

REALISTIC LIVING

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RESOURCES FOR REALISTIC LIVING

economic and political power is typically obsolete. Today our deeply-needed changes are so vast that electoral politics is more disappointing than usual. The US majority and its elected officials cannot be expected to be fully progressive.

Therefore, if we favor a fully progressive perspective, we find ourselves suffering an uncomfortable paradox: (1) we need a progressive political establishment to complete our vision and (2) we have a political establishment that is constrained to be less than fully progressive. So, we must renounce any desire we have for perfection and go to work for the best political establishment we can get.

Fortunately, electoral politics is not our whole social calling. There is much to do that is not electoral politics: citizen education, movement organization, nonviolent noncooperation actions that force awakening and change, supportive identification with the tyrannized 99%, local empowerment, and nongovernmental approaches to planetary issues. Yet we cannot ignore electoral politics, because a reactionary political establishment will undo the good work we have already done and frustrate what we hope to do.

Furthermore, there is no blessing to be found in the pipe-dream of having no political establishment. Almost every political establishment is a blessing compared to no political establishment. Though our political establishment is deeply flawed, we would not want to exchange it for the conditions of Somalia where an almost nonexistent government is powerless to prevent criminal anarchy. Let us recommend to all our "we-want-no-government" acquaintances that they move to Somalia and live there long enough to learn what no government feels like.

A deeply flawed but still semi-democratic political establishment is far better than no social order at all. Only if we are dealing with a vicious dictatorship that is willing to violently crush all dissent is it appropriate to promote actions that risk total social breakdown. Let Syria be our example. Syria is not our condition.

Neither Syria nor Somalia is our condition in the United States. We have Obama to work with as well as many thoughtful Democrats, Independents, and maybe one or two Republicans. We need to push these leaders into more forward-leaning

Sanity for This Election Year

a rant by
Gene Marshall



Many progressives are so disappointed with Barack Obama that they are not going to vote for him. I understand this feeling, yet not voting implies a misunderstanding of what it means to live in a two-party dominated democracy. Not voting is a surrender to the enemies of democracy. In our US quasi-democracy our choice is always between the least bad of two options.

Clearly, voting for Obama is not enough to serve the progressive cause. Progressives need to insist on changes that the Obama administration is not going to support. Nevertheless, it is imperative that progressive-minded citizens of the US vote for Barack Obama even though they may not agree with much that he has done or has failed to do. Even though it is typical to depend too much on electoral politics, we can also depend too little.

In this year when the vast majority of Republicans have shifted to positions of reactionary hatred toward all the progress made for women, minorities, workers, and the environment, Obama is clearly the least bad. And the least bad also means the most good.

If we could vote for a candidate that is fully good from a progressive perspective, there would be no need for us to be the sort of progressives we are called to be. Electoral politics, as it typically functions in the US, and elsewhere, is a decade or more behind the fully creative edge. This has always been so, and always will be so. Established

actions, and we have the opportunity to do so. So let's elect them and push them. If we have to hold our nose to vote for some of them, let's get out our clothespins, apply them to our noses, and go to the polls joyously. We can do this happily if we simply aim to reward any fragment of sanity and sideline the typical Republican insanity, as we have already done with the Ku Klux Klan. Some have chastened me for comparing the Republican Party with the KKK, but that Party has moved so far to the right that there is only a thin line between their policies and a wealth-driven oligarchy that rivals the evil of any dictatorship we have seen in centuries.

No More Capitalism or Socialism

identifying with the 99%
requires new thinking

a clarification by
Gene Marshall



If we are to honor the 99% and join in the conflict with the 1%, we need to understand a number of basic ideas differently than they are currently understood in the common discourse. For example, the word "capitalism" has come to mean "very good" or "very bad" or nothing at all. In the real world of social systems, capitalism does not exist. It has not existed in a pure form for many decades, and it has no hope whatsoever of a long-term future. What we now have and will continue to have in the real world are mixed economies, economies that are both socialist and free-market.

For example, in the United States we have many "socialized" institutions: the US postal service, public schools, public libraries, US parks, police departments, military services, Social Security, Medicare, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and many other examples. The inclination to privatize such services is unrealistic in the extreme. It is simply not true that private institutions can do a better job of these functions. Those who are passionate about privatizing such functions are in deep illusion. This wrong-headedness is being blurred with justifying terms like "freedom," "market-based," and, yes, "capitalism." This same delusory mindset has demonized the word "socialism" and then applied this demonized word to a number of appropriate roles of governmental service that are taking place or need to take place.

We need the public sector (that is, an array of democratic governmental bodies, unhampered by the control of corporation wealth) to manage more, not fewer, functions in our society. Government is not the problem except in so far as government

colludes with the huge corporations that are the real source of our most serious problems. For example, good government needs to regulate our rogue banking corporations. Good government needs to manage our healthcare insurance provision. As many nations have already discovered, basic health needs can be affordably provided to everyone by a well-managed governmental form of healthcare insurance (Medicare for all). This need not include the actual provision of health care itself, but it could mean the prevention of gouging costs by pharmaceutical companies, hospital chains, and clans of medical specialists. An ungoverned healthcare system bankrupts small businesses and denies adequate healthcare to many. The vigorous opposition in the U.S. to a government solution to the healthcare crisis is being driven by the confused, by healthcare profiteers, and by the ideological backing of the wealth-addicted 1% and their bought lackeys in media and political positions.

Energy provision is another instance where government management has become essential. The energy currencies of electricity and hydrogen could be affordably provided by government to all citizens and institutions. Democratic governments could own and manage the infrastructures for the delivery of these energy currencies and buy the basic energy from a free market of energy producers. Soon, governments will be forced to begin a step-by-step take over of oil companies, coal companies, and natural gas companies, and manage the phasing out of these fuels. Only government has the capability of leaving fossil fuels in the ground. Private owners will inevitably fully exploit the profitability of these deadly poisoners of our climate and environments. They will rip up our irreplaceable environments, fracture our water tables, plus drill and pollute the deepest seas in search of that last drop of moneymaking goo. Our health and our survival depends on phasing out these fuels and replacing them with solar, wind, geothermal, and other Earth honoring, air honoring, water honoring, plant honoring, animal honoring, people honoring energy sources. Those who say this is not possible are lacking in imagination, dumbed down by the capitalist foolishness that still haunts so many confused minds.

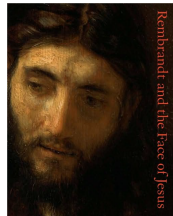
Such statements do not make me a socialist. They simply make me a proponent of a mixed economy, a better mix of the public and private management of our essential functions. Any function that is essential for everyone is a function that the public sector needs to manage totally or to some degree. Water, air, soil, food safety, the

electromagnetic bands, and other such things are communal essentials, not giveaways to private profit-making corporations whose leadership has managed to hoodwink the public out of its birthrights. Other things are best managed by the private sector. The manufacture and distribution of computers, vehicles, dishes, appliances, vegetables, meat, canned goods, and so on are best provided by a well organized and fairly governed market system in which the decision making is decentralized all the way down to the individual craftspersons, inventors, growers, artists, organizers, and purchasers. Entrepreneurial heroes are still a gift to the mixed economies of the future. We don't have to call them "capitalists" or "socialists" or any other misunderstood label.

I speak for China as well as for the United States. Both nations already have mixed economies, and both need a better mix. The ideological war between China and the United States is unnecessary. These two nations are partners in the co-destruction or co-benefit of planet Earth and its residents. Each of these nations can learn from the other how to mix their mix in better ways. The old warfare between a deeply misunderstood capitalism and a deeply misunderstood socialism is over. Those who foster such a warfare are insane. They need to be "admitted" to whatever healing institutions we can provide for them.

Jesus and Christianity

a theological spin
by Gene Marshall



To what do we point with the word "Jesus"? Scholars have put much effort into finding a scientifically dependable portrait of the historical Jesus, and they have found some very useful and interesting results. It has become scientifically plausible that a real human being did exist behind all the elaborations that were made about him. Further, this rediscovered historical person and his teachings were of such quality that all the fuss made about this person is warranted.

The Historical Jesus

Albert Nolan in his book *Jesus Before Christianity* found a way of seeing the intentions of the historical Jesus through exploring the choices that Jesus made. Nolan says that Jesus' choice to be baptized by John the Baptist shows us that Jesus identified neither with the pessimistic establishment that supported compromise with the Roman Empire nor with the optimistic Zealots who plotted

to overthrow the Roman rule. Jesus agreed with John's prophesy of doom with respect to Israel's independent nationalism, and Jesus agreed with John's optimism that Israel's spirit future could be assured if its members humbled themselves in repentance before the real limits and possibilities that they faced.

The second choice of Jesus that Nolan points out is Jesus' decision to identify with the poor, the outcasts, and the lawbreakers rather than the strict legalists, respectable people, and the wealthy. The vast majority of that nation were poor, despised, and damned by the small "respectable" minority at the top. Jesus' actions of eating and feasting, talking with and preaching forgiveness to these "compromised members of society" deeply offended the "respectable" minority. Jesus manifested a radical compassion that called the poor and other outcasts out of their self depreciation and hopelessness into a comradeship of celebration within a dawning "holy kingdom." And Jesus also sat at table with the "respectable" and thoroughly called their hypocrisy into question.

Nolan points out that Jesus was not a fatalist but a healer who called people out of their various forms of sickness, including their fatalism. Jesus, according to Nolan was not doing these wondrous transformations in people's physical and spiritual lives in order to prove that he, Jesus, was a super-holy somebody, but because he was compassionate toward the masses of people who had sunk into grossly hopeless deadends.

The "kingdom of God" which was central to Jesus' preaching was happening right now through these transformations in ordinary people's lives. This "kingdom of God" that was the core image in Jesus' good news was not an interior state nor a reference to some far away heaven. The kingdom was a real society on Earth coming into being through the transformations of people who were being healed of their attachments to and oppression by the current world order, which was ruled by rebellion from realism and by corruption and hypocrisy of every type. "Satan's kingdom," as Jesus called it, ruled human life, but Satan was now being robbed of his hold on his kingdom's members by Jesus, a stronger force because Jesus was a manifestation of that which is ultimately Real (God's kingdom -- Reality's Solidarity). "Kingdom," in Jesus' use of that term, does not mean hierarchy as opposed to democracy: it just means a real social manifestation. Indeed, God's kingdom is a blessing to the poor and a come-down for the rich. Its members are servants, not royalty. Jesus himself is a master servant.

Paradoxically, this quality of servant makes him “king” of the Jews (the true people of God) rather than Herod or Pilate or some other rich and famous person of that or any other time.

All this and more we can know about Jesus from the fragmented memories provided by the New Testament gospels. The life and teachings of this amazing person address “the kingdom of Satan” that we today still endure, ignore, collude with, and fight with in our daily, personal, and public lives.

Pitfalls in the Study of the Historical Jesus

If, however, we are to be critical religious thinkers, we need to be cautious about the motives and the results of some of the work being done on the historical Jesus. With such a narrow selection of scientifically credible information about this historical person and his teachings, it is easy for the skillful scholar to come up with a portrait of Jesus that derives more from that scholar’s contemporary beliefs than from the historical record. For example, Jesus was quite certainly a person of his times employing the metaphor of heaven above and Earth below. “Our Father who art in Heaven” can be translated by us to mean “Final Reality is like a good parent to me.” But Jesus himself did not make such translations; nor did he need to in order to talk to the people of his culture. Some scholars blur this simple truth.

Also suspect is the effort some scholars have made to paint Jesus as someone who supports a replacement of the fully monotheistic view of God that dominates both Old and New Testament writings. They prefer a “nicer” God and try to recruit Jesus to support their “idolatry.” Jesus was certainly a radical monotheist along with Amos, Isaiah, Paul, and H. Richard Niebuhr. Radical monotheism, as Niebuhr so beautifully spells out, is not a mere idea to be believed with the mind, but a quality of trust and devotion to the Absolute Wholeness in which all things cohere, the Void out of which all things come and to which all things return. Radical monotheism is the assertion that all that IS, is good – that full realism is the best case scenario for our lives, that fighting reality is a journey into despair, indeed that fighting Reality is joining the kingdom of Satan, the root cause of all corruption in the human adventure. The notion that Jesus supports a community of devotion different from radical monotheism is bogus.

Four Literary Portraits of Jesus

Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John provide us with four significantly different pictures of Jesus. Each of them is a literary creation. They are not, and

they never pretended to be, scientific biography. They are theological works of art. They are creative explorations of authentic humanness with Jesus as the main character in four different dramas, each of which is wildly creative. Here are oversimplified summaries of these creative differences: In Mark, Jesus is a mystery figure (Who is this Guy?), a secret to be discovered inwardly. In Matthew, he is a Jew’s Jew, a new Moses who shows us the true depth of the commandments of God. In Luke, he is Universal Hero for Jews, yes, but also for Gentiles. In John, he is the Final Message that created the cosmos and who brings the walking, talking Truth into our Earthly everyday living. This strange Fourth Gospel was written near the turn of the first century. Whoever wrote this stunning drama created a Jesus who gives long polemical or instructive diatribes directed toward a fully Gentile or Greek audience. The Hebrew underpinnings of this drama are hidden. What we face directly are paradoxes that attack the mental worlds of Greek thinkers with earthy imagery such as “eating the body of Jesus” and physically embodying the cosmic truth in the worldly drama.

These four dramas (as well as the letters of Paul and other witnesses) created Christianity, not the historical Jesus. The four gospel writers assume the existence of a real person who actually lived in history, but scientific biography was not one of their values. The fact that real memories of Jesus and real sayings of Jesus appear in these works is almost happenstance. These memories and sayings are there because they worked in making whatever point each writer was out to make. Also, all four of these gospels were written on top of several decades of creative elaborating of the Jesus story. This amazingly creative elaborating began a few days after the crucifixion and continued throughout the whole first century.

This creative elaborating of Jesus is Christianity. Jesus and his ministry was a presupposition of Christianity, but Jesus did not invent the religious practice we call “Christianity.” The four Gospel writers, plus Paul and other witnesses, created Christianity. The “Christians” who selected these books and left out other books also created Christianity. That the recently recovered writings attributed to Thomas were left out of the Christian Bible was not a mistake or omission. It was a choice. It came from a sense that these not-included writings did not fit into what was being created as the Christian religion. It is indeed true that the Thomas manuscript gives us some additional information about the historical Jesus. But what made Christianity Christianity was not

more information about the historical Jesus, but a mode of interpreting that information in relation to the lives of those who were accepting the name "Christian." The cross, the resurrection, and the Messianic title characterized Christianity. Jesus and his teachings were illuminated through the screen of these three religious symbols. Such an illumination of the Jesus advent is Christianity. Other interpretations of Jesus may be interesting, but they are not Christianity.



Luke 24

In order to illustrate the nature of the art of the gospel writers, I will comment on some verses from what I view as the most important chapter in the New Testament. Luke 24 contains three stories, all three of which are full of surprising meanings: (1) women visiting the tomb, (2) two disciples fleeing from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus, and (3) a terrifying, seemingly ghostlike appearance to the disciples. I am going to use the Phillips translation. Although it may not be the most literal translation from the Greek, it preserves the poetic character that I believe was important to the original writer.

(1) Visiting the Tomb

But at the first signs of dawn on the first day of the week, they went to the tomb, . . . (24. 1)

I believe that this emphasis on the first moment of the first day of the week is intentional on the part of this gospel writer. It reminds me of a common saying about "the first day of the rest of my life." The author is signaling that what is about to happen to the women going to the tomb is one of those "first days." If we want to make this verse contemporary in our own lives, we might ask ourselves, "What tomb can I recall that was a first day of the rest of my life?"

. . . taking with them the aromatic spices they had prepared. They discovered that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, but on going inside, the body of the Lord Jesus was not to be found. (24.1-4)

Clearly this was not what they expected. They went to honor the dead, and the dead was not there. So our question might be, "When have I expected to be honoring the dead and found myself surprised by aliveness?"

While they were still puzzling over this, two men suddenly stood at their elbow, dressed in dazzling light. The women were terribly frightened, and turned their eyes away and looked at the ground. (24:5)

These "figures" who so suddenly dazzled them

and frightened them are some sort of numinous vision, some sort of Awe experience, some sort of dread and fascination event requiring courage. Our question might be, "When have I been surprised with something so unusual that my taken-for-granted expectations were upended?"

But the two men spoke to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here: he is risen!" (24:6)

It is certainly plausible that these women would expect death to be the character of this tomb created by the violent torture to death of their beloved mentor. How could this tomb be life? How could this tragedy be blessing? How could their lives be a fresh beginning instead of a grievous end? So we might ask, "When have I experienced a moment of such complete turn around?"

"Remember what he said to you, while he was still in Galilee – that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, and must be crucified, and must rise again on the third day." (24:7)

The scholars are right to conclude that the historical Jesus never said any such thing. This is a statement of hindsight not foresight. So what sense is Luke making when he puts this in his story? Well, in an earlier part of Luke's story Jesus did say this. Both in the early part of the story and in this last part of the story, the following interpretation of events is present: the grim outcome of the cross was inevitable. And the "rise again" outcome was also inevitable. Everything was happening as it was supposed to happen. Faced with such an assertion, many of us may be ready to throw this book across the room. So our question to ourselves at this point might be, "Is it true that prophets like Jesus have to suffer to bring new life?"

Then they did remember what he had said, and they turned their backs on the tomb and went and told all this to the eleven and the others who were with them. (24:8,9)

So these women understood that their trusted mentor saw these events as they had to be (or to use the old metaphorical language: *these events were as God willed them to be*). With such a grasp of these events, they went to tell everyone who was critically affected.

It was Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, and their companions who made this report to the apostles. But it struck them as sheer imagination, and they did not believe the women. (24:10,11)

Well, was it sheer imagination or the sheer truth? Even though these were good women, the best of the group, it was not possible for the

disciples to believe such a message from these women or from anyone else. These apostles, as well as you and me, have to know for ourselves that this is true. Was the life experienced with this amazing mentor still alive in our actual history? That is our question too: "Is it?"

Only Peter got up and ran to the tomb. He stooped down and saw the linen clothes lying there all by themselves, and he went home wondering at what had happened. (24:12)

So even material evidence was not enough to clarify this matter. It was all a puzzlement. These may be some of our questions: "Is the resurrection still a puzzlement to me? What sort of truth do I feel I have to have?" In other words, "Have I had an experience in my interior life that makes sense of the notion that "Jesus-the-Messiah is risen indeed"?"

(2) A Walk to Emmaus and Back

The next story, the walk to Emmaus, tells of two disciples who have a resurrection experience. Jesus is walking with them, but they do not recognize him. Jesus speaks to them:

"What is all this discussion that you are having on your walk?" They stopped, their faces drawn with misery, and the one called Cleopas replied, "You must be the only stranger in Jerusalem who hasn't heard all the things that have happened there recently." "What things?" asked Jesus. "Oh, all about Jesus, from Nazareth. There was a man – a prophet strong in what he did and what he said, in God's eyes as well as the people's. Haven't you heard how our chief priests and rulers handed him over for execution, and had him crucified? But we were hoping he was the one who was to come and set Israel free. (24:17-21)

That last sentence is surely one of the strongest expressions of despair in the whole of human literature. The story does not say exactly what these two disciples were expecting, but clearly this was not it. They were fleeing the city of death in which their hopes had been totally dashed. If we wish to personally feel this part of the story we might try to remember times in which our hopeful expectations turned out to be completely out of touch with reality. Then in Luke's story Jesus provides some theological education:

"Aren't you failing to understand, and slow to believe in all that the prophets have said? Was it not inevitable that Christ should suffer like that and so find his glory." (24:26)

They eat supper with him and still do not know him.

Then it happened! While he was sitting at table with them he took the loaf, gave thanks, broke it and passed it

to them. Their eyes opened wide and they knew him! But he vanished from their sight. (24:30-31)

So what happened? They got a new view of how Jesus was the Messiah. The horrific event of losing their mentor in such a cruel, stupid, and tragic way was as it should be. This is what a Messiah looks like. This is what happens to authentic persons under the conditions of our actual world. Was it not always so? Will it not always be so? Anyhow they saw it that way and it proved to be a transformative vision. They had just walked seven miles before supper and before they even finished eating they rose from the table and walked seven miles back to the city of death, to the tomb that Jerusalem had become for them. The despairing events they had fled became the glory they returned to live. This transformation is the resurrection!

Until this sort of thing happens in your or my internal life, we have not experienced the resurrection. It remains an enigma at best and more likely a superstition that we have to dismiss. So here is the next personal question: "Have I experienced resurrection in a manner that it is not just accepting a belief that someone told me to believe, but an event that has actually happened to me, an event that has affected my whole body, including my legs and feet that could walk seven miles back to the worst experience of my life?"

(3) Ghost or Not

In the third story of Luke 24, these two transformed disciples tell their story to the eleven and the others back in Jerusalem.

And while they were still talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be to you all!" But they shrank back in terror for they thought they were seeing a ghost. "Why are you worried?" said Jesus, "and why do doubts arise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet – it is really I myself! Feel me and see; ghosts have no flesh or bones as you can see that I have." So he eats fish and talks theology with them, and then he ends with these words: "... that is why it was inevitable that Christ should suffer, and rise from the dead on the third day. So must the change of heart which leads to forgiveness of sins be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem." (24:36-47)

The core of this third story is a rebuttal that the resurrected Jesus is a ghost. He is not some sort of spirit being or psychological vision. He eats fish and talks theology. Who else is eating fish and talking theology? The eleven and others! Could it be that the body of the resurrected Jesus is precisely these fish-eating disciples! Yes, this is the astonishing implication of this story – that my ordinary friends, Joe Jones and Samantha Smith,

may be the resurrected body of Jesus-the-Messiah who has come to save all humanity from ruin. So how do we tell who is and who is not the resurrected Messiah? We can never know this with absolute clarity and our estrangements blind us to a large degree in such matters. But it remains true that we know the resurrected ones by their works, by their living. The resurrected ones have given up their illusory expectations and let Reality reign in their hearts. They have died to who they once thought they were and have let loose who they really are. So what might we see them do? Well, they might simply eat fish and talk theology and proclaim a universal welcome home to Reality. If we are to be among those who do such down-to-Earth deeds, where do we begin? Wherever we are! Jerusalem will do, if that is where we are.

In the closing words of Luke's Gospel, Jesus has this good-bye speech:

"You are eye-witnesses of these things. Now I hand over to you the command of my Father. Stay in the city, then, until you are clothed with power from on high." (24:48.49)

"On high" is two-story speech for "from Final Reality." The power of Reality's full support will be given when our surrender to living realistically settles in as the commitment of our whole life. When living in trust of what is Real is our choice, Reality becomes a power that mightily supports everything we do. The command of Reality is to be realistic. And realistic includes not fleeing from the city of horrific crucifixion, but hanging in the real world where the state of human estrangement from Reality is precisely this extreme: anyone who challenges the standard illusions will be hated. Here is another statement about experiencing resurrection: we receive the command of Reality and we are clothed with power from Reality.

Then he led them outside as far as Bethany, where he blessed them with uplifted hands. While he was in the act of blessing them he was parted from them and was carried up to Heaven. They worshiped him, and turning back to Jerusalem with great joy, spent their days in the Temple, praising and blessing God. (24:50-53)

Luke concludes with this master paradox about Jesus as the Messiah. He is incarnate in his community of followers. He is in history in a permanent way. But he is also in Heaven – that is, he is in the essence of things, at the right hand of Reality. Following Jesus-the-Messiah is not one option among other also good options. "Following Jesus" is the Christian religion's expression for THE realistic option. Everything else is some form of illusion.

Following Jesus is not practicing a religion.

Following Jesus is not a philosophy of life. Jesus-the-Messiah is the cosmic truth hidden in every event of history, in the creation of the cosmos, in whatever end the cosmos is headed for, in this living here and now of my living dialogue with Reality. Indeed, my dialogue with Reality is a dialogue with Jesus-the-Messiah – for Jesus is Reality's "proclamation of forgiveness" to all humans. And now, if I am Jesus' follower, I am also that proclamation of forgiveness to all who are with me in my space/time coordinate of history, in some Jerusalem, some city of estrangement that kills the best of us, in some sick Temple of estranged religious practice. In that sick Temple we followers of realism praise and bless Reality with great joy.

So being a Christian, according to Luke, is the simplest of all things – just being the being we actually are in the surrounding workings that are actually happening. There is nothing superstitious about it. There are not ten unbelievable things we are asked to swallow before breakfast. All our usual excuses for not being a Christian have been taken away. We now have a much more formidable reason for not being a Christian – living our real life is too much for us, so we may think. But wait, it is not too much for us. We are to be "clothed with power from on high."

One final question may come to mind for many people in this interreligious era of history. Has Luke implied that Christianity is the superior religion and that every other religion is second best or downright inferior? No! Following Jesus-the-Messiah is not a religion. The phrase "Jesus-the-Messiah" points to a way of living that is taking place everywhere. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other religious practitioners who are discovering a realism empowered by Reality are following Jesus. There is such a thing as the Christian religion, but it is only one religion among the many. Every religion is a humanly invented practice that at its best opens people to profound humanness. "Jesus-the-Messiah" is the Christian term for that profound humanness. That humanness is universal and may be accessed through many religious practices, including a Christianity that has moved beyond its literalistic superstitions into the deep vision that Luke and other New Testament story tellers were working to communicate.

Those who manifest realistic living will be rejected by those who adhere to the established substitutes for realism, but realism cannot be killed. So if you or I are called to follow realism, then we will go in joy to sick temples and wicked cities and proclaim the welcome home to Reality

for all humans. In our own experience of resurrection we become Jesus-the-Messiah calling humanity home from their "far countries" of estrangement.

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE

reviews by Joyce Marshall

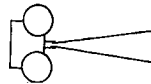
NOVEL

The Phantom Tollbooth
by Norton Juster



Written in 1961, illustrated by the incomparable Jules Feiffer, and introduced by the renowned Maurice Sendak (whom we lost this year), this story will never receive the wild acclaim of the Harry Potter series or *The Lord of the Rings*, but it has its own power to relate to child and adult alike. The story follows the journey of Milo, a boy who is in a perpetual state of ennui. One day he receives a mysterious package that turns out to be a tollbooth. For lack of anything better to do, he follows the instructions and assembles the booth only to find himself driving into an entirely different world. Like *The Lord of the Rings*, we are given a map of this world. It shows the Mountains of Ignorance, the Sea of Knowledge, Dictionopolis, the Foothills of Confusion, the Doldrums, Expectations, the Island of Conclusions (a place you have to jump to), and other mysterious landmarks. Milo visits all these places where he meets all sorts of curious creatures. One is a giant watchdog (literally, a dog whose body is a watch) who travels along with him. If you love word play you will love Juster. But the book is more than playful. As Milo and his friends become involved in saving the Princesses Rhyme and Reason, our own tendencies to jump to unfortunate conclusions or get sunk in doldrums come to awareness. This is another book Gene and I enjoyed reading aloud.

MOVIES



Midnight in Paris One reviewer called this film a sort of a daydream for American lit majors. I'm not a lit major, but I recognized most of the characters and found it absolutely delightful. Owen Wilson and Rachel McAdams play a couple on holiday in Paris with her parents. A hack screen writer who is working on a novel, he would like to live in Paris and soak up the literary air there. She likes Paris for the shopping and aspires to live in an upper-middle class American suburb. His midnight roaming of Paris streets results in a surprising magical fantasy which is juxtaposed with his daylight struggles with his fiancée and her parents, who underrate and demean our hero to their detriment.

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Undertow. Although the setting of this film is Peru, this story of forbidden love could take place wherever a small-town mentality, long-held traditions, and gossip prevail. Miguel is a fisherman whose life with his pregnant wife Mariela seems pretty idyllic. But his emotions, like the undertow of the film's title, are heading far away from the shores of stability and into the arms of newcomer artist Santiago. Santiago has an 'urban' sensibility, which means he is comfortable with his sexuality to the extent that he is prepared to be ostracized by this provincial community rather than hide it. Miguel, however, feels he must keep a closeted existence. The film takes an unusual twist when one of the characters becomes a ghost who needs a proper burial to set the spirit at rest. It sounds heavy, but the film has a touch of humor and is overall quite satisfying.

The Tree of Life is not a conventional movie. I found it frustrating at times but ultimately moving. Illustrating the verse in the Biblical book of Job in which God asks Job where he was when God laid the foundations of the earth, director Terrence Malick begins with a long pictorial exposition on the inner and outer wonders of the creation of the cosmos, demonstrating that creation is clearly beyond human control or understanding. This fact is grounded in the life of a family in Texas in the 1950s upon the death of the middle son at age 19. The movie is told through the memories of the oldest son, Jack, who bore the brunt of the controlling patriarchal father. How familiar this was to me. I know the role of the wife and mother in that situation – trying to protect the children but really powerless. The words "nature" and "grace" are mentioned by the mother. I would use "forgiveness" for the ending, in which Jack sees the journey of the family from the "eternal" perspective, beyond old and young, beyond good and evil, beyond death and life.

Beginners. After Oliver's mother dies, his 75-year old father comes out of the closet. At 38, Oliver has never had a meaningful relationship. So both men are "beginners" in learning about love. Highlights of this autobiographical story include flashbacks of Oliver's growing-up years with his delightfully creative Jewish mother, a costume party that was really fun to "attend," and a fantastic dog (a Jack Russell terrier) who talks in subtitles.

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy is one beautiful movie. I would be happy to merely watch it without knowing anything that was going on, because the cinemaphotography is so stunning, every shot a painting or a portrait. It is also beautifully acted

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and a wonderful puzzle to try to figure out. I want to see it once more, and I think I can then get everything straight. This is mostly a quiet spy story. No car chases, not a lot of violence, yet a sense of tension, and mostly the need to sort this all out and discover the mole.

Fair Game is based on the true story of CIA agent Valerie Plame, who shares some of the qualities exhibited by Gary Oldham's character in **Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy**. Both are stunningly skilled operatives. Most of the story you know: The Bush administration had decided to go to war in Iraq. Seeking reasons to justify an attack, it seized on a report that the nation of Niger (not Nigeria) had sold uranium to Iraq. Joseph Wilson, a former ambassador to Niger, was sent to seek such evidence. He found none. In fact, he learned that such sales would have been physically impossible. His report was ignored. War was begun using the nonexistent uranium sales as cause. He wrote an article in the New York Times reporting the truth. In order to discredit him, someone in the administration leaked the information to Chicago Sun-Times columnist Robert Novak that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, was a CIA agent. Eventually, Cheney aide, Scooter Libby, was tried and convicted of obstruction of justice and perjury, sentenced to prison, and had his sentence commuted by Bush. The part of the story you probably do not know was the "collateral" damage. Plame's sensitive work in the Middle East was disrupted and as many as 70 of her informants were killed. The Plame-Wilson family (including young twins) came close to breakup.

Naomi Watts and Sean Penn are excellent as Plame and Wilson, even looking remarkably like them. The film does not change the names of any principals, uses actual footage of administrative figures, and even closes with footage of Plame herself testifying before congress. Here are the ifs: If Wilson had kept quiet, Plame's CIA work wouldn't have been destroyed. On the other hand, if the Bush administration hadn't suppressed Wilson's information and smeared Wilson and Plame, there might have been no Iraq War. A story worth contemplating.

A Dangerous Method. I found this story about the development of psychoanalysis fascinating. Freud and Jung are masterfully played by Viggo Mortensen and Michael Fassbender. Most of us were unaware of the role of Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightley) in this development. Spielrein was a patient who became the two men's colleague and a lover of Jung. Though most people have not been psychoanalyzed, the work of these three people, for

good or for ill, is firmly embedded in our consciousness and how we think about ourselves.

Crazy, Stupid, Love. I find most comedies produced these days not at all funny. This film replaces raunchy slapstick with fine acting (Steve Carell, Julianne Moore, Emma Stone, Marisa Tomei and the wondrous Ryan Gosling) and is laugh-out-loud funny. The excellent screenplay of two generations seeking and finding love has two unforgettable surprise scenes. Don't miss this one.

50/50. Here we have a comedy based on the writer's experience when he was diagnosed with spinal cancer and given a 50/50 chance of survival. Adam turns to his best friend, Kyle, for support and gets it, though rather wildly at times. He deals with an aloof oncologist, a live-in girl friend who moves out, a smothering mother, and a therapist who does not remain uninvolved. The film isn't totally realistic, but it does combine depth with humor, thanks largely to Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who plays Adam with a sweet toughness.

The Spitfire Grill, a 1996 Sundance film, begins as a young woman named Percy is released from a Maine prison and arrives in the small town of Gilead. Ellen Burstyn plays Hannah, the cranky owner of the Spitfire Grill where Percy gets a job. Marcia Gay Harden is the wife of Hannah's nephew, who becomes Percy's friend and coworker. The symbolic name of Gilead is important, as this fable is about wounded healers and redemption and an epiphany not unlike that of Paul of Tarsus.

The 53-minute documentary, **The Practice of the Wild**, traces the career of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gary Snyder through major literary and social movements of the 20th and 21st centuries, from the Beats (he was the real-life Japhy Ryder in Kerouac's "Dharma Bums"), through Zen and the counterculture, to his seminal role in the literature of "deep ecology." The film contains archive footage, a few interviews with scholars and friends, and Snyder reading some of his poems, but most of the film consists of Snyder and producer/novelist/fellow poet Jim Harrison communing outdoors, Snyder's bearded elegance contrasting with Harrison's plug-ugly earthiness. Their chemistry is a delight. The title is taken from one of Snyder's books – concerned with the gulfs between humans and the remainder of the world. Snyder's poetry is fleet, beautiful, mysteriously sad, and the film is hauntingly gorgeous.

Oliver Twist. My daughter, a Dickens aficionado, insisted that we see Roman Polanski's 2005 film of

Oliver Twist. I have not read the novel and have seen only the musical, "Oliver," based on it. Since this year celebrates Dickens's 100th year, it is appropriate to revisit this amazing author. We are now reading aloud his last novel, *The Mutual Friend*, and relishing his depth of insight into human beings and the specificity, humor, and pathos with which he expressed that wisdom. Polanski and Dickens both had childhoods similar to Oliver's, so Polanski is perfectly suited to direct this film. I imagine that Dickens would be pleased with this rendition. I found it so awfully dismal at times that I wasn't sure I wanted to continue watching, yet the ending with Oliver's visit to Fagin in prison was wondrously satisfying and rounded out the entire experience. The message of the story is never dated. Here's my summary: Most people are stuck in a kind of blindness beyond their own personal needs. (This would be those pious men running the work house, Bill Sykes, the Beadle, the mean magistrate.) Some people have moments of being outside themselves and doing a kindness for others. (In this category are Fagin, Artful Dodger, the coffin maker, the kind magistrate, the bookseller). Then there are the Nancys, the woman on the road to London who fed Oliver and let him stay the night, Mrs. Bedwin, Brownlow, and Oliver himself, who, for whatever forces of luck or their personal choices, become heroes – those whose kind and loving acts encourage the hearts of those about them. This story inspires us to become one of them.

Buck is a documentary that feels like a movie drama. It is the story of Buck Brannaman, the man who inspired the movie, "The Horse Whisperer." He served as consultant to Robert Redford for the film and plays a small role in the film. Central to Buck's story is a childhood in which he and his brother were mercilessly trained by their father to be riding and roping stars. When their mother died, there was no one to protect them from the severe violence of their father. A coach at school discovered the welts, and they were placed with a loving foster family. Buck discovered "natural horsemanship" from Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt and used that and his experience of having been abused to accomplish what seems like magic with horses. He says, "A lot of times, rather than helping people with horse problems, I'm helping horses with people problems." Buck Brannaman combines respectful empathy with a zenlike authority that makes possible an unusual communion between human and animal.

Moscow, Belgium is a somewhat serious comedy set in a Flemish-speaking city in Belgium in which Matty is a postal worker whose husband has left her and their three kids for one of his students. She

keeps hoping he will come to his senses and return, but in the meantime she (literally) runs into a truck driver (well, into his truck) who brings a smile back to her face. This film is laugh-out-loud funny with scenes reminiscent of British director Mike Leigh's awkward family occasions.

Captain Abu Raed. Abu Raed is an aging widower in Jordan who works as a janitor at Amman International Airport. Finding a discarded pilot's hat in a rubbish bin, he playfully sports it as he walks from the bus stop to his home. A local pack of children decide he must be a pilot and beg him to share his adventures with them. He insists that he isn't a pilot but finally gives in and creates stories, inspiring them to believe that they can become somebody who has a meaningful life. But this is just the beginning. Abu becomes involved in the lives of two of the youngsters whose fathers abuse them – one by making him sell candy on the street instead of going to school, the other by physical violence to him and his mother. What Raed discovers is the terrible ambiguity of attempting to set things right in the world. He also discovers his own capacity for forgiveness, love, and sacrifice. This is a lovely film. Don't miss it!

The Iron Lady. Without doubt Meryl Streep earned the Oscar she won for her phenomenal portrayal of Margaret Thatcher. The film is set in the present, with Thatcher dealing with increasing senility in her old age. She chats amiably with her husband long after his death, and we see her life in flashbacks. The daughter of a grocer, young Maggie was always confident, ambitious and strategically ruthless in her climb to Prime Minister. In a striking scene she declares that ideas are more important to her than feelings. That seems to have been a governing principle in her life, driving her Conservative Party's agenda and allowing her to look with apparent limited concern at unemployment, hunger and homelessness in Britain. The movie is weak on the political story but Streep captures the poignant drama of a remarkably powerful woman whose power becomes only a lonely memory.

The TV series "**Parenthood**" was created by the people who gave us "Friday Night Lights" which explains why it gives us real people with real situations struggling to relate honestly with one another. The Braverman family consists of sixty-something Zeek and Camille and their four adult children: Adam, Sarah, Julia, and Crosby, each of whom is relating to partners and offspring as well as to one another. Now in its third season, the show improves as it ages. Check it out.

RECOMMENDED READING

reviews by Joyce Marshall

THEOLOGY

Jesus Before Christianity

by Albert Nolan

Orbis Books, 1976



Although this book was written in the 70s, I haven't read a more insightful, inspiring, or convincing portrait of the person Jesus. With a clear explication of the society in which Jesus lived, Nolan allows us to understand how very insightful and courageous he was. Nolan sees Jesus as a cheerful person whose faith was infectious, something that was not taught, but caught, and was based upon a conviction that goodness and truth ultimately can and will triumph over evil and falsehood. Nolan makes it simple to notice when one is not operating from faith. Any expression of fatalism is your clue, i.e., "Nothing can be done about it." "There's no hope." His exposition of the short ministry of Jesus makes it clear how Jesus came to the decision to die and what living like him might mean – something that is generally muddled up in churches that use his name. This book is short, easy to read, and a radical audit of the life of the reader.

Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap
and *Sunday School Manifesto*
both by Elizabeth Dodson Gray
Roundtable Press, 1982 & 1994

Given that the world continues to be rife with misogyny, I want to keep us thinking about what that means. With degrees from Smith and Yale, Elizabeth Dodson Gray taught at MIT, Williams College, Boston College and Antioch, and served as director of the Theological Opportunities Program at Harvard Divinity School, which sponsors lectures on patriarchy, ecofeminism, and women's interpretation of religious matters. In a playfully serious style Gray intersperses her narrative with cartoons, drawings, and photographs.

In *Patriarchy* she challenges major assumptions, such as: humanity is to conquer nature; the need for continual expansion of goods; male superiority; and patriarchal organization. By pervasive patriarchy, Gray means that men are in control of the myth system – the social and religious construction of reality. In fact, in disagreement with some feminists, she believes that women have never been in control of the myth and symbol systems – even when those systems were reverential toward women. She sees the social construct of reality as the culture men created to reassure themselves by achieving in order to offset

their sense of inadequacy in comparison to the mysterious fertility of women. Gray describes how women's moral reasoning is different from men who use abstract moral principles. She notes the subtle forms of biological programming toward the long-term future that result from the facts of sexual meeting: if a pregnancy occurs it is the woman who pays the price. Men are biologically able to walk away from the consequences of every sexual encounter. And yet, (to quote Gray) "Women's consciousness – which is so beautifully, albeit painfully, programmed to consider the longer term – has rarely been allowed into the boardrooms where decisions are made on corporate or public policy."

Gray doesn't use the term eco-feminism but is true to the concept. One of her books is *Green Paradise Lost*, in which she speaks of nature as compliant woman, patriarchal wife, and mother in chains. "We cannot in my opinion separate the rape of the earth from our culture in the United States where a woman is violently assaulted every eight seconds."

Gray is not the first academic woman I have read who complains of the abstract discussions of men in that world. "This kind of abstraction – in which the mind just hops around with its nimbleness in abstraction totally cut off from everyday reality – is something a great many women have little patience for."

When Gray wrote this book (in the 80s) male psychologists were saying that teens needed to break the parental tie in a traumatic way. Gray said what Charlene Spretnak (in review below) confirmed in her studies: that young people need their connection with their parents. Gray suggests that parents let their youth make their own decisions and take responsibility for their own lives, but stay connected to them.

To summarize Gray's premise: "The human species has, so to speak, been driving down the highway of life with one eye (the female) closed. We have listened to the music of life with one ear completely blocked. . . . For a two-gender human species interested in survival, it seems curiously maladaptive and self-destructive."

In *S.S. Manifesto* Gray points out that Jesus was not only NOT woman-hating, but "radically woman-affirming in ways totally at odds with his own time and with the subsequent Christian tradition." And, I would add, most especially at odds with the U.S. Republican right-wingers today who use his name. She (as does Albert Nolan in *Jesus Before Christianity* reviewed above) relates the many ways Jesus respects and affirms women. Gray calls out strongly for the church to move

beyond the “ancient and crippling hatred of women.” She calls for rituals celebrating the sacredness of women’s bodies and of giving birth. She calls for a Christian education which focuses on Jesus’ message of liberation and diversity and inclusion, which is relevant to our “contemporary struggles with racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and speciesism.” She also gives a beat to solidarity with the poor and one to sexual abuse of children (“the ultimate consequence of the gender power relations in our society that we call normal”). To wrap up: “You cannot have a children-friendly tradition until you have a woman-respecting tradition. You cannot affirm life without affirming women.”

THE INNER PERSON

Quiet:

The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking
by Susan Cain
Crown Publishers, 2012

Cain’s book on introversion does more than give introverts their long overdue due; it clarifies some of the egregious problems going on in U.S. culture today (like the global financial crash) and how we might make a perceptual shift in values to overcome them. Cain explains how Dale Carnegie’s rise from farm boy to salesman to public-speaking icon reflects our cultural shift at the turn of the twentieth century from a Culture of Character to a Culture of Personality. This shift moved us from the ideal of being disciplined and honorable to making an impression, being a performer – people who not only sell products but sell themselves, focused not on inner virtue but outer charm. Cain tells the story of how we made this shift without realizing what was sacrificed. She lists what the world would have missed without introverts, e.g., the theories of gravity and relativity, Chopin’s nocturnes, Harry Potter, and gives a pep talk to introverts, the approximately one-third of the population who have received short shrift for so long. Here is my summary of the pep talk:

Introverts are more quiet, resolute and have the kind of strength that not everyone can see. They tend to trust their intuitions. They have the tenacity to solve complex problems. They enjoy relative freedom from the temptations of superficial prizes like money and status. They may feel underestimated by those around them (and often are) but when focused on a project that they care about, their energy seems boundless. They are better at making a plan, staying with a plan, being very disciplined.

Introverts are not that good at small talk, even bored by it, but enjoy talking about values or morality. They

are highly empathic, have thinner boundaries separating them from other people’s emotions. They tend to have strong consciences and often focus on subjects like personal problems, which others consider too heavy. They tend to be spiritual or philosophical rather than materialistic or hedonistic, love music, art, beauty, feel strong emotions, and notice subtleties that others miss, like another person’s shift in mood. They don’t need as much stimulation because they are highly sensitive to stimulation. Others feel freer to confide their problems to them and feel understood by them. They make good sales persons because they listen better and ask good questions.

Extroverts are more prone to overconfidence not matched by ability. They would do well to listen to introverts when making decisions.

The Three Marriages

Reimagining Work, Self and Relationship
by David Whyte
Riverhead Books, 2009

Whyte, a poet, applies his poetic insights to the whole of life, seeing it as three marriages: to a special person, to one’s work, to oneself. Rather than talking about balancing these parts of one’s life, he sees each “marriage” as “a core conversation with life that seems necessary for almost all human beings,” even if the conversation is carried on unconsciously. He uses the life examples of writers like Jane Austen, Robert Louis Stevenson, Charles Dickens, J.K. Rowling, and spiritual teacher Pema Chodron to illustrate his points. Here is a nugget for each of the three marriages: The marriage to another person is a place to discuss one another’s three marriages. Our marriage to work involves deciding what we want to bring about in the world. And silence of one kind or another is necessary to come to terms with the self. This book has some stunning stories and good resources for deepening your life.

Clear Your Clutter with Fung Shui

by Karen Kingston
Three Rivers Press, 1999

I already knew (before reading this book) that I much prefer simplicity and order to clutter, but Kingston convinced me that even the clutter in drawers that I cannot see has the effect of sapping energy and concentration. Keeping things we don’t use or love, having too many things for our living space, and leaving things unfinished relate to issues in our lives. This book lists possible reasons to consider for your own cluttering, such as holding on to things “just in case,” sentimental reasons, to keep up with the Joneses, because you inherited it, or a belief that more is better (how

many kitchen knives do you really use and need?). She goes through the various spaces in a home and the variety of things we keep and exposes the holes in our rationales for keeping things. One of the most helpful for me was challenging the belief that I have to keep a gift even if I don't want it. She says to give yourself and others the freedom to appreciate the gift and person without having to keep it. Pass it lovingly along to someone else. I found de-cluttering amazingly freeing. I went through kitchen, bath rooms and bedroom. Now it is time to do my office, so I will look at this book again for a "pep talk" to get going.

The Etiquette of Freedom

by Gary Snyder and Jim Harrison
Counterpoint, 2010

This book includes the DVD, "The Practice of the Wild," which I reviewed in the movie section of this journal. The book and DVD introduced me to Harrison and I've begun reading his fiction. I've been captivated by Snyder since the early 80s when I read *The Real Work*. Watch the DVD first; then read the book, which includes a transcription of the DVD, additional conversations between the two, comments from others from the film, and some of Snyder's poems. These are fine folks to hang out with as they ponder together what it means to be wild and alive.

A BETTER WORLD

Relational Reality

*New Discoveries of Interrelatedness
that are Transforming the Modern World*
by Charlene Spretnak
Green Horizon Books, 2011

Gene gave an overall review of this book in the November 2011 journal. I want to highlight insights in the book that especially spoke to me. One of my daughters recently relocated from Phoenix to Sherman, Texas, a relatively small college town near where we live. Her experience in the shift from a dry desert urban area to quiet neighborhoods and streets with trees and grass verified for her the conclusions of the studies Spretnak noted: that immersion in nature causes people to be more caring, generous, and community oriented. In fact, proximity to trees speeds our process of healing and also improves our interpersonal attitudes. Other studies Spretnak cites found that beyond a basic level of material comfort and security, happiness is more related to having good relationships than with money and what it buys. For children and youth these good



relationships need to involve an adult. Youth who are peer-oriented often appear sophisticated on the outside but suffer from insecurity, don't do as well in school, and generally don't function as well, according to psychologist Gordon Neufeld. It has also been found that people with a few friends are less likely to come down with a cold, and six months of breast feeding results in a healthier, more intelligent baby. In fact, connectedness generally protects your health more than many popular health practices. ("And that is a medical fact," claims one M.D.) In addition, "The relational skill of active listening has been found to bring significantly more health benefits than does talking." Spretnak also underlines the importance of food in our local economies – the need to grow and eat locally – and the importance of adding the specific gifts of women to the leadership of our communities. Finally, I want to underscore her point on the need for religion – that is, to sing, chant, make rituals, dance together to "touch base with the larger reality."

I appreciate Spretnak's clear picture of the crises we face while holding up images of the positive forces that are already in motion and with which we can move, using her compass of relational reality as a guide.

Getting to Peace

*Transforming Conflict At Home, At Work,
And In The World*
by William Ury
Viking, 1999

Ury, a world-famous negotiator, brings his years of experience to the average person. The book takes the view that conflict always has three sides: the two opposing sides and the third side which is that of a peacemaker. Ury takes the position that destructive conflict is not a normal part of human nature; so it is not inevitable. He points out that while conflict and strife make news, the basic human condition is peaceful conflict resolution punctuated by periods of strife – not strife punctuated by periods of peace. Peace is the norm. Ury tells inspiring stories of conflict resolution, from the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert to high school students. He describes the ten roles of the peacemaker, which everyone can learn to mediate destructive conflicts. They are: the Provider, the Teacher, the Bridge-BUILDER, the Mediator, the Arbiter, the Equalizer, the Healer, the Witness, the Referee, and the Peacemaker.

Out of Poverty

What Works When Traditional Approaches Fail
by Paul Polak
Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008

To learn about poverty, Paul Polak goes to poor people where they live, focuses on learning from them without assuming he knows, and asks for details of their lives. He was stunned when he learned that people in the World Bank, or in research labs in Stanford, or in FEMA offices of U.S. government, etc., seldom if ever actually visit the people on site that they are commissioned to serve. This book is based on Polak's interviews with three thousand poor farm families and his listening carefully to learn everything he could about the specific context in which they lived and worked. First, he learned that the most direct and cost-effective first step out of poverty is to find ways for poor people to increase their income. That way they can make their own choices. Second, the most effective way to help poor people increase their income is to bring profitability to grassroots enterprises like small farms and small businesses. This is where design comes in. Polak wants to change the way design is done by designing for the 90%. That means designing what the customer (poor people) prefer and can pay for. (The so-called "experts" are worse than useless because of their preconceived notions.) Schumacher's "small is beautiful" is still true and Polak has added, "cheap is beautiful too." Polak's work over the past twenty-five years has helped millions of farming families invest in their own futures. This book traces his journeys to his revolutionary process which is downright practical, simple to implement, and astonishingly effective. In my book, the man is a saint.

Sacred Economics

Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition

by Charles Eisenstein

Evolver Editions, 2011

I met Eisenstein through his book, *The Yoga of Eating*, which I reviewed here in 2007 noting that though it is a practical book, it also is meditative and spiritually inspiring. Then he wrote *The Ascent of Humanity*, which I reviewed in 2010, saying that he "traces all of the converging crises of our age to a common source – Separation, the ideology of the discrete and separate self – which he sees as an illusion." This latest work has received wide acclaim, at least from the more progressive voices, acknowledging this young (45) man as "brilliant and original" and "one of the up-and-coming minds of our time." Picking up on the theme of separation, he begins this book with a description of the economics of separation in which money has become not only a universal aim but a universal means as well, whereby we mortgage our dreams to money. He does not advocate the abolition of

money, but restoring it to its proper place. Happily, his analysis undercuts the Chicago School of Economics ideology that is constantly beaten into our brains by the mainstream media. He carefully and logically deconstructs the arguments put forward by the spokespeople for that present system.

The second part of the book is on the economics of reunion which he sums up in seven shifts that are needed, forming his interconnected program for a peaceful transition to a stable, sustainable economy in harmony with Nature. He holds that the material world will come to be regarded as sacred, thus erasing the dichotomy between the material and the spiritual. The shifts are: 1) negative-interest currency, 2) elimination of economic rents, and compensation for depletion of the commons, 3) internalization of social and environmental costs, 4) economic and monetary localization, 5) the social dividend, 6) economic degrowth, 7) gift culture and P2P (peer-to-peer) economics. For each of the seven he notes what the motivation is for this shift, how to make the transition and the policy for it, and what the economic life will look like.

I want to say more about number 1 – negative-interest currency, which involves imposing penalties on money that is not in motion. He ties negative-interest money directly into the current debt crisis, and clearly charts a path by which we can gradually (hence non-violently) draw down the concentration of wealth and get money in motion where it matters most: in the hands of those who are not uber-wealthy. It reverses the dynamic we have today, where it is profitable to deplete the commons.

Not being inclined toward economic theory, I was most intrigued with Part III of this book, *Living the New Economy*, which I found both practical and inspiring. Eisenstein sees the foundation of a sacred economy as gift consciousness. He notes that we have become even more afraid of receiving than of giving and that to willingly receive a gift is itself a form of generosity. We tend to use money to mean that we can pay and then we don't pay attention to our fellow human beings. So the first step toward relearning gift culture is to learn to give the gift of fully receiving the gift of another. That is one of the most important gifts we can give.

The old economics has a concentration of wealth, excludes those who can't pay, is anonymous and depersonalized, shatters community and connection, and is oriented toward accumulation of money and property. Sacred economy, on the other hand, is egalitarian,

inclusive, personal, bond-creating, sustainable, and nonaccumulative. The positive word Eisenstein brings is that the old economics can't last. We can prepare for the new by living from it now, today!

Another step toward the new economy then, is nonaccumulation, or as we used to call it, "voluntary simplicity." It is a kind of economic decluttering; it keeps the heart light and free. There is no moralism here. Keep and use what you need; just don't aggregate large amounts of capital. Remember that the seeming security of accumulation is an illusion. If you have inherited excess wealth, the challenge is to give it in a way that is beautiful – like restoring and protecting the natural, social, cultural and spiritual commons. Eisenstein has a strong aversion to charging interest. He says if you want to invest in a village, give a woman a cow. Or if her dignity demands it, lend her money at zero interest. Invest in a wholesome future; do not try to make money off of the situation.

What he says about right livelihood reminds me of his book on food. He says "don't live by principles," but to "trust what feels good and right." He says even if it is working for a hedge fund, because he trusts that as your awareness grows, such work may not feel good and right and that trusting that feeling will mean it will guide you when it comes time to quit that job for something courageous. "Trust that you want to do beautiful things with our life." He insists that you not guilt yourself into working for some NGO, because it is important to develop the capacity to give your energies toward something you love. Eisenstein himself has moved toward doing what he loves and the gift economy by writing his passionate books and making them available free online, inviting a gift from readers who want to express their gratitude. He does not charge a fee for speeches or retreats, although he requests that expenses be covered and encourages attendees or sponsors to give what feels balanced and appropriate to them and reflects their gratitude.

Sacred Economics as described by Charles Eisenstein is realistic. It does not go along with the common pretense that we are isolated individuals who have no need of others. It recognizes that we live in community, are born and die naked, and need one another and the natural world to live. Such an economics moves toward acknowledging our deeper unmet needs for connectedness, play, and creative action toward creating a beautiful world. May we begin.

Resources for Realistic Living



Two overarching challenges characterize life in the 21st century: (1) the need for a New Social Vehicle and (2) the need for a New Religious Mode.

The New Social Vehicle and *The Road from Empire to Eco-Democracy*

Many visionary writers speak of "saving civilization," but "saving civilization" is not radical enough to be fully realistic. We are seeing that "civilization" means an aristocratically-ordered oppression of lower classes and an imperial ravaging of the natural planet upon which any viable human society must depend. A post-civilizational vision has been spelled out by five members of The Research Symposium on Christian Resurgence in a book recently published and titled *The Road from Empire to Eco-Democracy*. For a postage-free copy send a \$21 check made out to Gene Marshall; 3578 N. State Highway 78; Bonham, TX 75418.

The New Religious Mode and *The Enigma of Consciousness*

The long established double-decker, two-story, heaven-and-earth mode of talking about profound human living is over. Gene Marshall has elaborated an interreligious redefinition of religion in a book entitled *The Enigma of Consciousness*. Advanced drafts of all 34 chapters of this book can be downloaded from the Realistic Living web site. <http://www.RealisticLiving.org/PDF/Enigma/>

The Reconstruction of Christian Practice

The Realistic Living staff has prepared a simple introduction to the reconstruction of Christian practice in two sets of ten essays entitled **The Mathematics of Divinity** and **The Next Christianity**. To download these courses go to RealisticLiving.org and check **Training**.

August 16-22 Leadership Training School and Research Symposium

The staff of Realistic Living consider these meetings highlights of our effort. If you have been waiting to join us for one of these times of expanded context, methods learning, and face-to-face spirit communion, e-mail us today for information. jgmarshall@cableone.net

Check out our web site: RealisticLiving.org.
Also, check out our blog: RealisticLiving.org/blog/

To continue on this mailing list, we request a yearly contribution of \$20 or more (a tax-deductible donation within the United States). Contributors receive **two** issues per year of this Journal, plus **two** Newsletters on small group nurture, and our annual report.

If you have found this publication helpful, we invite you to give Realistic Living a significant place in your benevolent giving. Thereby, you can assist us to expand the readership of this publication. Also, your contribution supports **much more** than our Journals and Newsletters.

By supporting Realistic Living, you support:

- * new experiments in Christian community life
- * training in leadership methods & spirituality
- * publication of nurture methods and materials
- * research into community & religious renewal
- * innovative educational programing
- * EcoTheater & other grassroots artistic creation
- * local and continental bioregional organizing
- * the publication of social-change materials

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.

Order Jacob's Dream

A Christian Inquiry into Spirit Realization.

This book explores our Spirit Nature (Trust, Love, and Freedom) and uses the enneagram analysis of personalities to assist us in our Spirit Journey.

Send \$21 to Gene Marshall.

See RealisticLiving.org
for more information.

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

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