

REALISTIC LIVING

A JOURNAL ON ETHICS AND RELIGION

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Five Republican-nominated Supreme Court Justices can be blamed for this loose money. Their reckless decision-making on campaign finance law has undermined what democracy still remains in U.S. life. Most of the supporters of these Justices' actions belong to a corporate elite who cheer the Court from the perspective of ideological belief systems that favor wealth control of government. Other supporters of the Court are simply gullible adherents of the deregulation philosophy held by cloud-dwelling libertarians. Almost everyone is too absorbed with the daily dozen of survival issues and escapes to care one way or the other about the business of the Supreme Court.

That leaves a precious few citizens who are appalled by the implications of this drift toward the worst of all possible outcomes – little or no democracy and no check on ecological catastrophe. Even fewer citizens are puzzling and plotting how to counteract these Supreme Court decisions and eventually put in place a Constitutional amendment that reverses them.

When law and order have gone to the bow wows, we are wise to pay attention. Yet, instead of voting in unprecedented numbers to retain the Obama toehold on sociological sanity, many citizens of the United States did not vote or voted for Republican candidates who will support the appointment of even worse Supreme Court Justices and the delivery of still more power to the wealthy few.

This is our world. Noticing human depravity and its dreadful outcomes is the spiritual blessing of the Advent Season. It's a wondrous Advent Season: we can see more clearly than usual that pus and rot go deep into almost any topic that we might wish to discuss. And each of us is part of this mess. We are not standing alongside in some other universe. We are not in some ivory tower of purity unscathed by the mess of our times. We are part of the rot. We are sunk up to the neck in the cesspool of our times. We are civilization, and civilization is killing itself and the planet that might sustain an alternative to civilization. Will we inwardly die to civilization in order to envision that alternative? Will we opt for the uphill fight against the addicts of civilization to accomplish that alternative? Are we even paying attention?

Maintaining Hope in a Fallen World

an Advent meditation
by Gene Marshall



The four weeks before Christmas have been ritualized as the Advent Season on the Christian Calendar. This ritual season is dedicated to the theme of the fallen world and its dismal destiny. This season is also dedicated to the hope of Christmas, the hope of some bright star appearing in the sky, the hope of some small babe of possibility being born in some surprising place. But our techno-magical, perpetually upbeat, over-optimistic, dulled-out culture does not attend deeply to our fallen world and therefore has no context for the hope of Christmas.

The Spirit blessing of the Advent Season is facing up to things as they are. This has nothing to do with pessimism; it has to do with noticing what no one wants to notice. For example, the recent election season in the U.S. has been especially ruthless. The reactionary revolt against Obama's quite moderate steps toward our pressing challenges has bordered on complete insanity. Even more depressing has been the herd nature of the U.S. voters, rallying to the most well-publicized expressions of anger with noticeable lack of critical thought. And in the wake of some bad decisions by the Supreme Court, the reactionary Republican business community has poured millions of dollars of invisible money from corporation treasuries (investors' money) into buying negative ads.

Noticing all this corruption is a start on our participation in the only righteousness open to us. Our only option for righteousness is our recognition of the corruption and our acceptance that we are welcome home to the reality of our own natural goodness, our own natural body, our own Earthling status of birth-child-adult-and-death, and our consequent freedom from the corruption of which we are aware – the freedom that is also our responsibility for restraining and replacing these basic patterns of corruption.

Yes, we can do something. We can tell the truth. We can be honest, radically honest. We can witness to others with that honesty, however reluctant others may be to hear our honesty. And we can create honest solutions to our long-range challenges and manifest those solutions in our vocational and volunteer participation. Nevertheless, our capacity to change things seems small. What can one person do about so much evil? Does my participation or lack of participation even matter?

These questions prepare us to understand Christmas. One tiny babe of a low-class family is born in an out-of-the-way place. But the heavens are filled with angels singing. The wisest observers travel to the spot. The parents are overwhelmed with wonder. We know this is fiction, but what a fiction! This fiction expresses the nature of that hope that cannot disappoint, a hope born with each new life, a hope born anew when we return to our actual lives.

The Christmas hope cannot disappoint because it does not depend on the external situation. This hope does not depend on the seemingly meager results that may come from our very best living. This hope depends on an undeserved gift from that Final Mystery that penetrates the cosmos. Our true humanity does not depend upon our social conditions, nor upon what we are able to accomplish. Our true humanity is an opportunity that is being given to us without any effort on our part. This “Kingdom of God,” as Jesus called it, is knocking at the door. We have only to admit it. We have only to open the door. This is our hope.

All other hopes can disappoint us. If we are hoping that one of those five renegade Supreme Court Justices will wake up and reverse his bad ruling, we are likely to be disappointed. We may also be disappointed if we hope that a vast portion of the citizens of our part of the country will stop lying about their president in order to justify their obsolete ideology, their religious bigotry, or their downright racism. And if we hope that a whole lot more people will come to the aid of our chosen projects, we may also be disappointed. But the

hope of Christmas does not disappoint, cannot disappoint, will not disappoint. Why? Because it does not depend on human action, neither our own action nor someone else’s action. Christmas is the hope that our wondrous nature will always be knocking at our door. The Kingdom of God, the Commonwealth of Reality, the Absolute Wonder of things is knocking, will be knocking, will be there for us no matter what happens in the world or in our own wretched, habitual patterns of living.

This unflappable hope also shifts our view of other persons and of the social structures that currently smash so many of our hopes. Other people are only a simple step away from enjoying the same unflappable hope that we may have noticed, for that hope does not depend on us doing anything. That hope does not depend on the world changing for these other people. That hope is theirs for the taking. And since that hope is there for everyone, there is hope for changing the social structures. The doomed social structures can be dismantled and rebuilt by the hopeful. It is just a matter of doing it, like eating our breakfast, like going to our work, like saying our say, like taking our rest. Since our power to hope does not depend on us, we are invincible. Nothing can stop us. Neither life nor death, neither stars nor planets, neither animals nor humans, nor anything else in all creation can stop the hope that is given with our very existence.

In the larger narrative of the New Testament, the small babe of hope grows up into a man, and that man draws many men and women into this hope. A movement of thousands gathers on hillsides and later marches into the cultural capital of Jerusalem. Then the most hope-shattering of things happens to the closest companions of this man. They have left everything to follow this individual who holds the promise of life abundant for themselves and for all humanity. Now that hope is dashed. Jesus is taken away in the most horrific manner imaginable.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes long speeches to his disciples about his impending departure. Like the birth stories of Luke and Matthew, these speeches are fictional, but what a rich fiction John creates! Some of the most treasured verses in the New Testament are contained in these going-away speeches. Here is one such passage:

Set your troubled hearts at rest. Trust in God always; trust also in me. There are many dwelling places in my Father’s house; if it were not so I should have told you; for I am going there on purpose to prepare a place for you. And if I go and

prepare a place for you, I shall come again and receive you to myself, so that where I am you shall be also. – John 14:1-3

How might we translate the metaphorical talk of these often misunderstood verses? How might we say the message John was saying in a way that meets our own contemporary experience? Here is my effort:

Let not your heart be troubled by the fallen world in which we live. Trust in the Awesome Mysteriousness you are meeting in the vast transitions of your time in history. Trust also in that portion of the human species that trusts and lives our actual, profound humanness. There is plenty of room for you in the household of essential humanness. There is room for you and your friends and your friends' friends. Yes, tragic things are happening. Humanity at large is as dumb as a sack of hammers, and many are evil beyond even our most cynical imaginations; nevertheless, the profound humanity that you have experienced in my presence is the real deal. If this were not so, I would have told you. I am not shy about telling you how it is. In my coming and going and coming again I am exemplifying the binding force of profound humanness in which you can all participate. The profound humanness in which "I AM," you also shall be.

The writer of the Fourth Gospel is underlining that our hope for a life of righteousness and freedom and power and compassion and peace and strength and enchantment and joy is given, simply given, with our essential existence. And there is plenty of room there for each of us. We don't have to do anything. We can just trust the gift. We can just be the be. We can just open to who we already are. Jesus – in his life, his work, his leaving, and his coming again in the lives of his followers – is a picture of our own best selves. We can identify with Jesus when John has him say, "I AM the way; I AM the truth; and I AM the Life." – John 14:6

Such authentic Life is not the same as spacing out into a dream world. It is not retreating into an aggressive passivity that avoids all initiative. When we are living this Life, we may do much. But our doing flows from Life: we do not have to accomplish Life. And this Life is open to all humans, whether they are Christian practitioners or not. This Life is simply our true nature.

Our journey to Life will require a death to this hopeless world in which most people attempt to find their hope. To find Life we need to simply give up our illusions about what is and what can be and accept our actual limitations and possibilities.

Furthermore, finding our unflappable hope in

Life will put us at odds with the world. John expresses this in these Jesus-departure speeches:

If the world hates you, it hated me first, as you know well. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own, but because you do not belong to the world, because I have chosen you out of the world, for that reason the world hates you. Remember what I said: "A servant is not greater than his master." As they persecuted me, they will persecute you; they will follow your teaching as little as they have followed mine. It is on my account that they will treat you thus, because they do not know the One who sent me. – John 15:18-21

This is still true today. In the twenty-first century, conservers of the wealth-dominated status quo have gone crazy with hate toward every scrap of truth that challenges the veracity of their illusions. They lie and scheme in order to hide the bigger lie that their entire attitude toward Reality is delusory.

But we who are finding our home in the Truth, the Way, and the Life – we are the power that can build an answer to the challenges that face us. We already have a great host of hope-filled colleagues who are building a consensus about what the next social order needs to be. We can join the consensus building. We can join the work of dismantling the old and constructing the new. We are the hope, a hope that cannot be taken from us. No hatred need discourage us; no persecution stop us; no failure end our hope; no success tempt us to quit. If we let the true dwelling places of our essential being be where we live, we are an unflappable hope in this obviously fallen world.

Let not your hearts be troubled.

Living with the Devil

an interreligious spin
by Gene Marshall



In his book, *Living with the Devil*, Buddhist writer Stephen Batchelor discusses a topic Christians might call: "Living in Christ, tempted by Satan." The Devil/Satan has been a puzzle for many Christians. Perhaps this dialogue with Batchelor can introduce you to your personal devil. I will begin with a Batchelor summary on this topic:

Buddha and Mara are figurative ways of portraying a fundamental opposition within human nature. While "Buddha" stands for a capacity for awareness, openness, and freedom,

"Mara" represents a capacity for confusion, closure and restriction. To live with the devil is to live with the perpetual conflict between one's buddhanature and one's maranature. When buddhanature prevails, fixations ease and the world brightens, revealing itself as empty, contingent, and fluid. When maranature dominates, fixations tighten and the world appears opaque, necessary, static. (page 189)

When I substitute the Christian vocabulary that I commonly use into Batchelor's paragraph, the parallels with Buddhist thought are striking. Each vocabulary enriches the other:

Christ and Satan are figurative ways of portraying a fundamental opposition within human experience. While "Christ" stands for a capacity for trust, love, and freedom, "Satan" represents a capacity for despair, malice and bondage. To live with the devil is to live with the perpetual conflict between one's Christ essence and one's satanic fall. When Christ essence prevails, fixations ease and the world brightens, revealing itself as spacious, contingent, and fluid. When the satanic fall dominates, fixations tighten and the world appears opaque, necessary, static.

It is at first amazing how similarly Buddhists and Christians can speak about the same aspects of human life. There is, however, a difference I want to share between my amended paragraph and Batchelor's original paragraph. It has to do with the use of the word "nature." At its best Christian heritage makes clear that we have only one nature, our created nature, our Christ essence. Our satanic or fallen state is not part of our true nature (our essence), but a perversion of that essence, a fall from that essence. This "sin," as it is often called, is an estrangement from something good. Our nature is angelic; our sin is fallen angels. We sometimes speak of our true nature and our fallen nature, but it is important to notice that this fallen nature is not nature at all. It is un-nature. It is an illusion, a substitution for the reality of our actual lives. Sin is not a power with its own foundation. Sin is a falsification of something good; it is a substitute for the only foundation that truly exists.

Furthermore, our good nature cannot be destroyed by sin. Our Christ essence persists as a challenge to our fallen un-nature. This is why fallen un-nature can also be described as "despair," for the fallen state is a hopeless state. It is a flight from something that cannot be fled. It is a fight with something that cannot be overcome. It is a corruption of something that cannot be done away with. So our fallen state is a hopeless state. Even if it is peaceful for the time being, it is a state destined

for the hell of open and painful despair. I think Buddhist experience also witnesses to this painful state. Instead of despair, the common Buddhist word is "suffering." The practices of Buddhism do not relieve us of the ordinary pains of our finitude, but of the "suffering" we add to finitude through our rejection of it. This sort of "suffering" can also be called "despair."

Batchelor's word "confusion" is meaningful, for the fallen state is a huge confusion. But "confusion" is too mild a word to fully describe this fallen state as perceived in the best of Christian tradition. "Despair" rather than "confusion" captures the mood of Christian heritage. Despair is a hopelessness so intense that the blazing fires of hell are a fitting metaphor for it. Also, "confusion" is a word that can point to quite normal and good aspects of our wholesome experience. Confusion is part of our good nature. We will always be confused about many things. Absolute knowledge is not granted to the human species.

Batchelor contrasts Mara's confusion with Buddha's awareness, and for both Christians and Buddhists awareness is a bright light that dissipates needless confusion. But in the Christian vocabulary, the opposite of despair is not awareness but trusting that whatever we become aware of as real is also good. Our real life is the good life, our best case scenario for living. Our illusory life is opposed by an invincible Reality that inevitably drives us into despair. Here is an elementary example. I love basketball. I managed to play regularly until a few years ago when I injured a shoulder. If I were to insist on continuing to be an old guy who can run with the 20-year-olds, reality would drive me to despair. My image of myself and the reality of my body would be in conflict. I face a choice between trusting Reality or despairing over a Reality that I cannot escape. It may seem extreme to call this a choice between Christ and Satan, but in our more major life issues the dynamics are the same: open to our real life or end up in despair over some aspect of reality that we cannot escape. Often our despair is hidden in that fog that our psyche manufactures to keep us from even experiencing our despair. The Christ route is to experience our despair, pass through despair into understanding the unrealities that are causing the despair, surrender those unrealities, and thereby let our despair be put to rest.

Let us examine a life situation that may further clarify these dynamics. Let us imagine a major downturn in our bodily health. It is natural for us to grieve the loss of our health. Grief is part of that real situation. This feeling of grief will tend to

grow in intensity and then gradually taper away unless the grief feelings are made to continue by a persistent story we allow our minds to repeat. Normally, grief comes and goes like all other feelings. While it lasts, grief is part of our real life. If we welcome the grief, rather than suppress it, we need not despair. Despair is the state that accompanies our resistance to the reality we cannot avoid – in this case our resistance to grieving over loss of health. Our temptation to resist the Real is the meaning of “Satan.” Trust, on the other hand, is an inward surrender to what is Real – in this case unhealth and the grief that accompanies it. This Trust is the Christ path.

It is important to notice that the path of Trust does not mean passivity, for each real situation includes possibilities and the ability to take initiatives about health or whatever. Also, we need not become stoically numb, feeling no grief. We can open to the full experience of whatever feelings of pain or hope are real for us. Furthermore, trust itself is our natural state. We do not achieve it. Trust is a surrender. Despair is our self-inflicted unnatural state.

In the story about Jesus being tempted by Satan during a 40-day fast, we see this concluding sentence: “Then the devil let him alone, and angels came to him and took care of him.” (Matthew 4:11) If angels are visitations of Awe, then we can name some of these angels: trust, freedom, openness, love, peace that persists beyond all understanding. Such states are our natural being. Our nature is not despair. Jesus was in prayer about his vocation. Satan’s suggestions to Jesus were three: (1) emphasize economic needs, (2) be a self-promoting spectacle, and (3) let power in this world be your aim. Then and now, all three of these directions lead to despair. Satan did not mention this. But Jesus noted it. Even though Jesus’ vocation entailed massive rejection and a horrific and early death, it did not lead to despair. It was to be a life filled with trust of Reality: (1) Jesus de-emphasized economic prosperity for himself or others, he called people to value authenticity over the lure of wealth. (2) Jesus did not yield to being a self-promoting spectacle; his marvelous deeds called people to trust Reality. And (3) he did not allow worldly power to be his aim; rather he opted for the riches of freedom, openness, love, peace, and all the other angels of our true nature.

So here we are in our ordinary, everyday life with its ups and downs, its blessings and challenges. How do we experience “Satan” in our life story? Satan is nothing more spooky than our own self-made image of who we are, of what we think we can do, of what we think we cannot do.

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Most of us have images of self depreciation, not seeing our own greatness and capacities. Some of us have images of arrogance that exaggerate what we can do. Many of us both depreciate and exaggerate ourselves. Satan is a name for the lies that we have built into our life habits. Our true nature is far more vast than our self image – so vast that our true self may seem like no self at all. Our Christ essence is a huge mystery, a spaciousness like the sky. Our mystery-experiencing self is no less mysterious than the overall Mystery. We are huge. Satan is what tempts us to close down that hugeness, instead of trusting it.

I know about the temptation to belittle myself. I remember a time when I was assigned to do a Spirit talk for a large program in Chicago. About nine of us were assigned these talks. They were talks on an outline designed by my mentor Joe Mathews, and they were talks with which we were not familiar. I became doubtful, terrified about getting this talk put together. I kept coming up with questions I did not think I could answer, so I went to Joe to ask him about them. About the third time I bothered him with one of my fear-based questions, he said to me, “Do you want me to give this talk to some else?” No, I didn’t, and I said so. I left Joe’s office with a fresh realization that I was underestimating myself. I didn’t need to go to Joe Mathews for help. I could go to myself for help. Who is Joe Mathews anyway? He is just one more Spirit being like myself. So, I searched my own life and my own experience for the answers to the questions my fear was cooking up. Yes, this was a battle with Satan, a real power that was coming to me in the form of my lifelong habit of fear and self-belittling. My reality is bigger than that, much bigger. I came up with a talk. It undoubtedly had weaknesses, but I was there before that group, weaknesses and all, with a talk about the Spirit deeps of being human. I don’t recall Joe Mathews telling me that I did all right, but he didn’t have to. I had found a taste of my bigness, and I didn’t need anyone else to tell me so.

Why does our own private Satan have such power to deceive us and lead us into despair? The Satan dynamic is rooted in that wondrous capacity for imagination that comes with being a human being. Our species has this grand gift for living, but our capacity for imagination is also our possibility to create a false world that we prefer rather than using this gift of imagination to probe into the true Reality of our lives. Each of us has developed very powerful habits over the course of a lifetime that we call our “personality.” This lively set of habits gives us a certain sense of

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security, false though it is. We are constantly tempted to go on with what we have been habituated to be, rather than notice the whole potential of who we are. As Batchelor indicates, we are “living with the devil.” This devil never goes away. It is our own personality, our own complexity of accumulated habits. It is also our own construction of a self image. All this falseness and incompleteness, all this substitution of a fabricated self for the real self is the devil with which we live. Because this false and incomplete self is a substitute for the real “me,” to go along with it puts me on a highway to despair. It may seem to be the easy road, but its destiny is grim. The narrow path is hard only because to follow this true path we must give up our devilish hope for some other life. In the final analysis, Jesus’ path, Buddha’s path, the true path, is an easy yoke. It is no more and no less than our surrender to Reality. The angels of Awesome Totality are waiting to flock in to take care of us.

We live our own lives, yet we have the support of all God’s angels and they are mighty, mightier than the strong devil we have bound and tied down with our rejected temptations. But we must stay alert, for the devil is tricky, finding new ways to tempt us to retreat from the Realism that supports us. We live with the devil, and we will continue to do so. Take notice.

Rescuing Humanity from Extinction

a reasoned rant
by Gene Marshal



This will be a short rant, but I want to underline once again that we live in a time of serious threat, a threat so serious that we don’t want to even notice it. And if we do notice it, we don’t want to believe that we can do something about it.

This threat is first of all an ecological threat. The unleashed and undisciplined impulse to grow industrial civilization ever upward and onward has reached the limit of this planet’s capacity to support it.

The first appropriate response to this threat is to shut down our fossil fuel use and move toward solar, wind, geothermal and other non-carbon dioxide producing fuels. This direction is strongly resisted by companies that profit from the current practices and by those who prefer the familiar to any thoroughgoing change. This resistance is insidious. Its promoters are willing to lie and

spend millions of dollars lying and buying media and politicians to lie for them. In such a confused social environment, the plain and simple truth becomes something controversial and spurned.

Secondly, we face in the U.S. and elsewhere a threat to our democratic roots. We are returning to a wealth oligarchy, a hidden dictatorship that masquerades as a viable option for dumbed down and duped voters. The entire U.S. Republican Party and a large segment of the Democratic Party are infected with this addiction to wealth power. This can only be cured by awake citizens who take their citizenship seriously. Electoral politics is part of that seriousness, but it is not all. To be serious about what we actually face, we awakening citizens will need to go to the streets, shut down companies and governments, tear up railroad tracks to coal-fired power plants, or whatever is required to present the powers that be with a deal they cannot refuse. We need to insist on having state and national governments that will restrain the greedy and lawless forces of our society and at least permit the changes we need. In the long haul, we need governments that appropriately use our tax dollars to promote needed changes rather than hinder them.

Thirdly, we awakening citizens will need to empower the local communities where we live against the centralizing power of corporate board rooms as well as state and national governmental bodies. We need to decentralize power to the citizens. Citizens live in local communities. If we do not have the power to determine what takes place where we live, we are powerless. We are slaves to the huge and thoughtless forces that are shaping every local community on the face of the Earth.

Fourthly, we need to drastically reform our international institutions. The World Trade Organization, The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other bodies are run by wealthy corporations and their bought political leaders. As we empower our local communities, reform our state and national governments, and alter our ecological habits, we also need to build a new set of international institutions that are responsive to the citizens of the world rather than to the corporation wealth pools and their bought governments.

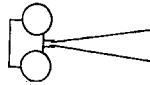
If this task sounds overwhelming, the actual details are so overwhelming that most of us don’t even want to know them.* The deep truth is that all of us long to find, as the old song says, “a sweet little nest somewhere in the West and let the rest of the world go by.” If we do not admit this longing,

we are not likely to resist it and do something meaningful with our one life.

Details of this summary are in an upcoming book by a task force of the Symposium on Christian Resurgence: **The Road from Empire to Eco-Democracy.*

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

reviews by Joyce Marshall



MOVIES

Cloud 9. It's unlikely that his 2009 German film about a 67-year-old woman in an extramarital sexual affair with a 76-year-old man will be everyone's cup of tea. But even if you are young (up to 55, say) and imagine that "elders" don't have sex, this simply told love story might open up hopes for your future. A 76-year-old myself, I found it wonderfully affirming.

The White Ribbon. Set in a German village prior to World War I, this film shows how a secretive, harshly punitive, and joyless society penetrates the daily life of families to create mean children who will grow up to embrace fascism. A classic film.

The Messenger is about two soldiers whose job is to inform families that their child or mate has been killed in combat. I recall that such news was delivered by telegram in 1953 when my parents learned that my brother was MIA (later presumed dead) after a bombing mission in North Korea. I like this film because it has lots of close-up intimate conversations between the two soldiers as they struggle with their job and their life issues, and because it is real.

The NBC program **Friday Night Lights** is entering its fifth and last season (on Direct TV) this fall. After watching the first seasons on Netflix, we have become committed fans. It is the best-shot, best-written, and best-acted series in the history of the medium. Well, I guess I haven't seen enough TV to compare it to the whole history, but others who have agree. It has the most honest moments of any drama around these days. It is based on a book, a true story about the 1950s Odessa, Texas high school football team, the Panthers. It was first made into a (bad) movie. The television series is set in 21st century mythic Dillon, Texas, and, though the town is obsessed with the football team, the series includes other aspects of Texas culture. Coach Taylor and his wife, the school counselor (and later principal), are a model couple. They don't hide their flaws or the problems they run into; they face them head-on, together. They are the stabilizing force that helps everyone get better. All the characters are likable, flawed, hopeful, real individuals. The episodes are sophisticated

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psychological and theological lessons in the guise of a gripping and entertaining drama. I warn you, if you start watching FNL, you will become hooked (even if you aren't from Texas), will eagerly see every episode, and (IMHO) will be the better for it.

The Maid. This Chilean film is really about several maids. Raquel is overworked and cranky, but when the upper-middle-class family she has served for 20 years hires extra help to assist her, she always manages to run them off. Only when Lucy arrives do we realize why Raquel is so surly. This is a fun film with a satisfying turnaround.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (Swedish with subtitles) is an uncommonly good thriller about Mikael, a journalist, and Lisbeth, a goth computer hacker (Sweden's best), who are trying to find a misogynist killer. Lisbeth is the girl with the dragon tattoo, a compelling heroine of unwavering intensity. A warning: scenes involving rape, bondage, and assault are stronger than most of what we see in the U.S. but are not exploitative. This is a sober, grown-up film.

Creation. This BBC production tells the story of Charles Darwin's struggle over publishing what he had discovered to be undeniable and doing so in the face of the common sense and faith of the time, including that of his wife. He preceded modern Biblical scholarship in taking away a literal belief in the Genesis story of creation. In the film, one of his friends says, "Congratulations, sir! You've killed God."

It strikes me as tragic that in Darwin's time (1800s), as well as today, many have assumed that you must choose between being religious, a person of faith, and being realistic, a scientist. Based on the belief that the only way to approach the Judeo-Christian religion is through a literal interpretation of the traditional writings, this is a tragic course that ignores our own experience of life.

So in the film we have Emma Darwin, Charles' wife, who is devout in her faith yet has to deny the truth of experience in order to sustain it; and then there is Charles, who because of his inability to deny the truth of his discoveries, feels he must deny any possibility of trust in the overwhelming Mysterious Reality of life. What a shame!

A Touch of Greatness is an hour-long biographical film about Albert Cullum, an elementary-school teacher whose inspired teaching methods in the 1950s and 60s were ahead of his time. Presupposing that children are smart and eager to learn if they're given "greatness" instead of mediocrity, he got classrooms of ordinary fifth and sixth grade students excited about learning

everything from geography to Shakespeare and instilled in them a lifelong appreciation of knowledge.

The film itself is somewhat primitive black and white footage of his innovative classroom work and the projects of his students, such as a literature festival and a performance of "Julius Caesar." We also hear (and see in color) his grown students tell about the profound effect he had on their lives; and we also see Cullum in action later as a teacher/educator, attempting to inspire the same passion in a new generation of classroom teachers.

Cullum engaged the whole bodies of his students rather than have them sit for hours. His students loved school. He created a community of learners rather than a competitive contest. The entire class learned together and truly no one was "left behind." The "thoroughbreds," in his terminology, "pulled the wagons." He put the class into teams for some projects, and they helped one another. Most impressive were students so young discussing their preferences for either Shaw, Sophocles, or Shakespeare and seeing their productions of plays by each of these authors.

Cullum was convinced that each child has his or her own "touch of greatness," and he proved it with his methods.

Here is a link to a 6 minute version of this film:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LObBpBYANFo&feature=related>

The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers. If you are young enough that you don't know who Daniel Ellsberg is, you definitely need to see this documentary. Even if you are familiar with this bit of history, you likely don't know the full story told in this riveting film of Ellsberg's transformation from Viet Nam War analyst and planner (in the Pentagon and at the Rand Corporation) to antiwar activist. An ex-Marine, Ellsberg was a dutiful hawk until he worked on a study of the Viet Nam War for Robert McNamara (Secretary of Defense), saw the reality of the situation, and observed that (by their own admission) the U.S. leaders were continuing what was clearly an unwinnable war only to save face.

As he saw his bosses lying to the public and saw the death and destruction in Viet Nam (where he was assigned for the study), he could no longer justify his suppression of information that made him complicit in the lies. He decided to ignore the Espionage Act and made copies of McNamara's 7,000-page study. He gave copies to antiwar senators, but they were unwilling to risk revealing it. He gave copies to the New York Times.

President Nixon got an injunction on the newspaper. (The title of this film came from Nixon's Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who at this juncture called Ellsberg the most dangerous man in America.) Ellsberg then got the papers to the Washington Post. As soon as one newspaper was enjoined, another would start publishing until 17 newspapers got into the action. Most decisively he smuggled a copy to the young (at the time) Senator Mike Gravel from Alaska, who read it into the Congressional Record, making it forever an open public document.

Having accomplished this, Ellsberg turned himself in to face criminal charges. By the time he went to court in January, 1973, the war was officially ending and Nixon's henchmen had burglarized the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist (to try to discredit him) as well as the office of the Democratic National Party in the Watergate Hotel. These facts were brought into Ellsberg's trial, which was taking place during the Watergate hearings. When evidence of White House wiretaps of Ellsberg was introduced, the judge was forced to dismiss all charges. Ellsberg had expected to spend the rest of his life in prison and very well might have, had things worked out differently. As it was, he was attacked, despised, and disowned by many, including many of his closest associates at Rand and in the government. Ellsberg said recently that human beings are herd animals and will go along with most anything to remain a part of the group. And a big part of going along is often saying nothing about what you see, even if you are clear that it is not right.

So you might say that Daniel Ellsberg indirectly managed to stop the Viet Nam War and remove Richard Nixon from office, although it was Nixon's attempts to destroy Ellsberg that led to his own destruction.

Narrated by Ellsberg, this film reveals who inspired his action. One inspiration was Thoreau, who wrote in his essay on civil disobedience, "Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence." He describes his powerful emotional response to a war activist, who went to prison for his protest, as a turning point. He reveals who assisted him: his antiwar activist wife; his Rand associate Anthony Russo (who suggested and assisted him in copying the papers and was charged in court along with him); and his young children (who helped him make copies).

It is discouraging how lukewarm the public was toward the release of the Pentagon papers. Perhaps we have long accepted it as normal and all right for public officials to lie. Also discouraging is how the same patterns are repeated. Ellsberg, still

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an activist for peace and for transparency of government (for which he has been arrested fairly regularly), notes in recent interviews that the Pentagon papers were a wakeup call in the 70s but the 9/11 events have wiped that out. He sees worrying parallels to the Viet Nam War in our relationship to Afghanistan today.

I didn't expect to write such a long review when I began this. The film provokes much thought about vocation, about standing for what is right, and standing alone when you have only your conscience to guide you. These subjects need to be high on the list of "those who have ears to hear."

NOVEL

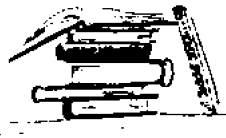
*The Marrowbone
Marble Company*
by Glenn Taylor



This story follows Loyal Ledford, who joins the marines in 1942 and becomes a man serving in the Pacific during World War II. He marries and fathers children. In the 1960s, his family joins with others to found a Utopian community in the hills of West Virginia. It is built around the business of a marble factory, with black and white people living side by side in mutual respect. It is not surprising that these arrangements incur wrath and violence from neighbors.

RECOMMENDED READING

reviews by Joyce Marshall



CORE SOCIAL THOUGHT

Eaarth
Making a Life on a Tough New Planet
by Bill McKibben
Times Books, 2010

Here is a readable, realistic state-of-the-Earth message with details about the moving parts and interacting systems that show where we are and what brought us here. McKibben calls the book *Eaarth* because we will never again live on Earth as we know it. It is no longer a matter of having to hurry and make changes before it is too late. That time has passed. We must realize that our daily lives in the way we've known them are gone. We will be forced to change to live in difficult conditions. What sealed the deal was that the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere passed 350 parts per million. The best science now shows that 275 parts per million carbon dioxide gave us ten thousand years of stability and that more than 350 is unsafe. We are already at 390. We can return to 350 if we work really hard; but many life-support systems are already too compromised to recover.

As McKibben says, we are "like the guy who smoked for forty years and then he had a stroke. He doesn't smoke anymore, but the left side of his body doesn't work either."

So the first half of the book is a melancholy litany of damage done by a carbon-fueled world economy that is leaving areas facing permanent drought, melting glaciers, fiercer typhoons and hurricanes, acidic oceans, dropping food yields, rising temperatures, and many disease-spreading insects. I like McKibben's approach: first we need to see our situation clearly; then we can decide how to respond. One thing we need to be clear about: it is not going to be more and more and better and better. The upcoming times are going to be challenging.

The second half of the book is his prescription for coping on this new Eaarth. Since a major cause of our situation is our attachment to growth, McKibben suggests that our first step is to mature: quit being "progress junkies" hooked on consumerism. Maturity, says McKibben, makes hope possible. Think workhorse instead of racehorse. Steadiness, not flash. His mantra is "close to home." Small and dispersed. He applies this mantra to food, telling how local people are discovering creative ways to compost all sorts of things and grow healthy food year-round almost everywhere. He applies the same mantra to energy needs – local is better than centralized. He suggests that we: 1) cut our fossil fuel use by a factor of twenty over the next few decades, 2) replace some of that fossil fuel with something else, and 3) practice conservation. Each community will have to use what is appropriate to its place. By way of example, McKibben describes a college in heavily forested Vermont that uses a wood-fired boiler and is growing fast-growing willows to continue its supply of fuel.

The internet is McKibben's answer to concerns about boredom or parochialism resulting from living a slower, simpler lifestyle closer to home. The Internet can enable virtual travel throughout the world, can assist us in learning needed skills, and even connect us with our nearby neighbors.

Read this book. It starts us in the right direction.

The Technological Society
by Jacques Ellul
Vintage Books, 1964

French philosopher Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) was also a Christian lay theologian and a leader in the French Resistance during the second World War. This book sets forth the pernicious effect of technique (and its offspring, technology) on

RECOMMENDED READING

humanity. Considered by many to be Ellul's most important work, the book sets forth seven characteristics of modern technology, each of which serves to make efficiency a necessity. The seven are rationality, artificiality, automatism of technical choice, self-augmentation, monism, universalism, and autonomy. These characteristics create a system that "eliminates or subordinates the natural world." Instead of technology serving humanity, Ellul notes that human beings have to adapt to technology. The present focus in schools prepares young people to handle computers and information, but does not "develop in a balanced way all the faculties – physical, manual, psychic, and intellectual." Our present system emphasizes "rote learning instead of personal observation and reasoning." In addition, what is needed is that "the child develop a social conscience, understand that the meaning of life is the good of humanity."

Ellul goes through one human activity after another and shows how it has been technicized – rendered efficient – and diminished in the process. He shows that technique possesses an impetus all its own, tending to slowly drown out human concerns and infiltrating every aspect of human existence. A society of dumbed-down consumers is absolutely essential to the technological society because the only thing that matters technically is yield, production.

This is not an optimistic book, given that our lives are suffused with technology. Whether you agree or disagree with Ellul, he will cause you to question the influence of technology on your life. Without doubt the drive for efficiency (the ultimate law of technology) impacts all our relationships – with our families, our neighbors, our communities, our friends, and our government.

This is a long, challenging book. If you are interested in Ellul and don't want to slug through the book, he is on some well-produced youtube:

The Betrayal of Technology: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdogID589Mk>

The Ascent of Humanity
by Charles Eisenstein
Panentheia, 2007

This is another long critique of civilization which sees humanity at the end of the defining myth of our age: "The Technological and Scientific Programs." Eisenstein, a brilliant and passionate young man, traces the journey of the human race from its beginnings to the present day in his quest

to explain why and how we humans have come to our current juncture of total crisis.

Whereas Ellul saw the essence of technology as the drive for efficiency, Eisenstein sees The Technological Program as seeking complete control of nature, which results in disrupting it through unintended consequences. The usual response to these blunders is more technology. Its partner, the Scientific Program, attempts to understand every phenomenon through the application of the Scientific Method – extending reductionism, measurement, classification, and enumeration to aspects of existence or relationships to which they do not apply. Eisenstein traces all of the converging crises of our age to a common source, "Separation:" the ideology of the discrete and separate self. Since this self-concept, to Eisenstein, is an illusion, he is more hopeful than Ellul. For him hitting bottom with our current programs is an opportunity to choose a more realistic path. He sees the Age of Reunion already emerging out of the birth-pangs of a planet in crisis. It is not simply a matter of changing course, however. In his most insightful section, *Eulogy and Redemption*, Eisenstein explains that our healing comes only through remorse over what we have done -- to ourselves, to one another, to Earth. "Nations and cultures, not just individuals, bear the self-inflicted wounds of their collective crimes. . . . One way or another, we must weep for all of this. . . . We are all among the victims and perpetrators both."

This is a well-reasoned, well-researched discourse that encompasses science, religion, spirituality, technology, economics, medicine, education, and more, all of which Eisenstein weaves together around his unified idea. The entire book is available on the internet, and the author is adding to his online videos a collection of his discussions of each section of the book.

MORE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

The Bridge
The Life and Rise of Barack Obama
by David Remnick
Knopf, 2010

This book tells the story of how Barack Obama came to be president, beginning with the March 7, 1965 Civil Rights "Bloody Sunday" March. The march was led by John Lewis, who received the first blows from the Alabama troopers' nightsticks at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. The book ends with the inauguration of President Obama. John Lewis, the only speaker from the 1963 March on Washington who is still living, is the first person Obama greets as he enters the inauguration



RECOMMENDED READING

ceremony. Many aspects of this story are familiar. Drawing on hundreds of interviews, Remnick enriches our understanding with backstories of those involved. With masterful artistry he reveals the historic significance of this happening. I couldn't put it down.

The Answer to How is Yes

by Peter Block

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002

In this book, management consultant Block addresses his concern that we often ask how to **do** something too soon and thereby trade our values for that which is practical and immediately useful. Instead of asking how, we need to consider what is worth doing. Asking "How?" emphasizes control of people, time, and cost. We need to be asking "Why?" which puts attention on what really matters to us personally, from commitments in our private lives to projects in the workplace. He points out that asking questions about "how," is often a way to avoid the deeper question of "why" and is a subtle way to avoid commitment and action.

Block challenges the basic assumptions of our culture. He sees as pervasive the two archetypes of engineer and economist--those of cause-and-effect and predictability. He would have us balance these with the creativity, imagination, mystery, and heart of two other archetypes: artist and architect. He holds up one of my favorite human beings, Christopher Alexander, as someone who embodies the integration of all four archetypes.

This book is full of wisdom. Here is one of the sentences I marked: "What will matter most to us, upon deeper reflection, is the quality of experience we create in the world, not the quantity of results."

The Deep Democracy of Open Forums:

Practical Steps to Conflict Prevention and

Resolution for the Family, Workplace, and World

by Arnold Mindell, Ph.D.

Hampton Roads Publishing, 2002

Author and facilitator of workshops and conferences worldwide, Mindell and his wife Amy are particularly skilled in dealing with conflicts that block community. Mindell notes that most of us are terrified of conflict, but we needn't be. He imagines a world where everyone looks forward to group processes dealing with conflict. By "deep democracy" he means that all voices, thoughts, and feelings are aired freely, especially the ones nobody wants to hear. His stories from meetings in global hot spots (such as in Dublin with representatives from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) are intense. The facilitator must be aware of and be

willing to acknowledge his/her own feelings, must pay attention to subtle signals in people's bodies and words, and must trust that the process will allow the anger to surface. The anger is usually followed by grief and often by reconciliation.

The book includes keys to breaking through impasse in any situation as well as instructive and inspiring stories of conflict resolution.

Killers of the Dream

by Lillian Smith

W.W. Norton, 1949, reissued 1994

One of the first prominent Southern whites to write about and speak openly against racism and segregation, Lillian Smith (1897–1966) spoke out all her life against injustice. *Killers of the Dream*, published in 1949 to wide controversy, became the source of much of our thinking about race relations and a catalyst for the civil rights movement. A closeted Lesbian, Smith had a lifelong relationship with Paula Snelling. The two published a literary magazine that critiqued the pre-60s South and gave voice to writers of any color.

This book is an analysis of the dynamics of racism that still rings true. Given the evidence that racism is rising again, it is appropriate to read or reread it. Smith also saw the connections between racial and sexual oppression. Her essay on women, black and white, in the South is deeply insightful. Her essay on the bargain between Mr. Poor White and Mr. Rich White clarifies what we see played out yet today. Her story of the New Deal is amazing. What some people felt then is echoed by Tea Partiers today. "We'll do these things that will profit us financially and morally but we'll never admit Federal aid has helped us, we'll always call it 'interference'."

Literate, poetic and unflinching, this depth study of the history of the South will widen your understanding and fill in the gaps for you.

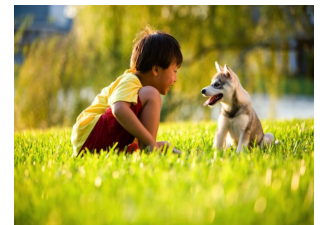
OUR ANIMAL COMPANIONS

The Tellington Touch

by Linda Tellington-Jones

with Sybil Taylor

Penguin Books, 1993



Tellington-Jones, now in her 70s, has been connecting to animals all her life. Born Linda Ann Hood, she rode horseback to school in rural Alberta, Canada for the first six years and taught riding at age 13. She and her six siblings were famous at horse shows where they became known as the "Riding Hoods." Her grandfather, whose credentials included training racehorses for Czar Nicholas II in Russia, taught her a system of equine

massage he had learned from Russian Gypsies. His influence and training plus her natural brilliance and experience with horses gave Linda an amazing ability to communicate with all animals. She married Wentworth Tellington and later Birchell Jones, both of whom were skilled horsemen. Both marriages were partnerships in riding, teaching, and equine research and publication. The couples won many awards and became well-respected experts.

In 1975, Tellington-Jones began training with Moshe Feldenkrais and combined his human bodywork method with Russian horse massage to form the now famous Tellington Touch Method. This book is about using that method with any animal. Moreover, it is a beautifully written, fascinating, and wondrous story of her experiences with all kinds of animals -- farm animals, wild animals, animals in zoos, and with fish, birds, and even reptiles -- as professional consultant and in her personal life.

Author Barry Lopez says: "What we do to animals troubles us . . . and our loss of contact with them leaves us mysteriously bereaved." Tellington-Jones has made that contact and masterfully demonstrates how we might as well. She approaches animals as complex emotional beings with whom we can live in mutual trust. In response, the animals are healed of physical pains and problem behaviors. Tellington-Jones also experiences intuitive communication with every kind of animal.

I thoroughly enjoyed this inspiring book.

Kinship With All Life
by J. Allen Boone
HarperCollins, 1954

This book is of similar stripe as that of Tellington-Jones. When Boone's filmmaker friends needed a sitter for a special dog who was the star of several films, they called on him. Strongheart, the dog (pre-Lassie and Rin Tin Tin), had not only been trained; he had been educated by Larry Trimble, who had the same attitude as Tellington-Jones. Boone was not experienced with animals, but he had the willingness to respect Strongheart and the openness to learn from him how aware animals are. He learned to communicate with Strongheart and carried this skill over into his experiences with other animals, even skunks, ants, and a fly.

These books awaken us to the possibility of deeper connection to the other animals with whom we share this planet. Our openness to learn from them will not only benefit them, but us.

BUDDHIST JEWELS

Unlearning Meditation
What To Do When the Instructions Get In The Way
by Jason Siff
Shambhala, 2010

Siff relates his own evolution from Tibetan and especially Vipassana training into a more fluid, open-ended direction which he calls Recollective Awareness Training. Probably this book will be more useful to you if have already practiced meditation, have tried different techniques, and thus have a sense of what is being "unlearned." Siff doesn't do away with sitting meditation. He begins with awareness of the body sitting still with attention on the touch of your hands in your lap. Instead of trying to hold your attention there, he suggests allowing your thoughts and feelings to come up. The only requirement is to sit still.

The usual approach to meditation is to follow instructions from a teacher of a certain tradition with a focus on making effort to concentrate, to remain mindful of the moment. Siff's instructions are basically to let your mind do what it does and then reflect on it. He suggests journaling after each sitting. One gift of Siff's approach is to free meditators from their own expectations and any guilt about not following the rules or not doing it the "right way." Meditation changes from an attempt to force oneself to fit a rigid model and becomes more like an exciting and challenging journey. Siff has found that if we let the mind follow its own drift and flow and give it attention, it will find its own way to the areas of consciousness that need healing and to its deeper wisdom.

Rather than promoting himself as a role model or his suggestions as the "only way," Siff manages to condense decades of thousands of his own "sittings" into advice that convinces you of your own authenticity. He assists you in developing greater trust in the meditative process itself, which is trust in the path of inner awakening.

Together Under One Roof:
Making a Home of the Buddha's Household
by Lin Jensen
Wisdom, 2008

Every time Lin Jensen releases a new book, I get a copy because of his down-to-earth wisdom and his commitment to take public stands (I should say "sits") for peace and for the earth. Here he tells the inspiring story of a group of middle and high school students in Los Angeles who acted for the earth by monitoring the dying L.A. River. He says, "Surely these enlightened youngsters descending into the scummy muck of what was once the Los

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Angeles River . . . are the bodhisattvas of our times. Their innocent delight in discovering there the least thing that still survives and grows is a measure of the heart's own native wisdom. Their seemingly hopeless undertaking to save the river measures the courage of the bodhisattva's vow to save all beings."

I appreciate his rehearsal of Zen wisdom about how to begin. "To enter Zen is to enter your own life, which can only be done from exactly where you are. If you feel lost or confused or worried, enter from there. If you are happy or sad or angry or frightened or elated, enter from there." Then he points out that though obviously there is no other place to start than where we are, we often are not in touch with ourselves enough to know just where that is. So first we must ask ourselves, "Where am I?" and be willing to look honestly at what we discover. Jensen encourages us not only to see where we are but to let ourselves experience it. He suggested to a student who wanted to control her anger that she go along with it instead of resisting it. "I don't mean necessarily indulging the feeling by acting on it or weaving a self-justifying story regarding its nature. But it helps to bed down with whatever feeling or mood I'm resisting and acquaint myself with the nature of its appeal for me."

I also appreciate Jensen's underlining this: though we desire to be compassionate, it may not ever be "possible to actually lift the weight of another's suffering from his shoulders, but it is sometimes possible to keep him company until he feels better." Sometimes "suffering with" is the only option, and may often be the best one.

This Is Getting Old
Zen Thoughts on Aging with Humor and Dignity
 by Susan Moon
 Shambhala, 2010

The title is not an expression of exasperation. It is a statement of "This is how it is," and the subtitle is asking, "How can I work with it?". Moon says the Japanese call impermanence and imperfection "Wabi-Sabi," where things are worn and frayed and chipped through use. She says, "I'm turning wabi-sabi. I study the back of my hand with interest: the blossoming brown spots...I'm my own research project." Her research includes diminishing capacities, health issues, and loneliness. She also contemplates "lasts." One chapter is *Will I Never Have Sex Again?* She also describes having to give up hiking, a long-time beloved activity.

One of her themes relates to her mother's hospitalization and death. Over several weeks the family had to make the painful and ambiguous

choice about how much intervention to apply and to deal with doctors and nurses who kept hoping one more procedure would turn things around. Moon's objective description of the details of her mother's death reveal the beauty, mystery, and utter sorrow of the experience.

Moon's Zen approach of staring life and its suffering in the face, seeing what it is really like without glossing over it with platitudes, is a gift to our culture, which focuses on youth and denies that impermanence is everyone's experience and can be faced with dignity.

Healing Lazarus
 by Lewis Richmond
 Pocket Books, 2002

"Suffering is not a cruel trick of fate; it is simply an unavoidable fact of human life." Richmond relearned this Buddhist teaching through a lengthy bout with near-fatal viral encephalitis. Like Moon, he is a Buddhist who describes life's difficult experiences with open, painful honesty and gripping detail. A cancer survivor, he found this attack on his brain a totally different challenge. He had fought the cancer and won. But lying flat on his back, unable to move or speak, forced him to draw on his experience with meditation and to allow others to help him. This was not easy for an overachieving corporate executive, Buddhist teacher, musician, and author. But he had great help – from a devoted wife with tremendous endurance, a fantastic medical team of doctors, nurses, physical and mental therapists, and many friends, including fellow Buddhist teachers.

In describing his long, arduous recovery, Richmond uses the symbol of the Biblical Lazarus, who died and was brought back to life. His encounter with this rare disease began with a 10-day coma no one thought he would survive. His recovery was extremely slow and spotty. His doctors experimented with drugs that in one case almost killed him. His biggest challenge was mental -- falling into despair and dealing with old, unhealed emotional patterns. He had lost his mother when he was four. His helplessness with this illness brought up those early feelings. His therapist told him at one point, "You have to decide now whether to stay that lost little boy or to be an adult again." He chose to grow and offers his story for others who struggle with major illness and who suffer mental and physical pain. Since these conditions likely include all of us at some point, I suggest you accept his gift and read the book.

INSPIRING CHRISTIANS

The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals
by Thomas Merton
HarperOne, 2001

I have not read this collection but I did read the seven journals from which it excerpts passages. Most people probably will not read all seven volumes; so I list this as an option. As a long-time writer of a personal journal, I found reading Merton's daily reflections nurturing and encouraging – partly because it soon becomes clear that this "saint" has struggles like anyone else. He writes honestly about his most intimate foibles, doubts, and challenges as a reclusive Trappist monk who also happened to be a world-renowned writer. The journals begin in 1939, just before Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky as a young monk. They end just prior to his death in 1968, the same year the world also lost Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. In the midst of a long-anticipated trip to the East, Merton, 53, was accidentally electrocuted while attending a meeting of religious superiors in Bangkok. He had just had three audiences in India with the Dalai Lama, with whom he had great resonance. He met Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche by chance, and they also felt mutuality. Sadly, Merton did not get to complete this trip of exploration of Asian religions. At an interfaith meeting in Calcutta he had said: "I think we have now reached a state (long overdue) of religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist discipline and experience. I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life and even to help in the task of monastic renewal which has been undertaken within the Western Church."

I enjoyed reading about Merton's responses to political happenings during those decades, his love of monastic life, his struggles with Catholic hierarchy, his reflections on his reading (he was a voracious reader and I have gotten lots of book suggestions from him), his passion for silence and solitude (and his difficulty finding it even in a monastery), and his surprising experience of falling in love with a young nurse while he was hospitalized in 1966.

He notes that "The faults of Gethsemani are American – puerility, rationalization, idiot belief in gadgets, fetish-worship of machines and efficiency, love of a big showy facade (and nothing behind it) – phony optimism, sentimentality, etc." Also, "The sentimental, out of date moralism and shallow self-righteousness of most American thought is too self-

evident for comment. It is a tragedy of great dimensions."

On living in the hermitage that was finally built for him: "I can imagine no other joy on earth than to have such a place and to be at peace in, to live in silence, to think and write, to listen to the wind and to all the voices of the wood, to live in the shadow of the big cedar cross, to prepare for my death . . . to pray . . . to love . . . It is 'my place' in the scheme of things."

On his love affair: "I have no intention of keeping the M. business entirely out of sight. I have always wanted to be completely open, both about my mistakes and about my effort to make sense out of my life. The affair with M. is an important part of it – and shows my limitations as well as a side of me that is – well, it needs to be known too, for it is part of me. My need for love, my loneliness, my inner division, the struggle in which solitude is at once a problem and a 'solution.' And perhaps not a perfect solution either."

In drawing up provisions for the Merton Legacy Trust the year before his death, Merton made it clear that his journals could be published in whole or in part as the trustees desired but not until 25 years after his death. Fortunately for us they chose to make all of them available with minimal editing. All seven (hand-written) journals were published from 1996 to 1998, an amazing achievement. One of the editors of this project said: "What sets him apart is the expansiveness of his spirit and his candor. Perhaps by telling his story, he invites us to reflect on our own stories." I personally found him an excellent companion to hang out with.

Prison Writings
by Alfred Delp, SJ
Orbis Books, 1962
(first English edition)



This is one of the books I learned about through Thomas Merton, who wrote the introduction to the English version. Delp is a kind of Catholic Dietrich Bonhoeffer: imprisoned in his late thirties and hanged by the Nazis in 1945 for anti-Hitler activities. Delp's experience included nine weeks of interrogation as well as beatings and psychological pressure to abandon the Jesuits for the Nazis, followed by four months of solitary confinement. Like Bonhoeffer, Delp wrote some fine meditations during his imprisonment which were smuggled out in his laundry.

I particularly appreciated Delp's explications of each line of two prayers: the Lord's Prayer and Come Holy Ghost. He was imprisoned during

Advent, 1944, and wrote a series of Christmas meditations -- on each Sunday of Advent, on the people at the crib and those not at the crib and what they each represent. He wrote his vision of a future society and the tasks toward a healthy humanity. One of his tenets was: "It is undeniable that every human being is entitled to living space, daily bread, and the protection of the law as a common birthright; these are fundamentals and should not be handed out as an act of charity." He also had opportunity between his "trial" and his execution to describe in detail the events of that trial and his interior response as he awaited death as well as to write goodbyes to his parents, the people of his church, his friends, and his fellow Jesuits. Delp was an intense, impulsive man who could seem to be a know-it-all. That, along with his heavy cigar smoking and loud laughter, made him a difficult character among Jesuits. His sense of humor is clear in one of his final letters, which concludes with, "Don't let my mother tell 'pious legends' about me; I was a brat." He also had a reputation as a gripping, dynamic preacher. During his final six months in shackles he did not succumb to despair but was a bearer of radiant light.

a review by Alan Richard

Strange Wonder

The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe

by Mary-Jane Rubenstein

Columbia University Press, 2010

In this her first book, Mary-Jane Rubenstein brings the rarest of voices to the theological wilderness once inhabited by the likes of Soren Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. At once accessible and nuanced, respectful and questioning, scholarly and down-to-earth, *Strange Wonder* examines the experience of wonder, which Rubenstein defines as "shock" (the shattering of what appeared to be most certain) and "awe" (amazement at what is). Using Plato's Theatetus and the Biblical Exodus as her guides, Rubenstein argues that wonder underlies and motivates both Greek philosophical and Hebrew biblical thought. According to Rubenstein, the experience of wonder can either be "inquisitively endured or covered over with unquestionable premises and conclusions that obstruct further inquiry." Although the latter path is a futile one, she argues, it is also tempting because "the discomfort of the inessential and the shock of the everyday" can prove too much for even the most resolute among us. She shows how the history of Western metaphysics is littered with the remains of brilliant attempts to do justice to the experience of wonder that swerve into brilliant defenses against it.

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And that's just the introduction. The body of the book goes on to stage an extended argument against Hannah Arendt's view that the best of philosophers, including Socrates, suffered from "too much wonder" to make engaged worldly decisions. Against Arendt's contention that wonder transports the wonderer out of the everyday and into "the clouds" where ordinary cares and social relationships are ignored, belittled, or confused, Rubenstein argues that genuine wonder *returns* the wondering self to its finite, everyday life with its cares and its inevitable interdependence with all other beings. Through close readings of Heidegger and post-Heideggerian thinkers Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Derrida, Rubenstein shows how responsible decision is not the act of an enclosed self possessing the right answers but a radically interdependent being pressured to "the height of undecidability." Rubenstein concludes with an extended meditation on the image of air passing into and out of our mucous membranes. We are beings suffused with what we are not and projecting into what we are not, and this openness is our "dwelling in wonder." Such dwelling, Rubenstein reminds us, may be "merely a matter of learning to breathe."

Breathing is an apt metaphor for reading this book, which was an act of unutterable joy for me. I eagerly inhaled every page, frequently exhaling little prayers of gratitude for the gift of a new, promising theological voice like this and for a book that assumes the astounding legacy left us by Christian existentialism without slavishly repeating it or turning it into some kind of moribund doctrine. Having found myself caught up in Rubenstein's profound dialogue with some of my favorite philosophers on the experience of awe, I found myself wanting to hear more from Rubenstein about how awe and wonder interact with Christian theology and symbols. In this book, she offers only a few tantalizing clues about the direction such an exploration might take. But given her interests ("the intersections of continental philosophy and Christian theology"), her youth, and her obvious gifts, I have every reason to hope that she will be bringing us fine, clear, and thoughtful theological reflections for years to come. I do not exaggerate when I say that Mary-Jane Rubenstein is an answer to my prayers. Please join me in celebrating this remarkable work.

You can find links to some articles by Dr. Rubenstein available for free on the web on her home page at:

<http://mrubenstein.faculty.wesleyan.edu/home/>

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Realistic Living
3578 N. State Highway 78
Bonham, TX 75418

November 2010

Issue No. 54

Printed on
Recycled Paper



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