrounded by a grey sky as I walked through parched grass. I imagined entering a frigid home without light, full of dust-covered walls and empty spaces. I imagined a chill running up my spine, then running to vomit. Instead it was warm. Everything just looked smaller, a little more empty and a lot less mine. I found drooping roses that had been left behind and dried up in their vase, as if reciting their own eulogy, saying, “this was a home once.”

Home was peach stained curtains that awoke my slumbering April body at dawn, wriggling my toes in my dew-grazed yard as I captured the

sunrise. Home was the collecting of blueberries along waves of hilly landscape in the Appalachian sun, along fragments of Susquehanna streams. Home was herb gardens, church bells, a kitchen on Easter morning. Home was a place I could gather eggs, husk corn, pass a soccer ball barefoot in the yard until my feet beamed like raw salmon.

I've painted this image before, at a storytelling competition called "Mosaic" located on my college's campus. The theme was "home", and I delivered a free verse poem of my interpretation of home. At the time, I believed that this was a concrete idea. This home that I spoke of would always be home. Tioga Street would remain my Tioga Street.

That's what I had been ineffectively attempting to mimic this whole time, what I had been lamenting in the poems I was lately writing. I was a shoddy claymaker working with pale illusions. When I was a child, and my mother was instructing me on how to maintain organization, she used to explain that "everything has a place." Why was I having such a difficult time finding my own now? I had been denying myself the ability to change with my surroundings, causing a dislocated existence. The version of home I was longing after could no longer be habituated.

There is a series of lyrics in the song "A Silent Cause" by The Paper Kites that reads,

"So long to your family home, I wonder if you'll ever get that feeling back?
Your family home".

So what is my family home?

I discovered the answer suddenly and strangely when I found myself standing in the fish aisle of a Korean market, alone. I stared at the shrink-wrapped seafood wondering how nearly a year could propel me into such

contrasting experiences, how I could feel such comfort in a place so foreign to my own experiences. I discovered how to be unexpectedly human sipping on Columbiana in the backseat of a tiny car being steered through the streets of Hackensack - momentarily pausing at a corner store for mango popsicles in the company of friends.

I felt that same freedom as I had at the concert- that I was slowly structuring a fusion of home, an ever-shifting environments for myself. I became a sojourner, caught up in a constant undertaking of the world. I wanted to take up residence in others' expressions of home, to see the comfort experienced in such varieties. Through doing so, I have been able to recognize that my "family home" has permission to shift, even into something that doesn't necessarily resemble a physical house. It doesn't mean that my previous version of home is suddenly null and void. Those same sunrises I photographed weren't *my* sunrises anymore. But I could borrow them for a while, so long as I needed them. I can still look back at how I defined home before, still find solace in it, but cannot remain with them perpetually. Sometimes home can be uprooted without a clear direction onward, and it's up to us to define what we want our next home to be. The most valuable lesson to take along the way is the ability to allow ourselves to be dazzled by the change.

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