

REALISTIC LIVING

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him and for everyone. "Papa" (abba) was a devotional word, not a description of God.

Hallowed be Thy name

All that we or Jesus or anyone know for certain about this Final Source is that it is mysterious beyond all measure. The name given us is "Hallowed," which is another word for Awesomeness, Mysteriousness, or Wonderment. That is, we have no name at all. We do not have a name that defines God. Rather this God of Moses and the prophets is the Mysterious Actuality that defines us. When in the story about the bush, Moses asked for a name, "NO NAME" was the answer he got. "I AM THAT I AM" means "stop asking for a name!" When we say "Hallowed be Thy name," we affirm that Wonder or "Namelessness" is the only name we have for this Thou to whom we are to pray.

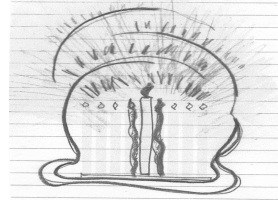
We are instructed with this first of six model petitions to hallow this already hallowed Final Reality. This Hallowed Otherness does not need our hallowing. It is we who need to hallow the Hallowed. Our hallowing means opening in trust to those here and now moments in which we are confronting this Hallowedness, this Awesomeness – this Mystery that never ceases to be mysterious.

Thy Kingdom Come

This second model petition concerns the future. The future is the surprise that happens to us as we are expecting something else. The future we have constructed from our experiences of the past is a prediction that is never entirely true. The actual future contains elements that are always unpredictable. We tend to be closed to whatever is unfamiliar. We tend to want life to continue in whatever familiar rut we have constructed for it. Sometimes our self-constructed expectations are optimistic, overly sentimental, less grim than life usually turns out to be. At other times our self-constructed expectations are pessimistic, overly glum, less glorious or joyous or innovative than life turns out to be. We do not know what the future will bring. This model petition is saying, "Let it come!" Openness to the actual future is the quality implied in this petition. If loss of everything I hold dear is my future, let it come. If gains that taunt all my pessimism is my future, let it come. Thy, not my, kingdom come.

Teach Us to Pray

a sermonette
by Gene Marshall



When the disciples of Jesus asked for help with prayer, Jesus, so the tradition goes, gave them a model prayer. Simone Weil claimed that this familiar set of six petitions includes everything that any true prayer includes. ("... we cannot conceive of any prayer not already contained within it." – from the last paragraph of her essay "Concerning the Our Father")

Our Father who art in heaven

These opening words indicate to whom we are praying. We are addressing the sire of our existence, the womb of our origin, the beyond of the beyond of the beyond. That Jesus chose the metaphor "father" rather than "mother" does not mean a contempt of women. It means that he lived in the first Century, not the twenty-first. Also, Jesus did not think of God as a human-built model of human values. God was sheer Mystery – the Unknowable Unknown without beard or penis, breasts or vagina. For this enigmatic Source of our existence, Jesus used the word "Papa" rather than "sire" or "womb" or "enigma," not because he knew something about the nature of God, but because his relationship with this Final Source was familial. He trusted this Final Source of everything to be *for* him. He considered himself offspring of this Ultimate Parenting. He gave up his right to judge this Final Source and assumed that all that came toward him from that Source was good for

Like the prophets, Jesus views the God he prays to as King over the future. So, the Kingdom of this Mysterious King will not be the kingdom I have imagined for myself or hope to build. God's Kingdom will not be built by me. God's Kingdom will come to me as a surprise, as unpredictable, as beyond my wildest dreams. If the term "kingdom" offends us, we need to remember that Jesus never heard of a democracy. And even if he had, Final Reality is not a democracy in which my vote determines the leadership of this kingdom. No, the leadership of Final Reality is beyond my control. That leadership, that King, will indeed grant me the freedom to make some difference and hold me accountable for the differences I make, but that will never mean that I tell this King how to behave. This King is King in a manner that makes me, for the most part, helpless in controlling the future. For me to pray, "Thy Kingdom come," means that I choose to be open to whatever comes. And that means that I choose to be detached from all "my kingdoms of expectation." It means that I am ready to be surprised. That is the second model petition on how to pray.

Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven

This third model petition pertains to the past as well as to the present and future. Whatever has happened in the past is all we actually know about the Will of God. Whatever has happened is the Will of Final Reality; otherwise it would not have happened. God as Final Reality has already done God's will, is still doing God's Will, and will do God's Will in the future. This petition means that we are consenting to the Will that God (Final Reality) has already done, is doing, and will do. Concerning the past, we are consenting to let the past be the past. Whatever has happened has brought us to our one and only real moment. That past cannot be undone. Our current moment can now be nothing other than it is. This is it. This petition is saying "So be it."

So be it here on Earth! We are not talking about some other realm. We are talking about the health or lack of health of our body. We are talking about the life or death of our companions. We are talking about the economic conditions of our community, nation, and globe. We are talking about the political structures we have and the leaders that we have to operate those structures. We are talking about the human-made cultures in which we live. The choices that we and humanity have made in the past have resulted in these consequences. Yet it was Final Reality, not humanity, that made the final determination about what these existing consequences would be. The past is God's will

(that is, the real past is what Reality happened to happen). We cannot get the past back. We cannot do it over. It is done. "Thy will be done" means that we consent to what has been done, we leave behind all pride, all shame, all guilt about the past. What is done is done. What is done belongs to God (Reality did it and now Reality owns it and won't give it back). Let it be. Thy will be done.

In praying this petition we also "let be" the present. The present is a moment of decision between past and future. We cannot undo the past. We cannot have a different present. But we can choose with regard to the future. And it is God's will (that is, Reality's determination) that our choices will make a difference with regard to the next present we will have and the next past that will be our past. Our choices matter. This is God's will. An eternal weight of significance is placed upon our God-given freedom. How do we know that our freedom is God-given? Because it is given. Whatever is given is God-given, Reality-given. In some situations Freedom is not given. Perhaps we are still trapped in old habits that rob us of our Freedom. But old habits can be broken. Habits are just habits. Our Freedom constructed those habits and our Freedom can be rescued from those habits and be given power in the present moment to choose beyond those old habits and perhaps set different habits in motion. When we choose in this present moment to act beyond all our habits, we are creating an act out of that deep well of emptiness that is our Freedom. Freedom is an uncaused act. We opt it. Like God (the Ultimate Source), we can bring something out of nothing. We can opt to choose. We can opt to choose here on Earth in this moment toward a future that is unknown, but nevertheless impacted by our choosing. This moment of Freedom is God's Will. Reality gives us our Freedom and requires of us a choice. Thy Will be done!

And the future is also God's will. Our choice will make its impact because it is the actuality of ACTUALITY for that to be so. (What will be will be different because we decide, even though that difference may be other than the future we expect.) The impact our choice will make is beyond our control. God/Reality will provide the future. It will be a surprise. In praying "Thy will be done," we open to this surprise. And we will show up in that surprising future in a new present which again allows us choice. This new opportunity for further choice is also God's will. "Thy will be done" means "let dialogue with Reality continue."

"On Earth" means "here and now where we actually live." We do not wait for some other time or place to let God's will be done. "As it is in

heaven” means “As it is in the eternal essence of things.” God’s will is always being done and will be done eternally. Reality is Reality is Reality. It is we who are here and now on Earth who are instructed to pray “Thy will be done.” This petition does not change the Eternal, it changes us and all our temporal doings. It means that we no longer rebel or flee the reality of our past, our present, or our potential future. Rather, we allow it; we open to it; we do it. In this third petition of the exemplary model for prayer, we choose realistic living. Thy will be done!

Give us this day our daily bread

This fourth model petition reminds me of the life of the birds who fly about our bird feeder. This seems to be their prayer, “Give us this day our daily seeds.” They do not pray for seeds for tomorrow. They only eat today. And they do not pray to Joyce and I about these seeds. They do not know who brings the seeds, nor do they care. They only care that seeds are somehow and somewhere provided. They do not know or try to know the mysteries of seed provision. They just eat. They seek seed and they eat. They do not bring all this to consciousness as we must do. It is we, not they, who are asked to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

On the ground floor level of living, humans are similar to the birds. We seek our food and other necessities of our bodily lives. We expect “God/Reality” to provide. We agree that it is appropriate to ask for this provision. We agree that it is appropriate for us to eat, drink, sleep, keep warm, keep cool, keep dry, wash off -- our primary needs. As we pray this for ourselves, we also pray this for all persons. We do not assume that we deserve to eat, and that others do not. We do not assume that we have entirely provided for ourselves and have no dependence on others and on the whole structure of the cosmos. No, Reality is providing. In petitioning Reality/God to continue providing, we take responsibility to share in the structures of that providing. We notice that we are participating in a network of providing that provides for every human and every living being. We can receive and we can enhance the receiving for ourselves and others.

None of us actually deserves to receive our lives and our food. What an amazingly rare and good fortune it is to have shown up on such a generous planet. No other planet in our solar system provides like this. We were born here. We live here. Realistic living begins by admitting our dependence and by asking Reality to “Give us this day our daily bread.”

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

Since this fifth model petition is also made to God, the Hallowed Finality, these are strange debts we are talking about. God is not literally a big bank from whom we have borrowed money. If we can be viewed as being in debt to the Final Reality, it must be because we have failed to live realistically and bear the consequences of that unrealism. So in this petition we are asking for a fresh start in realistic living. We, like the prodigal son, are asking to return from our far country of devastating unrealism to the real life we have squandered. We are asked to pray this fifth petition because we need to ask for forgiveness in order to claim it. God’s forgiveness is never absent. It is our asking that has been absent. It is our willingness to return to Reality that has been missing. Reality has never been missing. It is we who have been missing from Reality.

Jesus links this request for forgiveness to our forgiveness of those who have mistreated us, who have not paid their debt of realism to us, who have treated us unrealistically: moralistically in ways that denied us forgiveness, rationally in ways that did not recognize our whole emotional and Spirit being, sentimentally in ways that did not encourage our realistic living, violently in ways that disrespected our humanity, stupidly in ways that paid little or no attention to us, and this list is very long. Implied in this petition is the fact that we cannot ask for our own forgiveness of all these things unless we are also asking for the forgiveness of everyone – and indeed granting our forgiveness to everyone who owes us for the neglect and violations they have done.

The most preposterous implication within this fifth instruction on true prayer is this: Everyone is already forgiven by Final Reality, has always been forgiven, is now forgiven, and always will be forgiven. To appropriate this restoration to realism all we have to do is ask for this ever-present forgiveness. All anyone has to do is ask. Final Reality stands ready, like the benevolent father in the prodigal son story, to receive us back into the family, to provide us fresh clothes, to put arms around us and kiss us, to throw a feast with excellent food.

*And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil*

This sixth model petition recognizes that most of our “praying” has been about asking Final Reality to provide us with those unrealities that we most desire. With this sixth model petition we are instructed to ask to be kept real, to be kept home in the bosom of actuality. And what is evil? Evil is

being lost in unreality – being lost in the manufacturings of our own silly minds – not noticing that our thoughts and our actuality are two different things – not noticing that we are not thinking about what is actual, but are using our thinking minds to create a world of our desire to replace the world of our IS.

This model petition also implies that Final Reality can and will answer our request. We are never certain what that answer will be, but this petition implies trusting Reality to lead us into realism, not temptation. God/Reality will deliver us from illusory living, the only evil. All that is missing here is our request, our willingness to be delivered, our willingness to give up our temptations to unreality. Praying this prayer changes the sternness of Reality in its opposition to our unrealities into the blessing of Reality upon our ongoing success with the option of realistic living.

A deep irony is present in this petition. Often the last thing we want to pray for is realistic living. Often we would rather die than give up our illusions. Often we would rather rage in despair for the rest of our days than give up our desires to have life be different than it actually is. The temptation to such evil is very strong. Nothing is stronger than this temptation, except Reality. Yes, Final Reality is able to turn illusion into nothing in the blink of an eye.

So, the benediction that was added to these six model petitions is appropriate:

*For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power,
and the Glory Forever*

In other words, if you insist on picking a fight with Reality, you will lose. For Infinite Reality is the Rule that rules all things, the primal Power that none can defeat, and the Glory of fulsome joy meant for us from the beginning and for all time.

Here in simplified form is my metaphorical translation of the model prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven

Oh Infinite Silence, our devotional Thou, our Primal Parent,

Hallowed be Thy name

May we honor Your nameless awesomeness.

Thy Kingdom Come

May we open ourselves to whatever future You will bring to us and our planet.

Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven

May we accept the past and also the present situation of limits and possibilities as Your good gift to us in this real down-to-Earth moment.

Give us this day our daily bread

We ask no more than what we need for today's living.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

We ask for forgiveness for our malice, our bondage, and our self-inflicted despair, and we ask that we be similarly forgiving toward all our companions.

*And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil*

Guard us from the lure of unreality and deliver us from a life of despair.

*For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power,
and the Glory Forever*

For Yours, Oh Final Reality, is the Rule that rules all things, the primal Power that none can defeat, and the Glory of fulsome joy meant for us all from the beginning and for all time to come.

The Enigma of Prayer

A philosophical spin
by Gene Marshall



As the existential philosopher and Jewish theologian Martin Buber pointed out in his book *I and Thou*, the Bible is built upon the notion of a personal relationship with the Ultimate. If we are to understand the Bible as it speaks to our contemporary experience, we must first of all be absolutely clear that “I and Thou” is a metaphor. “I and Thou” is a creation of the human mind. And this metaphor did not drop down from the Ultimate into our minds; humans simply made it up. And it was made up very long ago. It has been a massively used metaphor by many religions, especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

To conduct what we call “prayer,” we need the I-Thou metaphor. If we are to recover prayer for our times, first we need to realize that “I and Thou” is a metaphor. We need to acknowledge that there is no scientific evidence for and no contemplative evidence for a literal supernatural being to whom we might pray. Literalistic theism is not an option for a thinking person in the 21st Century. Buber and other existential theologians are clear about this. But then, we need to see that this metaphor points to something real, that “I and Thou,” understood as a metaphor, is useful to us. It is as useful now as it has ever been, and it has been useful for longer than humans can remember.

But before I proceed to establish the usefulness of this ancient metaphor, we need to be fully clear

about what it means to not take this metaphor literally. The Christian theologian Sally McFague wrote a thoughtful book entitled *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. She asserted that it would be better to view nature as God's Body rather than to view God as a King and the beings of nature as His subjects. She spoke of this as promoting nature from something demeaned to something sacred. I agree that nature can be understood as sacred in the sense that the Presence of Absolute Mystery shines through nature. I agree with McFague that all God-talk is metaphorical. But what McFague fails to see clearly enough to suit me is this: *There can be no model of God, and changing the quality of our models of God only changes the quality of an illusion*. The God of Western monotheism cannot be modeled, cannot be imaged. The God of biblical worship is the Unknowable Unknown, the Absolute Mystery, the Infinite Silence in which all noises sound, the Infinite Stillness in which all motions move, the Infinite Nothing from which all somethings arise and to which all somethings return. This Void can be directly experienced by human consciousness, but no model for it is possible. God, the Void, is also experienced as God, the Infinite Everything within which all somethings cohere.

When we speak of this Void/Everything as a King or a Father, or a Mother, or a Lover, or a Friend, we are not speaking *about* God, but about our relationship with this Void/Everything. King, Father, Mother, Lover, Friend speak only of our trust and devotion to this Absolute Mysteriousness about which nothing whatsoever can be said. We see this more clearly when we speak of God as our Rock or our Fortress. Such inanimate metaphors do not tempt us to literalize. We do not expect to literally view the walls and moats and turrets of this Infinite Fortress. But when we speak of God as Father, Mother, Lover, or Friend, we quite often do suppose a literal Face. The God of the Bible is not a person or a non-person. The I-Thou story is just a story. I-Thou is a metaphor for speaking about our directly experienced relationship to the Infinitely Unspeakable.

So, how is the I-Thou metaphor useful in assisting us to express both our experiences of Final Reality and our experiences of being our deepest "I"? Here is the deal; we come into our awareness of some "Otherness than I" from the perspective of some sense of "I" that we assume we are. We may not notice at first that the "I" we experience ourselves to be is filtered through a self-created image of the "I" that we think we are. We can call this filtered "I" our "ego" if we mean our conscious self image. Or we can call this filtered "I" our

"personality" if we mean our partly unconscious, lifelong, self-created pattern of habits. Whether we mean "ego" or "personality," this filtered "I" is not the fullness of the "I" that we actually are.

Nevertheless, it is from the perspective of this self-created "I" that we experience a Mystery-experiencing "I" that does not fit with who we think we are nor with what we think Reality is. Both the Wholeness of Mysterious Reality and the "I" that experiences this Wholeness are VAST beyond all our self-created perceptions, concepts, stories, and metaphors. Reality is more, deeper, larger, than our mind's sense of reality. Similarly the "I" that I fully am is more, deeper, larger than our mind's sense of self. As our experience of life approaches the full Mysteriousness of our actuality, we can notice ourselves taking in more Reality and responding to Reality with more realism. We can notice that this sense of "Other than I" keeps expanding and our sense of "I" keeps deepening. I am an ongoing encounter with Reality and I am an ongoing response to Reality. This encounter/response dynamic is more than a mere picture in our minds; it is a direct experience. And this experience is the source of the I-Thou metaphor. We are an ongoing personal relationship with Final Mystery, and this ongoing relationship can be called "prayer."

Prayer is possible only because there is an I-Thou metaphor functioning in our lives. But prayer includes more than this basic structure in our mental functioning. Prayer is a passionate, emotional, life-and-death concerned activity. The word "Thou" or "God" is a devotional word. These words point to Final Mysterious Reality, but they also express a personal, passionate, ultimately concerned, trusting devotion to this Final Mysterious Reality. The process of prayer is a flow of this passionate devotion. The image of "Person" in the words "Thou" or "God" symbolizes this personal quality. "Personal" does not describe God; it describes our relationship with God. Personal describes our faith, our trust of Reality, but it does not describe the object of that trust. Final Reality is absolute Mystery. It is our devotion that makes our relationship with Final Reality personal.

Furthermore, this personal relation with the "Thou" of Final Reality makes the "I" personal. We become our deepest persons, and we move toward seeing others in their potential for an I-Thou relation with Final Reality. This results in our having I-Thou relationships, rather than I-it relationships, with other persons. Thanks again to Martin Buber for helping us explore this.

The I-Thou metaphor points beyond itself to a

Real experience of Reality and includes a passionately realistic mode of living, but "I-Thou" is still a metaphor. In some religious traditions it is not the primary metaphor. This tends to be true in Hinduism and Buddhism. How do we who are rooted in the I-Thou metaphor see validity in a religion that does not root itself in the I-Thou metaphor? This question deserves another essay.

Back to prayer: After experiencing the finitude of the I-Thou metaphor, can we still pray? Can we picture ourselves in vital encounter with this Thou and in passionate response to this Thou? Do we still have an intensely personal relationship with our God? *Yes we do.*

First, let us notice that our whole life becomes prayer when we view this life through the prism of the I-Thou metaphor. When we take in some fresh awareness of Reality, it is prayer. When we initiate some fresh response to Reality, it is prayer. All life is encounter with the Absolute Thou and response to the Absolute Thou.

When events convict us of our stupidity, habitual living, neglect, and malice toward others, we take in judgment from the Hallowed Thou and passionately pray our **confessions**. When events bless us or when unconditional forgiveness dawns upon us, we passionately pray our **gratitude** to the Hallowed Thou. When in our God/Reality-given Freedom we venture requests for ourselves, we are making **petitions** to the Hallowed Thou. When in that same freedom, we venture our concerns for others, we are making **intercessory prayer** to the Hallowed Thou. Indeed we are offering our body, time, vitality, passion to be used by the Infinite Thou to serve the needs of the others for whom we are making requests. All these everyday confessions, gratuities petitions, and intercessions are prayer. As we see our entire life dramas in the light of the I-Thou metaphor, all this is prayer. In each action of prayer we are accessing our essential Freedom, a Freedom we enjoy whenever we live in this I-Thou devotion. Prayer is Freedom, the Freedom to receive ourselves and to give ourselves in relationship with the Final Giver and the Final Receiver of our entire existence.

What shall we pray for? There are no rules for it, except the overall ruleless obedience of being an Enigmatic "I" in relation to this Unfathomable "Thou."

So, let us pray.

The Core Political Issue

a reasoned rant
by Gene Marshall



When big bankers move billions to scoop off millions without regard for the consequences, we have an extreme example of callousness. As millions of people are rendered jobless, hopeless, hurting, these money-sucking vampires view real persons as potential dollars. As world economies collapse and our fragile hopes for human survival on this planet lessen, these denizens of "I-it" relations fight the political progressives with their millions of \$ to prevent any structural corrections that limit their opportunities for further scams.

And the horror goes deeper. We the citizenry of this un-democracy stand helpless and apathetic before a Supreme Court with five wrongheaded judges who declared unconstitutional even our feeble efforts to close down the flow of investor's money from corporation treasuries into buying political policies that favor the wealthy few. Oh yes, this is complicated, and we the citizens are not financial wizards. Some of us can barely balance a check book. Some of us hate to even discuss money or our responsibility for it. Nevertheless, the answer to this continuing horror is quite simple: NOT ONE PENNY OF CORPORATION MONEY SHOULD BE SPENT ON INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY. The money in corporation treasuries belongs to investors, not managers. The money that those managers spend on lobbying and funding candidates should go instead to investors. As individual citizens they can decide if they want to use some of it to influence whatever policies they believe best serve the interests of themselves, their society, and their one planet.

The Constitution of the United States already supports this direction, but we may need a Constitutional amendment to make that clear to these five ideological dinosaurs on the Supreme Court as well as to Presidents and Congresspersons who make and approve their lifetime appointments. Some may point out that these five Justices are not dumb: that they are smart men who actually believe that our nation should be ruled by and for the wealthiest corporations rather than by and for the people. If that be true, then these five Justices are hypocrites, for they do not admit to that belief. Indeed, I count them worse than hypocrites, they are committing treason against a first principle of our nation. Perhaps they should be judged criminally insane and relieved from office.

Unfortunately, there is no easy, legal way to remove these Justices. Our next step is to remove from public office every politician who does not honor, support, and fight for the above capitalized words. When the masses of the citizenry refuse to cooperate with this governmental/corporation

collusion of greed, then there is hope for bringing about the changes we need. So, we the citizenry are to blame. Let that be clear. We permitted this situation, and we and we alone have the power to restrain this fundamental evil.

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

reviews by Joyce Marshall

NOVELS

Whistling Season

by Ivan Doig



I was deeply affected by this coming-of-age novel set in the Montana prairie of 1910. The story is told by Paul Milliron who remembers one important year in his childhood, when he was 13. He and his two younger brothers have recently lost their mother. Their father, Oliver--in trying to deal with being father, mother and homesteader--responds to an ad in the Minneapolis newspaper for a housekeeper and hires widow Rose Lewellyn. She arrives on the train, unexpectedly bringing along her brother, Morris Morgan, who is later hired to teach in the one-room school. My favorite scenes are those of Morris responding with marvelous creativity to a job he had never considered, but seems to have been born to. Paul's crossover to adulthood relates to his discovery of a secret about Rose and Morris and how he handles it.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight In Heaven

by Sherman Alexie

The book is a collection of short stories whose characters keep returning. There is no single plot, although Victor comes closest to being the protagonist. The stories feature residents of the Spokane Reservation and convey the current state of the American Indian: mostly depressing. Alexie, however, tells his people's stories in such a desperately real yet humorous way that it is as fascinating as it is educational (for most of us). I have always appreciated gallows humor.

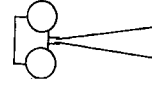
Four Freedoms

by John Crowley

Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech of 1941 (freedom of speech and expression; freedom of religion; freedom from want; and freedom from fear) drives the characters in this World War II story which focuses on the home front, in particular a plant for building bombers. Crowley's fictional plant is in Ponca City, Oklahoma, where he recreates the mores of that time when women were entering the work force and finding larger, more expansive lives. The main character is, like Roosevelt, a crippled man who uses leg braces to

walk. He finds his own life expanded by the need of that time to use the skills of everyone, since the "able-bodied" men were soldiers. One of his skills is his ability to listen to and relate to women and we meet the women in the story through their relationship to him. Crowley is a fine writer, and this is one of his best.

MOVIES



Divided We Fall. This Oscar-nominated Czech film of 2000 is one of the best I have seen. A masterful balance of comedy with drama, it tells the story of citizens in German-occupied Czechoslovakia near the end of World War II. Marie and Josef are depicted in their day-to-day life as they try to avoid drawing the attention of the Nazis. They don't want to risk taking in David (a Jewish friend) but they cannot imagine refusing, so he lives hidden in their attic for two years. Horst, a prewar friend and boorish Nazi collaborator, drops in frequently. It is hard to explain how such a serious setting could create a comedy of errors and then swing around at the end to become totally inspiring and redemptive. Abnormal times do strange things to normal people, sometimes bringing out the worst and surprisingly the best as well, reminding us that we all need to be forgiving and to hope for forgiveness.

Vitus (pronounced VeeToos) is an engrossing Swiss film about a child prodigy (in mathematics and piano) whose grandfather assists him in sorting out his life without succumbing to the controlling desires of his parents. Vitus is smarter than everyone around him and more mature than some. His rebellion is a mix of childishness and brilliance that constantly surprises. Vitus is played by two musical prodigies (at different ages) who play glorious music along the way. The movie, a masterful work of art, is both delightful and wise.

The Hurt Locker, a war film directed by a woman, won this year's Academy Award for film and direction. Perhaps it is the woman's touch that focuses on suspense rather than action, on personalities rather than events, and brings a new perspective to the war-film genre. The movie is a riveting depiction of the day-to-day life of the bomb-squad technicians who voluntarily risk their lives and challenge the odds to defuse roadside bombs on the streets of Baghdad. Staff Sgt. James, replacing the man before him who was killed, combines a surgeon's skill with an occasional recklessness that drives his cover man, Sgt. Sanborn, nuts. Sanborn does everything by the book. I cheered when this film won its Oscars.

Kolya. Louka, a cellist in 1988 Prague, has been thrown out of his job with the Philharmonic because he was flippant with the Russians who control the country. He agrees to a phony marriage (for a price) to a Soviet woman who doesn't want to return to Russia. Circumstances leave Louka as sole caregiver for the woman's five-year-old son, Kolya. The drama of man and child who don't speak the same language, who don't want to be together, and who finally learn to care for one another, and then must give up one another is beautifully done. Those Czechs really know how to make films.

The Young Victoria. I rank this film with the best of historical movies. Queen Victoria reigned for an amazing 63 years (surviving several assassination attempts). This film focuses on her from age eighteen to her early twenties as she fights off the attempts to set up a regency, is courted by Prince Albert, begins her reign, marries Albert, and has the first of their nine children. The film focuses on how these two strong-willed young people, committed to one another and to their responsibilities, assume authority individually and as a couple over against many about them who seek to exploit them. Emily Blunt is perfect as Victoria and is supported by a host of topnotch actors.

Departures. This lovely Japanese movie won this year's Oscar for best foreign film. Daigo, 30, a cellist in a small classical orchestra that goes broke, becomes an apprentice in "encoffinment." He works with a wise, kind man who performs for the family of the deceased an elegant, tender, and fascinating ritual with the corpse of their loved one which resembles a tea ceremony. While Daigo must deal with the attitude of his wife and friends toward what they consider a low caste job, he experiences deep appreciation from the families of the dead who are healed by the ceremony. He discovers his true vocation and works through an old hatred.

Up in the Air. George Clooney stars as Ryan Bingham, a corporate down sizer (he fires people for a living). He treasures his stockpile of frequent flyer miles, collected by spending over 300 days a year away from the office. (Not away from home because Bingham has no home.) His sophisticated contentment begins to unravel when he begins mentoring young Natalie, who has new ideas for firing people by computer. He is further undermined when he meets his nemesis in Alex, a female version of himself. This bittersweet tale captures you from the beginning and is sadly uplifting.

A Single Man takes place in 1962, when being gay was to live a hidden life. (More so than now.) The film is one day in George's life -- perhaps the last day -- because George is struggling to deal with the loss of Jim, his partner of 16 years, in a car accident eight months previous. George meticulously puts his affairs in order, even laying out his clothes for burial along with his will and other papers and notes. He then teaches his university class, has a brief interaction with a stranger (a young, gay James Dean lookalike), spends the evening with a close woman friend, and the night with a student, during which the student becomes the teacher. Colin Firth is marvelous as George in a film that, though about homosexuality, has meanings for anyone seeking clarity after losing a spouse. A fine work.

Unmistaken Child (In English, Tibetan, Nepali, and Hindi, with subtitles) is a documentary so artful that it seems like a drama. Israeli filmmaker Nati Baratz follows Tenzin Zopa, disciple of the 84-year-old Geshe Lama Konchog, through the Lama's cremation ceremonies and the search for the toddler believed to be his reincarnation. To appreciate this story, you don't have to believe in reincarnation. You do, however, need to understand that to the people in this movie a soul transmigrating from a dying Buddhist lama to a newborn boy is part of the conceptual stew in which they and their society swim every day. It is difficult for the Western mind to grasp what seems to be magic as the young child responds to the tests of recognizing the Lama's belongings. The central character in this story, however, is not the child, but the disciple who has served his Lama since age 7 and who feels unsuited for the assigned task of seeking the Lama's reincarnation. We go along as he visits remote villages in beautiful mountain areas to meet with families and young children. He does find the "unmistaken child" and then shifts from serving a lama 60 years his senior to raising, instructing, and ultimately serving one 24 years his junior. The ambivalence of the chosen boy's parents is obvious: joy at the amazing selection, and grief in turning him over to others to raise. The boy himself seems to sense and enjoy the role he is expected to play; yet he dissolves into tears when his family leaves. What a story!

An Education, based on a memoir, is about Jenny, a 16-year-old British schoolgirl who is the target of a sophisticated seduction by David, a 35-year-old man. Jenny, headed for Oxford, is becoming bored with school, while David is so smooth he takes in her naive parents as well and introduces Jenny to a

sophisticated world, including a trip to Paris. Carey Mulligan as Jenny has an Audrey Hepburn glowing quality that brings delight in her awakening to a wider world. Peter Sarsgaard is perfect in portraying the attractive, charming, intelligent David as well as the rotten scoundrel. Fortunately, Jenny has the smarts and the grit to actually wrest “an education” from this experience.

To Serve Them All My Days. This 1980 BBC Miniseries is based on a novel set in the early 1900s. It reflects on the story of Lieutenant David Powlett-Jones, a young veteran of three years of World War I, removed from active duty because of a leg wound and a severe case of what was then called “shell shock.” Thinking he might recover in the country, his doctor recommends that he pursue his dream of becoming a schoolmaster. The film opens when a troubled Powlett-Jones arrives at rural Bamfylde Boarding School for boys. The story is riveting as the schoolmaster faces personal tragedies and vocational challenges. The characters, from the cheerful but wise headmaster, to Powlett-Jones’ colleagues, his students, and the women he loves, are fascinating and perfectly portrayed. The 11 episodes cover about 20 years of the romance, trauma, contention, humor, and tragedy of the life of Powlett-Jones. Highly recommended.

Kirikou and the Sorceress. It takes an unusually good animated film to capture my attention. This West African fairy story of the child, Kirikou, is enhancing from the first frame, when he announces from within his mother’s belly, “I am ready to be born now!” Encouraged by his mother, Kirikou’s curiosity and assertiveness lead him to discover the root of the problems in the village. He is not always appreciated by others, but Kirikou never wastes time in discouragement. When one strategy doesn’t work, he tries another. This wise tale has much to teach adults and maybe children, too.

The Italian. In this 2005 Russian film, six-year-old Vanya is housed in a crowded orphanage with other “foundlings.” Their only hope appears to be adoption by a foreign family. Vanya is selected by an Italian couple and thereby nicknamed “The Italian” by his cohorts as the process is finalized. But unlike the other children, Vanya does not want to be taken away to a new life in Italy. He dreams of finding his real mother and begins a journey to overcome the barriers. Like **Kirikou** (in the movie reviewed above) Vanya is resolute and focussed. Nothing deters him. He needs to be able to read his papers; so he gets an older orphan to teach him to read. He needs access to the papers; so he takes the keys of the sleeping headmaster and opens the safe. When pursued, he runs. When caught, he bides his

time. Like a dark fairy tale, Vanya’s quest is heroic, even ferocious, and quite satisfying.

The Singing Revolution. This wonderful documentary introduces most of us to Estonia, a small Baltic country in which people sing and sing together, regularly at festivals, a chorus of 25,000 singing their traditional songs. In 1991 Estonia confronted its Soviet occupiers and announced its independence to the world. Music, not weapons, played a pivotal role in this event. Not only are Estonians a singing people; they know how to use patience as a weapon. Having lived under one occupation or another for many decades, they know how to watch and wait and act only when the time is right. These qualities were learned in trying times: a high percentage of their population was murdered outright or sent to work camps in Siberia. It is a privilege and inspiration to meet and hear the stories of those who led in the recovery of their country and to see and hear this people -- arms upraised and hands clasped -- singing.

Dear Frankie. Lizzie is a good mother to her 9-year-old deaf son, Frankie. She writes letters to him that supposedly come from his missing father. Lizzie makes up a story about the father being at sea on the H.M.S. Accra. When the Accra ports in their town, Lizzie has to act fast and calls upon a stranger aboard to play the role of Frankie’s dad. The story is well told and acted as these three work out what is true and what is good parenting.

Kenny is not a documentary, but feels like one; it seems so real. Kenny is a portable-toilet plumber in Australia working for Splashdown, a company supplying portaloos to large outdoor and corporate events. He is a positive guy, proud of his work, the go-to guy for all kinds of shit (literal and otherwise). His dad, his wife, his coworkers tend to “dump” on him, and the story is about his finding his way to being the hero he is.



POPULAR CULTURE

reviews by Alan Richard

Although I’ve long had interest in the comics as a medium, I’ve never been all that interested in Superman. I once owned a comic book collection numbering into the hundreds, but only a few were Superman comics, which I kept only because I’d inherited them from my uncle and believed they would have cash value someday. In graduate school, I unloaded the entire collection to help pay rent and utilities. I did not like the Christopher Reeve Superman movies, and was only marginally

interested in Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns*, which is an explicit attempt to remold the hero into a Christ-figure. To me, everything about Superman, from his patriotic colors to his simplistic "law-and-order" ethics to his near-godlike power, represented the arrogance and delusion of post World War II U.S. imperialism and jingoism.

Nevertheless, I have adopted the television series *Smallville* as a guilty pleasure. The quality of the writing in this series is uneven, as is the case for most commercial television, particularly when designed, like this one, for the young adult demographic. But *Smallville*, at its best, nails the essentials of the myth of Superman and these essentials express some important truths about our experience as human beings. My interest in these essentials led me to Tom DeHaven's *Our Hero: Superman on Earth*, a book-length essay on Superman's cultural significance.

***Smallville, Seasons One Through Nine*
by Alfred Gough & Miles Millar
Warner Studios, 2001-2010**

Smallville assumes the basic elements of the Superman story known to nearly everyone from childhood: the infant arrives in a spaceship as the sole survivor of the planet Krypton, possesses superhuman powers which are hidden in the identity of an ordinary human, Clark Kent, and becomes the protector of a humanity to which he does and does not belong. He will grow up and enter into a kind of tragicomic love triangle between his two identities and star Daily Planet reporter, Lois Lane. Unlike the earlier incarnations of this hero with which I am familiar, *Smallville* molds these elements into a story of a young person struggling to live within the tensions that constitute our human being, tensions which are not resolved logically but in the collision between events that shatter the hero's sense of who he is and the temptation to run away from the implications of these events. This dynamic is present in the very first episode, in which the infant hero arrives on earth in the midst of a meteor shower that spells disaster for other characters in the story. Lana Lang, who will become the adolescent hero's love interest, is orphaned when meteors from the shower kill her parents. Lex Luthor, who will first become the hero's friend and later his arch enemy, is disfigured and traumatized in the disaster. Other residents of the town of Smallville are also disfigured, becoming "freaks" as a result of exposure to the alien meteors. From the very beginning we know that the hero will only ever be able to affirm himself if he can also affirm all of this.

From this beginning, the series takes up the
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hero's journey from adolescence to young adulthood, in which he experiences losses that assault his sense of security and identity, and his discovery of his "true" self. The series, which has recently completed its ninth and penultimate season, gradually deepens and darkens the hero's inquiry into the meaning of his existence. On the one hand, the hero faces a strong desire to submerge his "alien-ness" in the everyday concerns of ordinary life. On the other, he faces a growing call to take flight from this ordinariness. Slowly, he begins to recognize that the ordinariness he has embraced as goodness functions instead as the greatest barrier separating him and his destiny. This realization takes concrete form as his refusal to embrace his "power" leads to the death of his adopted father and the loss of several friends. By Season Nine, he has declared that "Clark Kent is dead" and has removed himself as far as possible from human involvement, retreating into a "Fortress of Solitude." He still desires to preserve what he regards as wholesome ordinary human life, but can only do so as the unfocused "blur," never clearly seen by anyone else, and dressed in a black costume with the Kryptonian crest of the "El" family displayed on it. Increasingly, however, he discovers that this outward form of monasticism is also inadequate. By the end of the season, it is not only Clark Kent who has died, but also Kal-El. At the same time, his journey has brought him into contact with other colleagues who, though lacking his alien powers, have formed a kind of incognito community of those who care and who recognize in him the possibility of being more than even he has imagined himself to be. This journey, however, comes with a price. I will not reveal the price here so as not to ruin the Season Nine "cliffhanger" or spoil the final season for those of you who might want to share this guilty pleasure with me. Suffice it to say, despite its absurd comic-book fantasy elements, this series has much to offer those of us who have been awakened by the renewal of the gospel message found in the writings of Kierkegaard and the existentialist Christian tradition.

***Our Hero: Superman on Earth*
by Tom DeHaven
Yale University Press, 2010**

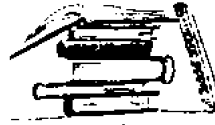
Tom DeHaven received the American Book Award in 1997 for a novel about the Depression-era context of the first comic books. In *Our Hero: Superman on Earth*, DeHaven interweaves the literary history of America's first superhero with the story of his own sense of connection with this hero, a connection that has challenged him to

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reflect on his own life. DeHaven begins by focusing on two poor, scrawny, dark-haired and olive-skinned Jewish immigrant teenagers who wrote and drew the first Superman stories and who described their creation as an outgrowth of their desire to overcome the inhibitions they felt resulting from their exclusion from the popular, celebrated bands of wealthy, athletic, blonde-haired and blue-eyed *übermenschen* and the high school girls who fawned over them. The early Superman also represented a conscious appraisal of the overwhelming odds confronting the poor and oppressed in the face of the powerful forces of wealthy Depression-era capitalists who owned everything from the factories that made the clothing you wore to the shelter you inhabited, along with the corrupt politicians and organized crime enforcers who did their bidding. In the early stories, Superman wasn't just fighting thugs. He was demolishing slums, building free housing, and inspiring his readers to imagine themselves doing the same.

DeHaven argues that six indispensable elements comprise the core Superman icon. These are: exploding planet Krypton, rocket ship to earth, secret identity, original tights-and-cape costume, Lois Lane, and flight. He shows how all six grew out of the double consciousness distilled in its creators' Jewish immigrant childhood and adolescence, as well to stories in the Jewish tradition, including that of Moses. More important than the specific biographical details that inspired these elements, however, is the challenge they pose to each generation of Superman writers and fans regarding Superman's "real" identity. Is he "really" Kal-El, the "Last Son" of the dead planet Krypton who, as Jules Feiffer argued, dons the weak, bumbling Clark Kent as a mere disguise, sending his readers the message that perhaps their own weaknesses are a mere disguise that will someday be cast off to reveal the "more than" that lies hidden within? Or is he "really" Clark Kent, the ordinary small-town boy scout, who desires only to belong to the mass of humanity, to fit in, and for whom Superman is a job like policeman, fireman, or garbage-man? DeHaven's conclusion is that he is both and neither. Superman is not the alien superlative Kal-El that calls the hero out of ordinariness to infinite surpassing (faster than - - - stronger than - - -) nor the ordinary, unnoticeable Clark Kent, but the relationship that relates the one to the other, the relationship that supports in every moment his solitary decision, his "freedom to act." Quoting Mark Waid, DeHaven concludes that "when he lives as who he really is, in full authenticity to his nature and gifts, and then brings

his distinctive strengths into the service of others, he takes his place in the larger community, in which he now genuinely belongs." This is not a simple belonging, not a belonging that hinges on being recognized by others as belonging, but a deeper, inward belonging that only appears incognito. The achievement of *Our Hero* is to show us how the Superman myth at its best confronts us with the decision that faces all of us, a decision to be our true selves without regard for the outcome or any external recognition whatsoever.



RECOMMENDED READING

reviews by Joyce Marshall

Finding Your Religion

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist

by Stephen Batchelor

Spiegel & Grau, 2010

I was introduced to Stephen Batchelor through his earlier book *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*, finding in him a person who relates to Buddhism much as I relate to Christianity: that is, he digs out the core of the liberating discoveries of the Buddha (or the Christ) and eliminates from his religious practice anything magical. I also share with Batchelor a deep appreciation of the Christian theologian, Paul Tillich, and of S.N. Goenka, who introduced both of us to Vipassana meditation. I also relate to his title *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*. I confess to becoming a Christian atheist when I was 34, and only later returning to theism when I realized that I could relate to God as the fullness of reality, not an anthropomorphic being, and could use the word "God" as a devotional expression of my relation to the All That Is.

So I read with fascination Batchelor's candid story of his journey: growing up in England; traveling to India at nineteen; meeting the Dalai Lama; becoming a Buddhist monk in the Tibetan tradition; learning Tibetan; becoming a teacher; becoming disillusioned with the dogmatism of the tradition; traveling to Korea and studying Zen; deciding he could not in good conscience remain a monk and disrobing after ten years; marrying a French nun (she also left her life as a nun) whom he had met, worked with, and come to love at the Zen monastery; becoming, with wife Martine, Buddhist teachers and authors who are respected around the world and who have no traditional or institutional authority, only the authority of their own authentic practice, scholarship, and personal integrity.

So that is one part of this book. Another part, which might be called the quest for the historical Siddhartha Gotama, demythologizes the Buddha story. In telling the Buddha's story, Batchelor refers to the Pali Canon, the earliest writings of the Buddha's teaching, life, and the world he lived in. He thereby attempts to make the Buddha's story like Batchelor's own: seeing Gotama as an ordinary human being who, in this case, made an extraordinary discovery about living, put together understandings and practices around that new awareness, and led others in ways of living appropriately in this world.

The third part of the book is Batchelor's simple, clear explanation of the Buddha's teaching, the Dharma, free of jargon, in all its radicality: its unequivocal embrace of contingency, its freedom related to embracing this contingency, its passion for this moment with its anguish and pain, its unsentimental love for all beings. Batchelor exemplifies in his life and in this book the final teaching of the Buddha: to trust our experience and follow it to an understanding of the Dharma that works on our lives. I admire Batchelor's integrity and dedication to seeking truth, his willingness to, over and over again, walk away from everything he has known, all that has made him comfortable, as his searching brings him to new conclusions. May we do likewise.

*How to Believe in God:
Whether You Believe in Religion or Not*
by Clark Strand
Doubleday, 2008

Strand began as a Christian and after a great deal of immersion in other traditions (including Jewish, Muslim, and becoming a Buddhist monk), he returned to his Christian roots. The title of this book is unfortunate, because it is more about trust in the Wholeness of Being than about believing in a kind of person usually pointed to with the word "God." What I like is that he uses the word "God" devotionally to express his personal relationship of trust in the goodness of life as it is given. Chapter by chapter his book unravels, in a non-literal existential way, the deepest truths of the key stories in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. For example, he points out the profound meaning of the first two words of the prayer we have come to call The Lord's Prayer: "Our" father. Not "my" father. "Our" father. No one excluded. We see ourselves as praying with every other being, all equally cared for by Creation. You could make that your practice for at least a month, daily saying the two words: "Our Father," aware of the significance of what you are saying. One southern minister

puts it this way, "Most of the you's in the Bible are actually ya'll's."

As Strand explores the Biblical stories, he shares stories from other traditions and from his own experience. He discovered, as I have, that studying other traditions only deepens the teachings you grew up with. Open to wisdom from all sources, he models the importance of putting your trust in that Mystery we cannot explain and of opening yourself to experience, within all the travails and sufferings of life, its amazing generosity, love, and forgiveness.

Memoir/Autobiography

I have recently been drawn to narratives of personal experience. I am currently in volume 5 (of 7) of Thomas Merton's personal journals (which I will likely review when I've completed them all). I also love reading published letters. Not everyone's personal reflections assist us in discovering ourselves or making us wiser. The six auto-biographical books I have chosen here offer these things: a story revealing universal wisdoms, and an author who has a memory of detail, the ability to see his/her personal life with objectivity, and a unique gift of story telling.

The Principles of Uncertainty
by Maira Kalman
Penguin Press, 2007

Kalman shares her illustrated journal musings of May 2006 through April 2007 with an observational, direct, and honest charm. This book is heavy -- literally. Printed on slick heavy paper and filled with Kalman's beautiful full-color paintings and hand-scripted reflections, it is a visual delight. It is also charmingly funny. And it combines the unending with the mundane in a whimsical manner that is quite moving. I love this book.

The Story of a Life
by Konstantin Paustovsky
Pantheon Books, 1964

Likely you have not heard of Paustovsky, although he is a favorite author in Russia. I learned of him reading Thomas Merton's journal. (Merton, a voracious reader, has led me to a number of writers.) With a poetic quality that evokes slow reading for the pleasure of the words, Paustovsky (1892-1968) tells of his early years in a tumultuous era of Russia. His stories of the creative, sensitive, and mostly goodhearted playfulness of the students in his gymnasium (secondary school) are inspiring. He lived through events that were often breathtaking. When Paustovsky was a young

reporter, he was sent to cover Lenin's speech to disgruntled demobilized soldiers, not a friendly audience. The crowd settled down quickly when Lenin spoke. As Paustovsky described it: "He was simply explaining to some angry but simple-hearted men what they were grieving about and what they had already heard, perhaps, plenty of times. But they had not heard it in the words they needed."

If you want to learn about Russia in a deeply human and personal way, Paustovsky is your man.

The Sky Begins at Your Feet
by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg
Ice Cube Books, 2009

Mirriam-Goldberg, poet laureate of Kansas, is a dream of a writer and a wise woman. Although this memoir is about a young woman -- college teacher, bioregional activist, mother of three -- dealing with a serious bout of breast cancer, her story will inspire anyone, including those dealing with cancer. Mirriam-Goldberg has the poet's sense of selection. She picks the scenes to depict along the way and tells them with detail, humor, and poignancy. She is aware of and honest about her thoughts and feelings and about the interactions with her husband and children and their community of support. She is great to hang out with, even (or particularly) under stress. Read this book and get to know my friend Caryn.



This House of Sky:
Landscapes of a Western Mind
by Ivan Doig
Harcourt, Inc., 1978

Doig (b. 1939), a novelist (see review this issue) and journalist, tells his own story like a good novel, the kind that you aren't in any hurry to end. This is one Gene and I read out loud together. It is so well-written that we are frequently stunned and delighted at the storytelling itself. Doig affectionately describes the Montana where he grew up: the small towns, homesteads and ranches, and the amazing people, beginning with his Scottish forebears, the characters in sheepherding country, and his father and grandmother. (He lost his mother at age six.) His vivid details of personal quirks, habits, ways of talking, and eccentric behavior leave you feeling each one's presence. At the end, in the 1970s, he has emerged as a writer with a graduate degree, living in Seattle, with deeply felt memories of the people and the land he has known.

Group and Personal Nurture

The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair
by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea
Berrett-Koehler Publishing, 2010

For those of us who have been meeting in circles for many years (let's see, 26 years, now) this book summarizes and adds to circle wisdom. As Peter Block says in his book, *Community*, (reviewed in June 2009 RLJ) "Small groups are the unit of transformation." Circles are coming into their own, no longer a countercultural phenomenon, as classrooms, board rooms, couples, families, and businesses large and small are experiencing the power of the circle.

Instead of a facilitator, these authors suggest three rotating leadership roles: the host, the guardian, and the scribe. The guardian is like what we used to call "vibes watcher" or "keeper of the heart." This person rings the bell when she senses a pause is needed. The authors use talking pieces when appropriate. (We used a talking stick or a rock. They suggest a feather for some processes and tossing a Koosh ball to pick up the pace.) A thumbs vote is suggested for straw polls: thumbs up for "I'm in favor;" thumbs down for "I don't think this is the right way to go;" or thumbs sideways for "I still have a question." Three practices are recommended for verbal interaction: Attentive listening (we called it "listening from the heart"); Intentional Speaking (our phrase was "speak from the heart, saying as much as needed and no more than necessary"); and Attending to the Well-being of the Group.

The book underlines the importance of opening up to conflictual issues that often are swept under the table. These authors call those issues the "Shadow." In his work with groups, Arnold Mindell refers to the "Ghosts," while Block simply calls them "dissent." Each of these authors has different methods but all agree, as Baldwin and Linnea say: "The only way 'out' is 'through,'" and that collective healing can result.

This book offers further tools to transform the world, one small group at a time.

Taking the Leap:
Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears
by Pema Chodron
Shambhala, 2009

Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist nun in the lineage of Tibetan meditation master Chogyam Trungpa, has published another short, simple, challenging book. In this volume, she introduces a way of responding to moments when we are upset -- stuck in anger, blame, self-hatred, and addiction.

In a nutshell, her radical message is “to get comfortable with, begin to relax with, lean into, whatever the experience may be. . . Drop the storyline and simply pause, look out, and breathe.”

What I like best about Chodron is that she doesn’t put herself on a pedestal. Sharing her own struggles, she makes it easier to see the possibility of getting “unhooked” from patterns in our lives that can become discouraging. We used this book as a 10-week study in our Bonham Circle and found it an excellent push for growth in our personal lives.

*Forgive For Love:
The Missing Ingredient for a Healthy
and Lasting Relationship*
by Dr. Fred Luskin
HarperOne, 2007



I am in my second reading of this book, not because it is difficult to understand, but because I need to be reminded frequently of its common sense message. It is easy for most of us, particularly in our intimate relationships, to believe that our frustrations and miseries come at the hands of others. Luskin’s seven-step program strips away the comfortable clothing of blame and complaint, leaving you dressed in humility and yet with a strange power. Some of us tend to believe that forgiveness puts one in a weak position. Quite the contrary. When you begin to take responsibility for your choices, recognize your own flaws, give up trying to control what you can’t control, accept what you can’t change, grieve your losses, notice and appreciate your partner’s gifts -- you become a hero, not a victim. You become equipped to make changes that are necessary and possible and to enjoy and not take for granted the unique ephemeral relationship you have chosen. This book and *Taking the Leap* (reviewed above) can be major life changers.

*The Underachiever’s Manifesto:
The Guide to Accomplishing Little and Feeling Great*
by Ray Bennett
Chronicle Books LLC, 2006

Bennett, a medical doctor, also has a penchant for humor. He elicits genuine wisdom as he pokes fun at probably most Americans and our go-go overachiever attitude. He promotes living life to the least and loving it. In this small short book you laugh your way through the ten principles of underachievement and the practical applications of these principles in work, love, diet, exercise, investment and more. It is a laugh-out-loud treatment of a truly serious issue. Probably the best

cure for our insane drive to be best, fastest, first, etc. is to see how utterly ridiculous it is and laugh heartily.

Social History & Commentary

1776
by David McCullough
Simon & Schuster, 2005

Gene and I read this one out loud and found it as satisfying as a fine novel. In one paragraph, McCullough can capture a life, a character, or a happening and leave you in awe with a fresh perspective on life in general and your own life as well. We were surprised by how little we knew about the Revolutionary War. The first year was crucial. So many things, large and small, could have changed the outcome: the weather at key moments, decisions by the British officers, the willingness or unwillingness of the mostly untrained Continental soldiers to fight (often barefoot and half naked) in severe winter weather, and, most of all, George Washington. We have heard of the greatness that caused him to be called the father of this country. What we don’t often hear is the depth of the struggle, not only with the conditions of the army and the weather and the forces against them, but with his own depression and uncertainties. But he was never uncertain about the cause they were fighting for. And no matter how bad the situation (even when some of his closest generals turned on him), he never let others down or blamed them. He always had a calm demeanor in the midst of battle. He made the best decisions he could, and when situations looked impossible, he continued to look hopefully for “some lucky chance to turn in our favor.” Drawing on many diaries of the times, McCullough introduces us to generals, soldiers, and their wives on both British and Continental sides. We sit in on the generals’ strategy meetings, and by the soldiers’ campfires. Most important, we are reminded of what it took to get through bleak times in birthing this nation, an important lesson for our own bleak times when a rebirth is needed.

*Bright-sided:
How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking
Has Undermined America*
By Barbara Ehrenreich
Metropolitan Books, 2009

There is deep wisdom in the Ecclesiastes poetry about a season for everything: a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant and a time to reap. Included is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. The nurturing

RECOMMENDED READING

realism in this wisdom is that life will always have both enjoyable and disagreeable aspects. The most wholesome way to relate to this fact of life is to say an overall "Yes" to it, to grieve wholeheartedly and to play robustly. To be a stoic with a stiff upper lip or a Pollyanna with a permanent smile is to pretend.

I imagine we all long to be simply real, to fully and courageously experience life without pretense. However, as Ehrenreich demonstrates, the culture of the U.S. of A. has developed a rebellion against life as it is and a pretense that we can make it more to our liking. Regrettably, like any addiction to unreality, this habit has had, and is having devastating effects. Ehrenreich first saw this pattern when she dealt with breast cancer. The attitude of many sufferers and healers of breast cancer is that positive thinking will heal you -- to the degree that those who have cancer are sometimes blamed or blame themselves for having cancer or for not getting better. Because of some forms of positive thinking we avoid noticing that something is wrong in the environment; otherwise so many of us wouldn't be getting cancer.

Exploring the roots of this pattern of positive thinking, Ehrenreich discovers in our history an attempt to break from the hellfire Puritanism of Calvin. The most popular forms were Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science and Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking*. The modern version is, *The Secret*, by Rhonda Byrne, and the belief that we create our own reality. Positive Psychology has come up with the (pseudo) Science of Happiness. Mega-church evangelists convince thousands that "God wants you to be rich." The motivation business with its use of positive thinking is rampant in corporations. Ehrenreich's interviews with those involved in the real estate crash revealed that anyone who wanted to insert realism into the discussion was either shamed or fired. In her words, "The near unanimous optimism of the experts certainly contributed to the reckless buildup of bad debt and dodgy loans, but so did the wildly upbeat outlook of many ordinary Americans."

Certainly it is good to be open to the positive, to say an overall "Yes" to life, do what you can, give of your best. That's different than trying to control things you cannot control, such as your feelings or final outcomes. In addition to encouraging people to live a fake, delusory life, the promotion of positive thinking in the U.S. encourages an already deep, unhelpful pattern of individualism. Moreover, if people think they are making everything happen by their thoughts, they don't notice, much less challenge, the injustice in the

workplace, the destruction of the environment, and the poor decisions made in governmental bodies -- things we might get together and do something to change.

Empire of Illusion:

The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle

by Chris Hedges

Nation Books, 2009

Hedges devotes one chapter to Ehrenreich's topic, positive thinking, which he calls, "The Illusion of Happiness." He notes that "There is a vast difference between social harmony and harmony ideology, between positivity and being genuinely positive." Anthropologist Laura Nader argues that harmony ideology is a concerted assault on democracy. Hedges' overall topic is the illusory nature of our culture and how it makes us susceptible to demagogues. Exploring more than you want to know about professional wrestling and the pornography industry, he makes it clear that they are part and parcel of a "celebrity culture." We are encouraged to think of ourselves as potential celebrities, longing to have our 15 minutes of fame, even if it means being degraded on the Jerry Springer show.

Hedges shows how pornography has gone mainstream, noting that it involves "the eroticization of unlimited male power and the expression of male power through the physical abuse, even torture of women, reflecting the endemic cruelty of our society." He relates these expressions to the wars we are waging, the treatment of the mentally ill, the warehousing of more than 2 million citizens in prisons, denial of health care to tens of millions, and the callousness of torture.

His summary of so-called "higher" education is that "most universities have become high-priced occupational training centers -- glorified vocational schools for the corporations." He closes with a chapter on our deep illusion about the country we call "America," which he sees as a dismal shell of what it was 60 years ago. The problem is that ours is a Peter Pan culture that needs to be dragged back to realism. Ironically, Hedges sees this fantasy culture as a culture of death. He calls upon the power of basic values like love, hope, sacrifice, and honoring of the sacred to overcome the wreckage created by raw power, militarism, discipline, and obedience.



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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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