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Contents of this Issue

- THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS
PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY
a sermonette by Gene Marshall
- DEMOCRACY IS COMING TO THE U.S.A.
a political commentary by Gene Marshall
- WHAT VALIDATES OUR THEOLOGY?
a brief treatise by Gene Marshall
- ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE
reviews of movies & novels
by Joyce Marshall
- RECOMMENDED READING
reviews of nonfiction by Joyce & Gene Marshall
- Art Work by Jeanne Marie Manning

“in Christ.” An unremembered shaman of some ancient hunter-gather tribe may have been “in Christ.” Being “in Christ” does not change, if being “in Christ” means being in this Eternal dynamic. Such an experience does not progress, it only repeats. It is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

So what do we mean by an Eternal experience that does not change? Is there such a thing? If we do experience such a thing, how will we know? The New Testament speaks of the Holy Spirit as a real happening in human life and likens it to a wind, a Wind blowing within our finite, temporal, passing lives. This blowing Wind is said to be the Breath of God, the Presence of the Eternal. This Holy Spirit is also said to be the blowing that characterized Jesus as God's son. Paul described this Holy Spirit as Trust, Love, and Freedom. These, I believe, are his three main categories, filled out with others like: a Hope that does not disappoint, a Peace that is beyond all understanding, and a Joy unspeakable. Paul described for us an Eternal experience with many facets. This experience takes place in the lives of ordinary human beings, living in ordinary changing conditions. These ordinary Spirit-infested human beings continually change their religious practices and their beliefs, but the Spirit that makes them Christians does not change, has never changed, and never will change. It is the same Spirit, yesterday, today, and forever.

If we define Christianity as a religion, then of course Christianity does change like every other religion. But if we view Christianity as a participation “in Christ,” then Christianity does not change, does not progress; it simply recurs, resurges, is resurrected afresh from the dead bodies of our corrupted religious communities.

So how shall we recognize this resurrection to Eternal Trust, Love, and Freedom? We will need to become competent in distinguishing the Eternal in our experience from the temporal in our experience. Our rational knowledge is temporal. Our theological clarifications are temporal, our biblical scholarship is temporal, our religious practices are temporal, our religious methods are temporal, our feelings are temporal, our desires are temporal, our passions are temporal, our states of

There is No Such Thing as Progressive Christianity!

a sermonette by
Gene Marshall



There are progressive politics, progressive economics, progressive culture, even progressive religion, but “progressive Christianity” assumes that Christianity is a finite set of religious beliefs and practices that can progress. Such an understanding is certainly an improvement over the view that Christianity is a finite set of religious beliefs and practices that never change. But if we view “Christianity” as having to do with temporal human beings participating in the Eternal that does not change, then the basic dynamic of being a Christian does not progress.

Here is another way to look at this: Let us suppose that the phrase “in Christ,” so often used by Paul, means participation in the Eternal quality of experience that characterized the living presence of Jesus. If so, then any of us who can be said to be “in Christ” are in a state of living that has not progressed since Jesus – not progressed in over 2000 years. Indeed, it has not progressed ever. For even Abraham, according to Paul, can be said to be

consciousness are temporal. So what on Earth, yes on Earth, is Eternal?

The Eternal Wind blows where it will, we do not know where it comes from or where it is going. Blown by this Wind, we do not know where we have come from or where we are going. Yes, I was born in Stillwater Oklahoma, but when born by this Wind, I do not know where I have come from. My origin is totally mysterious. Exploring it entails reaching out to the everlasting Black Hole before the Big Bang Beginning. My being is stretched to encompass a participation with and within the Every-Thing-Ness within which all things cohere.

If I open in Trust toward this impression of Eternality, to this Reality with a capital "R" that never goes away and never changes, then I am "in Christ." If I allow myself to Love this amazing realization of Spirit Self and to treat every other person the same as I treat myself, then I am "in Christ." If I act at my tiny space/time coordinate of history with "the Freedom that Christ has won for us," the Freedom from developmental habits, the freedom from all finalizations of good and evil, the freedom for all victimizations to a supposed fate, then I am "in Christ." This being "in" is Eternal. My reflections upon it are temporal, they change, and perhaps progress, but the "in" itself does not progress. It is the same "in" that Amos was in. It is the same "in" that Isaiah was in. It is the same "in" that Jeremiah was in. It is the same "in" that Jesus was in - as well as Paul and Augustine and Aquinas, and Luther, and yes, I believe, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and billions of other well known and unknown persons who somehow opened to let the Wind blow the leaves on the temporal trees of their ordinary lives. This is not progress; it is resurrection.

Democracy is Coming to the USA

a political commentary
by Gene Marshall



Leonard Cohen has a song named "Democracy is Coming to the U.S.A." Here is my favorite verse:

*I'm sentimental, if you know what I mean.
I love the country, but I can't stand the scene.
And I'm neither left or right.
I'm just staying home tonight,
getting lost in that hopeless little screen.
But I'm stubborn as those garbage bags
that Time cannot decay.*

*I'm junk, but I'm still holding up
this little wild bouquet:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.*

Cohen's poem assumes that we do not have democracy in the U.S.A., that we are still working on it. He also assumes that there is still a ray of hope that we might one day become a democratic nation.

As the news media move out of the Bush-Cheney orbit into the Obama orbit, U.S. citizens are learning more and more about how undemocratic the previous eight years have been. Redefining torture to permit torture is only the tip of the iceberg. Even more significant has been the permission given by the federal government to the big banking institutions to run, risk, and ruin the entire world economy. Even after being humiliated, bailed out, given stress tests, and challenged to behave better, the managers of these institutions still act with oligarchical arrogance, refuse to correct their interest gouging credit card policies, lead fights in Congress against fair refinancing of their own scandalous home mortgages, and continue to control with huge financial donations the voting of a majority of Congress. James K. Galbraith is correct in considering these and many other corporations as predators who care only for their own monetary bottom lines and thereby prey upon, rather than serve, the human population and planet. For democracy to come to the U.S.A., we will have to put in place some stiff regulations for the financial sector. In the longer haul, having a full democracy means doing what David Korten terms dismantling the Wall Street Economy and building a Main Street Economy in its place. These are complex matters, and they are poorly understood by the citizenry. But we can put the matter simply: we do not have a democracy as long as big money institutions make all the big decisions.

Senator Dick Durbin, interviewed on the Bill Moyer's program, spoke of the need for public financing of congressional campaigns. He sees this as absolutely necessary to correct big-money rule. Recent Democrat Arlen Specter supports Durbin in this initiative. But it will be a big fight against strong antidemocratic forces to put such laws in place. And more is needed. We must insist that TV networks give free TV time to accredited candidates as part of the rent these networks pay for the publicly owned airwaves.

Speaking of Arlen Specter, his shift to the Democratic Party has meanings far beyond the strivings of one Republican moderate to stay in

office. Moderates are no longer welcome in the Republican Party. The Rush Limbaugh, Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee wing of the Party has decided to purify itself of these "weak-livered traitors." And those regions of the nation that are the "base support" for this wing of Republican ideology agree with such "cleansing." Some Republican strategists talk about restoring a big-tent Republican Party, but they will fail. The Right wing of their Party is too dedicated to ideological purity and reactivity.

Ronald Reagan, with his Hollywood charm and communication skills, managed to hold together in one victorious, big-tent Party the financial predators, medieval Christians, and a lot of naive future-frightened citizens. This tragic union has now collapsed. Millions of those naive future-frightened citizens have become even more frightened of clinging to those deadly, past-oriented policies. They have left the Republican fold in droves to join Obama's promise of "Change." The financial predators have failed so badly that they can no longer hide their fraud, corruption, and greed behind the fine clothes of compassionate conservatism, fiscal discipline, and national patriotism. This emperor has no clothes. So most of what is left of the Republican Party is the medieval Christians and a thin scum of naive trickle-down, free-market, head-tripping ideologues. Yes, there are still a small number of good-old-days, big-tent Republican moderates, but their days are numbered. Look for more of them to become Democrats.

So what does this mean for the two-party system, often called the "duopoly"? It no longer exists. We now have one major party and it will continue to grow in numbers. And it will be a true big tent, housing everything from mid-right to fully progressive. In part, this is due to the incredible political skills of Barack Obama, augmented, of course, by Michelle and a super-intelligent team of cabinet members and advisors. Not since the Kennedy years have we seen such a brain trust. Most of them are not radicals, only a few are full-fledged progressives. Taken together, they are likely left-of-center moderates.

A case can be made that the Obama administration are the true conservatives. They are leading us in the conservation of the U.S. Constitution; in the conservation of the rule of law and order; in the conservation of a conscience about torture; in the conservation of effective, competent, well-organized government on behalf of the whole people; in the conservation of dialogue with all the elements of society in a democratic fashion; in the

conservation of a respectful and cooperative foreign policy; in the conservation of honesty and care for your neighbor; in the conservation of a free enterprise economy that works; and in the conservation of a big role for government as the spender of last resort in an economic downturn.

The Republican Party under the leadership of its current congresspersons has emerged as an attempt to continue the now discredited reactionary strategies that have proved disastrous during the last eight years. Their image of conserving is conserving tax cuts and tax shelters for the wealthiest citizens, conserving military expenditures that are no longer needed (assuming that they were ever needed for anything except enriching Republicans), conserving an over-reliance on military means in our foreign policy, conserving questionable means of interrogation, conserving unregulated banking systems that coddle corruption and theft from the entire global economy, conserving no-bid government contracts for political cronies, conserving the lie that corporation managers know best and that governmental regulation and labor unions are of minimal importance, conserving the remaining traces of racism and religious bigotry, conserving the belief that telling lies often enough and long enough makes them true. Such strategies can now be viewed as reactionary, not conservative. Though some Democrats and Independents have also supported reactionary strategies, "true conservatives" of whatever party will continue asking "Why must 'conservative' mean support for these untenable positions?"

The Obama administration is competent, cautious, and measuredly conservative. It is doing this nation a profound service by taking the place of the reactionary Republicans who falsely claim to be conservatives. This is why the Obama administration is a sea change in U.S. leadership.

So who are the progressives? And where is the political dialogue going to turn? True progressives have already reached the U.S. Congress. Prominent among them are Barbara Boxer, Russell Feingold, Patrick Leahy, Dick Durbin, Bernard Sanders and perhaps a dozen others in the Senate. In the House we have Dennis Kucinich, Maxine Waters, Henry Waxman, Barbara Lee, Sheila Jackson Lee, Barney Frank, Charles Rangel, John Conyers, and perhaps 50 others. We have Greens and independents like Ralph Nader. We are certainly not beginning at zero for a vital progressive movement that is capable of a vigorous dialogue with the Obama administration and its currently moderate policies.

Obama himself may be open to move much farther on some progressive topics than he is currently able or willing to do. Therefore, we need not worry about losing a two-party dialogue. We still have a two-party (or a multiparty) government, but in the future, Republicans will not be one of those parties. We will see a progressive-moderate dialogue take center stage, and we will see them agree to push all antidemocratic forces to the sidelines.

*I'm still holding up this little wild bouquet:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.*



What Validates our Theology?

a brief treatise by
Gene Marshall

When I teach a course containing students of postmodern theology, I often get some questions about the truth of theology, about how the truth of theology can be validated. At the risk of losing a few anti-philosophical readers, I am going to share some thoughts on this topic.

Here is my core assertion: **good theology is a contemplative reflection upon Reality with a capital "R."** It is Reality that validates our theology. But what is Reality? Everyone has a slightly different view of what is real. The various cultures have different views of reality. The various religions have different views of reality.

I happened upon a TV interview in which Gore Vidal said that he had always been opposed to monotheism. He prefers many gods, many views about things, many perspectives. He went on to illustrate the destructiveness of claiming that there is one God, one religion, or one view of things. He pointed out how useless wars have been waged between nations, each of whom claimed to be fighting for the truth of their one and only God. He is obviously right about the silliness of this sort of dogmatic certainty.

Yet Vidal appears not to understand the essence of the radical monotheism espoused by true Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The phrase "There is no god save Allah" can sound like some outlandish praise for the Muslim religion, but suppose that "Allah" is simply a name for Reality. Then this famous phrase means that no human sense of reality is final. Only Reality is the whole truth. There is only one Reality, and every human perspective seeking to grasp this Infinitely Mysterious Reality is limited, perhaps severely delusional. Every religion is limited. Every

philosophy is limited. Every worldview is limited. Every culture is limited. Every human being has a limited view of what is so. Only Reality is Absolutely So.

So, how can we approach this far-off, overwhelmingly mysterious Reality, and of what use would it be for us to do so? First of all, let us notice that we are the ones being approached by this overwhelmingly mysterious Reality. Indeed, we cannot escape from it. We are birthed by it. We are killed by it. We are supported by it. We are limited by it. Our wondrous existence is a glorification we cannot flee. And our full extinction is a destiny we cannot avoid. Reality is approaching us.

And Reality is approaching our views of reality, our perspectives on reality, our sense of reality. Reality is humiliating us with the realization that our sense of reality is flawed. Perhaps we have come to see, again and again, that our sense of reality is an array of unconscious lies mingled with enough truth to make these lies believable.

So humility is the main gift we receive through our intentional approach to and honoring of this one overarching mysterious Reality. It is humility to notice that our "view of reality" is usually a flight from Reality, and at best a flawed interpretation of our real experiences of Reality. Many of our interpretations of Reality have already been tossed by us into our own wastebaskets as the limitations of these interpretations have been revealed to us by the onrush of fresh "inconvenient" experiences. And our current sense of reality is no less vulnerable to obsolescence.

All our current experiences are being interpreted by our busy minds before we even have the opportunity to stop and think about the truth or falsehood of those interpretations. And all of these interpretations, intentional or automatic, are limited grasps of what we up against. My or your "uninterpreted experience" of onrushing Reality is not produced by us. Our pure experience is given to us by the OTHERNESS of that ONE all-encompassing EVERY-THING-NESS that we meet in each specific NOW of our living. In other words, Reality's Action upon us is the "pure experience" that precedes all the interpretive actions being done by our fragile minds.

Our scientifically trained minds are somewhat open to Reality. Good science is a willingness for the facts of our experience to challenge our old theories and provoke us to better theories. But our scientific facts are never quite pure experience. Rather, scientific facts are constructions that our

WHAT VALIDATES OUR THEOLOGY?

mind makes out of those aspects of experience that we choose to notice. Objectivity is our scientific ideal, and this means omitting from our consideration the subjective content that every whole experience includes. The arms-length facts of science are human constructions that only partially reflect the content of our pure experience of Reality.

We may have noticed that pre-scientific societies were open to noticing aspects of our actual experience of Reality that our modern scientific mental frames tend to block. For example, ancient societies were often more aware of the qualities of consciousness being lived by our animal companions. Also, some of the depths of human consciousness came to them more readily because the ideal of objectivity did not block those aspects of Real experience from their view.

But even though we modern and postmodern humans have these scientifically-honed, objectivity-loving minds, it is not necessary for us to avoid the inner aspects of our experience. We too can contemplate Reality with our core consciousness and notice that our mind is just a tool for this contemplative inquiry as well as a tool for our scientific approach to truth. Our mind is a tool, just a screwdriver with a larger range of application.

And we cannot stop our minds from functioning. Our mind, like our heart, is always active, always interpreting, always associating, always creating meaning, and this mental work goes on night and day, awake or asleep. The mind never stops until it is stopped by death itself. But our conscious person can stop engaging with the ongoing process of our mental interpreting. We can simply notice that we are aware of Reality and of our mind's working, and of our body's feelings, and of our awareness's awareness of all of this wildly mysterious processing.

When such an awareness of our awareness is present, then we can begin to understand (or perhaps we should say, "wonderstand") the radical monotheism of these long-lasting Western religions. We can notice directly with our core consciousness that Reality is ONE, that prior to all the interpretation by our puny minds the overarching EVERY-THING-NESS is ONE. It is only our minds that create the manyness. We give names to things. We must give names to things. We must distinguish among things. Our survival depends upon it. Our practical living depends upon our minds' definitions of differences among the aspects of Reality. But the Reality that we break up in this fashion is ONE Reality. Reality is TOGETHER. Reality is an EVERY-THING-NESS in

which all specific things cohere. Reality has no nouns, no verbs, no adjectives, no adverbs, no prepositions, no conjunctions. Language is a human invention. Language is a tool we use to interpret Reality in order to meet our practical needs. But Reality cannot be reduced to the 26 letters of the English alphabet or to the symbolic forms that these letters can indicate. Reality cannot be reduced to the mental pictures within the minds of we biological beings.

Now of course, there is some correlation between our thoughts and Reality. If this were not true, our minds would be useless for our survival. Our minds evolved to assist us in wending our way amidst Reality. But our minds, like our toenails, are finite instruments. Our minds are not capable of one-to-one correspondence with all the aspects of Reality. Our thinking must endure (or glory in) a process of perpetual revolution in our thinking.

The original sin of humanity is confusing our minds' products with the ONE WHOLE Reality that walks with us in the cool of the day and cries out to us "Where art thou." In this ancient biblical story, Adam and Eve, having opted to feed on the truth created by their own minds, were lost from living in the essential Garden being provided by Reality. Reality was never far away. Reality was walking and talking with them in the nonverbal ways that Reality, metaphorically speaking, walks and talks. But Adam and Eve were far away from Reality. They were lost, indeed hiding in the thickets of their own creations. Reality found them and rescued them by revealing to them that they had become ashamed of their own true reality, of their own finite biological nudity, of their own nudity of mental ignorance, of their own nudity of ethical uncertainty. Rather than being nude before Reality, they had clothed themselves with estranging creations of their own making. This is the original sin in which we all participate.

We modern-thinking people have been estranged from the wonder of these great ancient Biblical myths by our scientific literalism or by our hatred of an interpretive metaphor we commonly call "supernaturalism." This two-story picture of nature and supernature was created by humanity to interpret Reality. And this metaphor served humanity well from the dawn of human culture until modern times. When Nietzsche spoke of "the Death of God" he meant, I believe, that contemporary human culture was killing the supernatural metaphor of interpretation. Simply noticing that this metaphor is a metaphor kills it, as far as our scientific minds are concerned.

WHAT VALIDATES OUR THEOLOGY?

Literally speaking, there is no second story to the universe, and there never has been.

But what did this two-story metaphor mean to the generations of humans who used it and used it creatively to wonderstand and conduct their lives? Putting this in terms that we moderns may be able to wonderstand, early humanity saw with this metaphor that there is a difference between our direct overarching contemplative awareness of Mysterious Reality and our ordinary knowledge of nature which we use to predict and manipulate the course of our daily lives. According to this old metaphor, our awareness has these two dimensions: (1) the ONENESS that precedes thinking and (2) the thought-through practicality of our ordinary aspects of living.

So ancient theology, using this magnificent two-story metaphor, spoke of God, gods, goddesses, angels, evil spirits, and devils. All these personalized metaphors pointed to real aspects of their direct experience of Reality. Their theology was serious. It was not child's play, though it was often quite playful. It was adult thoughtfulness about the unthinkable. And their theology was validated by their direct experience of Reality. It was not validated by a literalistic interpretation of scriptures or traditions. Their scriptures and traditions came alive for them because they saw with their own inward eyes the Reality that these writings point to using supernatural poetry.

Those same scriptures can come alive for us, if we train our eyes to see Reality and to see that the old supernatural poetry is poetry. This old poetry used metaphors from the ordinary world of experience to speak about the incomprehensible dynamics of Reality. For example, we see in the Bible the metaphor of two supernatural kingdoms: (1) God and his angels, and (2) the devil and his evil spirits. If we encounter an angel, we encounter the whole kingdom of Truth. If we encounter an evil spirit, we encounter a whole kingdom of lies and deception. These two kingdoms are in a state of total war.

The relationship between God and the devil is not a complementary one like the relationship between masculine and feminine. Masculine and feminine are complementary principles that make up the whole of humanity. Each one need not defeat the other. Each is a part of a whole that is not fully realized without the other. Each biological male is mostly masculine, but also somewhat feminine. Each biological female is mostly feminine, but also somewhat masculine. The tension between these aspects of humanity is a complementary tension, two poles of a single

reality. This is not so of the relationship between God and the devil. God speaks the truth. The devil speaks lies and deception. God supports authenticity. The devil tricks us into illusion, perdition, and despair. In these Biblical metaphors, God and devil each seeks to defeat the other. God is the superior force. The devil is a derived actuality which has no essential or lasting being. The devil's entire kingdom, though strong in this world, can be resolved into nothing by a simple acceptance of God's truth.

OK, what is this metaphorical war between God and the devil pointing in our actual experience? It is pointing to the war between authenticity and estrangement in our actual existence. It is pointing to the war between truth and illusion in our actual living. It is pointing to the either/or quality of trusting Reality or rebelling against Reality. It is reminding us that rebelling against Reality is choosing the losing side, for Reality always wins in the end. So choosing the devil's kingdom means choosing despair, a despair that is most often hidden in some tangle of lies until those lies begin to unravel. Then despair become conscious. Then we can see that the source of that despair is in our flights from and rebellions against Reality.

And how do we know which part of our experience is trusting Reality and which part of our experience is our rebellion from Reality? We cannot ask our minds. We cannot ask our cultures. We cannot ask our religions. All of these are human processes that are finally untrustworthy. We must consult our own pure uninterpreted experience that we have through our direct awareness of Reality. We need not view and discuss our awareness of Reality using the old two-story metaphor. We have a new set of metaphors that are more keenly adapted to our contemporary cultures. These new metaphors can assist us to look beyond our scientific objectivity into our whole outward/inward experience of Reality, the Reality that we are actually experiencing in each living Now. Thereby, we can appropriate once again the radical monotheism of our Western religions, because we can speak again of the ONENESS of the EVERY-THING-NESS that we (through our rediscovered contemplative knowing) directly know that we confront.

We can directly know that every experience of our finitude is an experience of the Infinite. We can directly know that this Ununderstandable Void of the Absolutely Infinite is as real as a truck running over our toe. When we experience the bare truth of our finitude, we can notice that some invincible *mysterious power* is rendering us finite.

WHAT VALIDATES OUR THEOLOGY?

When we experience the mysterious truth of our coming into being, we can notice the “putting” action of this *mysterious power* that is putting us into our finite existence with all its finite drives for more life.

These finite drives or desires are going to be limited, but we can opt to trust both the desiring and the limiting. Only one kind of desire threatens us with the hell of despair. It is the desire to be unlimited. It is the desire that refuses our limitations. Actually, such a desire is not even a true desire, it is a choice to rebel from the limited existence in which we are being put. True desire is just desire. If we are willing for all our desires to be limited, they are as holy as our toenails and our brains. And this experience of the finite nature of our lives is an experience of that Reality that the biblical scriptures recommend we trust as our God. Part of this experience of Infinite Reality is the experience that we are already relating to Reality in flight or fight, in suppression or warfare. This useless and self-defeating warfare is called “sin.” But sin is not the only option. Sin can be renounced, surrendered, died to, given up, set aside, lived beyond. A true relationship to Reality is surrender, humble thankfulness for a life to be lived, for the opportunity to be aware, for a cosmos that supports us, and even for a death that protects us from arrogance.

If this surrender is opted for, the unresolvable tension between desire and frustration in which we all live is ended. Trust replaces sin. This healing of sin is never complete. Sin is vast and persistent. But the victory over sin is real and can, in principle, be complete. As Paul put it, “we press on to the full stature of Christ.” In other words, all our lies and estrangements can be overthrown. Our lies and deceptions can be vanquished. Our essential truth-trusting humanity can rise from the ashes of our slain pretensions.

Real life is indeed dark and bleak in the sense of including finitude and death. Yet the deeper darkness is our despairing relationship with these dark limitations. The deeper bleakness is our attempt to deny or openly hate the bleak aspects of real life. Our true light, our true brightening, is found in fully admitting the darkness and bleakness of our finitude. This enlightenment is, in the biblical view, our trust in God. As H. Richard Niebuhr put it, trust in God is the last option that people consider. This option is only taken because every other option is seen as failing to end our despair. The last option of monotheism is persisted in because people find it happy, victorious, joyous,

alive, rest, peace, tranquil, hopeful, enduring, strong, invincible, and lasting.

Good theology is just a bit of honest reflection upon the dynamics and qualities of this life that is given by Reality before any theology is begun. An honest and accurate theology can also assist us in moving toward a more complete surrender to the actual (holy) life that precedes theology and to lay out our practical steps for manifesting the presence of that holy life in the circumstances of our temporal existence.

Does good theology steer us past paralysis, indecision, and apathy or past fanaticism, idolatry, and intolerance? No, it is not theology that steers us past these pitfalls. Our guide is the ongoing gift from Reality of the Holy Spirit of Trust, Love, and Freedom. This gift precedes theology. Theology is just a commentary upon the guidance that this ever-present Holy Spirit is offering.

Our awareness and trust of Reality guides us beyond our religious and cultural bigotry. A commitment to being this basic awareness and trust ends the warfare between the religions, for each religion is just a humanly created approach to the Final THAT that is beyond capture in any religious practice. Each human culture is just a humanly created approach to the Final THAT that is beyond capture in any cultural wisdom or style. Each religion, each culture can bring us aspects of the Truth along with whatever lies have also accumulated in that tradition. How shall we know what is Truth and what is lies? We look with our contemplative awareness into our actual existence and see for ourselves.

I will close by illustrating this direct looking into ourselves with an interpretation of a well known bit of Biblical poetry, the 23rd Psalm. Our main block to hearing the Truth of the Psalms is our difficulty with the words “God” or “Lord” or “Thou.” Paul Tillich, a premiere theologian of the mid-20th Century, pointed out that the God of the Bible is not a thing among other things, not a being among other beings, but the Ground of Being. In other words, God is the EVERY-THING-NESS out of which all things cohere, or the NO-THING-NESS out of which all things come and into which all things return. This is not pantheism, not a worship of nature, not a worship of something of which we are a part. “Ground of Being,” “EVERY-THING-NESS,” “NO-THING-NESS” are just odd terms used to help us grasp the Infinite beyond nature, the Mysterious Source of nature that is manifest in nature yet WHOLLY OTHER than nature or ourselves. But none of these odd terms has the poetic power of the word “God.” They do not

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

indicate a devotional relationship. They do not indicate how we directly experience the Biblical God as our devotional worship. So as an experiment, let us substitute for the old supernaturally laden words of "God" and "Lord" and "Thou" the term "THE AWESOME PRESENCE." Here is the New English Translation of Psalm 23 with the "THE AWESOME PRESENCE" substitutions. I have also added a few bits of commentary in parentheses.

THE AWESOME PRESENCE is my shepherd

(is like a shepherd to me);

I shall want (lack) nothing.

(Everything I need is provided.)

THE AWESOME PRESENCE makes me lie down

in green pastures;

and leads me beside the waters of peace.

THE AWESOME PRESENCE

renews life within me.

And for the sake of THE AWESOME PRESENCE's

name (wonderstandable essence),

guides me in the right path.

Even though I walk through a valley dark as death,

I fear no evil, for THE AWESOME PRESENCE

is with me,

The staff and crook of THE AWESOME PRESENCE

are my comfort.

THE AWESOME PRESENCE

spreads a table (of nurturing food) for me

in the sight (presence) of my enemies;

THE AWESOME PRESENCE has richly bathed

my head with oil (with honor),

and my cup runs over.

(I have even more than I need.)

Goodness and love unfailing, these will follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of

THE AWESOME PRESENCE

my whole life long.

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

reviews by Joyce Marshall

Out of the Silent Planet,

Perelandra, and

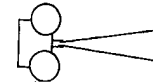
That Hideous Strength

by C.S. Lewis



These three novels comprise Lewis' *Space Trilogy*, which is his fictional series for adults as opposed to *The Chronicles of Narnia* (which, if you recall, we enjoyed immensely and reviewed here). *The Trilogy* moves more slowly than *Chronicles* but is quite satisfying in its development of Dr. Ransom from Oxford scholar, to hero, to spiritual guru. *Out of the*

Silent Planet follows Ransom on a voyage to Mars (he was abducted), where he encounters other intelligent species. *Perelandra* takes him to Venus, an idyllic world where Ransom must battle the invasion of a malevolent being. *That Hideous Strength* takes the battle between good and evil to Earth. Ransom's past experiences have made him a very wise and powerful man. He creates a cadre of ordinary folks, mythical beings, and brute beasts to thwart the forces of a sinister (vaguely familiar) totalitarian regime.



MOVIES

The Reader is a fine film. A young German youth, Michael, meets 30-something Hanna, who introduces him to sex and with whom he shares his literary studies by reading to her. After a summer of liaisons, she disappears. Years later as a young law student he sees her on trial as a Nazi prison guard. This brings up many strong emotions for him, and he discovers one of her secrets. He can't bring himself to step forward and reveal the information that would enable her to receive a more just sentence. The film ends with a moment of redemption many more years later, when Michael finally breaks the spell of silent shame and begins to tell his and Hanna's secret story to his adult daughter. The greatness of the film is its clarity about the ambiguities of morality and the importance of seemingly small things. It is a tragic story -- a tragedy hinged on secret shame and on missed intimacy.

Frost/Nixon is a fictionalized version of the 1977 four-session interview of disgraced former President Richard M. Nixon by British TV interviewer David Frost. Doesn't sound too interesting, but, amazingly, the film is not only a grabber; it's also moving. Frost is going for the trial Nixon never had because of the Gerald Ford pardon. Nixon uses his cunning to control the exchanges and frustrate Frost's attempts until the final session, when he does make admissions if not confessions and apologies. Frank Langella, as Nixon, is not without cunning himself -- capturing the poignant tragedy of this complex man just as most of us are ready to write him off as a villain.

With his film, **Rachel Getting Married**, director Jonathan Demme nails the pain of the dysfunctional family, taking you into the depth of it. Hand-held camera weaves us through the events surrounding Rachel's wedding, a colorful, homey extravaganza. The couple themselves are colorful, Rachel's white to Sydney's black. The wedding theme is East Indian, with saris, ragas, belly dancers, and a blue elephant cake. But

central to the celebration is that Rachel's sister Kym gets out of rehab to attend the event. If you know rehab, you know the main thing is to avoid triggers that might rekindle your dependency on alcohol, drugs, sex, you name it. High on Kym's trigger list are home and family, and here she is in the thick of both. In lesser hands, this might have turned into soap opera, but the script, direction and acting are excellent. I was sorry when the film ended.

In **Gran Torino**, Clint Eastwood, at 78, once again directs himself in his best film yet. The Gran Torino is an automobile and prized possession that retired Detroit autoworker Walt Kowalski helped assemble. Eastwood, as Walt, is a cantankerous, racist, beer-chugging Korean vet who keeps his shotgun ready to lock and load. Walt is like a retired Dirty Harry, except the Dirty Harry part is still on the job, a sort of security guard of his property. When gangs begin to threaten his neighbors, Walt's duties expand and he begins to notice that he has more in common with those he called "gooks" and "chinks" than his own sons and grandchildren. He becomes a tough-love surrogate father to Sue and Thao, the two teenage Hmong next door. The film is both funny and moving. A treat not to miss.

The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford, Brad Pitt's 2007 Western, was mostly ignored or panned, as it isn't the usual sassy gunslinger. If you're looking for thrills, this won't be your cup of tea. In fact, the film is a slow, meditative unmaking of the romantic myth of America in the nineteenth century. Pitt as Jesse and Casey Affleck as Ford, supported by appropriately melancholy music and cinematography, strip bare the heroic images to reveal immature young men walking the edges of sanity. If you appreciate thoughtful, elegiac imaginings of what might have been more likely, this is indeed a film for you.

Slumdog Millionaire is about a Mumbai orphan who rises from rags to riches through the Indian version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire." Jamal and his brother, orphaned as young boys, improvise their way to survival through such activities as pretending to be guides at the Taj Mahal. At 20 Jamal appears as a quiz show contestant, and his life is told in flashbacks that reveal how he happens to know the answer to each question. The television appearance also makes it possible for him to find his childhood love, Latika. The movie combines a realistic picture of brutal poverty in India with a colorful style complete with a Bollywood dance ending.

Milk. Sean Penn does a phenomenal job of portraying gay activist Harvey Milk, a San

Francisco community organizer who was elected City Supervisor -- the first openly gay man to be voted into office in America. You may remember that Dan White, a disturbed ex-policeman who served with Harvey on the city's board of supervisors, shot and killed Milk along with Mayor George Moscone in City Hall in 1978. Milk was 48. The film is a tribute to Milk's playful charm, intelligence, and his fighting spirit to help the disenfranchised help themselves.

Doubt. The setting is Saint Nicholas Church School in the Bronx in 1964. The progressive priest, Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), presides over the school and its church. Sister Beauvier (Meryl Streep) is the tough school principal, Sister James (Amy Adams) is a young idealistic newcomer, and Mrs. Muller (Viola Davis) is the mother of the boy who becomes central to the conflict. The controversy: Did Father Flynn engage in an improper relationship with student Donald Muller? Anyone attending this film will likely root for one or another of the characters, maybe first one, then another, and if you attend the movie with others, I expect that afterward there will be discussion and disagreement as to what is true. One thing is certain: you will know that you can never be certain that your belief is correct. You might realize also that none of us can ever defend a position of uncompromising certainty and that therefore humility is appropriate when making any judgments.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button is based on a story by F. Scott Fitzgerald about a man, born in 1918, who ages in reverse. Benjamin's baby body looks like an 86-year-old with the same illnesses common to that age. As the years pass, the body becomes younger. The film explores the conundrums of this condition, such as falling in love and fathering a child. Brad Pitt plays Benjamin simply and admirably, assisted by technology to give him an aged body and by younger actors in closing scenes. Cate Blanchett plays Daisy, a dancer (she does almost all of her own dancing). Their love relationship begins when both are adolescents; yet he appears to be an old codger, upsetting Daisy's grandmother. They are perfectly matched when they are in their forties. But then a child is born and decisions must be made, as they know Benjamin will become gradually younger. The story is told in a nursing home in New Orleans in 2005. Hurricane Katrina is raging as a dying Daisy has her daughter read Benjamin's diary to her. We see the flashbacks of his jaunt through the 20th century, and Daisy's daughter discovers her identity. The film evokes

contemplation on that century and on the nature of time itself.

Vicky Cristina Barcelona, Woody Allen's latest is, I think, one of his best. Two friends, Vicky and Cristina, decide to spend July and August in the Barcelona home of Vicky's relatives. They meet Juan Antonio (played by the amazing Javier Bardem), an abstract artist, and his former wife, Maria Elena (Penelope Cruz). A series of sexual liaisons occurs. The film is a reminder that most people have had impulsive sexual experiences. Sex tends to lead us into experiences we often do not intend. And those experiences change us, teach us things about ourselves and life that we likely are unable to articulate. Vicky and Cristina return to the U.S. mysteriously more mature.

Revolutionary Road. Once more director Sam Mendes takes on the tragedy of suburban 50s. (**American Beauty** was his first foray into that territory.) Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio portray the "successfully married couple with children" of this period. Beneath the veneer of the beautiful house in the lovely suburbs, a desperate struggle is revealed. As often happened in those days, the Wheelers met at a party, seemed to hit it off, and got married. Then reality sets in. Frank discovers he is dissatisfied as a "Man in a Gray Flannel Suit" commuting to a boring job. April finds that being isolated in the role of mother/homemaker leaves her depressed. When she expresses her feelings, she is met with Frank's suggestion that she needs therapy. When she allows that she doesn't really want a third child and is considering a do-it-yourself abortion (remember, her options were very limited), Frank suggests that she is an inhuman monster. The most honest person in the film is the real estate agent's son, John, home from the mental institution for a day, who comes along with his mother to the Wheelers' and mercilessly chops through the facade with his observations. This isn't a happy-ever-after story, but it does reveal how far we have come, baby.

Last Chance Harvey is a psychologically savvy romantic comedy about Harvey (Dustin Hoffman) and Kate (Emma Thompson). Harvey, a would-be jazz musician who writes commercial jingles, is being replaced by young techies. He arrives in London for his daughter's wedding to learn that she has asked her stepfather to give her away. Kate lives close to her clinging mother and has a job conducting surveys at Heathrow airport. She seems too old to hang out with the trendy bar crowd but too young to give up on the singles scene altogether. There's nothing wrong with Harvey or Kate; they just don't belong where they

are. But belong together they do, even though, as in most romantic comedies, it is not easy to get them together. But with Hoffman and Thompson the ride is deliciously sublime. Give these two a decent script (and this one is good enough) and they will break your heart. (And then warmly put it back together.)

Australia, Baz Luhrmann's epic adventure, is a story to expiate the racist sins of a nation's past. In this melodrama the heroes are pure and the villains totally wicked. Our heroes must try to keep the villains from stealing their cattle and from sending the mixed-blood boy, Nullah, to a state-sanctioned training school (similar to those for Native Americans in US history). On the marquee you will see Nicole Kidman, playing an Englishwoman whose husband has been running a cattle station near Darwin, and Hugh Jackson, a drover. But the key players are the mixed-blood Nullah and his grandfather, the Aboriginal named King George. They capture the beauty, mystery, and wisdom of the ancient Aboriginal culture, the heart of Australia, the country, and the movie.

Zelary is a Czech film nominated in 2003 for best foreign language Oscar. Although the setting is World War II, the focus isn't military. Eliska is a nurse who attends medical school in Prague. Her lover is a surgeon. They are part of the resistance covertly fighting the Third Reich. When their activities are discovered, both have to leave the city immediately and separately. Eliska's new identity places her in Zelary, a town in the mountains. A simple man there, Joza, agrees to marry her to keep her safe from the Nazis. At first this arrangement looks to be a great disappointment to them both, but gradually Eliska begins to appreciate Joza's gentle strength. The community of mountain people is fascinating and each person becomes real. Eliska attends to injuries and births, faces the possibility of discovery by the Gestapo, falls in love with Joza, deals with a drunk trying to rape her, and the chaos of the Russian "liberators." I like this film as much as any I've ever seen.

The Secret Life of Bees unfolds in South Carolina against the backdrop of the Civil Rights tumult of 1964. Totally frustrated with her abusive father and pushed over the edge by his beating of Rosaleen, their African-American housekeeper, fourteen-year-old Lily runs away with Rosaleen in tow. Seeking some knowledge of her mother, whom Lily accidentally shot and killed when she was four, she heads toward the only place she knows may have some connection to her. Lily and Rosaleen are taken in by the three African-

American Boatwright sisters, August, June, and May, who have a prosperous honey business. August teaches Lily to care for the bees and the women help Lily to heal. I appreciate the honesty of the film that is exemplified when August tells Lily what she knows of her mother and of love. A touching film.

Outsourced is about an American sent to India to train the low-paid employees of a new call center for his company, American Novelty Products. The way he describes his company to his Indian assistant: "It sells kitsch to redneck schmucks." The Indian asks, "Excuse me. What is 'redneck'? What is 'kitsch'? What is 'schmuck'?" The American is named Todd which Indians pronounce "Toad," calling him "Mr. Toad." Todd begins his training at the call center with lessons in pronunciation, but he eventually begins to learn about India and his callers. This leads to his greater happiness and to success of the center just in time for his American boss to move the operation to a yet cheaper place: China. The film is funny, charming, and sweet in spite of the irritating subject.

Seven Pounds is a difficult film to review because anything you say gives away its surprises. So, if you still plan to see the movie, you might want to wait to read this. The film asks an essential question: How do we atone for our wrongs? In this film Ben Thomas (Will Smith) works out his well-planned answer. Watching Ben work his plan is intriguing (partly due to Will Smith's being an interesting actor), but I don't agree with Ben's answer to the question. Instead of humbly accepting his forgiveness, he takes it upon himself to judge himself and to judge who is "good" and therefore worthy of receiving his gifts of atonement. He also judges that what he gives is needed to buy his redemption. Therefore, Ben is not giving to others from a generous heart but from a heart drowned in self-hate.

Taxi to the Dark Side. This documentary covers ground similar to Jane Mayer's book, *The Dark Side* (reviewed in the November 2008 RL journal), an indictment of the Bush administration's unofficially condoned use of torture. The film focuses on an Afghan named Dilawar who managed to buy a taxi. He was fingered by a paid informant in December 2002, taken to the American prison at Bagram, Afghanistan, and tortured so violently that he died after five days. An autopsy showed that his legs were so badly mauled that they would have had to be amputated, had he lived. Later, the informant who collected U.S. money for fingering him was proven to be the terrorist actually responsible for the crime the innocent Dilawar was

charged with. An official report said Dilawar died of "natural causes," even though the New York Times found an autopsy report describing the death as a homicide. Eventually, a few U.S. soldiers were accused of the murder. No officers were involved. Dilawar was the first casualty after we started to "work the dark side," (Dick Cheney's term for what he and others justified as necessary to produce intelligence). In all the torture scandals since, few officers have been charged. If all of these crimes took place without their knowledge, they would appear to be guilty of dereliction of duty, if nothing else. The film has television footage of administration officials demonstrably lying about what they knew and when they knew it and footage of experienced interrogators who make it clear that torture is legally forbidden and doesn't work. If you torture a man long enough, he will tell you anything to make you stop. If you act on that "information," you are likely on a fool's errand. The photos and images of torture at work in this film make it clear that torture is not only a brutalization of others; it destroys the humanity of the perpetrator and of us as a nation so long as we condone it. If you need more discouragement, consider that when we torture, we inspire even more terrorists to hate us.

In the first few scenes of **Happy-Go-Lucky** I found the main character, Poppy, to be tiring, maybe even empty-headed. As the movie progresses, however, this amazingly sunny Britisher shows herself to be intelligently dedicated to her young students, loyal to her friends and family and uncannily wise about the psychological upsets of those about her -- whether a street person, a student, her sister, or her driving instructor. As usual with Mike Leigh's films, this one is both funny and deep. My favorite character: Poppy's Flamenco dance teacher.

Hobson's Choice is a 1954 David Lean film that I found totally satisfying by today's movie standards. In Victorian England, widower Henry Hobson (Charles Laughton) manages a boot shop. Actually, his three daughters and the boot makers in the basement do the work while he drinks at the tavern and trades stories with his friends, holding tightly to his authority as man of the house. He's kind of a Victorian Archie Bunker. It turns out that his oldest daughter (at 30, Hobson claims, she is too old to marry) has a mind of her own and convinces the best bootmaker in the basement to marry her and set up their own business -- a blow for feminism and to classism in one swoop. Watching those two reach their potential and blossom into confident human beings is only one of the delights of this brilliant film.

RECOMMENDED READING

Leonard Cohen: Live in London. A couple of my friends recently had the privilege of experiencing Cohen in a Dallas concert. This DVD was made in 2008 in the earlier part of his tour, his first in more than 15 years. I can see why my friends raved so about the concert. Just experiencing it on the couch at home is wondrous. The 26-song set of beloved classics and fan favorites includes "Bird on the Wire," "Everybody Knows," "In My Secret Life," "Who By Fire," "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye," "So Long, Marianne," "First We Take Manhattan," "Tower of Song" and "Suzanne." As gifted a performer as he is songwriter, Cohen leans on the side of subtlety on this tour and leaves you in tears of awe rather than cheering loudly. He is phenomenal.

RECOMMENDED READING

reviews by Joyce Marshall



Less

Accomplishing More by Doing Less

by Marc Lesser

New World Library, 2009

This quarter our weekly group is studying this book together and finding it both challenging and inspiring. Lesser (his name and the book title are coincidental) combines his experiences as an MBA CEO with those of teaching Zen. His narrative and exercises help you to come to terms with what your life is really about. In that context you learn to select your activities and organize your life artfully in spite of living in a culture addicted to busyness.

Community

The Structure of Belonging

by Peter Block

Berrett-Koehler, 2008

The restoration of community is a vital need for us today. Block suggests that the first step to community is to quit thinking of community as a problem and instead to define it as conversations -- conversations of possibility. Block sees the role of leadership as convening small groups, which he sees as the unit of transformation. In starting the conversations in these groups, the leader needs to remember that questions are more transforming than answers; curiosity more useful than advice. He explains what questions have power and what questions squelch power. He also explains how to invite people, how to facilitate accountability and ownership, and the importance of physical space for meetings and how to design it. Having dealt with these issues a long time myself, I was pleased to see some of my wisdom validated and also to

learn important new wrinkles about small groups and community.

The Art of Focused Conversation

Institute of Cultural Affairs, Canada

General Editor, Brian Stanfield

New Society Publishers, 2000

In this book our dear (now deceased) friend, Brian Stanfield, and his colleagues pulled together many uses of a gift of our mutual mentor, Joseph W. Mathews -- the art form conversation. This book focuses on its use in the workplace, but it is adaptable to any group. If you are interested in community or involved in any groups, no process is more valuable than this conversation. This book tells the history of the creation of this method following Mathews' experience as a chaplain in World War II, explains its purpose and its parts, tells how to lead such a conversation, and offers 100 sample conversations for specific situations. The purpose of such a conversation is to allow a group of people to process their experience (to experience their experience, so to speak) by asking a series of questions in four different levels: the objective, the reflective, the interpretive and the decisional. This conversation gives form to a natural process which 1) grounds us first in the reality of life, 2) acknowledges the reality of our feelings, 3) looks at meaning based on the first two steps, not on some abstract idea, and 4) moves us into the future from the wisdom just discovered. This is a book of practical inspiration.

Things Hidden

Scripture as Spirituality

by Richard Rohr

St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008

Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr is more of a mystic than a systematic theologian: indeed, he reminds us that Jesus defines truth as personal rather than conceptual when he says "I am the truth." In the first chapter, "Information is not Necessarily Transformation," Rohr points out that God is manifest in the ordinary, the daily, and that "it is our experiences that transform us if we are willing to experience our experiences all the way through." (Which harkens back to the previous review about the art form conversation and makes clear its profundity.) He puts emphasis on the need to experience our pain and woundedness, saying: "Suffering seems to be the only thing strong enough to destabilize our arrogance and our ignorance. I would define suffering... as whenever you are not in control."

I appreciate Rohr's concern that outer authority has been emphasized to the detriment of inner

RECOMMENDED READING

authority and that we need to teach prayer, inner journey, and maturing consciousness.

His idea of maturing consciousness is to “keep your own feet to the fire” because the human delusion seems to be that “We tend to think someone else is always the problem, not me.” We try to change other people rather than ourselves. This has created the scapegoating, accusing, and blaming style of religion that is paramount in the world, even in Christianity, in spite of Jesus' refusal to be a scapegoater and becoming instead the scapegoat. Rohr says, “My lifetime of studying Jesus would lead me to summarize all of his teaching inside of two prime ideas: forgiveness and inclusion.”

As I was reading this book, the “debate” of President Obama and former Vice President Cheney on torture was taking place. It seemed to me to represent the two styles of religion Rohr discusses. I think Obama's election may mean that this country is finally making a shift away from scapegoating and toward maturing in consciousness.



New Seeds of Contemplation
by Thomas Merton
New Directions, 1961

The books of Thomas Merton continue to be among some of the most nurturing that I read. One piece in this book, titled “The Root of War is Fear,” echoes some of Rohr's themes (above) and speaks to the source of problems during the Bush era. Here is a quote: “It is not only our hatred of others that is dangerous but also and above all our hatred of ourselves: particularly that hatred of ourselves which is too deep and too powerful to be consciously faced. For it is this which makes us see our own evil in others and unable to see it in ourselves.”

Merton makes a strong case for solitude in this book. “Physical solitude has its dangers, but we must not exaggerate them. The great temptation of modern man is not physical solitude but immersion in the mass of other men, not escape to the mountains or the desert but escape into the great formless sea of irresponsibility which is the crowd. There is actually no more dangerous solitude than that of the man who is lost in a crowd, who does not know he is alone and who does not function as a person in a community either.” Spending time in contemplative solitude is the way to discovering our identity. Merton reminds us: “Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”

June 2009

Mindful Eating
A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy
and Joyful Relationship with Food
by Jan Chozen Bays, MD
Shambhala, 2009

Bays is a medical doctor and a meditation teacher. The combination makes for a fine book. She shares scientific data and yet writes in a meditative style. Since eating is such a fundamental part of our living, bringing mindfulness to this daily function on average of three times a day affects your life generally. In Bays' words: “Awareness is the key. Our desire to be awake, to see clearly how our blind spots make us and others suffer, has to be stronger than our desire to live on automatic pilot. It's not a simple, once-made-always-kept decision. It's a decision we will face again and again.” Bays doesn't present diets but instead gives simple practices which awaken awareness to the various hungers we experience (eye, nose, mouth, stomach, cellular, mind and heart), and to our particular habits and patterns with food. Then she presents guidelines for staying awake to our eating. These all allow needed change to take place naturally. I have found this book to be extremely helpful and I highly recommend it.

The Audacity of Hope
Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream
by Barack Obama
Random House, 2006

Barack Obama writes much as he governs, tackling diverse issues such as foreign policy, faith, and the Constitution in a personable way. His candid personal stories interwoven with his political convictions make for pleasant reading. I experience reading his book much as I do watching him handle the tasks of governing: a deep sense of satisfaction with a president who really knows the issues and the history behind them and comes down on the side of those who are treated unfairly by the system.

Rules For Radicals
A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals
by Saul Alinsky
Vintage, 1971

I found a review of this book on Amazon written by a man in his 80s who lived in the Bronx and “saw and heard Alinsky speak at building cooperatives and other organization events on various occasions”. He says (in answer to many critical reviewers), “Alinsky was NOT a Marxist and those who attribute this to him never saw or heard him. . . . Alinsky was the workers' knight in shining armor with a tongue that was greater and

Realistic Living • 13

RECOMMENDED READING

stronger than that of Sir Lancelot. If Hillary or any one else from that period learned anything from him, they were very fortunate for he was that unique voice of decency which appears all too infrequently." That is my feeling about Alinsky after reading this book. I'm sorry I didn't know him. I love his sense of humor, his pragmatic situational ethics (which I presume President Obama learned from him), and his awareness that it is in one's self-interest to be your brother's keeper. The book is dated in some ways, but the general approach rings true. As he told his young colleagues who faced strong opposition in their attempts to get their country to live up to its democratic ideals: you can do one of three things: feel sorry for yourselves, start bombing (which will swing people more to the right), or you can organize.

The Devil's Highway

A True Story

by Luis Alberto Urrea

Bay Back Books, 2004

Urrea is the author of the wonderful novel, *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, which I reviewed in a recent RL journal. *The Devil's Highway*, a true story, is written like a novel and makes the issue of illegal immigration real. With journalistic precision, Urrea tells the complete story of one group of 26 Mexican men, of their situation in Mexico, their families, the man who recruited them to cross the border, the Coyote who led them into Arizona, the day by day story of their journey through the desert which becomes a struggle for survival, and the Border Patrol who found them (and saved some of their lives). Reading this book will help you base your opinions on border policy in reality.

Prairie Time

A Blackland Portrait

by Matt White

Texas A & M University Press, 2006

This book is an intimate history of our place here on the Blackland Prairie, told by a man who loves this spot on the earth and knows it well. The title came about when teacher/historian/poet White and his wife took their daughter (who was then three) with them on her first visit to one of the few remaining untouched prairies. They weren't sure the girl was old enough to accompany them through the tall grass, but she loved it and even wanted to spend the night. As they drove away, she complained, "I need more prairie time." Indeed, we all need more prairie time, in that we all need time on earth in its natural form. In this case,

that form was awesome seas of tall grass. Next best is to read White's paean to the prairie in its glory days and his elegy to its passing. Here is a taste: "Today the bobwhites are gone from our land . . . the bobwhites no longer wake me up in the morning. . . Deep inside, I cannot accept that they are gone. I find myself hoping that they will somehow return; that one day the familiar *bobwhite* call will wake me up. . . . Sadly, my young daughters will not grow up hearing the bobwhite's two-note onomatopoeic call. Its haunting repeated phrase will not be woven into their consciousness. . . . As creatures disappear one by one over time, succeeding generations soon have no knowledge or memory of them. . . . The truth is that if they have never seen lightning bugs, my daughters will not miss them. Still, the loss is a tragedy. . . . Every time an organism disappears from the landscape, part of the place is gone too, and those of us who love the place cannot help but grieve."

The Reluctant Mr. Darwin

An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin

and the Making of His Theory of Evolution

by David Quammen

W.W. Norton, 2006

Picking up Darwin's life after the voyage of the *Beagle*, Quammen tells how Darwin developed his theory and wrote the book that changed science forever, *The Origin of the Species*. Clearly, evolution is not an ideology or "belief system." Darwin built his theory from many threads of evidence, taking years to detect and assemble them. He was very slow in publishing (20 years after putting it all together), quite naturally reluctant to challenge basic understandings of his time. His reluctance is even more understandable when you note the amazing fact that "almost half the American populace chooses to understand the origin of our species as though Charles Darwin never lived." When you add to that those who "prefer the 'guided by God' option, theistic evolution, which is still utterly contrary to what Darwin proposed . . . between 81 and 87 percent of Americans reject Darwin's view of human evolution." Quammen points out that it isn't a matter of evolution versus God. "The *existence* of God . . . is not what Darwin's evolutionary theory challenges. What it challenges is the supposed godliness of Man. . . . That's where Darwin runs afoul of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and probably most other religions on the planet." I don't think it is necessary to choose between religion and Darwin. Quite the contrary. I think the best of religions ask us as humans to take our place on Earth in humility and service to all the planet.

RECOMMENDED READING

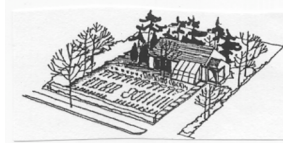
Giants

The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln
by John Stauffer
Twelve, 2008

This is one of the books Gene and I have enjoyed reading aloud to one another. Stauffer tells a great story, highlighting the similarities between the Civil War president and the renowned human rights agitator and freed slave. Both men had to fight, literally and figuratively, to break free from the limitations of their childhood circumstances. Both were tall, physically powerful, and unafraid. Both were alcohol-and-tobacco-free at a time when nearly all men indulged in both habits. Both had numerous sexual liaisons, and both loved poetry. One man was tasked with uniting a nation torn apart by the stigma of human slavery, and the other was charged with exhorting his people to free themselves from that stigma and rise above it. Lincoln, unlike most men of his time, was willing to let a black man cross his threshold and converse as an equal. The two had several meetings at the White House and mutually influenced one another as they helped to transform the nation.

reviews by Gene Marshall

Agenda for a New Economy
From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth
(*Why Wall Street Can't Be Fixed and How to Replace It*)
David C. Korten
Berrett-Koehler 2009



Many of you will remember David Korten from his *When Corporations Rule the World* and *The Turning Point: From Empire to Earth Community*. Berrett-Koehler collaborated with Korten in rushing out this timely book on the financial crisis. Wonderfully clarifying, forward-looking, easy to understand, the book is excellent grist for understanding the banking crisis and the structures and practices that led to it. Korten not only gives a devastating critique of the current state of affairs; he also gives us a doable 12-point New Economic Agenda that calls for an extensive overhaul of the current economy. Spelling this out in an understandable fashion would require more space than I have, but here are two colorful quotes:

"Since Wall Street behaves like a criminal syndicate, government should treat it like a criminal syndicate. Prosecute the guilty and require the merely culpable to clean up their act or fold their tents." (page 124). "It's time to recover from the Wall Street bookies what we can of their unearned phantom loot and encourage them to take up honest work by rendering their schemes against society either illegal or unprofitable." (page 125). If,

June 2009

in your economic thinking, you want to move beyond the minor reforms that Congress and the Obama administration will be struggling to enact, this is the book for you.

The Predator State
How Conservatives Abandoned
the Free Market and Why
Liberals Should Too
James K. Galbraith
Free Press: 2008



This is a paradigm-shifting book, for both conservatives and liberals, for both free-market economic thinkers and socialist-leaning thinkers. It is an empirical book, based on historical evidence rather than ideology. It reveals how our various taken-for-granted economic ideologies have failed. And most important, it gives us strong, vivid clues for how U.S. economic policy needs to work amidst the difficult-to-understand and horrific challenges that we and the other nations now face.

Galbraith has attempted to write an accessible book, but it remains a hard book, especially for those who have minimal passion for economics and little familiarity with the basic economic concepts. So I recommend beginning with chapter ten, where Galbraith outlines the basic idea of the Predator State. Then read the rest of the book, where he outlines how to overcome the irresponsible and illusory rule of the corporate elite.

Galbraith describes how the U.S. has become a "predator state" because the managerial elite control the government with their centralization of economic power. They have convinced this no-longer-democratic nation to abandon responsible regulation of these predators. The collapse of the credit market, the real estate market, and banking institutions is directly related to these illusory deregulation practices. These "free market" predators have wanted government "off their backs," but they now realize that a generous government backup and some firm regulations are necessary for a workable economy. Nevertheless, this remains our horrific condition: we have little or no democracy and little or no truly free markets because the predators rule.

The middle classes, the working classes, the poor, and the natural world are all prey. The predators value the prey only to the extent that the predators need the relative health of the prey to prey upon. The predators claim to be servants of the masses and even the environment, but they are actually untrustworthy cage-keepers of those whom they plan to eat.

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Also, check out our blog: RealisticLiving.org/blog/**

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Years ago we adopted as our philosophy of benevolence these thoughts from an *Utne Reader* which outlined **principles for the art of philanthropy** for people of ordinary means as well as the wealthy. Here are some of those principles:

- Support really good people who have a total commitment to doing good in the world and who are willing to put their asses on the line to do it.
- Seek out originality and imagination.
- Support unpopular truths.
- Fund players with a long view.
- Support people no one else is supporting.
- Support people whose work is their passion in life, not a day job.
- Fund those attacking root causes and trying to change the system.
- Trust what inspires you.

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In terms of such principles, we are willing for you to evaluate our work for its appropriate place in your benevolent budget. And we invite you to consider yourselves partners in promoting these religious and social directions.

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