



**TAKE
ANOTHER
LOOK?**

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WELCOME...

To the end of one year, and the beginning of another. *The Porch* is here, in rough times and smooth, all weathers, whether or not the electricity is working, when we feel fear or hope, if the last thing we want to do is switch on the news, or the first thing is to escape, if we are exploring the frontiers of conflict transformation or revisiting iconic movies about the tragedy of 18th century superficiality or the poetry of early twentieth century womanist empowerment, seeing ourselves in the face of our opponents, rereading mystery onto science, or the hope that amidst this painful and confusing cultural moment, we might learn more about how to live better.

The purpose of this issue of *The Porch* is to take another look: at who “we” are and at who “they” are, reminding ourselves that behind the “we” and the “they” there is only us.

Thank you for joining the conversation.

TIME OUT OF MIND

Bearden Coleman



I started running because I saw a picture of myself. The picture was on my phone. I can't tell you who took the photo or why it was taken. But I remember seeing the picture and the effect it had on me. I can still see it some four years later. The picture has me in profile. I'm outdoors, possibly at a park. Other people are in the frame in the way back. I'm wearing baggy shorts and a t-shirt. I look hot. I have a beard and very thin hair on top of my head. I'm in movement—possibly jogging or walking—from right to left. And here's the thing: I look entirely shapeless. I have no definition. I don't mean this is in a vain I-wish-my-abs-were-ripped way. It's true that I was about forty pounds overweight. But that's not what startled me. What I mean is that I looked at the picture and saw nothing that defined me as physical or spiritual being. I looked, to my eyes, like a man barely there.

This was the summer of 2013, which means I was thirty-seven years old. It also means it had been over six years since I had been clinically diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Lord knows how many years the disorder had pinned me down before the diagnosis. Fifteen? Twenty? Thirty-seven years?

Say it: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Just don't call it OCD.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder isn't OCD. OCD is what you call your roommate or spouse who is tidy. OCD is what you like to call yourself when you are the organized one on a work project. But please hear me out. That's not the condition I'm talking about. That's why I want you to say it: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. For most people, OCD is a cute, perhaps admirable, quality. But Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is hideous. To be obsessive is to be given to unnatural excess. To be compulsive is to have little or no control over how you respond to the anxiety provoked by this foul excess. To have a disorder is to have a socially unacceptable condition.

So what was it exactly for me? Without going into the ins and outs of my particular brand of the disorder, it's enough to say that it was hiding in bathrooms at work; it was drawing the blinds at home on sunny days; it was ruminating on phrases and words for long stretches of time; it was avoiding my children. I stopped reading books. I stopped looking people in eye. I stopped playing my guitar. I changed how I dressed. I closed my eyes on the subway on my way to work. I refused offers to go out with friends. I did anything and everything I could to shut myself off from others and from encounters with the world. And when that failed, when I made unwanted contact with others and my surroundings, I prayed to God, asking for forgiveness ten, twenty, thirty times, because surely I had acted improperly. Surely I had done something wrong. It was all of this and more until

the disorder managed to start erasing me. And that's what I saw when I looked at that picture of myself in the summer of 2013: a man erased.

I tried the usual routes toward wholeness. I burned through mental health specialists, spending thousands of dollars in the process. I took pills daily—up to three at a time—on the specialists' advice. I regularly asked a small group of friends from my church to pray for me. I tried begging God, down on my knees or face down on the floor of my bedroom, for healing. I tried my hardest to act normal.

But then in the summer of 2013, in the most literal (and least metaphorical) way, I began to pick my feet up off the ground and put one foot in front of the other—I started to move. I started to run. And it saved me.

* * *

I began watching the films of Yasujiro Ozu somewhere around 2010. My friend Matt who ran a film screening series through our church in Brooklyn told me about *Tokyo Story*. This was the year, to borrow a line from the great Pauline Kael, I lost it for the movies. I had been a written word guy. Denis Johnson, Raymond Carver, Thomas McGuane. Those were my people. Their words were a conduit to something greater than myself. I'd gone to graduate school down in Texas and earned a MFA degree in creative writing with the desire to show others what my heroes had shown me. But that near-mystical sway the written word held over me began to fade around 2010. Looking back, it's clear that Obsessive Compulsive Disorder did it in.

This is really hard to explain. But I'll give it a go. Reading (like most daily activities) became impossible as my disorder worsened because I nearly always got stuck. "Stuckness" is the hallmark of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. For example, I would start a book, say Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke*, read the first

sentence and think to myself that I didn't quite get the meaning on the first pass. This is typical enough for any reader, so I'd read the sentence again. But the second and third time through wouldn't satisfy me that I understood the words on the page. I'd read the sentence a fourth, fifth, and sixth time. But I'd still have serious doubts that I understood its meaning. I would read it again. Inevitably, somewhere around the sixth or seventh time running my eyes over the text I would get an ugly intrusive thought.

Like I said, this is really hard. So bear with me.

These intrusive and irrational thoughts are at the core of my brand of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. These thoughts are the kind that tell you the ugliest lies about yourself. They tell you you're a creep, a deviant, a pervert, a misfit. They are staggeringly specific. And they throttle you until you can hardly breathe. Where do they come from and why would reading a novel from your favorite writer provoke such thoughts? I'm still not sure, but to engage the thoughts and try to convince yourself you're not a creep is step into quicksand, to enter into an argument with yourself you'll never win. You'll ruminate on these thoughts for five, seven, ten minutes. You'll read the sentence in front of you again and again, looking for signs that you can move on, for signs that you're not "bad." But you can't move on because you're stuck. You'll shut the book. You'll give up. I gave up.

At the peak of my suffering, this kind of stuckness happened with almost every daily activity. Grading papers (did I grade these fairly?), washing dishes (did I wash off all the germs completely?), getting dressed (am I wearing this shirt to impress other women?). These kinds of questions took up a good 80% of my day. The loss of time taken from me by these ruminations is deeply saddening. And because Obsessive Compulsive Disorder came after what touched me most—

books—I was emotionally and spiritually leveled. But then came the cinema of Ozu.

As the written word became increasingly difficult to interact with, I found solace in moving images. In 2010 I dedicated myself to seriously watching films—watching at least one film a day. I made it very nearly a second job, not just a hobby. I could never watch enough. I watched American films from the studio system’s golden era. I watched French films from the 60s and Italian films from the 50s. I watched westerns and musicals and gangster films. I watched Iranian films from the 90s and American screwball comedies from the 30s. I watched films at home on my television late into the night. *Pierrot le fou*. *Johnny Guitar*. *Close-Up*. *The Long Goodbye*. I watched films on my laptop in bed. *Germany Year Zero*. *Notorious*. *Pickpocket*. *All that Heaven Allows*. I watched all the films the repertory cinemas in New York City exhibited. *Rio Bravo*. *The Grand Illusion*. *Bringing up Baby*. *The Mirror*. *Gun Crazy*. I was voracious and indiscriminating.

What was it about cinema that assuaged the grief caused by my disorder? I think it has everything to do with cinema’s essential property: time. As Andrei Tarkovsky wrote, “I think that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is time: for time lost or spent or not yet had.” Tarkovsky is right: cinema gave back to me that time I’d wasted obsessing. I don’t know that I could have articulated that then back in 2010, but it’s clear now that time was what I desperately needed. And no films gave back more time than Ozu’s.

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Running for me is about two different kinds of time. The first kind of time has to do with pushing myself physically—how fast can I run a certain distance? I found out soon after I started running in that summer of 2013 that I was decent at this kind of time. This came as a surprise to me: I was good at something I’d never

thought much about. I understood this about myself when I ran my second half marathon in an hour and a half. That is not an exceptionally fast time. But for someone in his mid-to-late thirties who had been overweight and extraordinarily out of shape seven months prior, it was a miracle. After that race I took to running as seriously as I took to watching films.

Thirty-eight, thirty-nine years old. How did I get that disciplined? So late? I still wonder. That's late for what I was doing. Daily I punished body in the blue-black predawn. This was Brooklyn, the place I'd called home for thirteen years. The place I entered into married life. The place where my wife and I started our family—two girls, one from Ethiopia one from China. And there I was running myself ragged to the absolute end of myself. Every day running that stretch of Kent Avenue in Williamsburg that hugged the East River. Seven to ten miles a day. Upwards of sixty miles a week. My knees ached. I iced my feet at night. I woke at 5AM on bitterly cold February mornings to run myself blind. I began watching what I ate, counting calories, to make my body lean. I ran intervals around the McCarren Park track while most of the city slept.

I did all of this chasing that first kind of time. And it worked. My times in the marathon and half marathon got faster. I qualified in my age group for the prestigious Boston Marathon. I even placed in a couple of races. And as bad as all that work may sound to some folks, for me it was fun.

It's the other kind of time, however, that lodged me out of the "stuckness" of my disorder. This kind of time is the literal hours I spent on my feet running each week and the way those hours expanded in my mind—the way this literal time exerting my body everyday helped to recover the hours, days, and weeks lost to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Running upwards of sixty miles every seven days translates to running around eight hours a week. And while I logged some of those hours with my local running club, I also spent a good deal of those hours

solo—from my home in Brooklyn, up through Queens, over the 59th Street Bridge, around Central Park, down the east side of Manhattan, back home via the Williamsburg Bridge. All that time alone—just me and my thoughts—would seemingly be a nightmare scenario for someone like me with my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Wouldn't all that time to think and let my mind wonder cause spasms of anxiety? You would think so. But the opposite was true. I discovered that no thoughts (tame or harmful) stuck with me when I was up on my feet running. In those hours alone I found a beautiful nothingness.

When I tell people I'm an avid runner, I'm often asked if I listen to music or podcasts when running. I've tried that. But no, I can't listen to anything on my daily runs. Listening to The Rolling Stones or Terry Gross has a way of putting me in touch with the day-to-day time I associate with my disorder. It has a way of making my runs feel longer and pained. "Then you must come up with a lot of great ideas out there by yourself." This is another thing people say when I tell them I don't wear headphones on my runs. But it's not true either. I don't have any ideas when I run. It's not that I haven't made the effort. I've tried thinking about work or writing. But I simply can't. It's a beautiful mercy—I think of nothing. The literal time on my feet transmutes to an abstract experience of time that encourages me to be simply present. Here I am climbing Cat Hill in the park. Here I am down among the warehouses in Red Hook. Here I am in Lane One. The only thought I had: Here I am.

Call this a religious or spiritual experience. Call it what you will. I can't figure it out and I don't want to.

* * *

I can't figure out the films of Yasujiro Ozu either. I mean their plots are as simple they come—a mother dies, a daughter marries, a widower learns to live on

his own. What I couldn't understand (still can't really) is how his films leave me feeling balanced, for lack of a better, more concrete word. This isn't just a balance in my mind, though it is that too. But the first, most immediate sensations his films give me are of the physical sort: a balance in my head, my lungs, my legs, my hands. A balance that counteracts the jaggedness in my soul caused by my disorder.

In the fall of 2011 I went back to graduate school to study cinema. I told my wife, my friends, my colleagues at the college where I taught, my thesis advisor at the university I attended, and, even, myself that I was going back to school to get qualified to teach cinema courses alongside my writing classes. But now with the distance of a few years, it's apparent that I went back to school for another reason altogether. I wanted to understand why Ozu's films ameliorated the anxiety caused by my mental and spiritual illness. In other words, I attended classes at night after long days at work, wrote papers in the spaces between other professional and personal obligations, and took out hefty loans because of my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

I've since stopped trying to figure out why his films have their particular, healing effect on me. Graduate school—as engaging, fun, and intellectually stimulating as it was—only got me so far in comprehending my relationship with Ozu. No amount of theory about montage or mise-en-scene could really tell me why his films work on me like they do. And that is okay. I no longer need to know. I just need the films.

It's in the films themselves, after all, where I find reprieve. It's in the way Ozu tends to elide dramatic events like weddings and funerals, instead choosing to linger in the empty rooms of the home, the bar, and the office long after the action of a given scene has ended. It's in the way Ozu's camera patiently contemplates trains, smokestacks, and clotheslines, not for explicable narrative

reasons but for the way the spaces captured in the frame speak to a wholeness of the fractured world.

These kinds of spaces—and the temporal way Ozu treats them—are rarely given form in narrative cinema because they offer up no apparent causal clues for the plot driven spectacles that clog up the multiplexes. And that is a shame. It's in these spaces that I first sensed Ozu making time—that thing I most desperately needed as a corrective for my disorder and that most elusive material—concrete and something to be felt. As Ozu's biographer Donald Richie puts it, "clock time ceases to exist" in Ozu's films. Indeed, the kind of time I found in Ozu was blessedly out of sync with the everyday time (minutes, hours, days, weeks, months) my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder tended to distort. Ozu-time, on the other hand, restores. So time is the great gift Ozu gave me, a tangible thing that hangs on and expands inside of me, to borrow an image from Flannery O'Connor. I can explain it no better. It evades close analysis. In my case, it discourages reason. But like I said, I just need the films. That's enough.

TO LOVE YOURSELF: DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST RECONSIDERED

Jasmin Pittman Morrell



Julie Dash's glorious film *Daughters of the Dust* is not for the faint of heart. Not because its violence is gruesome, nor because sexuality is on display as though the act of lovemaking were a spectator's sport. But it is purely provocative filmmaking, a dreamlike foray into the sultry landscape of the Sea Islands off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this land was largely considered unsuitable for white settlers due to its climate, which served as a breeding ground for various tropical diseases and fevers. Gullah culture was born from the once enslaved West Africans who tended their white masters' rice plantations in relative isolation, allowing for an unprecedented preservation of culture with little European influence. The film is set at the turn of the century in 1902, years after the Civil War had ended and Black folk wrestled with the dual identities of now being both African and American. Centering around the Peazant family, we are introduced to them in a moment of great transition. If they leave their island for the mainland, traveling North with its promise of greater opportunity and assimilation into American life, will they lose vital pieces of their culture and forget how to belong to themselves?

I first met Julie Dash, in college after a screening of her work. I must admit upon first viewing, I could barely follow the plot and hardly put into words how the movie had affected me. But it left its mark—whether that was through the images of beautiful women with darkly luminous skin dancing on the beach in ethereal, creamy Victorian style dresses, or the sense of connection I felt to the Peasant matriarch who charged her family to remember and respect their ancestors and traditions—I still can't quite say, but it left me longing to know more about this rich heritage, that at the time, was lost to me. I had known myself largely to be American, certainly, but the African piece, my own blackness, was mostly unexplored territory. I was, most immediately, born into a Black family who had worked incredibly hard in attempts to overcome the limitations of racism, but in so doing did not emphasize where we'd come from, only where we might go.

Ms. Dash herself posed a striking figure, her grounded, powerful presence as a storyteller something I simultaneously felt intimidated by but deeply admired. She spoke of womanhood, describing it in part as the ability to create, hold, and birth new life, our wombs the great container for literal and figurative transformation. She invited us to consider what we carried woven into our very cells, from our ancestors tenacity to survive, down to the lovers we invited into the sacred temple of our bodies. She seemed to wink at me when she mentioned lovers, and I am sure I blushed. This was also unexplored terrain, the kind of delicious sinfulness I had yet to taste for fear of eating, and in so becoming, tainted fruit. The religion of my youth had effectively divorced me from experiencing my body as something to celebrate, its pleasures only allowable within the confines of a heterosexual, martial union (and even then...I was fairly certain I was not supposed to really enjoy my own body, let alone someone else's).

What does it mean to be a daughter of the dust, equal parts soil and wind, matter and spirit? It implies something temporal yet lasting; the weight of history and the witnesses who have gone before us; the buoyancy of surrender to the energy of

transmutation. There is no daughter without mother. No dust without earth. No history without the present moment. Daughters of the Dust invited me into these seeming dualities, each one intrinsically tied to the other to form a whole. The opening lines of the film feel full of this ancient wisdom:

I am the first and the last

I am the honored one and the scorned one

I am the whore and the holy one

I am the wife and the virgin

I am the barren one...and many are my daughters

I am the silence that you can't understand

I am the utterance of my name

Resisting linear storytelling forms and opting instead for a kind of visual lyricism, one could almost argue that the film in itself is a series of bridging shots between the rooted past and the winds of migration. For all of the seeming conflicts between magic and religion, sexual purity and shame, African and American, slave and free, ancestors and children; you might imagine heavy contrasting in lighting and use of shadow, symbolic changes of weather, or quick montages juxtaposed with long, steady shots, but this is not the case. *Daughters of the Dust* is set in the balmy, warm afternoon light of the coast, its pacing deliberately measured, its sense of continuity an invitation to all to sit with its poetry in meditation, in community, or perhaps, if you can, with family.

When I watch *Daughters of the Dust*, I feel part of the Peazant family, but I don't think this experience is unique to me simply because I identify as African American. The themes of this film are universal, perhaps unique in specificity but not in applicability. We all benefit when we are familiar with our heritage, when we can look it in the face and see its laugh lines as well as its scars, accepting both, with all the sorrow and joy that may entail. When I belong to myself, when I truly

love all that I see in the mirror, there is nothing that tarnishes or diminishes me, unless I allow it. And that is provocative, that is revolutionary. *To love oneself* in a culture that is propped up by our fears, insecurities, and isolation, to belong to communities that imagine different ways of being and foster interdependence, this is radical. This has the power to change the world.

Daughters of the Dust has recently been restored and this exquisite version is available from Cohen Media Group. <http://www.cohenmedia.net/films/daughters-of-the-dust>

AND THEN SHE ASKED FOR RAIN

D.M. Williams

All the lights are out in here. And it *feels* as if the sun has gone down. But I know better. I know that beyond the heavy curtains and the foil which lines the windows there is still sunlight. Perhaps it's so bold today, even, that its rays stretch and sparkle across the vast expanse of blue sky—and I'm sure it is probably a sight to see. I bet the clouds have gone to their sacred hiding places to allow the sun its alone time for the day. Allow it to be brilliant in solitude—with no distractions. It probably beams magnificently and unapologetically, the sun, even though it feels as though its gone down. I just know better. In this room there is a bird in a cage and he chirps every now and then. Probably because it longs for freedom...maybe because it longs to be held—petted even. But I won't release it. And I will not touch it because I am afraid that once it realizes it is no longer caged its wings will flutter furiously, and I will be forced to let it go from fear of its frantic flapping and pecking and chirping. I suppose not having to worry about searching for its own food is consolation enough for being held in captivity.

There is a woman here too.

She is pleasant with soft skin and a very large afro. When she bends and kneels to lift me from my wheelchair I can feel its thickness and earthy texture all over the side of my face and sometimes I lean my head a little into it so that I might feel it even more against my skin and smell the coconut scent. She told me she uses coconut oil to keep it soft. And on days like today when I am lazy and just want to be left alone she goes into the kitchen and reads her Bible. Sometimes I ask her to read a verse or two out loud. Then I tell her to stop, that's enough. Because the Bible puzzles me and I don't understand the god in it. All that war and all that mess and all those odd sacrifices make me annoyed at him. Like he had something to prove. He doesn't seem like the type of god who would've been the maker of my soul. I suppose I would've just done things differently. Maybe even created a

world full of people like me so that they could see the world through my eyes and appreciate the delicate parts of it in ways they're hardly capable of—since they all seem so busy and all. And I wouldn't feel I had anything to prove because they wouldn't have anything to prove to me.

My ass hurts. It hurts because this chair gets uncomfortable after sitting in it for so long. The woman in the other room is washing dishes now. I can hear the pots and pans clanging and the water running and she's probably humming too like she does. I won't bother her and call to her to help shift me in this chair. I'll just let her be. I wonder how long people have to live in the world these days. I wonder if one day when I'm tired enough of living and listening to this bird and smelling that woman's coconut hair that I'll be able to call out to the god I think made me and ask him if I can go ahead and go on home. I've never had the courage to ask. Probably because most of the things I've asked for he's given me in due time. I've asked for money. And I got that. Enough to make myself satisfied and take care of my home. I asked for a shiny Cadillac and got that too. Only I can't drive it. It just sits out there in the driveway pretty and shiny and probably soaking in all that good sunshine. I asked for a bird in a cage so that I could have some company that agrees with me. I ask for rain and I get it. Usually a couple of days after my request. I can sense the clouds swelling with holy water and then the heavens give way to the rumbling of clandestine forces and then the water hits heavy and hard on the roof and the windows. And I just sit in silence listening to the echo of raindrops. Pretending to dance in the rain in my own mind.

Then I asked him to see again. Because I remember when I could. I asked my maker to open my eyes once more so that I may behold what I am missing. I always ask for my sight. But he hasn't given it back yet. So I sit here behind my curtains and the windows with the foil and that chirping bird and the woman with the coconut hair and wait for the day I am bold enough to ask for death because I know I'll get my wish.

RECONCILING ACTIVISM

Brantley Pruitt

We live in a noisy world these days; especially when it comes to political activism. Competing agendas can set the stage for division, watering down the chance for any large collective good. We've all likely felt it, I'm sure, undergirding our passionate talks at the dinner table, or in the news segments we catch in the early hours of the morning, and in the constant inundation of harried posts in our social media feeds. It's a despairing homily on repeat.

Why do we feel so primed to do this? Because the news seems always to be about our identities: who is "in", who is "out", who belongs and who should be cast out, who should be punished and who acclaimed. Identity, of course, feels so personal; *it is* so personal. How we see ourselves depends on the relationship between our individual quest for personal freedom and the demands of a society conditioned to a status quo. Our identities, therefore are a projection of who we are to society, a product of either internal or external agency. Some identities are placed upon us by society; others are relational, but the ones we seem willing to fight to preserve are the ones we chose for ourselves. This is why, when we feel that our perspectives are not being brought to the table, we can feel so demoralized and adrift.

But we won't find our way forward through panic or despair. I think we need a sense of patience and clarity to guide us as individuals as well as in our collective pursuits.

One way to resolve this conflict of competing identities and the ideologies behind them is to step back and separate people from the actions they perform and the institutions that they operate within. Nothing happens in a pure vacuum. What we should be invested in instead is criticizing the instances and abuses of power where our identities cross with the larger social framework.

One of the ways I have started doing this is to tell my accounts of witnessing societal injustices as a way of advocating for those with less privilege than me. For me, that means straddling the lines of being a queer, prep school educated, college-educated black man in the American South, with all the attendant baggage that accompanies those terms. For what it's worth, I have lived a mostly privileged life (still with its own difficulties) and have been given the ability to commune side by side with people who did not have the same advantages in life that I had.

A few years ago, I was a substitute teacher at a public high school. One of the classes I covered for a few weeks was teaching English as a Second Language.

This class was mostly filled with the undocumented children of Latino migrants. The curriculum was not adequate to get these kids' English reading skills up to par with the district's requirements. It honestly shocked me to find out the level of poverty some of these children were coming from: two girls from the class would regularly ask the student teacher I worked with for change to get snacks from the vending machines as they could not be registered for lunch subsidies due to their immigrant status. I would come home after working with these kids feeling so constrained and angry, so unnerved by the apathy of the people in the school who let these children suffer in that way. What made it worse was that I, as a temporary visitor, had no real power to change this, or even to bring it to light when those around me had already accepted it.

However it is incidents like these that show us where the margins of society really are. For me, it is imperative that stories like these are told so people are made aware of the larger world outside our own bubbles of comfort. To invite us to understand that there are other struggles that are not just immediate to our own. Once we understand the histories, struggles, and in some cases, traumas that go

along with some identities, we can better engage in stronger community building.

Yet another student comes to mind from that particular school. She was black, fifteen years old, and with enough sass to talk back to her teachers and cuss out fellow students. She refused to show up to class and never turned in her homework. I was eating lunch in the teachers' lounge and the veteran teachers intimated how much they hated her indolence, how they couldn't get through to her and how most of them were counting down the time until she would either drop out or be expelled. For some reason, she took to me, though, and I sensed that she needed a friend, or at least a teacher who would be some sort of mentor to her. She likely projected this tough-girl image as a way to hide her fears about her family life, her future and how her teachers felt about her. I tried to be as friendly as I could and respected her need for privacy in her personal life. As the semester wore on, I was surprised one day to find her walking by in the hallway after she ditched her first period class with me. She peeked her head in and said, "Mr. Pruitt, had I known you was teaching today, I wouldn't have skipped class." I'm still taken aback by her humor and candor, and I felt guilty that I was no longer a presence in her life when I moved on from substituting. It's moments like these where you sense how much of a difference you had or could have had in someone's life. How being there for someone, even in the least noticeable way, has the potential to reap big rewards.

That's the life I strive to live and I hope you will too.

Society, as layered as it is with bureaucracy and apathy, is still a collective effort. These days there's a lot of pressure to ignore that. But we must always be looking for the human story beneath it all. Focus on the person, the fellow human: their deeper motivations, anxieties, dreams, fears, shadows, their yearnings for true liberation. Replace the noise of division with a simple question: what is it like to be you?

A CONVERSATION WITH KATHLEEN NORRIS

Gareth Higgins



*Beloved author Kathleen Norris brings clarity and wisdom to her reflections on the relationship between the inner life and our outer experience. It's all one - depression and spirituality, the language we use to describe the indescribable, the poetry of the everyday. What I didn't know until we we met earlier this year was that Kathleen's love of cinema is as enthusiastic, elegant, humorous and alive as any of her works. We began our conversation for The Porch by discussing one of our shared favorite films, Jim Jarmusch's *Paterson*, in which a bus driving poet (or a poet who moonlights as a bus driver) shows us the meaning of taking life one day at a time. (This conversation with a contemporary mystic also includes spoilers for the films **Pulp Fiction** and **Melancholia**. Which is as it should be.)*

Kathleen Norris: It's rare that I've watched a film and realized that I am also being blessed at the same time. I was thinking of the Archangel Raphael whom Flannery O'Connor refers to as "the Angel of Happy Meeting". Basically the angel who is supposed to make sure you meet all the people in your life that you are supposed to meet. In my life Raphael works overtime I am sure and in most people, but [in the movie] was that incredible circumstance where here is this

young bus driver meeting a [stranger]. It's crazy circumstance and [the stranger] blesses the guy with this gift of wisdom and also the notebook that he needs. It really was like divine intervention through an ordinary human being; that I think is Raphael's specialty because Raphael is also God's healer.

When you look at the Archangels, Michael is the warrior, Gabriel is the messenger, Raphael is the healer. And that was the role that this man was playing and I don't know who that actor was but he was wonderful, because you had the sense both that he had no idea what he was doing and that he absolutely knew what he was doing.

Gareth Higgins: It really means something to me that this is a Japanese man who gives him the new notebook. I think my generation and younger people [may] have no conception of what relationships between white US American military veterans and Japanese people were seventy years ago and the reasons why such an encounter is a miracle. Never mind the fact that whole film is about how it's possible for the most ordinary life to be the most beautiful life. It challenges the idea that you have to have a sophisticated academic analysis about race in order to live diversity.

Kathleen Norris: Yes, you know, come to Hawaii and that whole notion will be shot out of hell, because we just live with it all the time. Because [here in Hawaii] we are 19% white, the rest Asian and Polynesian and others. It really is unique in America.

My dad was a musician, a Navy band master. He enlisted after Pearl Harbor when he was teaching music at a high school in South Dakota. But he was always a musician first and foremost. He was a show man, loved to do tours and things. So he got his navy band stationed at Pearl Harbor. They went on a tour of the Philippines, Korea and Japan in the early 1960s. And typically my dad made the

band members learn folk music and the languages of all the places they were going. So they could hear with this navy musician in American uniform singing folk music to his audiences. He said the band resented having to do it, but when they saw the audience response they got it, it was incredible.

On the day that President Kennedy was assassinated they were in Japan, scheduled to tour Hiroshima. And so they got on their navy bus, all kind of in shock, wearing the uniforms. They had bought flowers to put at the Peace Memorial. But what my dad said really got to him was all these Japanese people coming up to him in tears and even hugging the band members and saying how sorry they felt that our President had been killed. Dad said he just went and sat on the bus because it wasn't that long after the War, really, and here was this gesture of compassion from the people that we had massacred. He said that was probably one of the most powerful moments in his whole life. And so I guess that's what was in my mind watching *Paterson*.

Gareth Higgins: One of the things about *Paterson* is that it's edited in such a way that watching it feels like the experience of reading poetry. It slows down your mind the way that truly reading beautiful poetry does. You could tell that story with a different pace. You would tell that story and make some things that are oblique in the current film be more explicit. You could overact the character of his partner and make her into more of a comic foil but Jarmusch knows how to make poetry on the screen. So you are experiencing and that lovely rhythm of *Paterson* waking up at 6:10 every morning and the way the film lulls us into joy.

Kathleen Norris: And not boredom! This is a daily grind, but you don't feel bored at all.

Gareth Higgins: It's interesting, you said "not boredom" but I initially what I misheard you, thinking you were saying "not burden". And I think this is a film

that actually helps you carry the burden of your life. It could help you reframe the story of the ordinariness of your life in the way that people like Wendell Berry makes farming a tobacco field miraculous. It almost made me want to go and become a bus driver or to have a more regular 9 to 5 life. Some films help you face the burden and some films actually lift the burden.

Kathleen Norris: What really strikes me with Jarmusch is that I think early on he was trying to be too cool for school, but this one is very warm by comparison.

Gareth Higgins: It is indeed. So let's enlarge this conversation. This point you're making about your dad and the Japanese people expressing sympathy on death of JFK. Why do you think it is that most of the time we need to wait for something catastrophic to happen before we are kind to each other?

Kathleen Norris: I think that's just human. It's that daily burden that we have, we are going about our daily business and we are pre-occupied with whatever chores we have to do that day, whatever is on your mind. And often, it just takes a real wakeup call for something to happen. Sometimes it's catastrophic, but sometimes it's a simple gesture like this poet loses his notebook the night before and now he has been given a new one. Sometimes it's not catastrophic, but it's an event that says pay attention to this!

I think we all need those moments, and I guess the traditional spiritual term for it is "mountain-top experiences". I mean, sometimes they're devastating and sometimes they're just are inspiring. But we need those interruptions, to put down your phone and stop what you're doing and pay attention. I think catastrophes like 9/11 or the death of JFK have a way of reminding us wait a minute, what I thought was important five minutes ago might not be so important.

Gareth Higgins: Do you think there are ways to cultivate the kind of value that what I think is important most of the time isn't important without having to need catastrophes or funerals or even happy moments like a wedding or a birthday? Of course it's important to have these punctuating moments, and to ritualize them and to do them in community. But can we develop the kind of contemplative mind that can find things truly miraculous in the supermarket or other everyday experience?

Kathleen Norris: I've been a Benedictine oblate now for over thirty years and while I've never really considered myself a very good meditator or contemplative, but there's a great little line in the *Rule of Benedict* that really helps with this kind of perspective. If you really practice this, if you really do this every day, it's amazing what will happen. *Remember each day remember that you're going to die.*

Of course, for most people that's so morbid. But if you practice it, that's spiritual lifting. You can find it in, I think, all religious traditions. It's amazing because all of a sudden you're really angry over something that might be fairly trivial in the scheme of things, but then you look at this person, you think, oh he is mortal too just like I am. It's not repressing your anger, but maybe it's out of proportion here and you get a little perspective. And it really helps when you are in crowded situation like an airport security line or a hospital ER waiting room. You look around at everyone and you think they are only strangers. But allow yourself to believe that God loves all these people and we are all mortal, we are all going to have to face that someday, we are all in the same boat. It will take the experience and transforms it into something better than it usually is.

Gareth Higgins: How does that relate to fear? If you accept you're going to die that probably helps a lot with the emotional continuum with fear, because accepting that you are going to die is the beginning of undermining all fear. But other people aren't necessarily thinking the same with me, they're not necessarily

approaching you or me with the same kind of love and of acceptance and the hope of good relationship. How does the contemplative life assist in the world and the anxiety of the times in which we live?

Kathleen Norris: You know, other people can be scary and often a fear of someone actually might be a reasonable response to something, especially someone is either physically or verbally threatening. But I know that when I observed my monastic friends, there is something about that contemplative life lived in a community where they have all kinds of struggles, and when you recognize that probably the enemy you need to fear most is the one that's inside you, that really does help you cope with other people. Most of the time there really isn't anything to fear except your own passion, your emotions about things that are going to distort whatever is happening. There is a kind of self-awareness that is like the opposite of narcissism that I see in monastic people that's really inspiring.

I'll give you an example. I am working in my new book about formation, because monastic formation is still pretty drastic. If you took to monastery and said I want to spend the next six months searching, [the response will be] Okay, hand over your iPhone, your iPad, your personal computer, you are not going to use those anymore. That's for starters. Most people think that the hardest thing is going to be giving up the notion of personal property and personal devices that they are so used to checking. But the hardest thing is the fact that folk are coming from a world where the first question people want to know is *what do you do*, and the last is *who are you*?

All that stuff that really people enter into in a very deep way in the monastic formation. But it's the opposite of narcissism, because basically you're discovering who you are with this group of other people. If they see the slightest bid of selfishness, egotism, or narcissism they will shoot you down. They might do it in

a kind way, they might do it in an abrupt way but you are not going to get away with that kind of thing.

Gareth Higgins: I suppose the answer to *Who are you* in this day is different in ways that might be unprecedented, in that we are all connected to the hive mind in ways that the humans have not been before. The fact that you and I are even able to talk and see each other right now is one of the enlightened manifestations of this magical technology. But there's lots of shadow manifestations, and it seems to me that they are to do with a couple of primary things. One is that people behave online in ways that they might not even behave in the monastery! People feel able to say things to other people online that they might not feel able to in person. And you can analyze and say it's good to release it or you could say it makes things worse.

So if *Who are you* is the most important question or an important starting question, what should we be doing with technology given that it is affecting who we are so deeply?

Kathleen Norris: Well, we should be using it a lot more carefully than we do. Again, you can look at monasteries and how they use technology: almost all monasteries I know have cell phones now so that if you are going on a trip where you might need to make an emergency call or you are going to graduate school and it's cheaper to use a phone, you will be issued a cell phone. But then when you return to the monastery you turn the cell phone in, you don't have your own personal cell phone.

Monasteries tend to be very deliberate about how they choose to use technology. This just makes sense, if you're trying to have this kind of life. [As for email, much of the time] we don't need to communicate this quickly, certainly not for personal stuff. So I'm probably a pretty marginal user of technology, although I

recently discovered that someone finally came up with a wonderful use for Twitter.

KimKierkegaardashian. It's a mash up of her tweets with quotes from him , and it's just priceless. If I needed silly laugh I look that up.

Gareth Higgins: Clearly the Internet has been an incredible tool for connecting people but one of its shadow sides is that it seems that mutual suspicion in the United States is on the rise.

Kathleen Norris: It's hard to say how much it is in real life. [But I'm not sure that there ever was a "good old days".] I guess I would say I'm glad for the internet for the ease of doing research, the ease of connecting like this. I'm in awe of that. But I miss the ability to eat Twinkies without a guilty conscience when I was a kid! (Laughter.) They were telling us [Twinkies] were good for us]!

Gareth Higgins: I wonder if we are just seeing more "information" about painful things than before, with social media and the overwhelming 24/7 news or propaganda cycle. It's not so much that the world is worse, but that we cannot keep up with the speed of information exchange in a way that enables us to process it healthily. As you say, talking about the deepest things cannot be done that quickly. Take forgiveness for example. The way we talk about that in public is so often either superficial or even damaging. In northern Ireland we used to see people being asked to forgive almost before their loved one was buried. The fact that it's probably not psychologically possible for a long time because you're still in shock and you're still grieving was only the most obvious response. That's before we even talk about what we might call the "continuum of forgiveness". It begins with the violation. The first opportunity for forgiveness is when the violation happens. There's nothing to forgive until someone has violated you. And the first step is to restrain the totally natural urge to revenge. My view is that

if all you were ever able to do was that you did not take revenge on the person who harmed you, you actually took a step toward forgiveness. Because even in terms of our evolutionary biology it's completely natural to want to take revenge.

Kathleen Norris: Yeah it's a process step by step.

Gareth Higgins: Exactly and then if you've got as far as saying "I bear them no ill will", that's astonishing. That's good enough for me. That's a start.

Kathleen Norris: I think that you always have to give God the chance to work on people that God is not going to throw someone out of the picture because they've done something terrible. We've all done terrible things but God forgives us, and I want to let God have a chance to work on all of us, even if we'll never change. Maybe someone is too far gone but it's not for me to decide that. That's one of the reasons I tend to be against the death penalty.

I had a conversation with Sister Helen Prejean, who has a really finely tuned bullshit detector. She's really something. I told her I have such ambivalence about the death penalty because basically I'm against it but there are crimes that are committed sometimes and [it seems that the death penalty is] the only just response, and I go back and forth on it. Her response is really interesting. She said thank you for saying that, and that she thinks most people have that kind of ambivalence but they won't admit it. But God is not done with this person yet. It's not for me to judge that. Give God time to work on the person. Otherwise, we're playing the role of God when we ask the state to execute someone.

Gareth Higgins: Let's talk about current Presidential politics. Where do you think this all came from.

Kathleen Norris: My perspective is strange on all of this because I spent twenty-five years living in my mom's hometown in western South Dakota so I know a lot of Trump voters. They're not racist, they're not stupid. They're not even necessarily narrow-minded. If you look at my book *Dakota* it is actually seeming a little prophetic to me now. This would have been in the 70s, 80s and 90s that people in rural America and overlooked places in especially with a dwindling population of rural whites. They know the rest of the country puts them down and ignores them and I think, in a sense, they were voting for this guy who seemed to be saying *I'll pay attention to you*. I think in some cases it wasn't much more than that. There's still are people out there who tend to think of American means white and Christian which of course never will has. But that's their view and so the America that that they thought they knew is changing around them, and there is there is some kind of fear, [and part of it is wrapped in the fact that] nobody notices [these people]. It's discouraging.

Gareth Higgins: So what can we do about the mutual suspicion?

Kathleen Norris: It's so hard to know. But in a place like western South Dakota you have to really want to get there. There's no public transportation. You have to meet people and you talk to them one-on-one. I think people don't want to admit that they made a mistake. They got fooled in a sense. It's really hard especially when you've got someone at the highest levels of government manipulating suspicion like crazy, deliberately putting out conspiracy theories.

But it's a human universal that we always hold out hope. Knowing that we have had bad presidents before, we've had corrupt presidents before and we've come through basically okay. Having a historical perspective it helps me with the church [too]. Another way that can keep hope alive is you're going to be with other people who are wanting that same thing and feeling that call to action [that has been inspired by recent political challenges].

Gareth Higgins: You've written about metaphorical dark nights, and you also get up early in the morning when I presume it's still dark. I wonder if your familiarity with the physical dark and with the metaphorical dark may mean that it's less immediately anxiety inducing to be here now. Have you befriended the dark?

Kathleen Norris: To some degree and but it comes back to my own spiritual formation over these years. [I've been to places where] daily prayer begins at 3:30 in the morning; in this little church you enter when it's pitch dark. You realize that it's probably the most important office of the day because you're coming from the dark into the light; you welcome the dawn but then you welcome the night and you observe those times. So I guess in a sense I'm living a little bit like a Trappist with that observance and there is something powerful about getting up to read.

Normally I'll just sit and read for a while then I realize I don't need the light on anymore. I can turn my light off because the light is coming in; that's a powerful experience and it's available every day. Sun is happening every day, it's the most ordinary thing in the world. We're back to the original part of this conversation where the ordinary becomes a blessing.

[There's a very powerful movie called *Melancholia*, in which the mentally ill woman is the one who's right about things, and her ["rational"] husband is the coward. He got the telescope, and when he realizes that this planet is just actually kind of collision course with earth, he kills himself and abandons his wife and child. And it's a completely screwed up character played by Kirsten Dunst who gathers the family together and they die together calmly. That's an incredibly messy, crazy film, but I remember thinking oh yeah - people who have mental illness are often more realistic about the stuff that's really going on. And in this case they have a kind that there's a kind of realism to their expression of fear.

Gareth Higgins: So, what's the difference between realism and nihilism? For those of us who have been touched by depression, we may be more realistic and honest in our expression of fear, but that doesn't mean that our perceptions are all contextually accurate.

Kathleen Norris: No, but it was a powerful thing in *Melancholia* when I realized basically the grace that this sister, who had been the trouble all her life was able to gather the family and do something meaningful with a touch of grace at the end. I thought wow, that's, you know, no wonder it's called *Melancholia*! She's come through this terrible self-absorption of melancholia and she can make this gesture to get the three of them sitting together in a little huddle. And it's absolutely beautiful. It's crazy but beautiful. I like Jung's perspective on this whole thing that darkness and fear is always going to be worse and scarier when you're running away from it. But if you'll turn to face it, you face opening the door, you take the key and you've opened the door or you look at the clouds and you say okay, here it is but I've got my people here. I can love. Then things fall into perspective and generally speaking, it's never as bad as you fear. This even applies to little things like bookkeeping. I mean, this is silly but you worry about *Do I have enough money for the next month?* And I'm so afraid I have to go balance my checkbook and see what's there. But the fear about that is always much worse than just sitting down and doing the accounting. When it's all a muddle in your mind, it's always worse. I think that's the message that the movies that give me life are the ones that reflect that [journey of] people coming through darkness and fear. And they're not going to be Pollyannas, they are not going to be optimists, but they're not giving in to nihilism.

Gareth Higgins: So why do you think *Pulp Fiction* is a masterpiece?

Kathleen Norris: Partly technically because of the way it's edited, the way the story is played out is really fascinating. It's not predictable - you see these sleazy

characters but it's also a story about redemption. That the guy drives off the motorcycle named Grace at the end... But the John Travolta character who, the one who kind of is the nihilistic character dies, but the Samuel L Jackson character is the one who's totally changed his life. The events have made him see a new perspective on things and now when he quotes the Bible he's not only going to kill anybody anymore he's going to reflect on what it means. There's so much going on in that film. I really do think it's a masterpiece and I've since, seen it couple of Tarantino's other films. I saw one about Brad Pitt and the Nazis which was okay but not really great and then *Django Unchained*, but *The Hateful Eight* is by far the worst. I don't think I'll ever watch another of his movies anymore unless I find out that he's done something good with *The Sermon on the Mount*.

IN THE YEAR 1999

Mike Riddell

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!*

Robbie Burns

In the year 1999, as a new era approached, I pitched a series of articles that might have turned into a book. The working title was 'The End of the Millennium from the Ends of the Earth'. I never found a publisher, so the reports only ever existed in my notes and my imagination.

As a Kiwi, I've often thought that we have a unique perspective on the rest of the world. It's born of New Zealand's geographical isolation, our short colonial history, and our lack of global chutzpah. We watch the same events as the rest of you, but our take on them is the equivalent of eavesdropping from the margins. It results in a lot of head-scratching and derision.

Observing the election of Donald Trump was spectacular entertainment. It seemed from here, that he was the most unlikely candidate since Chauncey Gardiner in *Being There*. Who could have imagined a presidential candidate famous for a TV game show, who was alleged to be a serial harasser of women, and who announced policy by tweet? It was only too delicious when he actually got the job.

Of course I realize our ironic *schaudenfrende* has come at the cost of a great deal of pain for those of you who live in the land of which President Trump is now the leader. Possibly even for those who voted for him. It's our luxury in this remote

corner of the planet to stand back and smile at the absurdity of life. Forgive us our chuckling, if you are able.

I know there is a deadly serious element to all of this. We were recently informed that North Korea's new missiles are capable of reaching the northern part of my own fair land, which did much to wipe the smile off my face. Another movie character played by Peter Sellers was *Dr Strangelove*. How prophetic this satire all seems from the new millennium.

Recently Rebecca Solnit penned a profound opinion piece on the Don, entitled *The Loneliness of Donald Trump*. Her opening line sounds like it is heralding a hatchet job: "Once upon a time, a child was born into wealth and wanted for nothing, but he was possessed by bottomless, endless, grating, grasping wanting, and wanted more, and got it, and more after that, and always more."

In fact, it turns out to be not so much an attack on the incumbent President as a lament for the lack of checks and balances on personality development in our current society. If our political process throws up this figure as leader of the free world, is there not some deep failing in our notion of civil community? Should we scapegoat the confused despot, or reflect on ourselves?

It seems to me that there are two great forces driving much of the conflict in the world. They are polar opposites – acceptance and rejection. We crave the one and fear the other. In the West, fear of rejection is a malignant force that drives us toward suspicion and conflict. If there is a turn toward xenophobia, it is driven by the deep anxiety that people are against us.

Solnit suggests that much of Trump's unease in his own soul is driven by never being able to reach that which he strives for. "Some use their power to [...] live in the void of their own increasingly deteriorating, off-course sense of self and

meaning. It's like going mad on a desert island, only with sycophants and room service." In this sense, she almost offers empathy for his lonely condition.

It may be that the high farce of the Trump presidency is an opportunity to reflect on the currents in our own lives. How willing are we to accept our limitations, to hear the gentle resistance of our friends, to work toward genuine community with people who are only too aware of our faults? Is it easier to project onto a clownish figure all the disappointment we feel with our own failings?

The fear of rejection blights us all. It makes us cover our sins, repress our anger, and attempt to be other than we are. I recall a time when I became only too aware of this. I was a speaker at a Christian conference. After my address, a young man approached me and buttered me up with great compliments. This encouraged me to listen closely to him, as he was obviously a person of good taste.

As he poured out his heart, I became aware that I needed to go to the toilet. But rather than interrupt my flatterer and explain my need, I pretended to hang on his every word. Eventually, with a pious but pained visage, I pissed my pants. I didn't want to appear rude, and so instead I became a fool. I was not at ease in my own skin.

It has been the journey of a lifetime to finally be at home with myself. This was never something I could work up for myself – it was the by-product of unconditional love. I venture that no one is able to accept themselves until they have experienced being accepted. Donald Trump is not alone in feeling desperately incomplete. He may be so in not having anyone to teach him that this a problem he can't solve without help.

Solnit identifies the distortion in Trump's character as stemming from a lack of genuine community. "[T]he opposite of people who drag you down isn't people

who build you up and butter you up. It's equals who are generous but keep you accountable, true mirrors who reflect back who you are and what you are doing." Acceptance asks brokenness: a mutual honesty in which to become real.

That might not sound like much of a political agenda, but from this forgotten corner of the world, it seems that society will not be healed until we address it. On all sides we are surrounded by politicians who have not matured socially or spiritually. They are driven by the lust for power which will always prove ultimately destructive. We can't change them, but we can change ourselves.

Getting rid of the Trump presidency won't change the political systems that created him. A deeper transformation is necessary. We poor stunted souls need to find a way of rediscovering our humanity, compassion, and interdependence. As Martin Luther King said, "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."

It may be time to live what we hope for. To live intentionally rather than reactively. Critiquing the status quo is so very easy, with an emotionally crippled man holding power. Can we bear the thought that he is actually a reflection of our own immaturity? The work of transformation is slow and deliberate and demanding. This is no time to neglect it.

MENTOR

Steve Daugherty

Odysseus had to leave town for a long time, and his boy Telemachus would need more than babysitting while he was away. His son would need a guide, a wisdom figure to impart to the young man what was required to preserve a somewhat uninterrupted journey to adulthood. So Odysseus went to a name since proven to be one of the most enduring brands of all time, and hired a guy named Mentor. You and I have never prayed for a Telemachus.

By my thirties my longing for *things* was giving way to a longing for a wisdom figure; A guru, a sage, a wizard. Someone who could affirm my journey or correct it. Someone who could figuratively give me a little drawstring bag of coins, teach me how to take down a troll. I don't fault my father for not being a mentor. And why would I? We have the titles *father* and *mentor* because they're different roles. But I confess neither of the roles seemed filled to my soul's satisfaction, and the longing for a mentor was only getting stronger. For years I expressed this longing to my wife, fantasizing about having an older man in my life that could speak into me more deeply than anyone ever had. I never wished for the guidance of an older woman, which may have been both sexist and a subtle criticism of my father after all. It may have simply been because I'd always had a doting grandmother but had lost my grandfathers so early in life I've no memory of them.

I tried not to be weird about it, but I thought about finding a mentor somewhat constantly. I'd try to hide my tears every time I watched Mr. Miyagi train Daniel, or Rafiki explain to Simba what to do with the past. It would sneak up on me. I even got weepy when I considered the old, wise librarian in *The Never Ending Story* actually *gave* Sebastian that book. I was happy for that lonely kid when the princess told him at the end what to do with his life.

It was a most interesting time in my life when Bart showed up.

Bart was new to our church but not so much to earth. His white beard suggested a bit of magic. His eyes were sunken but full of life. His laugh was of a variety developed through years of not worrying about how your laugh sounds. He was in his late sixties, and for reasons I couldn't understand, he took an immediate interest in me, my teaching, my work. He gushed praise. He asked me questions and cupped my shoulder with his hand. He told me he prayed for me. Over the first couple of months of knowing Bart, I had to work hard not to jump to any conclusions, but in my defense Odysseus had been off to war for a long time. *Had God finally answered my prayers and sent a mentor to me?*

One evening I told my wife about Bart. My language and my tone were boyish I think. "This could be the one," I said. "What do I do, like *officially ask him?*" I said.

I'm in my forties now, and I think I assess clearly that my whole culture is burdened with an absentee wisdom figure epidemic. Perhaps I am projecting, and I concede cultural diagnoses are like pants—everyone has a pair. But I suspect most readers will agree to this point that we'd all benefit from a personal Gandalf. And I do see many doing the work of imparting deeper human knowledge to anyone willing to admit their cup is shiny but empty. But generally speaking, Telemachus is raising himself. And we know it.

Most of the folks standing at our trailheads are just selling speculative maps. Listen to who guides us, and you may note that they count on us sitting unreflectively at their feet despite their having never really learned how to walk. We prop up foolishness so long as the bearer is pretty or rich. We attach ourselves to folks who may not know how to live deeply, but know how to live in denial of our chronically maladjusted society—or even how to make it worse.

But from who else would we take our cues in a culture that has equated domination with morality, where toxic definitions of power are no longer exorcised but encouraged, where tribalism is uncritically accepted as the only available unity, where bending swords into plowshares is resisted because sword-swinging warriors are the true citizens while gardeners are impotent hobbyists? Maybe I am bordering on cynicism, but hear me out; I'm diagnosing that a genuine wisdom figure cannot easily stand at the center of this ethos, guiding us. The very fact we are able to push them to the edges proves they weren't worthy of being heard in the first place, right? They lacked a winner's grit, so good riddance. In this environment the true wisdom figure, the cave dwelling Obi Wans or imprisoned Nelson Mandelas might be quoted for their marginality but cannot be submitted to. And so we miss out on their guidance.

We miss their stories of simplicity and thoughtfulness, of transcended pain, their wounds fermented into the carafes of wisdom enjoyed outside the party that offers little more than the boxed shit. These folks aren't often on TV, don't have five-year plans, and rarely hold seminars. They may be the men and women in our midst contented to seem ill-equipped to help anybody win anything. They are those who can show us who we are despite initially seeming to our programming to be the very ones like whom we don't want to turn out to be. I'm saying the peacemakers, the awakened ones, those unloved lovers, might be people whose way breaks the very thing our own lives are made gaunt trying to hold together. I admit we already know this latent mentor archetype so deeply the trope makes us roll our eyes: the one whom we seek is the very one we're willfully overlooking. The stone the builders rejected turns out to be the most important brick in the wall and all that. But perhaps this serves my precise point; we've stopped applying wisdom because we done heard about it already. How else could a people connected to so much information elect a win-it-all billionaire gameshow host who sees other humans as rungs on a ladder, and then puzzle over the sociological cancer ravaging us afterward?

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After a couple of months Bart asked to schedule time with me. He said he wanted to pitch me something he felt was important, and was sure I'd agree.

Weeks later I remember I took a deep breath before the meeting, having already told my wife that Bart was about to pop the question. You know, the mentor-mentee proposal. Bart was nervous, a vibe I'd not gotten from him to this point.

"I've been thinking about what you do, and how special I think you are to the people you lead, about the burden you carry in being a spiritual leader," Bart said. "And I have been thinking about my role in that."

Now I was nervous. Bart continued.

"And I certainly don't want to add to your already-full plate, but I feel like the Lord is leading me to this, odd as this may seem for you." Bart swallowed and smiled. "I was wondering, Steve, if you would be my mentor."

It took me about four months to not feel angry about this. As Foy Vance wisely put it, *Baby, hope deals the hardest blows*. And damn it blowed. It didn't help that when Bart discovered I didn't hold Adam and Eve as necessary historical figures or that there wasn't probably a stegosaur stall on the Ark, he left our church, with prejudice. It would be some time before I realized the old man was looking for a wisdom figure too, and was so acutely aware of a deficit that he'd gone all in with me, an equally deficient man less than half his age.

I'm approaching the inescapable conclusion that I may be counted among an unqualified lot who's discovering, humbly, they may have been given stewardship of a better baton to pass. Not because I'm all that sharp, but because it seems clear to me that a better way is a *different* way, rather than merely making forced improvements on the current one. In a society of baby geese following whatever is

taller, there's a real rethink on the table about how we call forth the depths of our shared humanity, true community, empathy and unity, etc., and whether it's better to try and do so from a cultural stage, fighting to maintain a voice and a place and a channel and the right to and all that. Or, do we do it best out on the edges, to be discovered by those who've walked out. Are wisdom figures hosts or guests?

In any case, you and I have to be mindful of what we practice. Because we might be training unawares to become the wisdom figures the world needs, and you get good at what you practice. And as Fr. Richard Rohr reminds, the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better, so it's a life of peace that teaches peace. It's a life of love that loves. As the old stories insist, deep calls to deep, and it's hard work to sink down, slow down, and be who we've needed. What choice do we have if we're to return to our better humanity, but to accept true wisdom wherever we find it, take our blows, and in the next decades be the answer to our own questions.

A COMMON ENCHANTMENT

Tyler McCabe



When I was ten years old, I told my little sister that a witch lived in our fireplace.

“Don’t tell mom. Here—listen,” I said, pointing to the brick façade. Outside, the wind flying over the chimney created a sighing sound.

Her eyes widened. “She’s sleeping.”

I told her the witch couldn’t get out as long as she kept the secret, mainly so I’d stay out of trouble for “scaring my sister.” She stifled a laugh and tapped

at the brick. At that age, you get lost in your own fables: when she swore to keep the witch secret, I started believing the witch might one day wake up.

Today, my sister is a nurse. We don't talk about witches anymore, or enchanted fireplaces that bind them. She works in medicine and I work in data analysis, and those sorts of conversations seem to belong to a fairytale book we threw out a long time ago.

We were raised by a medical editor, under the watchful care of her diagnoses and knowledge of Western medicine. When our throats burned, we didn't swallow cayenne and honey, but ibuprofen. When we saw friends eating vitamin C like candy to prevent a cold, we cast knowing glances at each other, reminding ourselves the body can't absorb extra vitamin C that quickly. And later, when the twin vines of our development both took a turn away from the sun, when we began to each experience some form of generalized anxiety, we twined closer, noting that familial love by all accounts alleviates certain symptoms.

Now I send a text message reminding her of the witch. Outside, it's wintertime and the night is growing longer. My stomach is talking. I ask her if she wants to catch a bite. All down the street, I'm watching lights float up from the deep like little fish in a net. I can't roll my eyes at fairytales while I still speak in magical terms.

She texts back and I laugh. I can hear her laugh inside mine, which nobody would consider paranormal, but probably should. I have been rereading a book called *Science Set Free*, in which scientist Rupert Sheldrake carefully points out the gaps in our scientific understanding today. It's thrilling. He means to inspire a new generation of scientific inquiry and new ways of thinking about how even the most common phenomena arise. For example,

I would've thought the anxiety my sister and I share could be explained by genetic science, but the evidence just isn't there.

Sheldrake asserts that certain scientists' "faith in the predictive power of the genome is misplaced because genes enable organisms to make proteins, but do not explain the development of embryos." He explains how proteins are made according to genetic patterns, but how each protein folds in a specific way to create a structure for a unique purpose, and how genes have apparently nothing to do with that folding process, nor their eventual purpose. After more than forty years of intensive, well-funded research, scientists can still only describe how "cells, tissues, and organs develop in a modular manner, shaped by morphogenetic fields." In other words, why do proteins in development become at the right moment a heart and not a liver? There is no widely held theory.

In the absence of evidence, the vocabulary we use to talk about genes starts coming to life: we speak incorrectly of genes *molding* or *creating* form, *controlling* or *directing* habits, or we attribute motives like *selfishness* to them. It starts to sound as if genes are witches casting spells.

"Never before has the gap between the quantity of information and our ability to interpret it been so great," stated Francis Collins, former head of the Human Genome Project, in a 2009 paper in *Nature*. Despite billions of dollars in research, genetic science is still riddled with interesting questions and confounding bits of information. Gene quantity appears to have no relationship to the complexity of an organism: a fruit fly has more genes than a human. *Rice* has more genes than a human. Roughly fifty human genes associated with height, taken together, only seem to account for about five percent of the inheritance of height. And as Sheldrake notes, "Many other examples of missing heritability are now known, including the

heritability of many diseases, making 'personal genomics' of very questionable value. Since 2008, in scientific literature this phenomenon has been called the 'missing heritability problem.'"

We know so little yet we speak so calmly. I go about my day. It remains that siblings share gifts and afflictions regardless of my comprehension. I text my sister. I do not think about these common enchantments. It almost seems not to matter if there is a solid, demonstrable explanation for what my sister and I share. What does it matter? What would it gain me? Our healing is not in the explanation, but the story we are telling each other.

As in, once upon a time, a witch slept in a fireplace.

She snored softly through the winter.

One evening, a pair of foolish siblings playing nearby managed to wake her, and when they woke her she was very unhappy. She rose from her rocking chair, howled at the children, and dispersed into shadow. She vowed to follow the siblings all the days of their lives, to sew doubt into their joy and worry into their triumph.

There was nothing the siblings could do. They locked hands. They looked down and saw that their shadows, too, had joined.

Each looked into the other's face and understood.

BARRY LYNDON

Gareth Higgins



Most of the writing about Stanley Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon*, from the novel by William Makepeace Thackeray, and about the rise and fall of an eighteenth century social climber, reflects on the sheer technical prowess on display: Locations and costumes that feel as if they were photographed from inside a time machine, two hundred and fifty year old candlelit night scenes that were indeed only lit by candles when the movie was shot less than fifty years ago, a portrayal of royal protocol so dedicated to authenticity that Kubrick literally phoned the Queen. And yes, all those things - the way the film looks, the way it feels, the way it seems to even *smell* like how we imagine the 1750s - all those things combine to create something extraordinary: a work of cinema that surpasses almost all other attempts to do something similar.

But - and it's an important but - what gets too easily ignored in much talk about *Barry Lyndon* is that its central role is invested with such clarity of restraint by Ryan O'Neal that one of the greatest of screen performances has never really been noticed. From the first frame - and it is, like every other frame here, as exquisite as the paintings that must have served as references - we see Barry as that most difficult of characters to portray: someone whose behavior is dislikable, but who elicits empathy. He starts poor, he wants to move up the ladder, and in that regard is only doing what the dominant story of our culture teaches: to accumulate - influential friends, money, reputation, "property". The problem with the accumulative impulse, of course, is that it tends toward disregard for the doubts and loves which make us human. Getting more stuff isn't the same thing as getting wisdom either.

It's no wonder that the most tragic element of Barry's broken life takes place where he has most allowed himself to actually feel something real. His loss is irreplaceable, because he hasn't learned how to ask for help. He has, of course, been assisted in the process of his own zombification by the fact that he has adopted a culture that depends on overwhelming pretense, from the literal powder masks worn by the aloof, to the value system that exiles those in pain, and honors those who caused it. Ryan O'Neal's face in this particular scene - no spoilers - should be one of the iconic images of cinema history.

The film is full of those, and as an essay revealing what really matters by overwhelming us with a portrayal of what doesn't, *Barry Lyndon* is a brilliant paradox: a vastly entertaining movie about something awful.

The Criterion Collection has just released BARRY LYNDON in a gorgeous restoration, on DVD and Blu-ray. The special features do a beautiful job, among other things, of painting Kubrick not so much as the reclusive and slightly mad artist of clichéd renown, but as the avuncular patron of a ragtag family of people who thought that making films this way was normal, or even if it wasn't, they wouldn't have it any other way.

THE BRIDGE

Michelle Beers

Some months ago I found myself driving north on I-95 to Philadelphia trapped in dense summer traffic on a bridge overpassing the Susquehanna River. On this particular trip I was traveling with a good friend unfamiliar with the area and my intense, and admittedly unreasonable, fear of bridges. As we inched across the bridge, idling in my stick shift between first and second gear, the only conversation I could manage was a string of predictable complaints: “Where are all these people going?” “Don’t they know we have somewhere to be?” and of course my fear stricken plea “I really hope this bridge doesn’t collapse beneath us. We’d be goners for sure!” My friend had been playing along up to this point “Yes this is an awful lot of traffic” and “It seems no one told them we were coming to make way”, but when I began to express my fear of falling off the edge of the bridge lodged somewhere in between an 18-wheeler and a Prius she paused without immediate response. I didn’t take notice right away—likely too focused on the story I was building up in my mind about the traffic jam in front of us with me at the center of it. After a moment my friend replied, but this time not with passive agreement, instead with a question: “Michelle, why must the bridge collapse?”

When I was 18 I left home as the first person in my family to go to college. I grew up poor and viewed life only through the experiences of violence that poverty breeds. My father was homeless for the majority of my young life, and to fill his absence my mom worked long and hard to raise myself and my three older brothers. Our lives were crowded, messy, conflict-ridden, and, ultimately, complicated. Any opportunities available to me were skewed by this perception of violence, limitation, and fear. Thus, going to college wasn’t a given or a natural consequence of my own life circumstances. The first option, to stay where my family was, I knew. Others who look like me and carry my name have followed this well-worn path. The second option was murky, distorted by perhaps empty

promises of prosperity, and required leaving everything I knew behind me. It was the first time in my life I felt suspended over a set of circumstances, trapped above my own life, without actually being able to live it. I began thinking, feeling, and acting in fear. My high school graduation resembled an impending turning point: either I would remain in the grueling and shameful places of my childhood or I would leave them. Neither the former or the latter option was clear or laden with freedom.

In the end I left. The subsequent decisions I made, or did not make, as a result of this choice are not important. I am no better or wiser than another person, and how I have decided to conduct myself in complicated situations has not always been good, honest, or worthy of merit or glory. What *is* important is what fear has taught me. Fear is a simple expression and motivates us to simple thinking by leading us to ask: where is the quickest exit? And while this question may be alluring it distorts the truth which is that life does not have to be marked by a set of impossibilities. Rather, with faith, hope, creativity, and compassion we possess the capacity to see possibilities in the darkest, most fearful of situations.

I have told this part of my story many times, both in informal moments and at more formal events like this one. My persistent hesitancy in telling my story and using my life as an illustration of some greater message is that the honest emotional experience of my life will be lost. The words poverty, violence, and food insecurity—to name a few—are typically, in these settings, received objectively in an academic tone without challenge, but in reality these terms are experienced subjectively and viscerally. When I think of my father now living in senior public housing, visiting the local food pantry for meals, managing type 2 diabetes, Lyme's disease, and PTSD, or when I think of the number of times he has given me \$50 checks on my birthday which I do not bother depositing because I know they will bounce my mind does not go to the statistics that are intended to represent other men like him. My gut-wrenches into nausea, I loose my breath momentarily, and become dizzy with fear that I may end up like him because we

are linked by blood, and name, and the same freckled hands, and boxy chin, and emerald eyes. And I feel shame and guilt on top of it all for having left him and a storied legacy of tired impoverishment that terrifies me.

But I continue to share this part of myself, especially with all of you here this evening, because I know your fear is not objective. Your fear is physical and paralyzing. It cannot be captured in yet another New York Times interactive map detailing which social factors contributed to the result of our nation's last election. The only way to honestly capture your fear and challenge it is to name the moments it takes your breath away, pulls tears to your eyes, and forces you to sit down while you ask yourself "Why?" and "How?" and "What now?" and "How do I keep living?" These are moments of fear which our honest and needed, but do not capture the whole story.

Just like when I was 18, and when on the bridge this summer, seemingly stuck indefinitely, there is so much we cannot see or predict while we are suspended in this moment of our nation's history. But we can push back against a narrative of fear, a narrative of impossibility and sorrow and paralyzation. We can do so by inviting ourselves to see past the traffic jam and find a sense of calm on the bridge.

"Why must the bridge collapse?"

"Why must we give into our fear of a false reality?" A reality which is not certain and does not hold the power to define us.

For each other's sake, our own, and that of our collective humanity I feel that we are compelled in this moment, as I have felt at various other points in my life, to respond to our great needs as people of faith, people of hope, people of creativity, people of possibility, and people of compassion.

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