

# TAKE NO THOUGHT OF TOMORROW

...but find something good  
to do with today



## **CONTENTS**

<b>WELCOME FROM THE PORCH</b>	4
<b>LESSONS FROM ELSEWHERE - Gareth Higgins</b>	5
<b>GIVE ME DIRT - Steve Daugherty</b>	12
<b>CONTESTED SLEEP - Bill Ramsey</b>	15
<b>MY AWAKENING - David Wilcox</b>	20
<b>A GAME OF TWO HALVES - Mike Riddell</b>	24
<b>A LONGING THAT HAD NO NAME - Michelle LeBaron</b>	27
<b>A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL DOWD</b>	31
<b>HIM AND HER: A LOVE STORY - Michael McRay</b>	53
<b>TELL ME THE STORY OF THIS ANIMAL - Peterson Toscano</b>	57
<b>MOVIES BOOKS MUSIC</b>	60
<b>A GHOST STORY - Morgan Meis</b>	61
<b>THE HERO - Tyler McCabe</b>	64
<b>ANGELS IN AMERICA - Sarah Dean</b>	67

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## WELCOME

Hi folks, glad you're here. At *The Porch*, we often wonder about the difference between hope and optimism. One of our friends heard Wendell Berry speak recently on the question of hope - take no thought for tomorrow, he said, but instead find something good to do with today, and do it. These are hard times for those of us accustomed to worry. It can seem difficult to get through the day without being overburdened by the melancholy of a divided world, broken politics, and so much cultural noise.

We want to listen to Wendell Berry - to take no thought for tomorrow, but to find something good to do with today, and do it. As Michael Dowd says in our centerpiece interview this issue, find something to love, something to learn, something to let go, and something to carry forward. It's a lesson we're reflecting on elsewhere in the issue, from Steve Daugherty's television detoxification to Sarah Dean's bang up the minute consideration of what *Angels in America* has to say to us today.

When we say we're glad you're here, we mean it. It's easier to take no thought for tomorrow when we do it in community - so we invite you to join the conversation on Facebook about what's in *The Porch*, to let your friends know about what we're attempting here, and consider forming a Porch Circle to explore community, purpose, and taking good care of each other. There's more information here: <https://www.theporchmagazine.com/porch-circles/>

See you next time!



## LESSONS FROM ELSEWHERE - Gareth Higgins

The greatest misunderstanding that people have about the USA until they live here is that it's a country. I've been here for ten years, and the most surprising shift in my perception has been that the place might be better seen as really fifty nations, each with their own culture and laws, connected with their neighbors only as tightly as they want to be. This fact carries tension, of course, if you value coherence; but the liberating consequence is that if the first step to healing a place is knowing it, it may be much easier to know a state than the nation. The handful of key cities and rural communities that make up a state are conceivably knowable by a handful of people who care enough to steward the earth, nurture the people, and imagine "the next stage of good." That phrase, coined by Bob Woodward to refer to the role of US American Presidents, is spacious and inviting. It's a way to live. Looking out my window, seeing trees, but imagining the neighborhood and the city behind them, and the region behind those is a beginning of knowing. That knowing is vital to rootedness, and rootedness is the beginning of hospitality, and hospitality will save the world.

I'm pondering this because I grew up in northern Ireland, where an argument over national sovereignty, identity, and the treatment of minorities was weaponized. When no obvious recourse seemed available through the democratic mechanism, because democracy itself had not evolved to represent the oppressed minority, and nonviolent activism was not substantially resourced, violence erupted.

Nearly 4,000 people were killed, and 43,000 physically injured; countless more traumatized, and an entire culture damaged.

After decades, people were tired, scarred, and the realization was dawning that no one could win. That hating your neighbor made the neighborhood a terrible place to live. Eventually, people talked to their opponents, often in secret, often at risk, over long periods of time, with no guaranteed outcome - not even the safety of the participants.

People suffered, but in talking with their opponents they saw that the other was suffering too.

Community organizations, politicians, cultural figures, and the ordinary person in the street were energized. Philanthropic, national and international institutions funded opportunities for people to encounter each other, and for historically marginalized communities to develop.

The legitimacy of opposing political aspirations was recognized by all parties.

Peace talks began, chaired by three independent international figures - a US Senator, a South African anti-apartheid activist and politician, and a Finnish politician.

An agreement was reached whose details include an end to political support for illegal violence, the reform of the police, the release of prisoners whose crimes were politically motivated, the development of radical human rights and equality legislation, and the establishment of local government based on cooperation not domination. The most important point: we're in it together, and everyone will have to give something up in order for it to work.

It's not perfect. Victims and survivors have been underserved, and the ambiguous legacy of violence and oppression committed in the past by parties and individuals, some of whom now run the government, continues to hold us back. But two decades after the ceasefires, the previously unthinkable has become a fact of life: on the best days, former sworn enemies share power for the common good. On the best days, people who used to advocate each other's killing now collaborate on health and roads and education and environmental policy. People have a stake in their future. Currently the local government arrangements are in limbo, pending another round of negotiations among the parties), but people are, if not optimistic, confident that the peace will hold. Lament for the past is real, but we are moving beyond the cruelty and toward owning our story, in all its painful and joyful variety. We know what it was like to live in a society governed by fear and hatred. We're not going back.

Which brings me to the present moment, as it pertains to the fifty state experiment that may or may not actually be a nation. I'd like to offer some gentle thoughts on the state of the union, emerging from my experience of growing up in a place where we thought



we could dominate each other, and are only recently discovering that our needs are shared. I'm going to sketch seven principles and practices for thriving in the current moment. Let's begin with the one closest to each of us.

### **1: Feelings are messengers, but we don't always have to agree with them**

In these recent months, I think many of us have been going through an experience of shock followed by fear, then a sense of violation. How could this have happened? What will it lead to? Then a kind of grief as the progress of recent years seems under threat. Whatever the facts associated with these feelings, I do think it's vital that we acknowledge them. To repress genuine feelings of fear or grief will not serve us. So the first principle I'd suggest is to acknowledge the feelings of desecration and fear, metabolize them, and move forward.

And it is a desecration - the image portrayed of Trump is of a man who is rampaging through deeply held ideals: of respect, compassion, of the notion that actions have consequences, that leadership is supposed to be carried by emotionally mature people who at least pay lip service to the common good. He tramples over all of that. And some of us have particular personal reasons for our fears and lament - he reminds us of actual individuals who behaved badly toward us in the past. The fact that he is in charge of the country - and that nearly 50 million people put him there - is an ugly, distressing thing.

But! There is a very real sense in which this only matters as much as we're willing to let it. John O'Donohue warned us not to let the media become "the mirror, enshrining the ugly as the normal standard." There is far more beauty and hope in the world than the contemporary media culture represents. Trumpishness is real, but how we talk about it can also be an overblown fantasy.

In William Friedkin's revised cut of *The Exorcist*, during the break that the two priests need to take from expelling satan from the little girl, the younger asks the elder in despair why such a thing could be allowed to happen - how could someone so innocent be treated so badly? What had she done to deserve this? The older priest replies, "I

think the point is to make us feel disgusting, unworthy of love.” One of the dangers of the current moment is that we will allow Trump and the noise around him to project what looks like their own self-loathing onto the rest of us; that we will allow a deeply dysfunctional individual to define our lives for us.

We hear a lot about resistance, and this can be a useful posture, but the first resistance must be to the idea that we deserve this distress, that there is nothing we can do about it, and that our political opponents are less than us.

I think we would be better served by checking into the hospital of contemplation, that we might find our feet, breathe, and know that the good is more real than we can imagine. When I find myself in distress these days, I’m trying to pay attention to a simple four step process taught me by Mahan Siler. Feet - Breath - Allies - Wonder. And when I say *simple*, I mean *really really simple*. The kind of simple that seems so obvious we might disregard it without realizing we’re forgoing astonishing gifts.

So let’s try it.

Seriously - wiggle your toes. Slowly, up and down, while pressing the balls of your feet into the ground. Then take deep, filling breaths. Do it for a few minutes every day.

Then connect with allies: friends on the journey, inspirational figures of history, even fictional characters. It can be anyone who calls to your mind a sense of solidarity, safety, and community.

And finally, look for the wonder in every painful situation. The early twentieth century Irish activist Roger Casement wrote of the beautiful butterflies he saw by the side of the road, and the handsome young men, on his journey to document human rights abuses under the Belgian King Leopold’s oppression of the Congo. Beautiful butterflies and handsome men, mingling for attention with the cruelty humans can do to each other. Casement knew what we need to rediscover: that life is lived mostly in the in-between spaces, of sacred and profane, pain and healing, ecstasy and despair. It is possible to find happiness amid distress; or at least to know that we lament because we believe for



something better. Our tears deepen our memories of hope. And when we look at a situation clearly enough, we will find wonder in it.

And with these four steps in mind, we might consider the rest of the seven principles:

**2: The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better**

Are we police officers whose primary purpose is to control the behavior of others, whether well-meaning folk who stumble into using the “wrong” terminology, or those who try to enact laws that harm the marginalized? Or could we be better served by seeing ourselves as the pioneers of a new story?

**3: The duty of privilege is absolute integrity**

This means we take responsibility for learning about the advantages you have, whether you believe them to be earned or not, and using that power to serve the common good. And when we notice the places where we lack power, it is from there that we may learn to ask for help.

**4: Tell the truth, which also means understanding context**

Seek wisdom, not merely “facts,” and treat the media and cyberspace as an overgrown garden, some of which is well tended, some of which is toxic. Spend too long in there, and it will trigger allergies.

**5: With those who are targeted, threatened, or otherwise vulnerable, commit to witness, solidarity, and when necessary, protection.** Start by seeking conversation with people you can actually see in front of you, in your own local communities.

**6: With political opponents: build bridges at the local level**

Find ways to ask the question: What is it like to be you?

And finally, as Garrison Keillor says,

**7: Be well, do good work, and keep in touch**

This is a difficult moment. It's also a beautiful one. It's also just a *moment* - not an era, or an epoch, or a generation. Just a moment. Some of us are suffering. Some of us are working hard. Some of us are realizing that we have lots of opportunities, right now, to devote ourselves to love - of the transcendent, of ourselves, of our neighbors, no matter who they may be?

The English poet Christopher Fry wrote, in *A Sleep of Prisoners*

“Thank God our time is now when wrong  
Comes up to face us everywhere,  
Never to leave us till we take  
The longest stride of soul folk ever took.

Affairs are now soul size.  
The enterprise is exploration into God.

Where are you making for?

It takes so many thousand years to wake,  
But will you wake for pity's sake?”

Will we wake?

Will we expand your vision beyond the present moment - to not see merely the pain and trouble in the world, but the beautiful butterflies too?

Will we live only in fear and lament at how some things seem to not be working out the way we want them to? Or will we wake to a different way of seeing things: the fact that perhaps as never before, there are lots of opportunities to practice what we believe?

I recently walked about three hundred miles of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Spain, an ancient pilgrimage route along which there are hostels every few



kilometers, and people everywhere looking for a reset in life. It's hard to put into words what I learned, and I'm sure the lessons will continue to reverberate for a long time.

But if I could say something about what seems to be true for me now, it is this:

No matter what, love is stronger than death.

People are the same everywhere.

And kindness is waiting. All it takes is for someone to go first.

So let's consider this: could we let our pain and fear fuel our loving action for the common good? Could we allow our anxiety to trigger us into the present? To see how far we've come, to know that this is not the Trump *era*, but the Trump *moment*, as well as the moment when we have more opportunity to practice what we believe. That the path to happiness is, as Naomi Klein says, to ask not just what we want to say "No" to, but what is the bigger Yes?

## GIVE ME DIRT - Steve Daugherty

*The News.* Talking heads stare back at us each evening, their mouths framed in the center of the screen. If the TV is mounted on the mantle, their feet dangle just above the coals of the fireplace. I don't watch, except for those times I do.

One recent night, the host introduced and welcomed his panel: one in the studio and two others via satellite. The delay afforded by the satellite made the responses of the two almost look like thoughtful speech. If only we all had five seconds forced between another's sentence and our own. *Thanks for having me*, said each of the well-centered mouths. The topic of the evening was the US President, one whose ubiquitous attachment to everything makes Kevin Bacon's six degrees seem tenuous. I don't know why I continued watching but I did. And it was clear seven or eight minutes into the broadcast that the panel wasn't assembled to discover anything, or to draw disparate ideas together. It was a handful of different voices saying the exact same thing. And I didn't disagree with any of it, which was perhaps exactly what made me cringe. All four of them were beating the same drum with different sticks and there I was, cultured and conditioned to bob my head to the rhythm, even as others a house or two over watched different mouths on different TV's say different things they'd been groomed to nod at.

I felt sick. How can the conversation advance when that isn't what sells toothpaste and cell service and sedans?

So I changed the channel. It occurs to me now that walking away didn't occur to me at the time. I wanted to have my preferences served to me I guess, just less blatantly. My dad used to call TV the *boob tube*, and it would be years before I learned he wasn't referencing breasts.

I stopped a few channels over on NOVA, Latin for *The New*. The show was about *folds*, a theme so mundane I holstered the remote just to see how that could ever amount to an hour of grant-funded programming. I was immediately enthralled. Leaves and beetle wings and flowers and sea sponges and art, multiplied folds every one of them. My breath was taken. The natural world, our dear Mother, complex and beautiful, with or

without our noticing, layered like vintage garments in wooden chests we prop our feet upon. Moving gently, quietly, perpetually, unmoved by our flared anxieties driving us to postpone happiness, declare our wars, and obsess on the ludicrous. The president and Kevin Bacon have two degrees of separation by way of *The Associate* and *He Said, She Said*. I had to know.

It's too simplistic to say that my response to broadcast fighting was fleeing. There's a time for running away from it, and I do that. Fleeing is a frequent necessity for those more interested in their own emotional health. Then there are those lucky ones who have turned away from political discourse entirely, saying from privilege, "I don't pay any attention to that garbage," as the outcome of it all on their particular existence is roughly negligible. Still others flee one cable news channel and land on another, priding themselves on forming a superbly reasoned philosopher's balance by gulping from both sides of the glass teat. Never mind the inescapability of bias for the human experience, and that it's ultimately toothpaste, cell service and sedans over on that channel as well. These are the Statlers and Waldorfs—those curmudgeonly balcony muppets—criticizing the show as ones unaware that they're on the very same stage.

Initially I was fleeing, yes. But soon after I serendipitously remembered that there is other programming whose focus is more real. Here were these ladybug wings and white birch leaves, respectively unfolding and expanding in slow motion and high-speed. And here was I feeling real awe, both in what I was being shown and in how it was saving me as fast and as profoundly as the previous channel had dragged me to hell. So I went outside. It was late, but I went. Renewal. I remembered that in good spiritual practice we don't just listen to "both perspectives"—as if there were ever two—but far more we say yes to the whispered invitation to spontaneously go barefoot in our lawn, to go wading in a stream, to go staring at birds and bugs and big Joshua pines. To make contact. We say yes to the whisper to recenter ourselves so that the louder, uncentered might not take over the house.

The sky isn't falling. It's just jammed with invisible signals from commercial prophets of worry, because being enlightened has been conflated with being worried.

I tend to prefer to remember my agony over any bliss. I can sit alone in my house and rehearse my pains and my angers, my vengeful fantasies and my accounts receivable. It's the safest way to marinate I think, staying angry and afraid so that I can avoid getting hurt or disappointed again. Vigilance, as I understand it, means I'm paying attention. That way, in some distant future, I'll be able to look back fondly on how my persistent angst kept me from anything that could make me unhappy.

But it's hard to write out a revenge manifesto with river water swirling around my knees. It's hard to hear the echoes of my own childhood traumas when my ears are full of birdsong. It's hard to believe that I can participate in setting the world right by being pissed off for the right cause, with the right hyperbole and backed with the right hyperlinks to the right articles, when a birch tree is teaching me origami. In fact, I wonder how legitimate our righteous indignation about life on this planet can be if our feet almost never touch anything but socks and carpet and our fingernails don't have any earth under them. Perhaps we shouldn't take in or talk about the news, let alone allow it to cause us tension, until we gloriously capable hominids have been *renewed* in the greater context in which these lives of ours are unfolding. Don't give me the dirt, give me dirt!



## **CONTESTED SLEEP - Bill Ramsey**

*Note: The poem following this article contains a reference to offensive language.*

I wanted to take you right to the verses, to my Early April Chill poem, but then I realized that you might need to know a bit more about the contested sleep from which I awoke. So here are a few snapshots:

As a young child, I learned to wiggle my bare toes in the hot red clay of the rural Jim Crow South, in the shadow of the Stone Mountain of Dr. King's dream.

And then, I grew up in a Whitefish Bay, a suburb along Lake Michigan's western shore. What I did not know then is that folks 20 blocks south of us in north Milwaukee called my tranquil village "White Folks Bay."

After another move, this time to northern New Jersey, my adolescence was refined, if any adolescence is ever refined, on weekend night excursions through the streets of Greenwich Village, visiting coffee houses, piano bars, and small theaters.

In 1961, when I was 13, I was spending a sultry segment of my summer with relatives back in rural Georgia. A progressive mayor of Atlanta chose my uncle Herbert, an English major turned high school football coach, to monitor the desegregation of the city's pools. Herbert, with a promise of cool dips, invited me to spend a day on the job with him.

When we approached the first pool, I looked down through the cyclone fence on a shallow end and a deep end filled with only black bodies. Herbert said, "Get your towel and go for a swim." I jumped in and was greeted warmly. When we returned to his car, he picked up a clipboard lying between us on the seat, and placing a mark beside the name of that pool, winked at me and said, "That one's desegregated."

A year later, my father took me out to the side yard of the farm house where he had grown up and handed me my grandfather's pistol. He set up one of my grandfather's tobacco cans on a tree stump, and together we paced off the distance. Dad stood over

my shoulder, bracing my arm against the recoil, as I aimed and fired at Sir Walter Raleigh.

After a few rounds, he told me that the last time he had seen this pistol, his father had placed it in a leather holster under his suit coat and drove into town, where he and other armed men stood on the courthouse steps, pistols drawn to prevent African Americans from registering to vote. The pistol's cold steel weighed heavy in my hand. The following year, in the fall of 1963, newly settled in the hills of northern New Jersey, I tried to insist on taking part in a Presbyterian youth group field trip to join a Newark picket line for equal access to housing. My parents refused to let me go.

A few years ago, I was astounded to discover a letter dated around the same time, September 20, 1963, in which I railed against the desegregation of my suburban high school. There they were, my words, yes even the "N" word, written in my own sprawling handwriting, echoing the words I had heard a month earlier that summer as my Georgia relatives discussed the "change that was gonna come."

So I left for college a very conflicted young person. Divergent models of adulthood were contending for my soul. They included an unlikely bunch of characters: Walt Whitman, Barry Goldwater, Joan Baez, Martin Luther King, Bob Dylan, Billy Graham, Buffy Saint Marie, and more closely, older cousins who were Kappa Alpha fraternity men at Emory and older beat friends with whom I had gathered to read poetry and make music.

My sophomore year, I found myself, on the one hand, a fraternity brother at a small conservative college, selling my Bob Dylan record albums to pay off a fraternity house poker debt.

And on the other hand, I was a wide-eyed participant in the October 21st, 1967 March on the Pentagon, facing a line of military police, as a young woman placed a daisy in the barrel one of the MP's rifles. We were frightened young people on both sides of that line.

I stood on the steps of the Pentagon, uncertain of what would come next, and wearing the wool topcoat that my father bought for me in lower Manhattan, looking more like an FBI agent than an anti-war demonstrator.

So, now you have a few snapshots from my contested sleep. Here are the verses that came later:

### **An Early April Chill**

I, too, had a dream,  
an adolescent fantasy  
a young lad's longing.  
It was not to be deferred,  
a brother initiating others –  
a child of privilege – grown up and  
exercising my birthright to exclude.

Now the dream was within reach,  
but in a cabin near the border  
of Virginia and North Carolina,  
I reached the limits of privilege.  
The woods outside – brutal,  
brothers hazing others .

Paddles pounded backsides,  
gagged compliant pledges,  
naked, blindfolded and cold ,  
 chests scoured and bleeding.  
 Treacherously, we passed on  
our proud, proper traditions.

Fleeing an early April's chill,

we sought the cabin's warmth,  
while our initiates sat on ice.  
The radio's soul music subsided.  
A bulletin from Memphis –  
a bullet pierced my heart.

Shouts fired across the room.  
Ear to the radio, I took cover.  
as a brother's bravado broke in ,  
"Someone finally got the nigger."  
Where was I? In who's company?  
"Brothers for life," we had pledged.

Were we now brothers for death,  
our secluded souls on ice?  
In silence I left these brothers,  
I left when I heard he was dead,  
I left when I heard their revelry,  
I left aching and shaking to be free.

The road out of those woods  
twisted as I churned within,  
swaying to a distant tempo,  
with a momentum beyond me.  
It became a byway to others,  
at last, my sisters and brothers.

A decisive break away,  
An incisive breaking open,  
an unordered about face,  
no time to teeter-totter,  
my whereabouts lost,  
my where with all found.

A turning – a touchstone,  
a moment that mattered,  
a hint of equity's clarity,  
a cusp – no turning back –  
behind me all that ranking,  
ahead the way leveled.

Why did he have to fall  
and breathe his last  
for me to turn and  
breathe free at last?

*Bill Ramsey April 4, 1998*



## MY AWAKENING - David Wilcox

Spring is here, and my bicycle has been in a state of suspended animation. Suspended from a hook in the garage. But the warm scented air tells me it's time. I take a quick outdoor shower this morning and go straight to the garage in a towel, 'cause everything I need is there.

The bike and the helmet are there and the helmet is full of the gloves and the sunglasses. There's the bag that has the shorts and the jersey and the shoes and socks. So I'm standing there naked in the garage. I step into my cycling shorts and pull them up to about knee level. And I open the tube of the thing that makes long distance bicycling possible. Chamois butter. I take a little dab—spread it right there on the center of the shorts, pull them up, and Whoa! I feel that little chill thrill as the cold chamois butter hits right where the seat and I will meet. But I know it'll warm up quick. I get the jersey zipped up, and I get the socks on. I get the shoes on, and I get the helmet on. I put the gloves on. I put the glasses in the back jersey pocket (I'll wait for the downhill for those) and I lift the bike down from the hook and set the wheels on the ground.

And I can feel I have to pump up the tires 'cause the bike has been waiting a long time. So, I get the big red tire pump which has a long throw, so, you know, you have to lift the handle way up and then straighten the arms as you push down, and then with a bend of the knees give it weight so the last part of the stroke gets that 100 pounds of pressure in those tires. Then disconnect the hose from the presta valve.

(psssssssss)

And then, I lift the bike—ahh, it's so light. The titanium frame is a work of art and a miracle of science. Drop the bike an inch or two and feel the tires land firmly, tuned and vibrant.

Yes. It's time. Walk with the bike out of the garage and hear the clip clop clip clop as the cleats on the bottom of the cycling shoes click on the concrete. At the same time I hear the tick tick tick tick tick of the freewheel ratchet. I walk out of the garage and into the sun. I make sure the water bottles are fresh and full and swing a leg over, click that cleat

into the pedal, and I hear it snap home and lock. And then, we're rolling. Click the other pedal in...The first downhill is cold 'cause my blood's not moving yet, but as soon as I'm on the uphill, then, I'm In The Line-up. And what I mean by "In The Lineup" is that I see the world from the point of view of a bicycle rider. And I have seen a lot of the world from a bicycle. And it *all* comes back to me. All at once. It's a familiar way of seeing, and it's not just what I see.

I mean, I see my two hands on the handlebars, on the hoods of the brake levers. I see it in my field of vision, but just in front of the handlebar is the hub that's turning. And of course below that, there's the point of contact where the wheel is touching the ground. And of course, at the place where the wheel touches the ground, *that* part of the wheel is not moving; it is *one* with the pavement. The *top* of the wheel of course is going twice as fast as I am, but halfway up, right there in the middle, that's where the hub is that holds the fork that connects to the frame that moves me forward at the speed I'm going.

And I know, I know, even just thinking about all that, I am re-inventing the wheel. But why not? Because the wheel has re-invented me. I have been changed by this beautiful, efficient mechanism of transformation transportation. I have traveled all over Europe—in Italy and France, and Switzerland and Spain, and Portugal and the UK. I have traveled from the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington state all the way down to Florida. I have traveled up Georgia and the whole length of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Skyline Drive and up into Vermont and New Hampshire, Maine, and Nova Scotia. I have traveled all the way down, corner to corner, ocean to ocean, all the way to California. And I *feel* all those places when I snap back into this way of seeing. I click back into this rhythm of the long uphill, when I have that breath:

Whoo- Whoo - Whoo...

Three strokes in and two strokes out. The steady rhythm that gets all that oxygen in my blood. All that oxygen in my brain. That's PART of what I mean by In The Lineup. That's part of the long uphill, but there's more. There's also the angle where my gaze meets the road. My gaze rides the road about 20 feet in front of me. I'm just looking for any sparkle of glass. I'm looking for any stick or crack to avoid. And when my gaze is riding the road at that angle, something seems to get sharpened.

It's sort of like what the Wizard told me. I met the Wizard at the farmers' market in Santa Cruz. I'd been riding; I was hungry and of course, when you're on a bicycle trip you can eat so much great food. So yes, I had the smoothie, and, YES, it was awesome, (California) and then I had the savory crepe with a little Sriracha. And then, I had that little paper cup of the sipping chocolate. Just the sample size. But it was so rich and righteous with that cayenne kick, it was delectable. And I sipped it slowly as I looked around the whole farmers' market. And the first thing I saw of the Wizard was his Volkswagen bus. It was a 1969, kind of a Horizon Blue. He had it right behind his little canopy tent there at the farmers' market. It was his sharpening booth.

He had this amazing wheel: a big German-made knife-sharpening wheel that turned so slowly. And there was a jig that would clamp any blade, so that you could bring the blade down onto the stone wheel, at the best angle. That's what the Wizard knows. That's what anyone who really knows how to hone things knows: The Angle. When you meet anybody who's really good at what they do, they know that the love they have of what they do, creates a microcosm of wisdom that they can shine onto the rest of their life. They can see the world that way. So I talked with him about the lessons of sharpening. About keeping the consistent angle. Because that wheel turns slow and steady, and the knife blade actually goes edge-first, toward the oncoming ribbon of road. That circular stone turns toward the blade as if the blade is trying to shave the stone. But of course, as the stone is shaved, the blade is honed. And the Wizard can tell by the feel in the blade. He can also tell by the sound, when the right amount of metal is ground down, when the cutting edge is now present on the surface. What the Wizard knows is the benefits of keeping that consistent angle.

I smile. I know. I've seen a lot of the world from that angle. And yes, when you get enough objectivity on it sure enough, the world does have that curve. You can see the wheel of the horizon line. But when I ride that wheel at ground level, when I see the world coming to me, my gaze meets the road at that precise angle. My gaze is riding the road 20 feet in front of me, moving forward across that surface: there is a sharpening of my consciousness that happens. And it's not just the blood to the brain, and it's not just the memories. It's not just the dream of some distant ocean that I will draw inevitably

into my horizon. It's a method of honing the way I see. I agree with what the Wizard told me in his tent. He was talking about his beautiful German-made wheel with the jig on it that holds the blade at the precise angle. Yes, and, the angle of my gaze, as my eyes ride the road 20 feet in front of me is just the same.

It's the cutting edge of the present moment, the cutting edge of the present moment that is resting on the ribbon of road that is moving toward me, running under me, this turning wheel, this abrasive surface that hones my consciousness by cutting away the dullness. This bicycle is the jig that sets my eye at the precise angle on the world that I call the Lineup. And when I'm in the Lineup, I see, between my hands, the handlebar, yes, the hub, the point of contact, the wheel that's turning. Yes, of course it's all a big, blue, beautiful wheel that's turning. Yes. Of course the arc of the story of my life makes sense. It's not just the blood going through my brain at this pulse rate. It's the familiar frame of reference that aligns me with this point of view. It's the cutting edge. So when the Wizard told me his wisdom about how to hone away the dullness, I said YES!

I understood. I have a wheel in my life too. And it sharpens me. So I said: Thank you.

And I knew, that the sipping chocolate would get me up the next hill just fine. So I said goodbye to the Wizard, and I walked my bike out of the Santa Cruz farmers' market. Clip clop clip clop clip clop. Tick, tick, tick, tick...and I got to the edge of the pavement, and I swung a leg over. I heard the cleat lock into the pedal with a click. And I'm back. I'm back in the same place I always go. I look at the world through the Lineup. I find a gear that suits the slope, and as I turn the pedals, I turn this big, blue, beautiful wheel toward me. My eyes—out in front—riding the rolling road at the familiar angle. And sure enough, I find my edge. This is my Awakening.

## A GAME OF TWO HALVES - Mike Riddell

I spent the first half of my life trying to make a name for myself. Not that I ever admitted this dark secret to anyone else. I preferred people to perceive me as I portrayed myself: a gentle, kind, insightful, and humble Christian man. In truth I was manipulative and ambitious. I felt I was on the way up in the admittedly small world of the Church. In hindsight I don't despise that drive—I just wish I had have felt more able to be honest to myself and others.

It's the task of the first tranche of life to live out of the ego, and to seek success in the terms that we have absorbed from the group in which we live. All of our drivers are external, often involving family, career, and financial security. I wasn't aware of all this while it was happening, but like many things it has become clear in retrospect.

The high point of this upward trajectory came around the age of 41. For the first time I was invited to speak at Greenbelt Arts Festival, the annual gathering of people of faith who find themselves a little out of place in other environments. The invitation came on the back of my first book that had been published both in New Zealand and the UK.

I was in my element. I got to hang out with some of my heroes in the artists' zone, and dance to the music of Midnight Oil and The Proclaimers. People seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say, and my sessions were well attended. I met with my new publishers up in Oxford, who actually put me up in a hotel for the night. It was all heady stuff.

That was the beginning of a period when I was writing and speaking regularly. Once or twice a year I did international tours sharing my wisdom with people who would pay to receive it. One memorable occasion was on Orcas Island off the coast of Seattle; a small group gathered at a luxury retreat to eat fine food, drink wine, and sit around discussing my thoughts on the future of Christianity. I was rewarded substantially in US dollars.



It seemed I had everything I was hoping for. But it was something of a duplicitous life. Back in New Zealand I was pastor of a small urban church, comprised substantially of psychiatric patients and other misfits. One parishioner brought me down to earth by suggesting he and I were very much alike. He asked if I shared his experience of brain damage.

There was a disconnect between my role as an international speaker and that as a rather ordinary man in a small context back home. Which of these stories was the truth, and which of them a fabrication? The duplicity ate at my soul, and I worked out my angst in a poem that included the lines:

*I observed a man  
living my life.  
He carried it off  
with surprising ease,  
dispensing smiles  
like painkillers.*

Unbeknownst to me, this was the first inkling of the arising of the Self, that deep identity that only looms above the horizon in middle life. It was the neglected core of my being, determined not by the expectations of others but by the nature of the soul within. I didn't welcome this visitation, as it seemed to run counter to my life thus far. But I might as well have resisted the rising of the moon.

Through much pain and time and deconstruction, I came to a place where I was ready to put away my former life in order to become myself. I resigned from my role as minister, and over a period of years began to turn down speaking engagements. I saw with a fresh clarity that I had become something of an entertainer for the Christian left wing, and began to doubt whether that was a meaningful contribution to be making.

I set out to try to be a writer in the public realm. The net result was anonymity and a loss of frequent flier miles. That external approbation which had fueled my ambition quickly dried up. This transition dealt serious blows to my ego but nourished my soul. I

lost fans and gained integrity. My income reduced to negligible levels, and I was now reliant on the earning power of my wife to support me.

My life had become a game of two halves. In the first I was successful, recognized, and rewarded. In the second I became unknown, indigent, and vulnerable. And learned who I was. Previously my ambition and achievement blinded me to a withering inner life. I pursued the goals of others. Now I began to discover the shape of my own desires, and accept the presence of my shadows. I was free to be my Self.

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? I understand now that when we offer false versions of ourselves, we diminish not only our own lives but those of others. They are not so much impressed by our great abilities as constrained by them. Honesty, acceptance, and vulnerability are the conditions that encourage all of us to find our way in the world, rather than be crushed by false expectations.

Recently I completed a memoir, reflecting on the course of my life. I wrote this: "For all my struggles to 'be' someone, in the end it has come down to recognizing that I'm already someone. And that who I am is not so much the total of my achievements as it is the degree to which I've been able to live my life freely from the inside. The greatest challenge delivered in our small stories is to become who we are, rather than who we think we should be, or who other people want us to be. To be me is the gift I have to bring to the world."

## **A LONGING THAT HAD NO NAME - Michelle LeBaron**

I was haunted for years by the thought that it might happen: a startling deathbed revelation that a core belief on which I had built my life was faulty. I would see in an instant how hundreds or thousands of micro and macro decisions had issued from a false premise. Scientists encounter this phenomenon frequently in research, and have to go back philosophically and methodologically to the fork in the road and choose a different direction. But I would have no opportunity to do that, and would die immersed in regret amplified by realizing my unlived lives too late.

And then it happened. I recognized that I had told myself an untrue story for years. I had indeed acted upon it in ways I regretted. The saving grace was that this happened not on my deathbed, but in my mid-forties.

Let me set the scene. My parents were pre-war prairie babies who lived through The Depression on dusty farms with seven siblings each, only to have that suffering replaced by the dangers and deprivations of war as their adolescence bloomed. They learned hard work and forbearance, making it through long winters on carrots and potatoes from their root cellars. My mother lamented even as an older adult that she never had a bicycle growing up. My father hoed beets and shot hoops in the Mormon church across the street from a house that the frigid wind blew straight through. Neither knew much about what would come to be called emotional intelligence. They married at twenty, and six weeks later, my father left her for over two years to serve a Mormon mission in South Africa. At the time, getting to South Africa was a weeks-long proposition via train to New York, then ships to Southampton and Cape Town. The only communication they had were weekly handwritten letters. My mother lived with her parents in a small Canadian town and worked as a medical receptionist to save money for their married life to come, shelving her dream of becoming a nurse. Though they had planned this separation before they married, she never forgave him for leaving.

I was born ten years after the Paris Peace Treaties that concluded World War II, into a very different time, a time of hope and mod cons. Fed on formula and then things from boxes and cans, I had a mother who embraced every possible labor saving strategy. Her

fury was never far beneath the surface. So I grew up hiding. I hid my feelings, even from myself. I hid the shame I felt when I overheard her telling her friends that she had not wanted to have me at all.

My father hid, too; absorbing his work like a sponge, coming home late, saturated and spent. On the rare evenings he remained at home, he wound the only curly telephone cord into the only private space in the house (the bathroom) and talked for hours to work friends.

So I believed I had been abandoned. This perception was reinforced by a broken marriage and early relationships in which I abandoned partners before they could leave me. Many other things issued from this belief, including a high level of activation; I was always ready to respond to someone precious leaving me high and dry and thus became defensively self-reliant and carefully in control. I hid my quest for authenticity inside an outer image of sincerity. My choice of a professorial career – one of the only sectors where jobs can be counted on – was no doubt related to my wobbly beginnings.

Only later did I see that I had a key role in recreating the very abandonment that was a core aspect of my childhood. It happened by surprise. I was at a workshop on the Enneagram, a personality system developed by a Chilean psychologist Oscar Ichazo and further elaborated by Helen Palmer and Richard Rohr, amongst others. In this system, there are nine personality types. The theory holds that each of us choose one of the nine very early in life in response to our realization that the world will not respond to our needs as they arise. I had worked with the system for several years, having self-identified as a point three. Threes value achievement above all else. They have huge energy and the chameleon-like capacity to blend in and succeed. They tend not to be aware of their feelings, instead driving themselves to achieve more and more in a quest for elusive self-worth.

This description, while true in some ways, had always fit me imperfectly. As I walked past the point four group that afternoon, I overheard them speaking, and I thought to myself, "Now those people make sense." It was then that I realized that I was more like these point fours than the point threes with whom I had identified for so long. Richard

Rohr writes that “the life of Fours is shaped by longing....” and that they believe they need to make an impression so they are not abandoned *again*. As I joined this group and we shared similar life stories, I not only felt found in the Enneagram. I felt found in my life in a new way as I realized that my capacity to live from equanimity rather than longing arose from my relationship with my grandmother Luella.

Luella had spent long hours with me as a child, folding origami, relating stories, and playing card games. She said our surname “LeBaron” was sexy, supplanting my longing for the Scottish or English names of so many of my peers. She gave me her piano, an old upright where I had perched, mesmerized, as she played rousing marches. I still treasure the yellowed pages of that crumbling book of music. Luella was there for me when my parents were too busy or too troubled with their own struggles. She was the finger in the dyke; she saved me from the free fall of emotional abandonment.

Realizing that I had grown up with someone whom I completely trusted not to abandon me freed me. I embraced my vocation as a peace-builder in new ways, writing on the positive value of emotions in conflict. I began to work with dancers and artists to find out what they knew about conflict and I was willing to explore vulnerability in new ways. As the imagined demons of my inner tortured child receded, I welcomed the life-giving understanding of what Luella had bestowed on the sensitive child I had been. I found myself more able to be with others in pain. The patient and reliable accompaniment of a body psychotherapist brought me to a place where I could have honest conversations with my adult children about the legacies of my journey for them.

My work continues. I can still fall into a place of longing even in the midst of beauty and joyful times. I can catch myself re-enacting old scripts of abandonment. But now, in my sixties, I can often interrupt these scripts, replacing them with a lived-in faith. This faith extends not only to the unseen world of spirit, but – importantly – to the tangible world of relationships where I live out a serendipitous realization that I owe my resilience to a grandmother who found time to sit beside me and listen even to my unspoken hurts and dreams. These days, I have found freedom, too, in realizing that my suffering parents had their own distorted perceptions, and that their ways of coping



showed mostly the limits of their imaginations. They weren't personal rejections of the little curly-haired girl who asked too many questions.

I had never intended to lie to myself. But touching the deeper truth that one important person received and loved me as I was, allowed me to comfort and heal my abandoned inner child. This realization opened a new path accenting beauty not only in my work, but also in my relationships and my home. It made me more courageous in telling the truth to self and others, even when the news was not good.

The fear of dying with regret about unlived lives no longer haunts me in the same way. I am living more and more of the life I sensed as a child was mine to live, a life that is no longer hidden inside the longing that had no name.

## A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL DOWD

*Michael Dowd wants to confront us with reality, but for him, that's good news. A self-described Christian evolutionary naturalist, Dowd invites his audiences to radically consider our lives in light of the challenges to our expectations inherent within climate change and an economic system that so obviously doesn't meet our needs for community, purpose, and sustainability. Despite his clear-eyed facing of the "great contraction" currently underway, he is not a prophet of despair. Indeed, his confidence that humans will adapt and live better when forced to by circumstance leads him to assert that the contraction will be accompanied also by a "great homecoming". We need to do what we can, he says, to love something, learn something, leave something behind, and carry something forward. There are uncertainties on the horizon, of course, but there's no time like the present to get busy planting trees. When we spoke to him recently, we began by asking him to describe his childhood.*

*Michael Dowd: I'm the eldest son in an Irish Catholic family, so I was expected to be a priest. I went to Catholic school for seven years, loved the smells and bells and the ritual and actually never really got traumatized. I've never experienced any kind of strong negativity in that context that I've then had to recover from, which I'm grateful for. My parents divorced when I was 12. We moved to Miami, and I sort of stopped going to church in my mid-teenage years and then went with a friend to a Baptist youth camp. That's where I was first exposed to a fundamentalist evangelical interpretation of religion. It impacted me and then I struggled with what I would now call my "mismatched instincts", with drugs and alcohol and sexual stuff in my teenage years. I graduated high school in 1976 and went to university one year, but just partied all the time, so did not really get much done and joined the army, spent three years in Germany. That's where I sobered up, and had a born-again [Christian] experience in an Assemblies of God context, hitchhiked around Belgium and France, and spent a week in Israel. In Ireland I stayed with some Irish missionaries, and that's when I felt the call to ministry.*

Of course what that meant to me back then was "getting people saved because Jesus is coming back". I didn't think we'd see the end of the 20th century. I got out of the army, went to an Assemblies of God college in Missouri. Later I went to what was then called Eastern Baptist Theological seminary, focused on pastoral care and psychotherapy. I

also got into neuro-linguistic programming and hypnotherapy, really into the healing arts and psychological transformation.

Got married, had three kids, pastored three churches. One in Western Massachusetts where I was the town parson of the only church in town, then in Southeast Ohio and then my third one in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I encountered the work of Thomas Berry and Joanna Macy and those who are really taking a science-based understanding of the history of everyone and everything, or what's now called big history, and interpreting it in inspiring ways. I wrote my first book *Earth Spirit*, a handbook on nurturing an ecological Christianity in 1990, and then just continued to immerse myself in everything related to ecology and evolution.

And then I did sustainability work for five years; my job was essentially to help neighbors come together, four to eight households within two or three block radius and meet for several months, using this Eco Team workbook and supporting each other and using less water, driving less, composting, recycling, basically lowering their carbon footprint and their ecological impact, but also building trust and a greater sense of community with their neighbors. Many of these people had never even met their neighbors before. So it helped build sort of friendlier, healthier, safer neighborhoods also while shifting people's habits. It was really about habit change.

Did that for five years and that's where I met Connie Barlow, my wife, a science writer. I had become familiar with her through her writing, her book *Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science*, which is really the spirituality of sciences. It's one of the leading books in the field of religious naturalism. And so I really sort of began adoring her before I even met her. We fell in love in 2000, got married in 2001 and we've been living on the road for the last 15 years. We've traveled North America, we've spoken to about 2,200 groups literally from atheists to evangelicals.

Essentially what we speak about is where science, inspiration and sustainability intersect. And the first 10 or 12 years I was more of a techno-optimist and had more of a linear understanding of evolution and a linear understanding of human history. I've since rejected that in the last four years and fully embraced climate change and

sustainability and peak oil and have much more of a cumulative but cyclical understanding of human history, that in the same way that our bodies grow old and die for very understandable reasons, civilizations become great and then decline for very understandable reasons. We've got hundreds of cultures that we know about, but we have only 24 complex city-based civilizations and they all died in the same way. They all go through a very predictable process of catabolic collapse where they overextend, where they can afford to maintain and start feeding on themselves. And that's where we are. We're four decades into global industrial civilizational catabolic collapse.

So what I'm trying to do now is essentially communicate some pretty scary stuff from this big picture perspective that helps people move through denial and the other stages of grief because the death of a worldview is no less traumatic than the death of a spouse or the death of a parent. I try to help people really stay present to a naturalistic interpretation of religion, something grounded more like evidential understanding of reality that inspires them. How do we stay present to the bad news, the challenges, the things that are now inevitable, that are not problems that can be solved but predicaments we have to now adapt to and live with, many of them of our own doing. And ultimately come out to what Joanna Macy calls "active hope", to be inspired to move through denial and anger and depression, bargaining and all that to not only acceptance but then to action based on a vision. It's a possibility that's not pie-in-the-sky, it's not otherworldly but local, and it nurses their souls and allows them to plant seeds for healthy forms of human culture, assuming we don't go extinct which is not a guaranteed thing, but I think we'll make it through the bottleneck. It's a deeply ecological and big picture understanding of reality then the healthy forms of religiosity and healthy forms of culture in the future can emerge and grow out of.

*The Porch:* So what is your definition of religion?

*Dowd:* Religion is the beliefs and rituals and practices that help groups live in right relationship to primary reality that is ecological integrity, which includes the air, water, soil and life on which they depend and then our social unit, our group and then ourselves. So personal wholeness, social coherence and ecological integrity are the three fundamental roles of religion, which helps us cooperate on a larger scale than our

instincts would; it helps us live in right relationship with primary reality, our social reality and our personal subjective reality.

*The Porch:* So where did it go so badly wrong?

*Dowd:* Well, it went wrong with idolatry. Idolatry isn't bowing down to statues. Idolatry is when you have an understanding of a god or primary reality that's not actually aligned with primary reality. So if your understanding of god is nearly otherworldly and that leads you then to treat what is truly primary reality - the soil and the forests and the land that sustains you and the atmosphere that sustains you - if you treat all that as an 'it' and you think you can exploit it for your benefit, you'll cause your own demise. It's only when we realize that any god who merely transcends the universe is less than a god who transcends and *includes* the universe. Any god who really transcends time and nature is less than a god that also *includes* time and nature. We need to live in right relationship to time and to nature; when we think of god or the divine or ultimate reality as only transcending time and nature we will inevitably betray the future because we have overpowered all of the constraints that the natural world naturally applies to other creatures. Our symbolic language and our tool-making ability have allowed us to overcome these limitations, so that we then become our own greatest enemy and we ultimately damage and destroy the air, water, soil and life upon which we depend which is idolatry. Human centeredness, anthropocentrism is idolatry.

*The Porch:* I remember John O'Donoghue being interviewed on the BBC and asked about did he believe Catholic doctrine and he said, "Yeah, I believe every word of it." And the presenter was really skeptical saying, "You can't be serious." His response was (paraphrased), "Well, there are three caveats. One is when looking at Catholic doctrine, I think we would need to interrogate the whole question of how hierarchy has manifested itself in Catholic history. I think we'd have to look very seriously at how the question of Eros has been dealt with in Catholic history and I think we would have to acknowledge that there has been a pathological fear of the feminine. If you look through all three of those lenses, Catholic doctrine is just fine with me."

I want to ask you something similar. In layperson's terms, what would be two or three examples of where you have seen institutional Christianity get it more right; and what would be two or three examples that are fairly typical of where institutional Christianity has got it more wrong?

*Dowd:* To my mind, it boils down to how we interpret doctrine, how we interpret dogma, how we interpret the tradition, how we interpret everything. It seems to me that almost anything religious can be interpreted in an unnatural way or in undeniable way, but not both or at least not both at the same time. So for example, interpreting the doctrine of the fall of Adam and Eve in an unnatural way is to say that a snake literally talked. Snakes don't talk except in a mythic or a dream-like or an unnatural way. So if I interpret that literally that's unnatural. To interpret it in a scientifically, evidentially, undeniable way is that if god is reality with a personality, not a person outside reality, and if we do not honor the grace limits of undeniable reality – the soil, force, water, upon which we depend as I said before – we take ourselves out of paradise and onto the path of hell and hell for our descendants. Because of our tool-making capability that seems to me only possible if we prioritize the future. If we prioritize the present over the future, our instincts will kill us.

Our original sin is about our instincts being no longer aligned with the nature of reality. These instincts will kill us individually and collectively because we have many cognitive biases programmed from millions of years with really good reason. Those will lead us in a direction that will ultimately be self-destructive if we don't prioritize the future. Our natural interpretation of Trinity is imagining the three persons of the Trinity as three otherworldly beings who reside outside the universe somewhere, but an undeniable interpretation of the Trinity is to recognize that our brains are personification machines: we give human characteristics to what's instinctual. So for me the Father or the Creator is a personification of creativity of the past, all creativity that's made this moment possible has happened in the past. And when I personify that, when I have an I-Thou relationship to the past, I'm having a personal relationship to the first person, the Trinity.

What does the past give birth to? Well, the future. Why is it that all the themes of the monotheistic traditions, especially about the messiah, the savior, the Christ, is all about the future? And so for me Christ is a personification of the future and having a personal relationship with Christ is allowing the future to be the primary thing that guides my actions in the present. And my suggestion is that finally the third person of the Trinity the Spirit of God, is as the Hebrews thought. For the Hebrews you don't need to believe in the Spirit God. The spirit of God was essentially a personal relationship with the breath and with the wind, and the only place you can experience the breath and the wind is in the present moment. So for me the third person of the Trinity is a relationship with a personification of the present moment.

So when I act in the present moment I am conscious of my breath, honoring the past and being guided by the past. For example, we have a lot of evidence of what sustainable cultures look like and what unsustainable cultures look like. So when I allow that past wisdom to guide me in the present so that I can be a blessing rather than curse to the future, I am living in Christ, I'm living with the future. For me asking Christ to be my Lord and Savior is a mythic way of saying I'm allowing the future to be the fundamental guiding principle of my life in the present. And that's a personal relationship to the Trinity understood in an undeniable way. The past is undeniably real, the future is undeniably real, the present is undeniably real.

Religion, if it's interpreted merely in an otherworldly, unnatural way, very quickly leads good people to do evil. Really honorable people live in dishonorable ways because their beliefs are no longer grounded in reality as revealed by evidence. We start falling into what I call the Triple Idolatries, idolatry of the written word, idolatry of the otherworldly and idolatry of beliefs. That's certainly where the monotheistic traditions have gone down a path that is now reaping its own consequence.

*The Porch:* So I can say with no degree of surprise this undeniable religion is not the religion I was introduced to. I was introduced to a religion that was about ensuring I did not go to hell when I died and hell was Dante's hell. Even though the rhetoric was life and life more abundant, ultimately how that manifested was in controlling my behavior according to certain puritanical moral code. How do you begin a conversation

with the sincerest, most goodhearted folk who have only been taught this and are terrified of questioning it, because they have internalized the notion that to even doubt is to risk eternal damnation?

*Dowd:* I don't. I'm not invited to speak in those contexts and my role in the body of life isn't that. My role in the body of life as I see it is as a mythmaker. I'm an evolutionary evangelist, I'm a sacred realist. I'm a big historian who tells the history of everyone and everything in ways that validate yet stretch and evolve the various religious interpretations. So I don't have engaged conversations like that with those kind of folk very often.

*The Porch:* So if those kind of folk are reading this interview, what's one step you could invite them to take?

*Dowd:* I would say that just think about the claim that I'm making and meditate on it, pray on it. The claim that I'm making, that every doctrine you believe in, every aspect of your faith that you've been taught can be understood in an unnatural way or an undeniable way, and what might that look like if it was interpreted in a truly undeniably real way, and just see what opens up for you.

*The Porch:* What would gathered religious practices look like in the world you're describing?

*Dowd:* I think gathered religious practices would be about the three things I talked about before, which is right relationship to ourselves, right relationship to our group and right relationship to primary reality, the ground of our being, the literal ground of our being which includes the soil, the forest.

*The Porch:* So what does what is traditionally called worship look like? I mean literally, practically, Sunday morning 10 o'clock if you're doing it, then do you sing songs?

*Dowd:* Sure. Well, yeah, I mean songs, rituals, litanies, dances, meditations – these are all a part of the human experience. And so simply asking the question how can our



rituals and our songs and our litanies and these sorts of things reflect an ever more accurate understanding and how can they facilitate deeper, more intimate personal relationship with primary reality? I'm talking about the green aspects of primary reality with our local group, and with ourselves in terms of our own inner world, and there's a tremendous amount. One of the things I fell in love with Connie about in her book *Green Space, Green Time* is that she has rituals, science-based, evidence-based sacred rituals that help people have a more intimate personal relationship to various aspects of this one reality in which we live and move and our being, whether you call it god or the universe.

And my book *Thank God for Evolution* was trying to build on an entire movement of people who are seeing the greening of Christianity, basically seeing ecology and evolution in the same way that Augustine was trying to bring in the best platonic thought into Christianity, reformulating Christianity in that regard. Now our time is to bring in the deepest, reveal reality, what god is revealing through evidence about ecology and evolution and how do ecology and evolution transform our understanding of our own faith and then how does it help enhance our rituals and our practices and our preaching and our litanies and all our songs and hymns and all that stuff in light of embracing ecology and evolution as sacred, as holy, as revelatory.

*The Porch:* Growing up in an evangelical charismatic tradition, our songs were often about worshipping Jesus. And what intrigued me was discovering the verse The Gospels where Jesus says don't worship Me. And it seems to be one of those wonderful ironies of the more fundamentalist you are, the more you seem apt to wholesale ignore large swaths of scripture. So what do you think Jesus meant when he said, "Don't worship me but the one who sent me?"

*Dowd:* I'll tell you a story. Sister Miriam McGillis who is a nun, an organic farmer, I remember years ago a presentation she did, probably in the late '80s. She said Jesus was a finger pointing to the moon. Jesus was a finger pointing to God, to reality, to primary reality. And we've been sucking on the finger which was pointing the way to right relationship, to primary reality, social reality and personal reality. But we've been sucking on the finger rather than following the way He was pointing us to.

How the word “worship” is interpreted will make an enormous difference in the practical joy and challenges of a person’s life. I’ll use myself as an example. I used to think that worship – because I used to think of my faith in otherworldly unnatural ways rather than undeniable ways – imagining a supernatural being who resided off the planet and outside the universe. But for me it’s not otherworldly anymore. For me it’s the exultation of Spirit. There’s this joy that only a position of humility like on my knees or with my arms splayed up can honor the emotions that I’m feeling. For me worship is about honoring.

And if your understanding of worship doesn’t include honoring, then you’re missing something vitally important. For example, the idea that I can worship god as an otherworldly being and yet crush the environment or treat others in an unjust way should be considered blasphemy. Honoring god, honoring the green ecological reality, honoring the reality of evolutionary time, honoring the reality of my mismatched instincts. Living in a world as I do and you do, of supernormal stimuli worship is about choosing to allow how can I be Christian, a savior of the future and in that process be a redeemer of humanity, allow the future to guide me. So for me worship is about honoring the past, being in the present, honoring the past and being a blessing to the future, having legacy consciousness that is Christ consciousness, that is being a savior of the future in whatever little ways that I can. So honoring I think is a better word than worship, at least I find it more useful.

*The Porch:* Richard Dawkins thinks religious people are deluded, but I haven’t seen him take on or respond to this vision or religion. What’s your invitation to the new atheists?

*Dowd:* Dawkins actually wrote a letter to his 10-year-old daughter called “good and bad reasons for believing” that I was so impressed with, and he allowed me to use that letter as an appendix in my book. I would say what all of the new atheists really don’t get is the evolutionary significance of religion. Most of them just hope that religion goes away but what they mean by religion isn’t what I’m talking about and it’s not what David Sloane Wilson who is probably the leading evolutionary theorist alive today talks about: that religion is about promoting personal wholeness, social coherence and

ecological integrity, and it's not going to do that, if it has only an otherworldly unnatural understanding of the divine. What the new atheists have been attacking is this otherworldly, unnatural, trivial, impotent understanding of the divine. I'm grateful that they're playing within the body of life, but they just do not get the evolutionary significance of religion. And that's why the people I more closely align with are people coming from what I call the 'world of religious naturalism.'

We interpret all mythic language as saying something about this one reality in which we live and move and our being but the new atheists don't get the evolutionary significance of religion. They're attacking otherworldlyism and it's understandable that they're doing that and they've been doing a pretty good job of it. But they just don't get the central role of religion in making groups of people. Jonathan Haidt has this great quote. He says, "If you find 15,000 insects cooperating, you can be sure of one thing. They're genetically related." Throughout human history when you found 15,000 human beings cooperating, you can be sure of one thing. Religion is there.

*The Porch:* How do you think about the concept of an afterlife?

*Dowd:* To my mind, there's absolutely an afterlife. When I die life goes on, no question about. As a religious naturalist, it seems pretty clear that where we go to when we die is the same place we came from before we were born. That could be spoken of as coming from god and returning to god or coming from mystery and returning to mystery or coming from nothing and returning to nothing. I think all of those are legitimate. But as I often say not just humorously, if where I go to when I die isn't the same place that every other plant and animal and bacteria have gone, I'm going to be pissed.

I think the idea that we humans are uniquely blessed beyond other species is one of the things that's leading to climate chaos and another global scale catastrophes. So yes, life goes on when I'm dead, but I have one opportunity to make a difference to be a Christian, to have legacy consciousness. And Connie and I go to graveyards all the time, we visit graveyards and I'll look at a gravestone and I'll try to figure out the relationship of all kinds of stuff. You don't have to be there very long before you realize

a lot of kids died under five and a lot of women died in childbirth, but one of the things I'll do is I'll look at the gravestone of an adult and I think to myself, now whatever it is that this person may have believed about his or her consciousness or spirit or soul that transcended death, that by having that belief helped them with a good life, that's great. I just bow respect to that. But from the perspective of every life form in the universe, this guy's everlastingly dead and I am soon going to be just as everlastingly dead. And so Connie and I remind ourselves all the time that we're soon going to be everlastingly dead and thank God that we're not immortal, and that's not to deny whatever mystery goes on. I don't know how to make sense of Michael Dowd's consciousness surviving the death of his brain. And so I don't need that for deep inspiration. I live a life of almost nonstop joy, that would be an overstatement, but I live on a day-by-day basis. Connie and I have calibrated to each other, having been married for 16 years. We love each other, we have joy and lightness and happiness. And we got a few really simple tools that helped us come back to a place of 10 on a scale of 10 joy and happiness and all that kind of stuff. We're very mission-oriented, very legacy conscious and we have a very simple life. And I love my life and I am at peace with my challenges or imperfections and they don't sabotage me in the way they used to. I can live a great life, have healthy relationships, die a peaceful death and leave a sweet legacy without any otherworldly or unnatural beliefs about what happens to me after I die. But I also don't deny that people who have that belief and it's important to them and they frankly can't imagine how to live a great life or have healthy relationships or die a peaceful death or leave a sweet legacy, without that then I bow in respect to whatever otherworldly beliefs they may have.

*The Porch:* So how do you deal with the stuff in the world that you don't like or that distresses or even frightens you?

*Dowd:* Well, the same way that every other animal does, which is why animals don't stress out and get freaked out and depressed about reality. They accept reality as it is and then they make the best of it. A mantra for me is this: Okay, here's what's real, now what's possible? How do we discern what's real? Well, do we simply go on what old men and old books have told us is what's real? Or do we go on our best collective intelligence globally in terms of what god-reality has revealed through evidence about

the nature of our inner and outer and social realities? I'm always looking to find the best global collective influences about reality, including the very scary realities and stay present to those in a way that allows me to then be in a place of okay, here's what's real, now what's possible? How can I make the biggest difference for the future, for the planet in my lifetime given my unique gifts and limitations?

*The Porch:* Some of us at the moment are terrified, and some of us are actively, directly threatened. At the same time there is this historical myopia, you know, when people have been using the slogan 'now more than ever', as if this is the worst moment in human history. My view is this is probably the moment when privileged white people are more exposed to the sufferings that everybody else has always lived with than privileged white people have ever been, partly because the miracle of the Internet means privilege can't hide anywhere near like it used to, and partly because of the downside that we still haven't learned how to edit or editorialize the bombardment of information. I think there's this sense in which people think everything is happening right now to them; and the great danger of this is this falsification of anxiety causes people to act the way the way people under threat act, lashing out.

So what's a word of comfort that you could offer to people who haven't had the privilege of doing the work in the life that you've had, and who are genuinely scared right now?

*Dowd:* First of all, I think having a worldview that is aligned with the way things really are may be the most important thing. For 99% of human history, what was considered news? What we're evolutionally programmed to pay attention to, or where you can potentially make a difference? It was in your local community. And we're now exposed to things from all over the world that engages our emotions and our imaginations and take up our time in terms of talking with others and our feelings, yet we can't make any difference whatsoever. And so to go on a news fast, maybe where you check the news once a week is what I'm doing now. Limiting your exposure to what gets called the news can be a huge thing.

The guy who discovered dark matter and dark energy, he worked out the mathematics, Joel Premack and his wife, Nancy Ellen Abrams, coauthored a book called *The View from the Center of the Universe*, in which they say “Without a meaningful believable story that explains the world we actually live in, people have no idea how to think about the big picture. And without a big picture, we’re very small people.” What I’ve attempted to do in my *Standing for the Future* videos ([standingforthefuture.org](http://standingforthefuture.org)) is articulate the reality-based understanding of the big picture. And if I understand that our civilization is in decline and it’s not expanding and that we’re never going to see the kind of growth economics that we saw in the last half of the 20th century again in our lifetimes, then the world I’m living in – in my imagination – is aligned with that. So then I find ways to be a blessing, I find ways to thrive in the face of challenges, I find ways to be involved locally, in ways that are soul-nourishing to me and others around me. But if I think that because I lived and my parents and even my grandparents lived in a world where things kept getting better and more expensive and more inclusive and greater wealth and all of this and I expect that to continue throughout the 21st century, and I believe that technology is going to do that for us and we’re going to have unlimited stores of energy, then my thinking is not aligned with reality. I’m going to be constantly running up against frustrations. So if you understand for example, the rise and fall of the past 24 civilizations and that we are well into catabolic collapse, then the election of somebody like President Trump doesn’t occur to you like oh, no, this shouldn’t be. But it occurs like oh, right on schedule. This is what happens in the decline of empires and civilizations. What can we say confidently giving the fact that we got 24 previous examples of how this has happened with civilizations contract and we got a lot of scientific evidence of what happens when climate warms, which parts of the continent dry out and which gets torrential downpours and all that kind of stuff. It typically takes one or two centuries for civilization to go from its height to the Dark Age where people are farming and you got a fuel economy again, people living very simply, non-money based society. It usually takes a couple hundred years for that to be the case.

*The Porch:* Is it possible to arrive at that place, the new communitarianism without passing through blood on the streets?

*Dowd:* I don't know that we are going to have a massive blood on the streets. But I do believe that we will experience a decades-long contraction where every decade is a little bit worse than the previous one. And there are partial recoveries. When we talk about the collapse of the Roman Empire, it wasn't Mad Max, it wasn't the hordes. It was 325 years of the long descent and partial recoveries. That's the way civilizations contract and collapse.

*The Porch:* What should those of us who are beginning to wake up to the fact that the system is not going to work the way that our parents taught us it was going to work? I mean, certainly my generation has woken up to none of us have jobs for life anymore, but one of the beautiful things is my generation shares things in ways that my parents' generation didn't know how to. We're far less attached to our stuff and many of us are far less attached to their reputations. What are the steps to a new world that you would advise the average capitalist to take? A more generic way of asking that question is what's the role of money?

*Dowd:* Well, I don't know about the average capitalist but the average person living in this society...I often say to audiences is **love something, learn something, let go of something and carry something forward**. To love something means to love something green, to love something local, to love something living that's not human, that's beyond human. A couple summers ago, I spent the better part of an entire day going to these 400 trees, these baby trees and watering these trees and I tended these trees the entire summer. It's like these were my babies, my baby trees. When you think the world's going to hell in a hand basket or you're sure that things are contracting, do something on behalf of life, what Joanna Macy calls *active hope*.

How do we create systems, economic and political and local systems that help us live in right relationship to ourselves, our group and primary reality? I've spent the last four years learning all this stuff and I can't even begin to tell you, it is literally immeasurable. The quality of my life has been enhanced by understanding the nature of ecological reality, the nature of economic and political reality and the nature of the most likely future.

John Michael Greer has a book called *Collapse Now and Avoid the Rush*. Let go, use less oil, drive less, fly less, eat lower on the food chain, eat less meat, be involved more locally. The more that you can voluntarily downscale your life - we're all going to have to do this soon anyway. And so the sooner you do it ahead of time, then the more of a blessing that you can be to your neighbors and friends and family who are freaking out when they haven't thought about it and they are now forced to do it. So love something, learn something, let go of something and then carry something forward. All of us have gifts and skills that we can pass on to a younger person, that we can mentor and to the degree that we do that we feel like we're participating in this flow of life, this legacy to legacy to legacy. And so I encourage people to do that and to voluntarily downscale.

*The Porch:* Would you advise someone who has not yet bought a house to not do so?

*Dowd:* Probably yeah. I think it's quite likely that we will experience an economic downturn, every bit as big as 2008 and it could easily be as big as 1929 or 1931, '33 in the next six months or the next year or two. And so this would not be – I mean get out of debt, here's a practical thing. Get out of debt and find ways where your work, your contribution, what you do, you know, either in a barter way or that brings you money, and make your life dependent on cars and long distance transportation as little as possible.

Become friends with people who can grow food, learn to grow your own food, make it this year. You and I are talking in April. Just do something small, little plot but get your hands in the soil and participate. Thomas Berry used to famously say that gardening is an active participation in the deepest mysteries of the cosmos and it's a sacred thing and to learn to approach gardening and growing a little bit of your food and befriending farmers might be a good thing to do.

*The Porch:* I had an extraordinary experience yesterday. Outside my window – see the trees? Yesterday, I was listening to some wonderful contemporary traditional Irish music, and the wind was blowing and the trees were dancing in time with the music. It was the best moment of the day.



*Dowd:* Yes, exactly.

*The Porch:* It was the best moment of the day. Okay, let's talk about Steven Pinker's thesis in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and the people who believe that violence has significantly reduced over time, the reverse of what most people seem to think. And the conditions are in place and can't be consolidated for a continued reduction.

*Dowd:* Well, I don't believe that last piece. I've read Pinker's book, the whole of it. I think his thesis is basically correct but what he has not factored in and what most people who have a linear understanding of human history don't pay attention to, is the role of energy. Up until the late 1700s, the primary source of energy in all cultures was human and animal muscle power and timber, trees. And then when we started tapping these nonrenewable forms of concentrated dense energy, first coal and then oil and natural gas, we tapped into a reservoir of energy that was truly unimaginable.

My great mentor William Catton, the author of the book *Overshoot: The Ecological basis of Revolutionary Change*, which Connie and I both consider the single most important book we've ever read in our lives. He talks about the fundamental predicament of humanity at this time. The carrying capacity, what I call "grace limits", is the fundamental, ecological and I think theological concept. Every island, every continent, every bioregion in the planet as a whole has a limited ability to provide resources to any given species and a limited ability to absorb the waste of any given species, without its systems starting to break down. So living within the carrying capacity of your bioregion, your continent, your island, your world, is to live in such a way that you could live indefinitely. That is, you can live for thousands of generations without diminishing or destroying primary reality – the air, water, soil and life – it's living within the carrying capacity, living within the grace limits of the primary world.

Europe was achieving all kinds of population conflict, population pressure – when the "New World" was discovered and then our bugs, our diseases went ahead of us and wiped out 90% of the Native Americans before most Europeans had to interact with them. So it seems to be from the European perspective an uninhabited continent with

unlimited resources in terms of timber, in terms of food, every kind of animal you can imagine, in terms of everything. All the resources would then allow the human-animal to survive and thrive and have a great life and produce abundantly. So our population skyrocketed and our institutions all reflect the sense of limitless possibility, limitless opportunity; it really wasn't limitless, but from our vantage point it seemed to be. And we exported the limitlessness mindset and the institutions to the rest of the world. The problem is, we no longer live in a world of carrying capacity surplus that we did for the first 200 years here in North America. We now live in a world of carrying capacity deficit, that is, there're not enough resources on the planet to support 7 billion people. In fact, there're not enough resources on the planet to support 3 billion people living in the way that the most of us live.

The only reason the earth can currently support that mass is because we are drawing on half a billion years of stored energy. Well, as we burn through that which were burning through very rapidly, we've got at most 100 years or most likely several decades more of this cheap concentrated energy, human population will decline. And 250 years from now assuming humans survive, there will be more than a billion or 2 billion human beings because that's what the earth can support. So we have exported the mindset and the institutions that reflect this sense of limitlessness and abundance, yet we don't have the reality behind that.

I think it's more likely that when you look at the previous 24 civilizations that have contracted over a period of one to two centuries usually, we find violence increases and even groups contract, that is people no longer identify, it's no longer easy to be generous and compassionate in an ever-decreasing pie. When your pie is shrinking you start getting tighter about your in-group. So it doesn't mean Mad Max, it doesn't mean extensive violence, it doesn't mean mass violence, but it does mean that there's a stinginess. There's a contracting of in-group that is endemic to contracting civilizations. And we're looking at decades and even a century or two of contraction.

We have overshot the carrying capacity of the planet and now we're going to have a couple of centuries of challenge to deal with that. That doesn't mean we can't still live

great lives, have healthy relationships, die a peaceful death and leave a sweet legacy. But we're not going to do it in the same way that we did previously.

*The Porch:* So it seems to me the stinginess of which you speak is the shadow side of what you might call locally centered sharing frugality. The world that I envisage is the one in which most of the people you know would be the people you can actually see. I mean we're not saying there's going to be no Internet, although we know there may not be. But most of your life happens in the area that you can walk or hopefully share a solar-powered electric vehicle.

*Dowd:* Exactly.

*The Porch:* So how do we tell the story invitationally rather than as a threat?

*Dowd:* That's a great question and I would say it in the most short, concise mythic way is that we are experiencing both the *great reckoning* and the *great homecoming*. We have been out of right relationship to reality, whether we use secular or religious names for reality. We'd been living out of right relationship to reality for several thousand years. City-based cultures, almost by definition, live beyond the carrying capacity of the region, so they have to draw on the hinterlands for resources to survive. They have overshot the carrying capacity and city-based cultures have been doing that for 5,000 or 6,000 years.

To speak mythically, for 98 percent of our experience as humans, we lived in the garden; that is we had an intimate personal relationship of the past and intimate personal relationship of the future and intimate personal relationship to primary reality. We call it animism but it wasn't. The indigenous peoples didn't believe in spirits. They had a personal relationship to reality in all its different forms and they were forced to live in a way that ultimately was sustainable, that is where they lived unsustainably.

Human beings survive and thrive in groups of 200 or less. In fact, often 150 or less, that's where we thrive. We're tribal animals. Bees thrive in hives, wolves thrive in packs and humans thrive in tribes and we don't thrive without them and we don't have

extended families anymore. So we've been living out of right relationship to ourselves, out of right relationship to our groups and out of right relationship to primary reality for a long time and there are now unavoidable consequences.

Robert Louis Stevenson says, "Sooner or later, we all sit down to a banquet of consequences." And so that's the great reckoning. However, that's only the shadow, the scary side. The positive side is also the Great Homecoming for humanity, the prodigal species. We've squandered millions of years of our inheritance. We're waking up to our predicament now, and we're coming home to god, to reality. We're coming home to what is fundamentally, undeniably and inescapably real. And any use of the word god that doesn't include what is physically undeniably, inescapably and fundamentally real is a trivial, impotent and inconsequential god. This larger perspective that allows us to face the challenges of our time, but not from a place of fear. It's like of course, of course, of course, we are collectively in these situations. And also some clarity with regards to how to come home to god, how to come home to reality individually, socially and ecologically, and that's where deep inspiration in the face of really challenging times is not only possible but I think inevitable. Then you have what I call an "apocaloptimist".

The two mythologies that most Americans are caught in are one, the myth of perpetual progress, and the other if they let go of the myth of perpetual progress they often snap to its opposite which is the myth of the apocalypse. If I think the world's going to just keep getting better and better inevitably or if I think the world's going to go to hell in a hand basket inevitably, I don't need to change my life, I don't need to do anything different. They both keep us from being in action. But if you realize from the previous 24 civilizations that have contracted that those are the two least likely options, then we get engaged locally. And so that's where we can be enriched.

*The Porch:* Well, and it seems to me that if the homecoming is partly a homecoming to the tribe...We know things about how to do tribe better than we did before, we know how to do tribe without necessarily having to slaughter the neighboring tribe in order to sustain the tribe. This has been happening at a subterranean level for 50 years now. It's the reason we have restorative justice, it's the reason we have truth and

reconciliation commissions, it's the reason we have psychotherapy that works. And when the crisis happens and it's undeniable, all this stuff will flood in and we won't have to reinvent tribe from scratch.

*Dowd:* Absolutely, I think we are in this amazing time. Every civilization has its great work to do and ours is the work of helping humans come into a mutually enhancing relationship with primary reality. And one of the things that we can do that truly is holy work, it's no less holy than the Irish scribes, transmitting the information from the past on to the future through their dedication. Carrying forth the wisdom and gifts of the last several hundred years to the waiting arms of the future is truly holy work.

It cycles back to where we began at the beginning, which is for me human-centeredness, anthropocentrism is really the essence of idolatry. It's valuing both the individual but also our species above all other species and measuring progress and success in human-centered terms rather than in god-centered terms, that is life-centered terms, that is in biosphere-centered terms. So if and when humanity measures progress by decade by decade, health and wellbeing of the soil, the forests, the rivers, the fisheries, the carbon and the atmosphere – when we measure progress and success in life centered terms we shift away from idolatry, from anthropocentrism, from human-centeredness and we come home to primary reality. To use the Christian mythic language of Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, then my interpretation of that in an undeniable way is that there is one way to live in right relationship, to primary reality. That one way was exemplified by hundreds of indigenous peoples. It's living in a personal relationship with the past, the present and the future and living in a way that doesn't diminish or destroy the quality of primary realities. That's the way and to live in the way, the truth – the truth is revealed not just by old men and old books as we talked about before, but the truth is revealed by global collective intelligence.

If people don't understand systems then they don't realize that we're living in what I call a demonic system, a demonic economic system, that is, we have an economic system that is a system of laws and practices that by design or by default, they reward the few at the expense of the many. They measure progress, our economic system measures progress by how fast we can turn the biosphere into pollution. And it forces

billions of us to betray the future just by pursuing the so-called good life. So if the word *demonic* has any meaning in a modern world, any system that makes it easy or inevitable for millions of good people to do evil, is going to qualify. And so it's the system, stupid.

The fundamental thing that we now need to do systemically is to evolve a new economic system, and this is going to happen only after the current system collapses. We're not going to get from here to there one step, it's going to be a contraction and then we'll build economic systems locally that truly do that, that measure progress in life-centered, god-centered, reality-centered terms.

Connie and I have this little ritual that we personify the season. At the end of every season we'll say like we did just a couple weeks ago, "Thank you winter. Thank you for being such a tremendous blessing. If one or both of us never gets a chance to experience you again, we just cherish what a gift you've been. And we're silent and often I'll cry because I actually hold the possibility that I won't live to see the next winter, and by holding that, taking each season as if it could be my last, that sacredness helps me do that.

*The Porch:* For people who are feeling overwhelmed by reading this, what's one thing you want them to know?

*Dowd:* Google 'standing for the future' and 'grace limits' audios, that's the best thing that I have to offer in terms of a worldview that allows people to feel like oh, of course, of course, of course – this deep understanding of the nature of reality that's been revealed by god, by reality, that helps us make sense of our times and how to stay inspired to action in the face of really scary stuff.

I feel hopeful, and that doesn't mean I don't sometimes feel grief and anger and depression. I mean, I feel all of that, but to honor it all is to honor that we are in a sacred process called life, called evolution, called whatever you want to call it. We all have a role to play and we can all be in the better story. We can all act from a place of love and compassion and generosity and integrity, so that we can be a blessing to those

around us when they're freaking out because they've not been helped to think about this stuff.

## HIM AND HER: A LOVE STORY - Michael McRay

*For Honey*

“Oh, not much worse.” That was my granddad’s response almost every morning when I asked him how he was. On occasion, he varied from this, offering a nuanced version of the same sentiment. But this was rare. These last years, he’s become a man of routine, and his language like a liturgy we can all recite with him.

For several years now, dementia has progressively vandalized my granddad’s mind, stealing countless memories and modes of thinking. This has resulted not just in a loss of critical thought and recollection, but also of identity, as those faculties particularly defined my granddad, both to himself and others. In short, my granddad is disappearing.

From 2011-2014, I was privileged to live on and off with my grandparents in their Nashville home. In exchange for a comfortable room upstairs, warm meals, and plenty of love, I supported my grandmother in taking care of my granddad. This happened in various ways, but perhaps the most essential was simply through companionship—not so much for my granddad, but rather for my grandmother. Almost every morning, my grandmother and I visited over coffee and homemade muffins, sitting in our blue swivel rocking chairs in the study where the tall windows looked out over the Stones River. Along with losing his memory, my granddad has essentially ceased to converse. And so my grandmother watches as her conversation partner of nearly 60 years fades like the last rays of sunset. The few years I lived with them granted me the gift of traversing that uncharted country with her, hearing her tell their stories, and sitting with her through the pain of great loss.

Sitting in the study, shelves and shelves of my granddad’s books surrounded us. Biblical commentaries, biographies, histories, and various theological works are still stacked like monuments commemorating a mind well-formed. Awards, artifacts, and pictures from around the world decorate the walls. They are physical representations, remnants, of a world and a life they once knew.

My granddad was a scholar—and a damn good one. Born and raised in rural Oklahoma, he left his simple upbringings, and all the struggle and trauma they



contained, to pursue the world of biblical scholarship. More than once, I've heard my grandmother refer to him as a "giant of a man." And it seems he was, especially for his world. For 45 years, he taught and researched at various universities and lectured to audiences worldwide. He preached to his students the importance of a relentless pursuit of truth, and he himself lost much for that pursuit. He authored multiple works on the New Testament, archaeology, and the Apostle Paul, and his sweat mixed with the dirt of numerous archaeological digs in the Middle East. He raised three outstanding, service-minded sons, and he loved his wife with a dedication and fire all could admire.

Almost everything that made my grandparents giants together is an article of the past now. Though my grandmother is still as sharp as ever, my granddad continues to become more and more like a child. Sometimes when I'm visiting I'll notice him watching TV for hours with no sound—just staring at the images, as if he's hypnotized. Whereas once upon a time this professor with a PhD from the University of Chicago could read and translate ancient Greek, he now often rereads the same simple books multiple times a week because he forgets that he read them the day before. Though he loves the taste of tacos and pizza, he wouldn't know to tell you if you asked. His disease is chaotic. Random. He may forget that he ate breakfast just two hours earlier, but he'll remember a stanza of 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish poetry. He can't remember his own age, but he knows how to calculate the Roman numerals of the Super Bowl. There's no rhyme or reason to the madness. And thus, we've watched him slip away—illogically, unfairly, uncontrollably, so that he is but an echo of his earlier symphony. I used to watch him—inconspicuously—as he stares glossy-eyed into seeming nothingness. He sits there like a shadow, a ghost of the man he once was. As I've heard my uncle Rob say more than once, "I miss him even when I'm with him."

Despite all he's lost, my granddad knows two things from his past well. With a deep familiarity, he sings the traditional hymns of his Christian faith. Sometimes I joined my grandparents for Sunday morning service, a tradition dear to them both, though my granddad likely could not explain why. On occasion, my grandmother nudged me during the hymn singing: "He knows every single one by heart," she'd whisper, and I'd look up at this frail man who rarely speaks, but who musters up some kind of soul-sound when he sings the hymns of his faith. He knows those old songs. And he knows my grandmother.

A few years back, my grandmother went to Chicago for a few days to visit their youngest son. When she called to check on him, I'd hear him say, "I miss you, Sugar. When are you coming home?" After 59 years, she's still his sugar. Due to her role as primary caretaker, my grandmother rarely gets time away. One of the gifts I offered was coordinating schedules with her so I could stay with my granddad while she left the house, time she usually spent looking in on lifelong friends who spent their days alone. When she left, she always wrote a note for him, saying where she'd gone and when she'd be back. When she was away most of the day, he didn't get out of bed. He'd arise in his pj's, read the note, grab a muffin she'd set out, and go back to bed. Some days he stayed in bed until 4 or 5pm. Without his sugar, where is the sweetness in life? She is what he lives for. Even if he doesn't consciously know it, his body does.

And thus, when all other pieces seem to be gone or going, two remain: hymns and her. Music and love. After all, I've wondered, what else is there? There is some kind of music that lives in my granddad, some kind of rhythm and recognition, coming alive to the familiar tunes of faith and "sugar."

Though I've known deep sadness witnessing my granddad's disappearance, I cannot express the depths of my gratitude for the gift of living with them those years. I saw the reality of love well-nurtured, the beauty of a marriage tested and found miraculous. I've heard the melody of a love song *59 years* in the making. For he loves her, and she loves him. Even though there's not much left of the man she met back in 1956, you would never know it when you see them together—'cause my grandmother works wonders.

Though today's reality was neither imagined nor chosen, it *is* what is, and she lives each day with a freshness that astonishes. Though she's learned the liturgy of my granddad's speech, she recites it with him every day like it's the first time. Every morning, she sets out his clothes and breakfast for him, as decision-making is one of the many casualties of his disease. Each week she organizes his medicine for the next, and she always leaves notes. For the family, and especially my grandmother, preserving my granddad's dignity is paramount, and she is masterful at it. When visitors come calling, she always includes him in the conversation, though he has nothing to add. When visitors ask him something, she gently intercepts, offering an answer, but always turning to him for confirmation. She saves him the embarrassment of not knowing, but allows him the

dignity of inclusion. I've watched her in wonder as she weaves his voice in and out of a conversation.

Today, every decision for my granddad is challenging. Whether it's ordering food or picking a movie, he seems paralyzed by choices. Over the years, I've watched my grandmother carefully, learning from her grace and craft. When my granddad stares dumbfounded at a menu, she'll approach delicately. "Well, you've always loved this," she might suggest. "You want to just stick with that this time?" "Yeah, that'll be fine," he replies, as if the problem was more his indifference than his incapability. In his old age, my granddad is serene. Nothing worries him, because his bride knows him well and has his trust.

Describing her loving is like describing the sharing of a great story—you have to be there. For her loving exists in the looks and the touches, the movement and the stillness, the words and the silence. I see her love him with her laugh and her smile. I see her love with him with presence and tears, as she grieves his passing. I see her love him with hugs and sweet kisses. I see her love him with unyielding devotion and intentionality. And I see her love him with grace and acceptance.

In the end, I think my granddad is right: day to day, he's "not much worse." But that's because she couldn't love him any better.

## TELL ME THE STORY OF THIS ANIMAL - Peterson Toscano

*Hi, and welcome to the Homo No Mo Halfway House. My name is Chad, and I will be your tour guide. The Homo No Mo Halfway House is a Christian, residential, 12-Step program, that helps men—oh, and women too; we don't discriminate—overcome addiction to homosexuality and compulsive sexual behavior. It is an AMAZING program, and I'm so glad they took me in, just in time.*

That's how I begin the play, a comedy about 17 years I spent receiving conversion therapy in hopes of becoming straight. It's not funny at all, but ridiculous all the same.

I've tried telling the story in other ways.

After I came to my senses and came out gay, I moved to a new city and started a new job—a fresh start. Over dinner and drinks I met my new colleagues at the private high school where we worked. Educated, worldly-wise, sophisticated in my eyes, they impressed me with their liberal ideas and their ready access to literary references. I felt so plain next to them. Then almost as an aside, I told them my story.

"I spent two years in a residency program in Memphis, TN. You know, it was one of those places where they try to cure homosexuals." Darcy, Martin, Christina, these new co-workers stared, open-mouthed, momentarily frozen.

Christina broke the spell, "You're shitting us, right?"

Their shock surprised me. Spending nearly 20 years with other Christians struggling with homosexuality, I had not realized how bizarre the whole thing had been. Their reaction affirmed me in ways I did not know I needed. I took in their outrage, their exasperation that something so stupid was being offered when there was nothing wrong with being gay.

"That must have been awful for you!" They helped me begin to see what I had known all along but kept hidden from myself. It had been an insane and traumatic experience.

I attempted to write about the experience through a straightforward narrative. I even inserted some humor. It was useless. The crushing weight of the story depressed me and no doubt would have depressed my readers. I scraped the book and instead decided to embody the story through performance. To do so though, I had to morph into other characters.

Chad, a participant in the Homo No Mo Halfway House is a campy sissy. The very kind of fem guy I hated when I saw him in the world and especially in myself. On stage I embraced Chad with all of his flurries and self-delusion. As I did, I developed a fondness for the character. I discovered and exposed his humanity.

In the climax of the play, Chad brings the audience into his bedroom. He shows the photo of his older brother, Tad, who died from HIV / AIDS. Chad helped nurse Tad, prepared healthy soups, and ultimately saw him fade and die.

Chad then tells the story of when they were kids growing up in the mission field of Ecuador. He and Tad would visit the small zoo in Baños. They worked out a little routine starting with the first cage. Tad would say, "Ok, Chad, every animal has its own unique story. Tell me the story of this animal." Chad admits his stories were not very sophisticated. "One day this animal was walking in the woods and fell into a hole. A little boy found him and rescued him and brought him to the zookeeper." At the next cage Chad said to Tad, "Now tell me the story of this animal." Chad jokes about the elaborate stories Tad told. "There was always, like, three wishes, a little prince, a hot air ballon, and on and on and on."

After telling stories at each cage, they came to the last one. "Tad would turn to me with his conspiratorial tone. He'd say, 'Ok, Chad, I want you to promise me something, I want you to promise me that tonight we are going to sneak back into the zoo, and we're gonna let all the animals out of their cages! And won't the zookeeper be upset about that?'"

Chad pauses and then tells the audience about the last time he and Tad visited the zoo. Tad was sick, but still able to get around. "And I swear in all that time they didn't switch out any of those animals. Same old tired animals. And sure enough when we got to the first cage, Tad turned to me and said, 'Ok, Chad, tell me the story of this animal.' And I said a story. And he said a story. It was amazing how many of those stories we remembered from when we were little. And I swear every now and then an animal would look at us and say, 'How'd you know my story?'"

On stage I'd cock my head sideways like a puzzled dog swiveling its head. The audience always laughed. They needed to relax. They needed to breath in deep at that point in the story. I paused and slowed down to deliver the next lines—almost identical to the ones Chad's character just said, but with a shift in tone. The repetition of the lines along with the context of Chad's story about Tad's death and Chad's own story of conversion therapy built to a tense tenderness.

“And sure enough when we got to the very end, Tad turned to me and he said, ‘Ok, Chad, I want you to promise me something, I want you to promise me that tonight we are going to sneak back into the zoo, and we’re gonna let all the animals out of their cages! And won’t the zookeeper be upset about that?’”

At that point the Chad characters weeps. Those tears came quickly and flowed easily. Although I was playing a character telling a fictional story, I knew I was telling my own story, and that I could never be more open and honest than I was at that moment.

**MOVIES BOOKS MUSIC**

## A GHOST STORY - Morgan Meis

Every ghost story that has ever been told has its roots in existential panic. It is a panic we've all experienced at some time or other, generally in the wee hours when the mind turns to fear and death. The secret truth is that the ghost stories we tell later, once we've calmed down, are really a form of consolation. The stories serve to forestall our root fear by means of spooks and scares. The idea that there are specters out there, many of them malevolent, is preferable to the alternative, which is that there is nothing "out there" at all. An evil spirit is, at least, confirmation of an afterlife, if an angry confirmation.

The scariest ghost story imaginable, then, would be a ghost story in which there is no ghost, in which there can be no ghosts, because there is only the abyss.

David Lowery's new film *A Ghost Story* flirts at the edge of such an abyss. In the film, a young man (Casey Affleck) dies in a car crash, leaving his young wife (Rooney Mara) to mourn him. The young man, whose name we never learn, comes back in the form of a ghost. We know he's a ghost because he is wearing a white sheet over his head. The white-sheeted ghost proceeds to "haunt" the house in which he previously lived. Eventually, his wife moves out. But the ghost stays. New tenants come and go. The ghost stays. The house is demolished and a giant office is built in its place. The ghost stays. The ghost is thrown back in time (just go with it) and experiences events at the same spot long before the house was built. Still, the ghost stays.

He stays all the way until the living version of himself comes to occupy the house he's been haunting. Time has doubled back on itself. Very early in the movie, the young man and his wife hear bumps in the night. We now learn that this was, in fact, the young man's own ghost doing a retroactive bit of haunting. If these details seem confusing, no matter. The point is that the haunting of *A Ghost Story* becomes self-reflexive. We are shown a ghost in the act of haunting himself. A deeper truth is revealed therein. All hauntings are, at their root, self-hauntings. We are haunted, primarily, by the specter of our own death.



The ghost of *A Ghost Story*, then, can be seen as the part of us that cannot accept the idea that our role as subjects on earth is profoundly temporary. By becoming ghosts, we can extend our subjectivity indefinitely into the future, perhaps infinitely.

But the idea collapses, alas, into its own absurdity. That's because "being us" is so rooted in time. Our "self" is tied to the particulars of our specific bodies, tied to a specific time and place, to the people we know and love or hate. The fantasy at the heart of all ghost stories is that we can somehow continue "being us," even past the disappearance of our own bodies and everything that makes us who we are. Thus, the true horror of David Lowery's ghost story comes from the exploration of what would really happen if we stuck around after our own death: Everything that made our lives meaningful would slowly fade away. Our world would die as we watched, helpless and impotent to intervene. The thought experiment of the "ghost" reveals to us that subjectivity can't exist in the abstract. There is no "me" or "you" that can be plucked out of context and extended into infinity. What we think of as our essential "me-ness" is, in its essence, a finite thing, a thing shaped and bounded by the contours of a brief span of time.

Thus the sad beauty of *A Ghost Story*. Its triumph as a film is to show the collapse of the typical ghost fantasy, to let it disintegrate before our eyes. The more the ghost tries to hold on to the life he once led, the less real he becomes.

As the movie progresses, the initially playful (verging on silly) conceit of having the "ghost" wear an actual white sheet takes on a greater resonance. There is something visually stunning about the looming presence of this human-sized white sheet, silently watching life unfold in the house where he once lived. Lowery heightens this effect by presenting the film in 1:33 aspect ratio (in which the height of the screen is almost the same as the width). We are used to seeing films in the wide screen format. *A Ghost Story* is almost a square. The aspect ratio gives vertical space for the standing ghost. The ghost is always there, taking up territory on the screen.

And yet he is not there. He is presence without presence.

This internal contradiction is accentuated by the fact that the ghost is played by a famous actor, Casey Affleck. The filmmakers insist that it really was Affleck under the sheet throughout the filming. You might consider this is an immense waste of actorly talent, especially since Lowery directed Affleck to move under the sheet in a non-Afflecky way, to behave as if it could be anyone under that sheet. In fact, this ghostly anonymity serves a deeper purpose. The immense presence of Casey Affleck is negated by the giant white sheet that hides him. That which is present is also absent.

There's a crucial scene in the middle of the movie where the present-but-absent ghost observes a late-night party at the house (long after his wife has moved away). A man (credited as "The Prognosticator" and played by Will Oldham) gives a drunken soliloquy. He explains that we are all doomed in the long run. In the vast sweep of cosmic time, no act of creation, no work of art, nothing can outrun the obliteration that is eventually to come. The universe hurls ever outward into dissolution. What then, one might ask, is the point of doing anything?

It is a question that David Lowery, a man engaged in making works of art that tackle questions of the meaning and purpose of life, has asked himself more than once. Lowery has described himself as "an atheist." But he is also the son of a Catholic theologian. He was raised in a milieu in which art was discussed in relation to the deepest philosophical and theological problems.

The upshot of *A Ghost Story*, whatever one's theological commitments, is that we have to take our finitude seriously as finitude. We have to understand death as a real and genuine end. Meaning must be found within that context, under the eyes of a death that cannot be escaped. If we touch upon eternity, if we touch upon God, we do so precisely in terms of that finitude, as creatures who actually and really die. The punishment for not taking death seriously, for atheist and religious alike, is that our lives become ghostly. We enter a realm in which eternity is purchased at the cost of anything substantial, anything real. As the ghost of *A Ghost Story* finally discovers, the only way to truly have our brief existence is to let it go.

## THE HERO - Tyler McCabe

At first blush, *The Hero* seems to be a story about aging in the spotlight: Hollywood-powered stardom meets end-of-life regret, and then second chances, redemption, and finding something more human beneath it all. We have watched similar fallen-star characters traverse this territory in compelling and humorous ways before: Michael Keaton in *Birdman*, Robert De Niro in *The Comedian*, or Lisa Kudrow in *The Comeback*, to name a few.

The main delight of *The Hero* is the amount of time we get to spend with Sam Elliott, who plays the main role as Lee Haydan, a Western film icon who shares more than a few biographical details with Elliott. Throughout, there are winks and nods at our real-life Western icon's roles in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Big Lebowski*, and many more. When Lee explains early in the film, "Movies are other people's dreams," there's a beautiful tension in realizing Sam Elliott is also reminding the audience that the person we know him to be is just our dream of him. Underneath the fantasy is something darker, more complicated.

Lee Haydan's story begins with a cancer diagnosis that causes him to reconsider his failed relationships with his daughter, ex-wife, best friend, agent, and others. This plot ostensibly drives the film, but ends up being about as clichéd as it sounds. What really stands out are the moments in between the predictable beats. The first moment that Lee decides to embrace the life he has left, he does so by attending a conspicuously cheesy lifetime achievement award ceremony in a nondescript hotel banquet room that's half empty. Nostalgic, aging fans only want to talk about his first film role. In that setting, while also tripping on molly, he has a breakthrough during his acceptance speech: he calls a random woman up to the stage and presents her the award instead, chanting: "Diane! Diane! Diane!"

Diane, who only appears in the film at this moment, smiles shyly at the crowd now applauding her lifetime achievements. It's the moment we all sort of think we want: to be recognized, applauded, loved by strangers.

Lee Haydan realizes he's had his fill of it. He's grateful but hungry for something else. Maybe that something else is the magical Charlotte Dylan (Laura Prepon), a woman at least thirty years his junior, who walks into his life and almost immediately wants to date him for reasons I won't spoil. Maybe it's to reignite his faith in his career by auditioning for a blockbuster sci-fi film. Maybe it's just to reconcile with his daughter, Lucy (Krysten Ritter), though the nature of their estrangement remains unclear.

As Lee churns through solutions, he displays an astounding array of selfishness. He's indulgent, sentimental, privileged, self-pitying, self-absorbed, angry, and totally unreliable. His relationship with Charlotte is almost entirely about his own insecurity about being 71, a fact that Charlotte pokes fun at just one time and which unfairly requires her apology. His daughter makes good-faith efforts to engage with him, but he makes it clear that he'll only engage on his terms and timeline. I mean, he literally springs the news of his cancer on his ex-wife during her big gallery opening. He doesn't tell his best friend at all.

Lee is just not that great of a guy. But Sam Elliott, with great skill, somehow makes the man's behavior captivating, sympathetic, and at times, charming. Who among us can't identify with Lee's foibles?

I think it would be too easy to call the story of Lee Haydan the tale of a star who finds redemption late in life. I question whether Lee is redeemed at all. But it is the story of a man who is learning—with baby steps—how to get out of the spotlight that he's created for himself, treat himself more kindly, shrug off a larger-than-life mythos, and become a part of a family. May we all be more like his friends and family, full of patience, while being tender to the parts within ourselves which, like him, are learning to be with others.

## ANGELS IN AMERICA - The UK National Theatre revival, reviewed by Sarah Dean

"Okay," says my university tutor, "we are going to go round the room and I want everyone to finish the sentence 'safe sex is...'. Just say that first thing that comes into your head and we'll write them up on the board. I'll start. Safe sex is...consensual sex."

"Safe sex is.. fun sex!" grins the girl sitting to his left. He scrawls it on the board.

"Safe sex is sexy sex!" says the next person.

"Yes! Great!" he replies. "Keep going. Sarah, your turn, go!"

"Erm...Safe sex is...no sex?" I offer positively. Some of the group laughs.

"Oh dear," says the tutor. He doesn't write my suggestion down.

This exchange took place at an undergrad Contemporary Theater tutorial just weeks into my first semester at university. We were studying Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*, a sweeping epic about Reagan's America in the face of the AIDS epidemic. The seven hour, two part show had opened at London's National Theater nine months earlier, having been picked up by the National following some workshop performances in San Francisco. It had been a huge hit and had transferred to Broadway just a few weeks before my classmates and I arrived at university.

My "safe sex is no sex" answer wasn't due to some kind of abstinence teaching or a super strict Christian upbringing. My parents and my church were very liberal, however the mandatory sex education lecture at my high school in the rural east of England can only be described as scaremongering.

"Get pregnant, girls and your life is ruined. Get HIV, boys, and you'll be dead by twenty."

Our elderly deputy head teacher warned us helpfully, adding, "Oh and don't share a toothbrush, sharing a toothbrush is a very risky thing to do."

It is easy to see how I formed my logical conclusion that sticking with the whole virginity thing that the Bible is so keen on might be the safest option in this terrifying world, where even lax dental hygiene can kill you!

"This is an important play, a theatrical masterpiece, as significant as *Death of a Salesman* or *Oh What a Lovely War*," our tutor told us as he handed out a list of the play's themes: right wing politics and corruption, the ozone layer; the experience of the gay man—closeted and out, the personal and societal impact of the AIDS epidemic; faith and sexuality. This was theater at its most contemporary and my secret shame was I just didn't get it!

Other students declared *Angels in America* was their favorite play of all time, while I silently fretted over why I couldn't see it's genius. Maybe it's because I was a latent homophobe? After all the sex scenes made me blush. Or maybe it was because the character I identified with most was Joe Pitt, a closeted gay man struggling with his faith as his worldview changes, but after the mortifying "safe sex, no sex" comment I wasn't going to admit *that* to my fellow students and be singled out as "that religious girl" again.

The show's subtitle is "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes." I was a straight, non-American woman, who knew very little about American history and politics. For example I didn't know that a character in the play, the deeply sinister lawyer Roy Cohn was actually a real person, a fact which is fairly vital to the plot. And the plot is nuts! Angels crash through bedroom ceilings, characters ascend into heaven, which is described in the stage directions as "San Francisco post the Great Quake." The origins of the Mormon religion are commented on by a gay man who thinks he is a prophet and a mentally ill woman who has just gnawed through a tree trunk like a beaver!

During the time we studied *Angels in America*, we didn't actually see it on stage! Ironically we studied one of the most theatrical contemporary plays, just by reading the

text. And when your only point of reference for stagecraft is a youth theater production of *Godspell*, it is no surprise that I struggled to comprehend the stage directions: "The Angel is related to humans but isn't human...while she should be comprehensible to the audience, she should also be terribly unfamiliar." Huh?

This year *Angels in America* is back at the National Theater. With a cast including Andrew Garfield and Nathan Lane it is one of this summer's hottest shows. I booked tickets mainly due to "Event Theater" FOMO (I now work in the theater) but also because I still hadn't seen it on stage.

In the current climate of Trump and Brexit the play's themes—global warming, the influence of the religious right, freedom of expression—are as relevant now as when the show was written, perhaps even more so. Kushner's notes on the current production state: "I've always written perched on a knife edge of terror and hope. Today the edge is sharper than it has ever been." It was chilling to read in the press notes for the show that the real Roy Cohn was a mentor to the young Donald Trump!

A quarter of a century after I first wrestled with these angels, I can now wholeheartedly recommend this show to you, all 8 hours of it. (And you can see it this summer at your local movie theater in the US, Canada, and numerous other theaters worldwide via NT Live. Details below.) This time around, older, wiser, more engaged with global politics, less hung up on sexuality and faith, I loved it. The production is glorious and epic. Angels do burst through ceilings in front of your eyes and heaven does look like a quake-wrecked San Francisco. Plus, it turns out that I was so absorbed with trying to understand the text the first time round that I missed the fact that it's very funny!

I realize now that I can't have been the only person in that drama studio 25 years ago who found *Angels in America* challenging. I do continue to wonder why it didn't strike my university tutor that perhaps not every 18 year old would be ready or able to discuss sex, politics, and religion just three weeks after leaving home! But perhaps that isn't surprising as he also hadn't spotted that plays are written to be performed rather than read. **NT Live screenings at movie theaters worldwide are listed here: <http://ntlive.nationaltheater.org.uk/venues>**

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